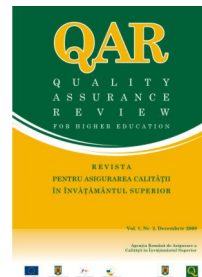


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## Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

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

Sorin Costreie, Rodica Ianole, Raluca Dinescu

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

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**Rezumat:** Conceptul de calitate se află încă în căutarea unei definiții precise. Acest fapt are drept consecințe ineficiența și neînțelegerea generală a rolului asigurării calității în învățământul superior. Pe de altă parte, acest lucru poate oferi diversitate și creativitate în spațiul rigid al reglementărilor și standardelor de calitate. Articolului nostru își propune să fie o reflecție sistematică asupra principalelor concepte ce definesc procesul de asigurarea calității, pornind chiar de la calitatea însăși. Cadrul discuției este dat de o evaluarea națională a asigurării calității în Universitatea din București, argumentele noastre bazându-se pe exemple reale și oferind sugestii pentru reflecții ulterioare. Abordarea noastră începe printr-o analiză atentă a conceptelor și încearcă să vadă cât de departe se poate merge pentru a da seama de realitățile din instituțiile superioare de educație. Plecând de la cazul particular al Universității din București, noi identificăm unele din provocările generale privind evaluarea asigurării calității.

**Cuvinte cheie :** evaluarea și asigurarea calității, cultura calității, management universitar.

**Abstract:** Quality still defies a precise definition. The result is a lack of effectiveness and a general misunderstanding of the role of quality assurance in higher education. On the other hand, this may offer diversity and creativeness in the space of rigid regulations and strict standards. Our paper aims to be a systematic reflection on the main concepts concerning quality assurance processes, starting with quality itself. A national quality assurance evaluation of the University of Bucharest (hereafter, UB) is the reference framework of our discussion, strengthening the arguments with real examples and providing further food for thought. Our approach starts with a minute analysis of the concepts and tries to see how far one may go to encompass the realities of higher education institutions. From the particular perspective provided by the case of UB, we identify some of the general challenging issues concerning quality assurance evaluation.

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

## 1. Introduction

Currently, 'quality' is on everybody's lips. *Quality Assurance* (hereafter, QA) is at the top of most universities agendas, and quality evaluation and enhancement are without any doubt among most important tasks of any higher education institution all around the world. In Europe, QA plays even a more important role, being regarded as one of the key factors which will lead to the creation of the European Higher Education Area<sup>1</sup>. However, in spite of this crucial role, QA still remains an ambiguous concept<sup>2</sup> that poses many difficulties in its assessment processes. QA continues to be a

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

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

challenging subject on the negotiation table between global, national and institutional agencies on the one hand, and the higher education institutions, on the other hand. Thus, “What does ‘quality’ mean?” and “How can ‘quality’ be measured?” are still the basic important questions in search for a plausible answer.

In this context, we will focus our attention only on a discussion concerning quality evaluation of higher education institutions. This is still perplexing, since one’s notion of quality evaluation often does not coincide with another’s, and, as very often may happen, no two experts in the field ever come to the same idea when debating what means an excellent university. Some authors go even further and claim that not just the mere notion of quality lacks a stable and unique understanding, but the whole quality environment varies from place to place: “Perhaps the most obvious recent influence on assessment has been the policy climate in relation to quality assurance and enhancement. The quality assurance and accountability climate differs from nation to nation”<sup>3</sup>. Thus, the whole standardization process, that becomes more and imminent in the application of the assessment techniques, is somehow in a fight with the traditional diverse and heterogeneous academic manner of expression. A “one size fits all” framework is far from being applicable in this particular case.

Our analysis will emphasize the UB’s institutional evaluation as a dependent variable on the university’s mission, tradition and size. The value parameters were defined through a ‘on the spot evaluation’ on several days, including as main methodology of assessment a peer review session performed by experts in their field of study, and endorsed by a substantial self-evaluation: internal audits of faculties and administrative departments developed in the form of cooperative learning processes.

We can safely assess that we have evaluated “the evaluation” as a learning experience, encompassed by pros and cons from different angles of seeing the university. Paraphrasing the famous title of Frederic Bastiat’s essay<sup>4</sup> with regard to a major debate concerning this type of quality assurance process, the final results are the reflection of the fact that what is seen is not actually totally seen, and a good deal of action should be *foreseen*.

## 2. Quality Assurance Evaluation

We will start our analytical construction by posing the common sense question of what does *Quality Assurance Evaluation* (hereafter, QAE) mean. In order to answer this question conclusively, we find appropriate to break it down in another two questions:

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

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

Currently, almost all universities have a unit comprising several experts dealing with this topic, and almost all European countries have national regulations in this sense. Moreover, all around Europe, there are various agencies that take care of this process at a national and even international level. The main objectives of an evaluation deal with the functioning of the university as a whole and the functioning of its components, the programs (degrees) and the disciplines. The evaluation actions are covering areas like teaching, research, outreach, as well as the State policies or the governance of institutions.<sup>5</sup>

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

<sup>4</sup> We are referring to the essay *What is seen and what is not seen* that analyses both faces of the coin in economics: the visible and invisible effects. See Bastiat (1995): “In the economic sphere an act, a habit, an institution, a law produces not only one effect, but a series of effects. Of these effects, the first alone is immediate; it appears simultaneously with its cause; it is *seen*. The other effects emerge only subsequently; they are *not seen*; we are fortunate if we *foresee* them.”

<sup>5</sup> Weber (2003).

QA has thus a double target. First, to increase its *internal* organizational power; second, to face *external* regulations and standards, which could make a HEI more flexible and compatible. Both ends are very important and both should be seen and approached in their mutual interaction. A better inner quality life and organization of an institution means a better compatibility with outer institution and vice-versa, and HEIs make no exception to this rule. Commonly, QA is regarded now as a tool which helps HEIs to improve their management. In this sense see for example Bogdan (2009)<sup>6</sup>.

Now, let us deal with the second question: How can one **evaluate** *quality assurance* of HEIs? Normally, to evaluate or assess something means to measure its parameters and compare them according with certain standards. Dealing with universities is no different. The parameters are called in this case 'performance indicators'. So far, so good, but the next inner questions that may arise in this context are *what are these indicators* and *what really do they indicate*. If in the business environment when talking about performance indicators everybody has a common representation of profitability, in the academia we can find many different representations and interpretations. In compliance with the textbook definition, quality indicators are designed to measure the degree of implementation and efficiency of a quality management system in a HEI. In short, they measure quality. But this seems already highly paradoxical, since one aims to measure *quantitatively* the quality of an institution.

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

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

In a sense, all of us have a certain idea of what quality means, the hard part comes when we have to identify exactly what confers quality to an educational product or process. The problem gets even more complicated, depending whether we consider education an outcome or a process, or both. Even though this distinction is very important we do not want to tackle it here and thus we shall make a step further, and cross over this point by asking the following questions: What quality assurance indicators cannot measure? What does fall out when evaluating the quality of an educational system? What they cannot really measure is the existence of a **culture of quality**. What does this mean?

### 3. Quality Culture

So far, we have discussed the formal and more technical image of quality assurance and it is time for quality culture to enter into the scene since it had been proved to be equally relevant to the issue, providing a more comprehensive approach for organizational development. Measurement and control techniques still remain the pillars of the quality management system, yet they are not quality generators *per se*. The existence of a quality culture in a higher education institution presupposes, at different levels of interferences and development, (at least) three important aspects: the commitment of the central management<sup>7</sup>, the awareness of all participants and the existence of an efficient evaluation system.

In addition, a quality culture in HEIs reflects not only an orientation towards the needs of its

<sup>6</sup> In original: „Calitatea în sensul cel mai general al termenului, reprezintă unul dintre cele mai importante instrumente reglatoare ce acționează asupra instituțiilor de învățământ superior, independent de celelalte variabile de mediu care acționează asupra sistemului”, p. 45.

<sup>7</sup> For more on the role of university management and quality culture, see Gordon (2002).

stakeholders, but also an internality that supports its staff in the fulfillment of their duties.<sup>8</sup> But still, what is meant by *quality culture*? In short, the philosophy of quality culture could be expressed by the following:

*To write down everything you do, and to do all you have written.*<sup>9</sup>

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

An evaluation focuses primarily on the first component, on the *documentation* of the institution, and the second, the *implementation* of the procedures, if wanted, could be easily mimed in the case of an evaluation. Yet, exactly the second part accounts for the inner life of an institution. This particular ingredient indicates the existence of a *quality culture*. Employing a trivial example, it is like cooking. The recipe acts as a procedure that has to be followed. Tasting the food from time to time has as counterpart the periodical inner and/or external evaluations of the institution, evaluations which provide an essential feed-back in order to adjust and improve the quality. But does following closely a recipe provide enough assurance and predictability that the meal would be good? In a sense, yes, it means that the food will be good, but here good it is not good enough, and what we need is excellence. But good food means that it is eatable, whereas an excellent one means much more, and this 'much more' does not appear in any recipe, it is not captured by any procedure. What is lacking in this case is exactly the skill that makes someone an excellent cook. That means to know very well the system. Moreover, it means to know how to adjust its parameter in order to provide a better outcome. This is the real mark of the existence of a quality culture: both the desire and the knowledge of how to obtain quality. We could perhaps go further and emphasize the need for changing attitudes and convictions in the way we perceive evaluations and assessments. At an operational level we have to focus on finding the adequate answer to the question of reframing them as feedback oriented processes and important catalysts for quality and organizational development.

#### 4. An Instance of a Quality Evaluation – The Case of UB

The University of Bucharest faced this year an important quality evaluation done by ARACIS<sup>10</sup>. The evaluation focused on the university management at various levels, including the university as a whole and its administrative departments, as well as undergraduate<sup>11</sup> programs at all its nineteen faculties.

Using a bottom-up approach, we will start by providing a suggestive instance of a very common dysfunction of HEIs. The evaluators asked for example our department<sup>12</sup> to provide an indicator concerning the ratio of professors to students. We asked the General Secretariat to provide us such information, but their answer was negative: they could not offer us such ratio. We turn then to the Human Resources Department, but again the result was negative. The impasse was evident. What can be done in such cases? We contacted again the General Secretariat and asked them to provide us the total number of students; we got it very quickly. We asked then Human Resources to provide us the number of professors and we got it without any problem. The happy ending was provided by the Quality Management Department that made a simple arithmetical calculation and obtained the required ratio.

<sup>8</sup> Yorke (2000).

<sup>9</sup> A similar approach may be found in McGhee (2003), p. 1: "Write down what you are trying to do and check periodically that you are doing it."

<sup>10</sup> Romanian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (in original: *Agenția Romană pentru Asigurarea Calității în Învățământul Superior*)

<sup>11</sup> An evaluation of its graduate programs has been done separately.

<sup>12</sup> The Quality Management Department of The University of Bucharest

The moral of this story is obvious: confronted with the specific requirements of an evaluation, we discovered a lack of communication among the departments of our university. It seems that they do not use the benefic practice of sharing information and, in fact, we discover a lack of transparency. In the attempt of being vigilant to the contemporary business approaches, we can also say that we find ourselves in a context that lacks organizational synergy. To illustrate this point we can use the classical example of Adam Smith in his famous work “The Wealth of Nations”, analyzing the 18th century pin factory: 10 workers, by dividing up their various tasks associated with making pins, were able collectively to produce about 48,000 pins per day. He opined that if each of them were to work alone, doing all of the tasks independently, it was unlikely that in any given day the factory would be able to produce even a single pin per worker. Doubtless, the previous case seems to have a different specific historical explanation but at a conceptual level we find a similar kind of rigidity in drawing invisible lines between the departments of the same unit. This stands also in apparent contrast with the concept of ‘internal client’ promoted by all quality systems: seeing your work colleagues as providers or client depending on their position on the value chain. Needless to say that transparency and enhancing quality work hand-in-hand, and they increase the capability of the institution to adapt to and solve new challenges and changes.

Another negative aspect that came out during the same quality evaluation was what we may call *The Ivory Tower Symptom*, a very enlightening metaphor especially in the present knowledge based society and economy. In our case, it basically reflects the tendency of most UB professors to consider that their main task is only to teach and research, while administrative work is not part of their current duties, and, accordantly, it should be charged extra. But is this right? For instance a normal contract of a tenured North American professor stipulates the following duties: 35% - *Teaching*, 35% - *Research* and 30% - *Administrative work*. We consider that as an important aspect of our academic life, and we think that it should be a mandatory requirement for all faculty members to provide some administrative work. Certainly, most administrative work<sup>13</sup> is highly time-consuming, yet it should be done by someone, for otherwise the institution could not function properly. The hard truth of the matter is that administrative duties are somehow the binding between all the elements of the systems. Teaching and research activities are, in most cases, oriented only towards one group of interest: students in the first situation, and a broad national and international auditorium in the second one. Of course, we can admit the existence of cooperation, with a teaching assistant or with a research team but the area still remains quite restricted, compared to the university as a living and interconnected social organism. From this perspective it is worth stating that involvement in the daily activities, at different levels and structures should be regarded as a necessary condition of evolution and progress. The sufficient condition in this case is given by the fact that involving all members of a department in academic work will certainly increase their awareness and capacity to provide quality. Quality means feedback and consciousness, but quality means also teamwork and coordination. Certainly, it is very important to provide increase the quality of our teaching and research, and in this case administrative work acts as a burden, which distract us from the real stuff, yet, when discussing about the quality assurance at the level of the whole institution, administrative work is essential. If one weights the pros and the cons of the case, one soon realizes that things resumes, on the one hand, in prioritizing the important and urgent activities, on a tactical level and a small time horizon, and on the other hand, in following the mission and objectives stated in the university strategy.

We have chosen to present first the negative aspects not because we are negativist but because their acknowledgement and the feedback received from the evaluation team are essential in order to expand the numerous positive elements of our university, especially the ones regarding the teaching and research activities. The whole point of QA is exactly to identify the weak spots of the system, and to find the adequate means to change the situation. Therefore, the identification of the mistakes is the first crucial step; the second is the implementation of the most appropriate means in order to

<sup>13</sup> What is meant here is not administrative work done by people working in the administrative compartments of the university, but the administrative work done or which should be done by the professors themselves.



better modify the system. Usually, for instance in the ISO terminology of QA, this is seen as a four step process: Plan-Do-Check-Act. We prefer to conceptualize it in a two step process, since both pairs ‘plan’ and ‘check’, and ‘do’ and ‘act’ have substantial overlapping zone. Anyway, what is important is not how many steps we see in the process, but to have an effective process, namely, based on certain feedback to be able to adjust correctly the system.

Now, let us say few words about our good practices. The self-evaluation process of UB, as an introductory step of the institutional evaluation, gave a good starting point for the evaluation team. The statistical data and the descriptive information for each faculty had represented a very valuable resource, offering a broad image of the dynamics of people and processes. The systemic complexity of UB – 19 faculties with different profiles and orientations–encompassing the major fields of teaching and research was recognized both as an asset in the national landscape, as well as a big challenge in running the system at its full potential of interdisciplinary and collaboration.

A special attention was given to the informational, technological and communicational resources. There were identified and appreciated some good practices regarding the learning facilities, transparency of information regarding courses and interactive relations between professors and students, in the virtual environment. As a signal of the increasing preoccupation for this area, the Faculty of Sociology and Social Work, in collaboration with the Quality Management Department performed a research study<sup>14</sup> on the use of this type of resources of UB’s students. The results confirmed the progress made in last period but of course there is still room for many improvements.

The focus on quality and internationalization was positively scored both from the perspective of the significant number of international partnerships, collaboration agreements and student’s mobility, as well as regarding the great efforts conducted to create an awareness sentiment for quality assurance procedures and quality culture climate.

## 5. Post Evaluation

From the communication theory’s point of view, the post-evaluation stage is a crucial one that cannot be ignored in any context, being responsible for “closing the loop”. At this point of the process we have to be able to transform the data obtained from the evaluation activities into specific, realistic and applicable initiatives that will enhance the quality of teaching, research and administrative activities.

In this regard, after the evaluation, the collaborative initiatives became more intense, especially between the science faculties – Mathematics, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics – with respect to the idea of creating some integrative departments, with a more clear focus on research activities in interdisciplinary fields of interest. As expected, the transformation path will not be an easy one, but the evaluation process served also a starting point in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of each actor involved. Also, it was a good opportunity of sharing and discussing ideas with our colleagues, especially with the evaluators that have a recognized expertise in their fields, and also the experience of many evaluated subjects.

Another follow-up evaluation action, this time concerning the role of creativity in building excellence, was the launching of an internal competition between faculties, at the level of their undergraduate programs of study. The topic was how such a program can be improved with the help of new technologies, in terms of learning outcomes. The idea has had many positive echoes from the academics side, and we are optimistic that even if it will be only one, two or three awarded projects, the rest of them will generate a positive wave of renewing practices and also a search for funds and external research projects for materializing them.

Expanding what we can learn from this experience it would also be interesting to take in consideration a deeper analysis of what services can or should be externalized and what services can

<sup>14</sup> The research study “*Utilization of technical and communicational resources in the University of Bucharest - Internal Report, 2009*” was a first attempt in offering a reliable base for drawing future strategies and policies regarding the information technology infrastructure. Also, it represents a good overview of the student’s attitudes and expectations regarding the above mentioned issues.

or should be better internalized. Maybe this is a bold scenario in the terms of our actual stage of evolution and development regarding HEI, but in terms of efficacy and efficiency of the university we consider that a better allocation of scarce resources should deserve a better look and a specific and separate evaluation.

## 6. Conclusions and Future Research

The declarative aim of quality evaluations in higher education is to maintain and to increase the quality of teaching and research activities but also at the level of administrative departments. Promoting a greater responsibility and accountability and a competitive place in the international academic arena are also included in the strategic set of objectives. These are very impressing and complex targets and so it is the evaluation of the degree of accomplishment achieved through the evaluation. It is difficult to believe that we can design such a perfect methodological instrument of evaluation that will include such a great number of dependent and independent variables that affect the educational process and organization of HEI. Moreover, even if we situated ourselves in a very optimistic scenario regarding the evaluation tool, it is even more foolish to think that this will act as a magic wand. In other words, an evaluation process is more or less another variable that can influence the higher education system in pushing it forward or pulling it backwards. However, what we can do is to adjust the parameters in order to minimize or maximize the impact.

One can totally agree that for the purpose of having a functional system is essential that the findings and recommendations of the evaluation to be further cornerstones of the drafting of new strategic documents such as the operational plans and the UB strategy for the next academic year. The critical challenge for quality assurance processes is how to prove themselves as activities which demonstrably adds value to institutional activities and how to become an inherent natural “trophic chain” in the life of a HEI.

An essential remark regarding quality culture is that it requires a good coordination: *horizontally*, a better coordination and collaboration between academic and administrative departments; *vertically*, a better coordination and communication between central management and its local counterpart. By and large, our understanding of the ways **to enhance quality assurance** in a higher education institution has to main points:

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

Many important researches have indicated<sup>15</sup> that in the knowledge society creativity is one of the keys in solving the issues stated above, and it could play an interesting role in helping university overcoming the black and white paradigm of seeing things. Thus, the emerging agenda should take in consideration to put a growing emphasis over factors like cross-cultural communication, the importance of multicultural environment or the role of design and aesthetics. In addition, a creative approach would be closely linked to the concept of an entrepreneurial university which continuously tries to enhance its functioning through its different components.

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<sup>15</sup> The METRIS Report (2009)



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