

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Quality Assurance Challenges in Higher Education in Central-Eastern Europe

Iván Zádori

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education, Vol. 7, No. 1, 2017, pp. 13 – 24

Publicat de: Agenția Română de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior - ARACIS

Locul publicării: București, România

Tipul publicației: tipărit, online

ISSN: 2066 - 9119, 2069 - 2188 (online)

Adresa: Bd. Mărăști, nr. 59, Sector 1, București, cod poștal 011464

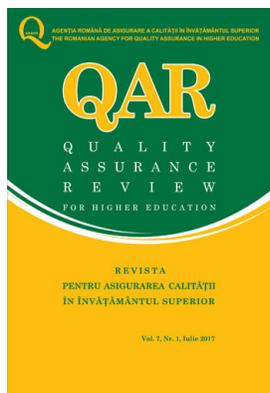
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Pagină electronică: <http://www.aracis.ro/en/publicatii/qar-magazine/numarul-curent/>

Revista *Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education* este editată din fondurile proprii ale ARACIS și, în această etapă, contribuie și la sustenabilitatea proiectului „Dezvoltarea și consolidarea culturii calității la nivelul sistemului de învățământ superior românesc - QUALITAS”, Contract POSDRU/155/1.2/S/141894.

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Published by: The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ARACIS

Place of publication: Bucharest, Romania

Publication type: printed, online

ISSN: 2066 - 9119, 2069 - 2188 (online)

Address: Bd. Mărăști, no. 59, sector 1, Bucharest, Romania, postal code 011464

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Web page: <http://www.aracis.ro/en/publications/qar-magazine/current-issue/>

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education is edited from ARACIS own funds and, at this stage, also contributes to the sustainability of the project “The development and the consolidation of quality culture at Romanian higher education system – QUALITAS”, POSDRU Agreement 155/1.2/S/141894.

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Abstract

Evaluation processes have started to become a “normal” part of operation of higher education institutions in Central-Eastern Europe in the last decades. If we examine higher education institutions in this region of Europe, there are several institutions where operations are in a very high level with permanent evaluation and improvement processes of programs, quality management, human resources management and economic activity, but of course there are some universities where there are plenty of things missing and the improvement of quality assurance is relatively low. This paper, beside the need and importance of quality assurance in higher education, is focusing on the emerging issues, experiences and future challenges of quality assurance in Central-Eastern Europe and also tries to find answers for the basic question how these activities could contribute to the improvement of the normal, everyday operation of organizations, and future success of higher education institutions in this part of Europe.

Keywords: *Central-Eastern Europe, higher education, quality assurance challenges*

Background

In Central-Eastern Europe there are many similarities in higher education. Countries of the region basically face the same or very similar challenges: challenges of political changes of the 1990s, challenges of the transition economy and challenges of social changes, globalization and European integration. If we are focusing on higher education, in the 1990s there was a relatively wide expansion of education institutions and educational programs, due to the fact that there was a great need for certain competences reflecting market economy conditions in these countries that was missing from the earlier educational supply. Beside the state funded higher education institutions with non-profit character, market actors have also appeared in picture as private providers of higher education, everywhere in Central-Eastern

European Countries (CEEC). Just an example: in post-1989 Romania there were 46 higher education institutions in the country and this number became three times bigger in few years, as well as the number of students which increased significantly. In the new circumstances the role of quality assurance has become more and more important and the processes regarding the establishment of internal and external quality evaluation mechanisms or establishing quality assurance structures has started in some CEE countries without much delay. The fact that the importance and intensity of these activities increased, the on-going progress and the organizational culture of evaluation processes have not been perfect in every situation. This certainly means that, because of the periodical nature of evaluation in a given period of time, there is an urgent pressure on higher education institutions to consider with care the activities related to external evaluation of quality assurance, from internal paperwork, site visit of experts, communication with agency etc. until the final result of the exercise. When the process is over, many higher education institutions feel they could “relax” for a while, namely for the next few years. This kind of attitude certainly does not lead to the evolution and development of real organizational culture of quality at universities, besides the fact that institutions permanently have to face economic, social and environmental challenges, so there is a continuous adaptation pressure for quality assurance processes to adjust to the changes.

Experiences

I have a dual experience in connection with higher education quality assurance: on one hand I have been invited as an external evaluator for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) many times in the last few years. Participation in these evaluation processes is a unique opportunity to follow quality assurance processes in Romania and have an insight to the continuous improvement of quality and development processes and the main dimensions of present and future challenges of the Romanian higher education. During my visits to other higher education institutions of the Central-Eastern European Region, the quality assurance way of thinking I have learnt during the evaluation processes helped me to get a general overview of the operation of these universities. On the other hand, as a vice dean, earlier responsible for Finance, and now responsible for Foreign Affairs at the University of Pécs, Hungary I have relatively appropriate information about the “other side”: how a university and other university units make attempts to deal with the challenges of evaluation and quality assurance in the everyday operation of an institution.

According to the nature of self-evaluation processes, generally speaking, strategic objectives of higher education institutions are in order, most of them are focusing on the maintenance of the present favorable position and provide future development with improving institutional quality and management, teaching and learning environment, ensuring a high quality level of education that meets the needs of the students. As well as the managerial structures of higher education

institutions, departments, centres and other organizational units of the institutions have a transparent, logical structure and they are suited for the correct management processes of the organization. The operation of the institutions relies on a system of regulations, procedures and tools covering the whole set of university life, parallel with the permanent evaluation and improvement of the different types of programs, quality management, human resources management and economic activity. The academic staff of the institutions is both academically and professionally highly qualified and has proper competencies, qualifications, and academic degrees which results in a good level of performance in teaching and research as well. The financial situation is relatively stable, number of students, educational programs, competences and qualifications, public transparency and social responsibility are considered at appropriate levels.

But if we look behind the curtain, we could relatively easily identify the challenges and problems these institutions face. One of the most important challenges is the institutional-financial sustainability that provides the required resources for the activities of the institution. This is a rather important challenge as most of the higher education institutions and organizations are financed and maintained by the state. The financial resources coming from the governmental sector are usually not in a stable level, which results in a permanent adaptation process, financial instability and insecurity, and sometimes unpredictable situations, that could jeopardise the normal operation of the given organization. If the above mentioned stable circumstances are not given, the institutions have to develop different types of surviving strategies (often instead of strategic planning) to ensure the normal operation and services. If the way of finance is not changing, universities should pay much more attention to fundraising, projects or any other opportunities that could result in extra budget incomes. It is a big question that the available human resources, knowledge and competencies are suitable for producing these outside resources or not. In most of the cases (especially in Hungary) there are many institutions that lack these competencies and those colleagues who are forced to produce extra budget incomes or forced to participate in projects sometimes do not have proper knowledge and these activities are only manageable at the expense of their normal, everyday work. On the other hand, the result is often that several “university” processes and project activities have basically no connexion with the academic world.

In an optimal situation, the financial background is stable and predictable, the institutions have enough resources to purchase these competencies from the market. Available resources are also affected by demographic processes, and demographical loops which influence the number of students, institutional capacity, human and financial resources as well. There were, and there are certain periods when higher education is among the priorities of the state and financial resources are available for the normal operation of higher education institutions. There are some situations when these preferences are changing and higher education institutions, parallel with the traditional role of the universities like knowledge

transfer, creating next elite-generation, satisfying the needs of the labour market, research, academic activities are forced to produce extra budget incomes from the market, from projects that institutions use to finance the everyday operation. The big question is if universities are forced to deal with these challenges or not? Are they forced to produce money and reach a certain level of self-financing, instead of being financed by the state? And, anyway, what is the exact role of the state in this process? Most of the times, state universities have to adapt their activities to these changes, changes in the funding policies, strategies, or techniques of the state, centralization or decentralization processes in the name of anything, and in some situations, like in Hungary in the last few years, the changing level of autonomy as well.

It is also important to point out that in case of public and private universities there are great differences in finance, resources, motivation, scientific research, teaching, administration, fundraising and competences, and this is a very important aspect in Romania, where there are still relatively many private institutions which operate in the country.

There are certain situations in Central-Eastern Europe where the infrastructural background is simply not appropriate for a more sustainable operation since the buildings are old, the utilities are from the 20th century or even earlier periods: in this situation the remodelling, rebuilding is only feasible from outside (mainly governmental) resources. These outside funds are depending on the actual (political) preferences that cannot affect all institutions at the same level at the same time. In a newly built infrastructure it has to be a crucial priority to create and develop proper conditions for sustainable resource management and the state has to try for working up strategies to deal with sustainability challenges of the old infrastructural conditions as well.

According to the sustainable focus in the everyday operation, the second important field for organizations is the sustainable resource management (utilities, waste, renewable resources) that also could be a substantial priority if the management and colleagues deal with these areas and prefer sustainable solutions in resource management. Despite the fact that public service organizations and higher education institutions use very different resources, there are significant differences and many various approaches in connection with sustainability. The most often appearing activities could be the next:

- starting energy saving programs;
- using renewable energy;
- sustainable waste management;
- using sustainable development strategies;
- becoming self-sufficient institutions;
- minimizing environmental impacts of the institution;
- intensifying public engagement.

According to the OVHR-model values (Zádori-Nemeskéri-Seböck, 2016) are mainly about internal efficiency that leads to significant improvements in the efficiency of public services and designing service processes to produce maximum value for end-users by rethinking the existing organizational culture to satisfy the needs of them. By understanding the importance of the above mentioned fields we presume that higher education institutions are appropriate structures for setting examples, best practices, good patterns and precedents for the public.

To implement and realize a realistic and effective quality assurance in higher education, the most important factors could be the next:

- universities have to be proactive and have to pay enough attention to the permanent changes (number of students, financial stability, changing needs of the potential students etc.);
- universities permanently have to invest in the physical and human infrastructure and facilities when own resources, state support or any other funds allow;
- universities have to create and ensure the possibility of academic career, personal goals beside organizational goals;
- universities have to exploit more intensively the potential of the teachers and students by offering more educational programs, scientific and cultural events for the public;
- universities permanently have to manage their national and international partnerships and connexions, and should establish new partnerships with institutions, associations, companies;
- for national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields, higher education institutions have to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment;
- internal quality assurance and evaluation has to function as a real process, not just a required activity for accreditation and external evaluation;
- place of quality assurance within the organization has to be clear;
- universities have to deal with social responsibility, as the third mission of higher education institutions;
- universities have to reduce the existing gaps between the missions, objectives, strategies and practices, in everyday operation;
- universities have to keep their autonomy and independence;
- parallel with traditional roles, universities have to adapt to the new needs of the students where permanent improvement of quality has to be in focus; keep in mind that adaptation needs flexibility and investment in human capital;
- universities have to find their competitive factors with specialization and have to define and find the role and the place in the local and international market.

Emerging Issues

Global economic, social and environmental processes of the second half of the 20th century have resulted in more and more intensive efforts in different fields and different levels to react to the challenges and negative feedbacks of the activities of humankind and lead to rethink the role, purpose and aims of the education all over the world. These learning processes could produce informed and active citizens who are able to solve the problems with creativity, who understand the working mechanisms of nature and the environment, society, law and the economy, understand the connections between these elements and make responsible decisions in their individual and public actions. The worldwide experiences of global education show that there have been several global, regional and local attempts, activities, programs with the participation of different stakeholders of market forces, governmental and nongovernmental actors, formal and non-formal education institutions. The main goal of these activities has been to prepare students at every stage of life for responsible actions, focusing on learning for peace, democracy, active citizenship and responsibility, intercultural learning, learning for sustainability, environmental education, with using the holistic, interdisciplinary and cross-cultural aspects of learning. The quality assurance related to the challenges and effects of these tendencies in a more and more globalized world for teaching and learning processes could be the next:

Foreign students

Globalization is strengthening the mobility of students, all around the world. This special market seems an important priority for the universities of the region that results in many foreign language educational programs on different fields. It is also possible that this new direction becomes a strategic priority of a state: in Hungary, in the framework of Stipendium Hungaricum Scholarship Program, thousands of foreign students enter and learn in Hungarian higher education institutions. In this year, 53 sending partner countries are engaged in the program from 4 different continents. With the number of Stipendium Hungaricum applicants, the number of available scholarship places is also increasing. In the academic year 2017/2018 approximately 4000 students can begin their studies in Hungary in the framework of the Stipendium Hungaricum Program.¹ Stipendium Hungaricum scholarships are available for bachelor, master, one-tier master, doctoral and non-degree programs (preparatory and specialisation courses), depending on the sending partner country's educational program interest.²

¹ More information about Stipendium Hungaricum Program: <http://www.tka.hu/new/6984/stipendium-hungaricum-call-for-application-2017-2018>

² It is also important to note that these scholarship programs in certain fields offer better conditions than Hungarian students have.

Of course, this new strategic orientation in Central-Eastern European higher education institutions results in a relatively strong competition in the region and not every university has the same possibilities and educational supply to attract these students. If a university decides to expand foreign language activities, it is also important to know our students, markets, market needs and motivations learning abroad to develop high level educational programs. Beside some very highly ranked universities, most of the students are not the best of the best and have lower financial background than those who attend Western European or American universities. On the other hand, quality assurance needs very much this field as well, and this is not just about appropriate curriculums and the foreign language skills of the staff, but also about the services and service providers at every stage of a university operation. In those countries affected intensively by migration³ it is also an important question that what kind of steps higher education should take and how these challenges will reflect in the next years.

Flexibility of educational programs

Higher education has to reflect to the changing needs of the potential students. In the 21st Century the traditional, normal, formal education of the 20th Century seems to change radically. If a higher education institution wants to attract students, it also has to deal with the atypical needs of the target groups, and this often results in more flexible educational programs (less contact hours, consultations at weekends, e-learning and distance learning methods, blended learning, validation, adult education programs, experimental learning etc.). This flexibility becomes more and more important in higher education, although universities should avoid the over-flexibility of educational programs just because of the need of increasing incomes, and also have to avoid becoming paper factories. Of course, there are some cases when this flexibility is not possible because of the legal background, although if certain circumstances exist, more students will enter to the higher education system. Flexible education also means that curriculums reflect to the permanently changing economic, social and environmental challenges and the present needs of the labour market, parallel with satisfying the needs for global competencies, global education, global citizenship education (not just language competences!).

E-learning challenges

E-learning could also be an important diversification path for universities, although to achieve this aim institutions have to rethink their normal educational activities and have to change the traditional knowledge transfer methods as well. With the spread of MOOCs (massive open online courses) in more developed

³ Due to the lower economic performance, in this moment Central-Eastern European countries are usually not target countries for migrant groups.

parts of the world, open online courses have appeared in the region too. Some universities consider e-learning programs as a new strategic orientation, others just test the potential market with different types of electronic teaching and learning. On one hand, nobody knows exactly how this new type of learning would transform the traditional academic world in the next years. On the other hand, to develop a good electronic program, universities have to learn a lot. It is relatively easy, to say, to start an e-learning program or course, but this certainly does not only requires a pdf-file on the website- time, money, energy, and a new way of thinking is needed to create efficient online educational programs, parallel with the task how higher education institutions could make money from these programs.

Cooperation, educational partnerships

For national and international visibility and recognition on scientific, educational and other fields higher education institutions have to develop connections with its academic and social-economic environment. To establish connections, partnerships, develop research and exchange programs, participate in events and conferences abroad, and publish scientific results in foreign periodicals are certainly traditional ways for cooperation. Beside these activities and institutional prestige, it is also important to meet the needs of the students, and develop dual degree/joint degree programs or establish other educational connexions with other universities that could be very attractive for those students who are seeking international experiences, language skills and would like to know other parts of the world as well. In the European Higher Education Area this way of cooperation is relatively easy if international cooperation is in focus and universities have the financial background to maintain, manage or develop these connections, although there are countries (like Hungary), where legal background and local regulations, often in the name of quality assurance, doesn't guarantee the smooth way of developing educational partnerships and cooperation.⁴ Dual degree/joint degree programs could be especially important at master level, due to the fact that in some countries (like in Hungary) the number of students at master level is decreasing (after bachelor level many students want to work and earn money) and several potential students prefer foreign master study programs instead of national ones. If universities want to reflect to these trends, they have to satisfy this need with attractive supply where students have the possibility to spend some time abroad. Universities also should focus more intensively to the incoming and outgoing students, and should intensify student mobility, if students are partners in taking advantages of these programs.

⁴ In these days it is also possible, in Hungary, that for political reasons, with changing the higher education law, Hungarian Government limits the operation of an American-Hungarian university (CEU – Central European University).

New generations

To teach new generations, new set of tools are needed, traditional learning is changing. Digital competences become key competences (Cseh-Egervári-Horváth-Pankász-Szebenyi-Szellő-Zádori-Nemeskéri, 2017), and universities have to change the traditional way of knowledge transfer (for example, how many books and traditional libraries are needed in the 21st Century?), and of course, teaching staff also has to adapt to these changes and has to use the technology of the information society. New generations probably are going to face the growing global economic, social and environmental problems. To prepare them for these challenges, new knowledge elements are needed and universities could play a crucial role in this knowledge transfer. There are also new groups that are in focus parallel with the traditional markets (senior generation, high-school students, adult learning, nonformal education, study tour, short cycle programs etc.). To attract new generations, innovations, experience learning, new forms and types of education are needed.⁵

Spin-off in higher education

In the second half of the 20th century, world economy did undergo a transformation which resulted in higher appreciation of knowledge. As one of the sources of training human resources, universities gained a new role besides education and research, namely to improve the economy.⁶ Based on successful knowledge transfer and spin-off activity, any university in any region can become the main accelerator of economic growth. The number of spin-offs is also related to fame and researcher excellence. A famous university with long traditions may convince outstanding researchers more easily than smaller or mediocre universities, and such concentration of human resources combined with good opportunities may result in spin-off activity which is high quality and intensive (Horváth, 2016). Countries of the Western world are clearly in a better position compared to Central-Eastern Europe, considering governmental provisions, regional opportunities, entrepreneurial affinity and availability of venture capital alike. Historical disadvantages in Central-Eastern Europe can only be counterweighed through long-lasting and hard work. Benchmarking of best practices is necessary, but only if they are adaptable to the local environment. For example, in Hungary there is a lack of ongoing and predictable support mechanism that can be found in

⁵ There are many interesting examples from all over the world, like Semester at Sea. This study abroad program founded in 1963, and now Colorado State University is the current academic sponsor of the program. <http://www.semesteratsea.org/>

⁶ According to the fact that university spin-off processes, after other, more developed parts of the world, become more and more important in the Central European region as well, it is worth to insight to the Hungarian research results of Judit Bernadett Horvath (in English: Horvath, 2015a; Horvath, 2016; in Hungarian: Horváth, 2013, Horváth, 2015b; Horváth, 2015c and Horváth, 2017.)

Western cases and which supports continuous positive results of spin-offs in their different age cycles. Furthermore, an important task for universities and spin-off companies is to find and build productive relationships with venture capitalists. (Horváth, 2015a)

Conclusion

The 21st century seems to be the period of the knowledge-based economy and society. More and more people realize this all over the world from different points of view but one thing is common: people must keep up with the economic and social changes. To achieve the aims they have to improve their learning abilities, their capacity to transfer their skills into new areas, they have to be ready to work in various fields, and to accept that this process requires flexibility, adjustment, adaptivity and investment in human capital. Institutions need much more responsibility, responsiveness, flexibility, innovation and social entrepreneurship, institutional diversity and real culture of improving academic quality, because:

- it is good for the students, they could get real, useful knowledge and competences;
- it is a clear signal for the stakeholders and governmental bodies, to the external environment;
- it is good for the institution, especially if it is based on real strategic planning – where we were, where we are, what we want to do, what kind of resources we have, how we manage these resources, and what kind of objectives we want to reach?
- it can lead to a new culture of university research, teaching and learning;
- it could be an integral part of organizational culture of the academic world;
- higher education institutions have to be more sensitive towards students' needs and expectations;
- institutional diversification, specialization, new strategic orientation could stabilize university operation on a long run;
- if quality assurance became an integral part of the everyday operation of a higher education institution, external evaluation could be replaced by external assistance to help real institutional quality assurance;
- if higher education institutions want to reflect to the present challenges and want to give proper answers for the new needs, more flexible accreditation system is needed that helps institutions to develop new educational programs.

In permanently changing environmental and socioeconomic circumstances is very hard to forecast how we should manage and mediate university activities and what is exactly going to be useful in the future. The changes of the world are relatively fast, in most of the cases we are not able to see all the changes, we are not able to feel the real situations, and hardly can say what and how we have to react to reach better solutions. Permanent quality assurance approach in higher education could be one answer for these challenges.

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