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## Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

### Turning Competitive Master's Degree Programmes

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# Turning Competitive Master's Degree Programmes<sup>1</sup>

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**Rezumat:** Pretutindeni în lume, sectorul de învățământ superior se confruntă cu factori ce induc schimbarea. Universitățile trebuie să facă față restrângerii numărului de candidați după o perioadă de cerere masificată pentru învățământ superior; noile tehnologii de informare și comunicare exercită un adevărat asalt asupra cadrelor didactice și studenților; managementul și marketingul programelor de studii este reconsiderat din perspectiva internaționalizării învățământului superior; managementul calității devine o componentă esențială a interfeței dintre universități și grupurile de persoane interesate de rezultatele învățării din fiecare program. Articolul discută procedee și mijloace aplicabile de către o universitate pro-activă în vederea transformării în oferte competitive pe plan internațional a unora dintre programele sale de studii de masterat. Aspectele legale și organizaționale sunt completate cu cele legate de folosirea limbilor străine, de recomandarea literaturii internaționale de referință pentru pregătirea și evaluarea studenților, de aplicarea mai hotărâtă a unor metode interactive în procesul de formare. De asemenea, sunt discutate instrumente de asigurare internă a calității care evidențiază calitatea procesului de formare și relevanța rezultatelor învățării. În final, se subliniază cât de importantă este viziunea universității cu privire la implementarea conceptului de învățământ centrat pe nevoile studentului. Acesta este astăzi un factor al avantajului competitiv pe care universitatea poate să mizeze în contextul competiției internaționale acerbe pentru cei mai buni studenți.

**Cuvinte cheie:** programe de studii de masterat, competitivitate, avantaj competitiv, competiție internațională, asigurarea calității, relevanța rezultatelor învățării, viață și muncă centrată pe student în campusul universitar.

**Abstract:** There are many change drivers in the higher education sector all over the world. Universities face the shrinking number of freshmen, after a period of massified demand for higher education; teachers and learners are confronted with the assault of the modern information and communication technologies; internationalisation of the higher education exerts a growing pressure on the management and marketing of study programmes; quality assurance and quality management are becoming core parts of the interface between universities and stakeholders interested in the learning outcomes of each programme, etc. The paper discusses the means and ways applicable by a pro-active university which aims to turn its master's degree programmes into internationally competitive ones: legal and organizational aspects are complemented with elements referring to the use of foreign languages, international literature and more interactive teaching methods. Quality assurance tools which highlight the quality of the training and the relevance of the learning outcomes are also discussed. Finally, the vision of universities related to the concept of student centred delivery of study programmes is approached as a factor of competitive advantage in the context of fierce international competition among universities for the best students.

**Keywords:** master's degree programmes, competitiveness, competitive advantage, international competition, quality assurance, relevance of learning outcomes, student centred life and work on campus.

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## Present Context of the Higher Education

The higher education sector is challenged by lots of changes in all its features: a new relation between demand and supply on the higher education market; a more sophisticated approach of institutional differentiation in the sector; a relaunched vivid debate concerning costs of higher education and cost-sharing among direct and tertiary beneficiaries; a reloaded discussion on equity of access to higher education and the means to be involved to prevent or limit exclusion; an emerging new challenge for universities in the context of strong political, business and societal interest for lifelong learning, etc. These challenges are routed in the dynamics of the community which hosts the university, in the international opening of the higher education, in the insufficiently researched impact of the new information and communication technologies on the teaching and learning process.

Some of these aspects are critical for making competitive Romanian master's degree programmes in the international higher education market and ask for complementary comments concerning the specific environment of the Romanian higher education sector:

• **The balance between demand and supply has recently changed in the Romanian higher education sector.** After a period of steady growth of demand for higher education (which led, on one hand, to the legal set-up of new higher education institution and, on the other hand, to the massification of the education process in some of the public and private universities), Romania is confronted in the last few years with a *reverse trend*: the number of high school graduates is decreasing due to the demographic decline and the offer of study opportunities in public and private universities is higher than the demand for this service. One should not neglect the fact that another component of the post-communist growing demand for bachelor degree studies has meanwhile significantly shrunk: the holders of a first higher education diploma (usually in engineering, hard sciences or in special fields of study) and interested to get complementary knowledge and skills, mainly in those fields of study which were suppressed or politically limited during the communist regime (sociology, psychology, law, business, etc.).

In order to keep or even increase the number of teaching positions in the departments, most of the public and private universities embarked the facile means of increasing the number and (formally) differentiating the offer of master's degree programmes. It is complemented with a lowering of the admission standards. This attitude (teachers' interest driven education) cannot help those universities which aim to turn competitive their educational programmes on the international market.

• Teaching and learning in higher education institutions are confronted with the **assault of the modern information and communication technologies**. Traditional teaching *ex cathedra* is still the most popular way in Romanian universities to transfer knowledge and skills to the learners. Focus on theoretical knowledge is still favoured by most of the teaching staff irrespective of generation. That means less interest for transfer of skills and development of personal competences based on values and attitudes.

Despite the improved technical endowment of most of the universities, blended learning is present only as an exception mainly in case of master's degree programmes. In fact, "blended", "hybrid" or "mixed-mode" teaching and learning represents a way of achieving *cost-advantage/ leadership and differentiation* in the local and international education market. According to the classical approach developed by Porter (1985) *cost-leadership* and *differentiation* represent two *generic competitive strategies* applicable by a provider in the context of competition for resources and clients. They have at the same time a strong impact on the *attractiveness of the programme* for those students which cannot reach the face-to-face instruction. Even in the face-to face classroom a greater reliance on technology facilitates the *access to virtual learning resources*.

Modern communication tools play also an important role in the enhancement of co-operative work through video-conferences with partner universities, professional associations and relevant employers of the graduates. In the same time, the appropriate use of the new technology asks for complementary training of the teaching staff, for permanent assistance offered to students and a fundamentally different design and use of teaching resources.

One should not omit a *third generic strategy of competitiveness* which is the **focus strategy**. It rests on the identification and care of a niche clientele with high potential of sustainable development in the next future. The design and implementation of a master's degree programme in close cooperation with a large local company, a multinational corporation or a commercial bank for the further education of its human resources is just an example of making use of this generic competitive strategy.

• **Quality assurance and relevance of the learning outcomes (qualification of graduates)** are becoming core parts of the programme management and represent the nucleus of the interface between universities and the external and internal stakeholders of each programme.

There is a *shared responsibility for the quality and relevance of the education process and of the learning outcomes*. Two kinds of actors are involved in this feature: institutional ones and physical persons. In terms of *institutional accountability*, one has to mention the university as a whole and, in particular, its department for quality assurance, the department providing the study programme and all the external institutional stakeholders interested in reaching high quality of the teaching/learning process and relevant qualifications for the graduate labour market. On the other hand, there is and there has to be permanently revitalized the *personal responsibility* of teachers and students for each aspect of the teaching and learning process, for the evaluation of the knowledge and skills acquired during the programme, for students' satisfaction and teachers' satisfaction. Representatives of alumni, relevant employers, recruiters and of professional associations relevant to the study programme have also their tasks in assuring the quality and relevance of the learning outcomes.

The management of the study programme should implement appropriate tools to assure a systematic periodical 360 degrees round evaluation of how all these moral and physical stakeholders respond to the mission they assumed or could play in the improvement of the programme's competitiveness and attractiveness.

• **Internationalisation of the higher education** exerts a growing pressure on the management and marketing of study programmes. There are various meanings attached to the concept of internationalization of higher education.

Knight (1993) understands internationalization as a "*process of integrating an international, inter-cultural and/or global dimension in the goal, functions (teaching/learning, research, services) and delivery of higher education.*" In discussing that opinion, Zha (2003) observes that several key concepts are present in this definition, e.g. the idea of internationalization is discussed as a dynamic process and not as a set of isolated activities; there exists an integration or infusion of different cultures that contributes to the sustainability of the international dimension; the definition refers to three defining universal functions of a university and namely, teaching, research and service to society.

The definition also lets us understand that internationalization of higher education is not an aim itself. In fact, internationalization helps universities achieve wider goals such as quality enhancement, competitiveness in the local and in the international educational market; it helps restructuring of curricula and syllabi, up-grading student services, etc. The approach of internationalization of higher education suggested by van der Wende (1997) covers "*any systematic, sustained effort aimed at making higher education responsive to the requirements and challenges related to the globalization of societies, economy and labour markets.*" This definition underpins the responsiveness of higher education to the expectations of the global environment. It also reveals the main benefit of the international orientation for the higher education institutions – their further development is in line with the dynamics of international standards.

To turn a master's degree programme into an internationally competitive one means to review each strategic and operational component of the programme design, delivery and marketing. With an innovative and flexible programme management, each element has the potential to become a factor of competitive advantage when compared to the practice of other competitors in the market. Sometimes that means intensive investment in the learning environment and/or in the improvement of the teaching staff and its professional capabilities. In other contexts it consists in reviewing contents and teaching processes. Changing vision of the institution in the delivery of study programmes is also a potential

factor of competitiveness and the implementation of new partnerships with other providers or with businesses could strengthen the differentiation a study programme from the other ones available in the market.

## **Pre-requisites for an Effective Management of the Internationalization of the Romanian Master's Degree Programmes**

Among the environmental factors which could ease the management team of a master's study programme aiming to become internationally attractive and competitive, one can enumerate the following ones:

- *Supportive legal framework* concerning internationalization of the higher education: Even if the current legislation is not explicitly focused on this aspect, universities could turn that lack of regulation into an advantage and feel free to develop their own set of rules to attract international students and to promote international cooperation for the development of competitive study programmes;
- *A sector level strategy of internationalization* is still in progress as two recent projects have recommended coherent sets of measures and policies to be adopted by the coordinating Ministry of Education and its agencies which interact with the Romanian universities;
- *Internationalization as component of the mission and vision of the universities*. Romanian universities were recently grouped by a team of international experts into three categories of higher education institutions: research intensive and teaching universities; research and teaching universities and teaching focused universities having a modest involvement in research projects. At least the universities pertaining to the first two groups should insert in their mission statement the fact that they intend to grow internationally visible in the relevant rankings developed abroad and that their vision is a borderless teaching and learning;
- *Appropriate organizational infrastructure* for an *effective decision-making* concerning the on campus and beyond campus life and work of international students and teaching staff. It means at university and at faculty level a responsible compartment for developing and implementing internationalization policies. There is a clear need for *a management team at programme level* able to assume the design and implementation, the quality management and the continuing improvement of the delivery. The administrative staff of such a programme should have the appropriate communication skills with international students;

An effective management of the study programmes asks for *pro-active attitude, innovation and flexibility*. Attracting international students requests an inclusive approach of all the components of student life and work. It cannot be limited to professional advice or to career counselling. It should cover also intercultural issues and communication between different cultures and the home country's culture in form of extra-curricular activities.

## **Internal Quality Assessment – a Permanent Task of the Programme Management**

By accepting a paraphrase to Porter's lesson on generic strategies, the management team of a master's degree programme which expects to become competitive in the context of international higher education market has to make a choice about *the type* (cost-leadership, differentiation and/or niche focus) and *the scope* (global approach or narrow address) of its competitive advantage and then to maximize the impact of the chosen combination.

After the prolific conception of master's degree programmes during the last years (more than 2.8 thousand programmes were presented to ARACIS for external evaluation and accreditation),

Romanian universities try to turn internationally competitive some of the existing study programmes. This is why they have to carry out an in-depth analysis of the *internal advantages and shortages* (material, financial and technical resources available for the programme and core competencies of the academic and administrative staff) and to identify opportunities and threats originated in the *external business environment*.

Based on Porter's five forces theory concerning the behaviour of *suppliers/who is offering what similar programme, industry competitors/which are the traditional providers, new entrants/who are expected to be active in the given educational niche, buyers/potential students interested in the programme and substitutes/alternative study programmes*), the programme management team can implement those measures which shape the *uniqueness of the programme* and fosters its local and international *attractiveness* in terms of learning outcomes relevance and cost effectiveness.

Despite the huge number of existing master's degree programmes, one could not exclude the possible intent of some research intensive universities to promote new study opportunities which are conceived from the very beginning as international programmes. Launching a "*Born Global*" master's degree programme implies:

- *Extensive analysis of the international labour market* needs which have to be answered by competences generated through the scientific and professional excellence of the university staff in the given field,
- *Well targeted curriculum design* which highlights the uniqueness of the programme, a modern delivery of the programme (with a permanent internal quality control; eventually with a focus on advantages offered by extracurricular work on campus or as recommended internships), and
- *An ambitious marketing plan* to make the programme internationally visible and constant participation in international education fairs, visits to potential international employers, etc. aiming to transform the launch of the new study programme as a success event in the international market.

For gaining competitive advantage, the management team of the study programme will have to favour one of the following strategic options or to promote a combination of the three following alternatives: *product leadership, operational excellence and/or customer confidence* ("*intimacy*" in the terms used by Treacy and Wiersema in their 1995 book, reprinted in 1997).

**Product leadership** should be a *permanent goal* to be followed along all the phases of the life-cycle of the master's degree programme with a focus on systematic internal quality management. It is the management team's task to secure that quality of the "product" which lines up the programme among the best ones in the local and international market. It is also the responsibility of the teaching staff and of current students to demonstrate the leadership position of the programme. Finally, alumni and employers should feel also responsible for the "product" and assist the management team to enhance all the elements which could support the leadership of the given master's degree programme.

Internal quality assessment should be present in all the stages of the design, preparation, delivery and marketization of the programme as a means allowing for self-evaluation and early feedback to the programme management team. It refers to:

- Design and relevance of learning outcomes covered by the proposed curriculum and the content of syllabi as a guarantee to reaching the expected academic/professional qualification;
- Hiring teaching and research performance based local and international of academic staff;
- Check of the learning resources teachers choose to use for the transfer of knowledge and skills as well as for the development of personal values, attitudes and aptitudes;
- Control of the balance between the different forms of education and training (face-to-face, hybrid learning, individual assignment/research, team-project development, enhancement of innovation and creativity, etc.);
- Continuous assessment of teaching performance, quality of learning outcomes and student satisfaction in direct connection to each cohort's intellectual and professional capability;

- Evaluation of the advertising channels and of the marketization of the programme, including the role of the alumni association in making the programme visible.

There are plenty of *tools involved in the internal quality assessment* of all these steps of programme design and delivery (peer-review, exposure to the comments of external stakeholders and of alumni, comparative analysis of student achievements in each of the courses, student evaluation of the teaching and training staff, assessment of the effectiveness of the advertising and marketization channels, market entry rate of graduates, etc.). What should not be neglected is the *integrative approach of all the results* of a continuous internal check of the quality against the goals set for the programme. On the other hand, as competitors adopt usually a dynamic attitude towards the expectations of the clientele, the enhancement of quality should also be considered as a permanent task of the management team.

**Operational excellence** depends on:

- The *relevance of the learning outcomes* guaranteed by the programme curriculum is essential in the competition with other study opportunities. Learning outcomes have to be transparent and easy understandable for students and for employers of the graduates. This is why the terms used in the description of knowledge and skills have to be clear from the point of view of actors in the graduate labour market (professional associations, recruiters, employers);
- The *content of the syllabi* covering the complexity of the learning outcomes, with a focus on skills and personal competences. This is an important element in the dialogue with students enrolled in the programme with a strong impact on the indirect moth to year promotion of the programme. A transparent conduct of the management team could also encourage the up-load of the syllabi on the programme's web site and helps local and international students to do a comparative analysis of the benefits of choosing a particular programme;
- The *quality of the recruited teaching* staff in terms of professional standards and of command of the leaching language is crucial for a programme aiming to be internationally competitive. A presentation of the teaching experience and of the language excellence could be used as powerful instruments in promoting a new programme. Opinion of alumni could also influence the choice of the future students;
- The *research performance* of the teaching staff involved in the programme in terms *international visibility of the research output* is an important dimension of those programmes which are more research oriented;
- The *quality and relevance of the learning resources*. For numerous students holding a bachelor diploma the quality of the handouts and the international relevance of articles, studies and books recommended as learning resources represent reference points in choosing one or another master's degree study programme to continue their education;
- The *intellectual capabilities of students* to be enrolled in the programme. Many Romanian study programmes accept candidacy in a master's degree programme based on the average grades students were able to get during the first cycle. Sometimes universities practice a weighted average of the first cycle grades and the final examination rate of each candidate. These file examination aims at ranking the candidates and selecting/accepting only the best ones. An overall examination of the pre-requisites for a successful participation in the master's programme is rarely applied. On the other hand, study programmes with a high rate of demand ask for a GMAT or a similar certification in order to rank the future students. For the management team these are measures that limit the drop-out risks and ensure the financial means which support the programme delivery;
- The *involvement of stakeholders* in the programme management is relatively scarce in Romanian universities. It is highly recommended to attract representative employers or professional associations in the programme design and delivery as well as in setting the best evaluation tools for showing the learning outcomes in their complexity. As opinion

pools among employers revealed, it is irrelevant to confine the evaluation to elements of advanced knowledge and/or to use of that knowledge in insufficiently defined work conditions. In the end of a master's degree programme the evaluation should touch also personal competences of the graduates such as values and attitudes, self assessment and team building, leadership and communication skills in real work environment;

- The *relevance of case studies* prepared for the programme delivery and/or for the individual or group assessment of students. Learning advanced theory and research methods should be complemented with applications in form of simulations and case studies in the teaching and learning process. Individual and/or group case studies aiming at problem solving in real or simulated contexts should be assigned and presented by students in order to check their personal competences as enumerated above;
- The *appropriateness of the internship* component of the curriculum. The teaching and learning outcomes are frequently harmonized with the internship requirements. Only well established internship agendas help students to reach that level of knowledge and skills that is expected to be demonstrated in the labour market;
- The *variety of education forms* applied in the programme delivery is another success factor. The management team of most of the study programmes concentrate on curricular work and neglect the advantages of extracurricular activities. These “extracurriculars” help students to overcome cultural clashes, distribute roles and assume responsibilities, improve quality of learning outcomes and living conditions.
- The excellence of a foreign language mediated study programme heavily depends on the *good command of that language by teachers and students*. A master's degree programme is build-up on a philosophy of continuing exchange of opinions, of ideas and of alternative solutions in discussing a case study or a real issue. There are two consequences for the management team:
  - Student recruitment for foreign language mediated study programmes cannot disregard a test of the *written and oral* communication skills of the candidates in the given field of study;
  - Teaching staff has to be carefully trained to get the appropriate *written and oral* communication skills needed in an inter-active classroom or in virtual training of the students.

Each element involved in the design, management and delivery adds to the excellence of the programme and to the satisfaction of students. The management team has to develop and implement a comprehensive set of *quality assessment tools* which should help it to assure a sound delivery of the programme and to correct possible errors or poor conducts in the interface between teaching staff and students.

Programme managers should never neglect a full (360 degrees round) evaluation of the teaching and learning process in all its aspects from content appropriateness and teaching methods to balance between theory and applied training, between learning and research, to learning resources, student advice and to assessment tools and final evaluation means involved by the teaching staff. It is important to link the internal quality assessment to the learning outcomes in terms of relevance to the labour market. They are specified in the syllabus of each discipline. In this process alongside self-evaluation, the opinion of peers, students, employers and alumni should be researched. In order to highlight strong- and weak-points in the delivery of courses multi-criteria comparative analysis should become a routine work in the end of each semester for the programme management. This is the only way of exploiting the collected data with the intent to improve quality and relevance of the learning outcomes.

In the advertising message the focus should be on the *vision* of the managerial team in delivering the programme (student centred teaching and training, team building and extracurricular activities in a multicultural environment). For smaller higher education institutions the student-care services might also be used as a means to make known the operational excellence.



**Customer confidence** is developed via specific elements of the study programme. Soft and hard arguments might be involved in the development and consolidation of the customer's confidence.

The *soft arguments* rely on emotional reactions of the potential "buyers". They focus on information related to the satisfaction of graduates, to their success rate in entering the labour market after successful completion of the programme. Career success stories of alumni are also effective means to convince people how "good" are the learning outcomes of a study programme in terms of labour market appropriateness.

Among the *hard arguments* used by study programme providers in their relation to international employers of the graduates, it is recommended to present on the web site of the programme the full description of the academic qualification. The term refers to a standardized description of the system of learning outcomes presented in an easy understandable form. Instead of the mere insertion of a list of disciplines or of the curriculum the management team of the master's degree programme should insert on the web site the full description of the qualification given to successful graduates. A distinct mention referring to the upload of the given qualification in the *Romanian National Register of Qualifications in Higher Education – RNCIS* will gain in power as a *confidence factor*. The referencing process of RNCIS against the overarching Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area has positively ended in the beginning of September 2011 with the recognition of the full compatibility of the Romanian Qualifications Framework in Higher Education with the requirements expressed at European level.

On the other hand, the qualification given by a Romanian master's degree programme should be relevant (not only) for the European labour market but for more or less all the labour markets around the world. Romanian universities should consider and encourage the interest to study in Romania of potential students coming from non-European countries. Recent meetings at ministerial and rectors' conference level with country' representatives from Africa, Asia and Latin America confirm the high potential to attract fee-paying students from these regions of the world, mainly for master's degree programmes.

As the *qualifications' framework* in higher education is a relatively new tool involved both in the university academic management and in the dialogue between universities and actors of the labour market, a cautious use of this argument is recommended in the promotion of master's degree programmes: the discussion partner might not possess all the needed elements to understand the excellence of the programme in terms of learning outcomes and the correspondence between the learning outcomes and the expectations of the graduate labour market. Providers should use a non-sophisticated wording in expressing learning outcomes (level of knowledge, complexity of skills and variety of personal competences of the graduates: aptitudes, conducts and values) and to complement them with soft arguments such as success stories of the alumni hired by multinationals, commercial banks, large local companies or public administration bodies which might be relevant in the dialogue with employers and recruiters.

Another hard argument consists in the outcomes of *relevant external quality assessment* performed by local or international agencies specialized in the specific professional sub-sector for which the master's degree programme prepares its graduates. The external evaluation carried out by ARACIS – the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is a valuable one, but *complementary external quality assessment* might be of great support for a master's degree programme aiming to attract foreign students and for international companies as employers of the graduates. Costs cannot be neglected and the preparation of such complementary external evaluation asks for a lot of administrative work, but the certification given by an academic or professional evaluation body from outside the country is in the eyes of the customers a powerful quality guarantee for the "product/service" they intend to buy.

## Final Remarks

There are plenty of internal and external factors which contribute to the international competitiveness of a master's degree programme. *The foreign language mediation of the delivery of the programmes is a necessary but not sufficient pre-requisite of the success of master's degree programmes* intending to become internationally visible and competitive.

The involvement of *modern tools for effective operational* management of the teaching and learning process and a *permanent internal monitoring of the quality* generate the programme's reputation in the eyes of students, alumni and employers.

The *programme* itself, its *uniqueness* and its *competitive advantage* have to be internationally visible and recognized if the management seeks for international audience.

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