CONTENTS

Introduction

This report:

1. Is about the ***academic quality and quality assurance mechanisms*** of higher education (HE), namely the relations between HE system objectives, academic activities and their corresponding results;

2. Proposes ***an analysis of the state of quality*** (ergo: not an analysis of its dynamics) in the higher education as a system[1], so that any reference to the HE institutions or to their relations are merely implicit;

3. Is based on ***subjective data,*** i.e. on statistical distributions of perceptions, opinions, beliefs and representations of students, academic staff and employers about the system's activities and results, as well as on ***objective data and information*** about system inputs, processes and outputs;

4. Makes ***comparisons*** between data and information about the Romanian HE system and other European higher education systems;

5. Identifies ***achievements and performances***, but also issues and critical concerns, all in order to open informed discussions on the future dynamics of higher education system and of its institutions, in a framework which is and aims to be as much European as possible.

This report proposes a **contextual framework** for further analysis and discussion. It intends to remain open to interpretation and in particular to generate new information and data to ground further rigorous arguments. For instance, next year we will focus on an institutional approach and on a new set of data and information in order to later have available longitudinal analyses, all associated to benchmarking procedures. Gradually, the references to contextualization will not only be national and static, but increasingly dynamic and explicitly European.

So far, this analysis and its public discussion are still fragile, especially since we can hardly meet a person not making assessments, be they informal, about the quality of higher education or of a university or a study program. Such assessments are often categorical and clear-cut, as if they were based on numerous local and international experiences and on the most objective information. Moreover, the meanings associated with academic quality are as numerous, as contextualized. Such impressionistic reference to academic quality in Romanian higher education has to be abandoned. One of the objectives of our report is to provide grounds to build a gradually emerging ***analytical framework***, to identify a common ***context of reference*** and provide a clear, distinct and carefully documented image of the ***academic quality*** in our higher education.

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1   The word „system", we use in association with „higher education" in this report, should be considered restrictively. It is no more than a way to refer to the higher education sector as a whole, and it is not intended to promote a „systemic" understanding of the education sector.

1. Quality Evaluation: A Contextual Approach

In building a foundation for discussions about academic quality, we start by considering a set of contexts. We should admit from the outset that there are multiple perspectives on academic quality, all depending on the contexts taken as a reference. For illustration, we propose in Figure 1 a representation of a multi-horizon context, which shows the key evaluation contexts considered, each of them being positioned along two lines of construction. On the horizontal line, with time references, there are positioned the three periods higher education went through after 1990 (corrective transition, transition towards a new equilibrium and the current period characterized by gaps and differences that demand for specific system adjustments and convergences). In addition, the horizontal line shows the transition from the internal to that external context which is the key generator of changes. On the vertical line, there are positioned sets of perceptions/ representations that correspond to the five main categories of stakeholders, particularly interested in higher education quality. The vertical line shows also that at least two types of macro-contexts can be built: a national context[2] and a European context of quality evaluation.

Let's say, again, that a multi-horizon context of quality evaluation in higher education is, after all, a subjective one, even if based on objective data. This subjectivity must be understood in terms of perceptions of different categories of stakeholders on education in general, and on the academic quality of HE study programs in particular. We also considered, of course, an objective contextual horizon, defined in terms related to general demographics and to higher education demographics, in particular, and to the public funding of universities. We also combine external with internal references, objective data with subjective variations in the perceptions of different categories of persons interested or directly involved in higher education. However, we do not plan in the future to combine a static analysis of academic quality with any macro-analysis of the society in which higher education operates. We leave to others such ambitions, and we limit ourselves to highlighting the subjective or objective attributes of the academic quality in the Romanian HE system, which could contribute to the development and improvement of a genuine *quality culture*.

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2   The context concept here concerns institutional objective arrangements which may contribute to the construction of the subjective perceptions of stakeholders with regard to the quality dimension of higher education.

Figure 1: Multicontextual horizon of quality evaluation in higher education
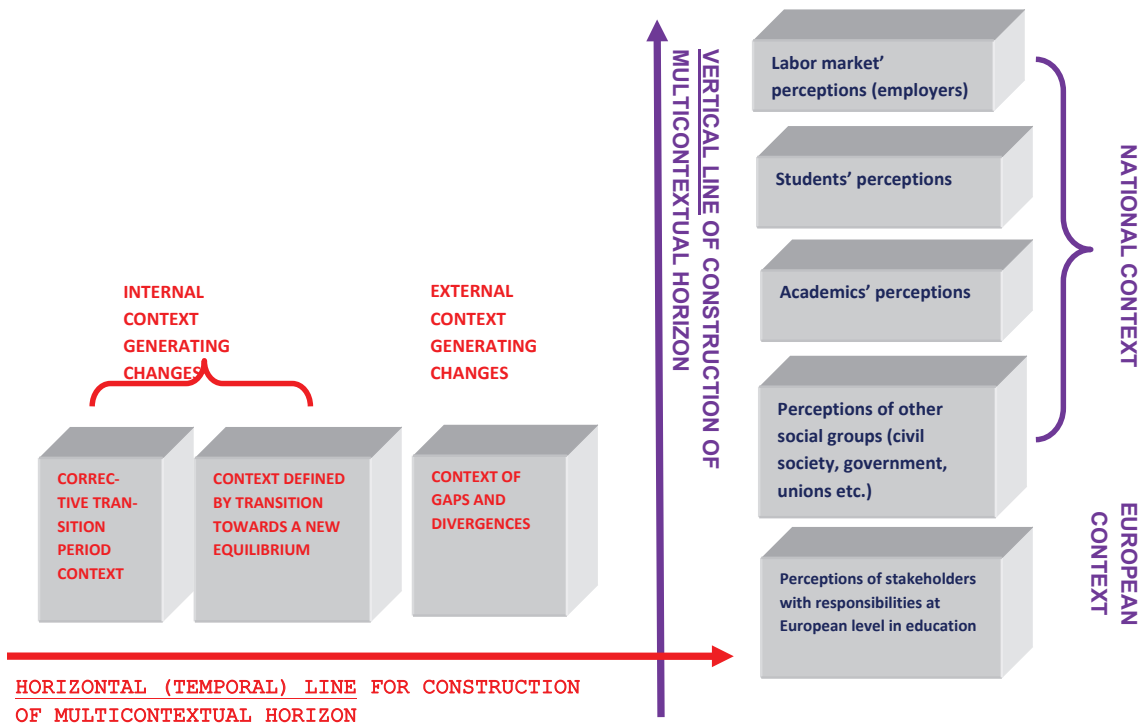
2. A Synthetic Image: Indicators and Scores at a Glance

Let us first make a synthetic presentation of the state of HE quality. The indicators selected to do so are presented below, together with their associated scores. The indicators are measured on a simple ordinal scale, each associated with three score levels: positive status ("green card"), moderate status ("yellow card") and negative status ("red card"). The association of scores to each of the proposed indicators is supported by the quantitative and qualitative data detailed in the report.

The first set of indicators (S1.2 – S1.10) is conceived in the context of Romania's participation in the Bologna Process. The selected indicators in this set correspond to the major objectives of the Bologna Process: organization of university studies in three cycles, recognition of diplomas, European student mobility etc. The second set of indicators (S2.1 – S2.10) regards the context resulting from the external (i.e.: extra-institutional) messages of the bodies involved in academic quality assurance. The indicators selected in this set are mostly about the relations between

students and their studies and about the perceived quality of HEIs educational offers. The third set of indicators (S3.1 – S3.23) regards various institutional aspects of the academic world, as perceived by employers, students and academics.

Set 2 of indicators measuring the status of higher education quality in terms of external quality assurance system (developed by ARACIS)

Code	Indicator Definition	Type
S2.1	Quality of Romanian universities measured by study destinations of foreign European students	Feedback
S2.2	Transparency of university education offers to students	Input
S2.3	Ratio between number of students and number of academic staff	Input
S2.4	Ratio between the number of students enrolled in the system and the number of graduates	Output/ outcome
S2.5	Participation in lifelong learning programs	Input
S2.6	Development of functional information systems for the collection, processing and reporting of quality assurance data at university level	Feedback
S2.7	Develop in universities student carrier and labor market guidance and counseling systems	Process
S2.8	University scientific research	Output/ outcome
S2.9	Operation of central university commissions for quality assessment and assurance	Feedback
S2.10	Acquire equipment for laboratories and classrooms	Input

Set 3 of indicators measuring the status of higher education quality in terms of main stakeholders perceptions (employers, faculty, students)

Code	Indicator Definition	Type
S3.1	Number of students continuing their studies in the university next cycle	Input
S3.3	Quality of organization of the learning process (academic staff perception)	Process
S3.4	Content quality of learning process (academic staff perception)	Process
S3.5	Academic staff perception regarding the existence of resources necessary in the learning process	Input
S3.6	Academic staff perception on the extent to which the faculty where they are teaching helps students to acquire the skills and competences they need to work	Output/ outcome
S3.7	Students perception on the extent to which the faculty where they study contributes to training graduates for the labor market	Output/ outcome
S3.8	Quality of learning process organization (student perception)	Process
S3.9	Quality of learning process content (student perception)	Process
S3.10	Quality of academic staff (student perception)	Input
S3.11	Existence of resources that students need in the learning process (student perception)	Input

S3.12	Student perception on the existence of available instruments in the academic departments in which they are studying to guide and prepare them for the labor market	Output/ outcome
S3.13	Student perception on the chances they have on the labor market as higher education graduates	Output/ outcome
S3.15	Quality level of university studies (employers perception)	Output/ outcome
S3.16	Student perception on the quality of the contribution of their academic department to the skills and competencies they need to work	Output/ outcome
S3.17	Student perception of the usefulness of their university degrees on the labor market	Output/ outcome
S3.18	Student perception of the degree of corruption in the faculty and university where they are studying	Process
S3.19	Student perception on the operation of the institutional communication channels in their faculties	Feedback
S3.20	Degree of implementation of course evaluation by students, according to academic staff	Feedback
S3.21	The degree of correlation between the qualities defined by the academic staff as important for employment and the skills defined by employers as important	Output/ outcome
S3.22	Student perception regarding the extent of corruption in the Romanian universities	Process
S3.23	Quality of education in the context of the Bologna system implementation (employers perception)	Input

Of the 40 selected indicators[3], 11 have obtained the "green" value, 14 the "red" value, and 15 the "yellow" value. Therefore, pushing ahead things, we may say that the quality of the Romanian higher education can be assessed as contextually and predominantly "moderate". However, such statement may be regarded as superficial, given the fact that the indicators which may seem really important in the current trends related to the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Agenda (the contribution of higher education to increased employability and economic development) were assessed as "red". In other words, quality dimensions such as the relationship between the labor market and the Romanian universities, and the content of the educational process have a "negative" score. As these indicators regard HE *results*, the conclusion may be rather alarming: ***unless introducing significant and rapid corrections in the HE system and in its universities, we risk having less efficient universities, more and more diplomas, less individual professional skills, and finally, a chronic lack of European competitiveness.***

These statement should, however, be considered with caution, given both the national socio-economic developments and those of the European Union, as well as the developments of the Bologna Process in the 46 participating countries. At the moment, we must accept an undeniable reality: the Lisbon Agenda's overall goals are not to be reached by 2010, and the Bologna Process is entering in 2010 in its second phase. Accordingly, the projections for higher education

3   The indicators presented in the three sets came out of a selection made among a much broader range of indicators. This is why the indicators are not given consecutive numbers.

cannot be of a deterministic type. For example, we can not yet offer documented answers to the question "what do economy and society expect from universities and their graduates?" The answer would probably have several known components, such as: "graduates to become good citizens in democratic societies, to develop their personality, to learn and master foreign languages, to master computing and communication techniques etc."; but the answer may also have insufficiently grounded components, regarding issues like: "which economic areas need us to prepare graduates for in terms of their individual professional skills and how will the demand for such graduates evolve over time on the labor market; what is the labor market we refer to in Romania in the context of globalization; which are those areas in which research should be stimulated in conjunction with social and economic demand etc." Unfortunately, remedial actions taken at the university level, in the absence of answers to such questions, would significantly disrupt an already disturbed system, without solving anything! The most striking example is in the health field, where Romanian recently graduating doctors and nurses find easily work in countries like France, Italy, etc. This situation is seen in Romania as exclusively due to the State's incapacity to providing them with jobs leading to material and professional satisfaction, and not as a proof that the medical staffing issue was not actually resolved. The situation in France, Italy or Portugal is different, as for instance in Portugal the rural areas are largely covered with naturalized Brazilian doctors.

Let's refer from another perspective to the three sets of indicators, as outlined above. They can be organized, in terms of their institutional relevance, in three categories: inputs, processes and results. Following such reading, the academic quality of university programs can be summarized as follows:

Quality Indicators Matrix[4]

INPUT INDICATORS			PROCESS INDICATORS				OUTPUT/ OUTCOME AND FEEDBACK INDICATORS	
S3.1							S3.20	S3.21
S1.2							S3.19	S2.9
S1.3	S3.10						S3.16	S2.6
S1.4	S1.7	S2.2					S3.12	S1.9
S1.5	S1.8	S2.3	S3.3	S3.8	S2.7		S3.13	S2.1
S1.6	S2.10	S2.5	S3.4	S3.9	S1.10		S3.15	S2.4
S3.5	S3.11	S3.23	S3.7	S3.18	S3.22	S3.6	S3.17	S2.8

Positive status of the quality indicator
Moderate status of the quality indicator
Negative status of the quality indicator

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4   The function of this matrix is descriptive, in that it shows the distribution of indicators in the three categories of quality status: positive, negative and moderate. In other words, it is an alternative way to re-sume/to re-think the three sets of indicators presented earlier in a matrix type sequence.

The quality indicators which have most often obtained a "positive value" (green) are those of an input type (entries into the system). This indicates a ***general concern that regards the higher education system's capacity of meeting certain quality values: it is better suited to face inputs demands and less so in meeting outcomes demands.*** The quality of higher education, in terms of results, seems to be rather poor: out of the 15 outcome type indicators, 7 take negative values, 7 take a moderate value, and only one takes a positive value. It seems that we are still mostly concerned with input values in the system, but without targeting effective and well defined results.

There is at least one explanation to ground this general concern, still mostly focused on satisfying input values indicators. It is an institutional explanation stating that the earlier assessment methodologies, established in the 1990s by the former quality and accreditation agency (CNEAA), saw quality in relation to the institutional compliance with some rules which first of all required the achievement of certain entry requirements (student admission to study programs; ratio between the number of students and the number of teachers; availability of certain material resources etc.). The inertia regarding the academic quality evaluation, derived from the past methodology, is still present today. This particular form of quality understanding and evaluation (which mainly values the matching with input indicators) diverges from the form of understanding and assessing academic quality in terms of learning and institutional outcomes, already existing in the present ARACIS methodology and dominant in the ENQA and EQAR systems: the quality of higher education is considered in particular against the degree of achievement of output indicators. Achieving the minimum performance level indicators of inputs is only one condition, necessary and assumed from the beginning[5], as it is, but far from being sufficient.

After this summary, let us further proceed to a detailed presentation.

3. The Bologna Process

At the European level, in the context of the Bologna Process implementation, Romanian higher education has positive feedbacks and a good image. According to the Bologna Process Stocktaking Report (prepared for the Ministerial Conference in Leuven, 2009), our country has achieved a grade of "excellent performance" for 8 out of the 12 indicators measuring the degree of implementation of the Bologna Process.[6] Among the quality indicators with the most

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5   For instance, in Great Britain, the input indicators are organized in a set of benchmarks known as Academic Infrastructure. Any higher education institution in the UK (England, Northern Ireland and Wales) must meet the requirements of Academic Infrastructure in order to get the institutional accreditation. Therefore, meeting the reference points on the conduct of study programs does not mean any particular level of quality, but rather the compliance to a minimum level of conditions without which the education process cannot take place.

6   The 8 indicators relate to: the degree of implementation of the first and the second university cycles; the degree of participation of students in the two cycle university system; the degree of access to cycle II of university studies; the degree of development of an external quality assurance system; the degree of student participation in the quality assurance process; the degree of national implementation of European standards of quality corresponding to EHEA; the degree of implementation of the Diploma Supplement; the

frequent positive status are those referring to the steps taken by Romania in the field of quality assurance in higher education. ***Thus, were highly appreciated both the international external evaluations of ARACIS, and the fact the Romanian agency obtained full membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and particularly in the exclusive European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).***

The image of Romania at the European level in terms of formal implementation of the Bologna Principles is not, however, exclusively positive. In this regard, one weakness is represented by ***the delays in the implementation of the national qualifications framework in higher education.*** However, we should keep in mind that this issue is not only Romania's; it is somewhat general in Europe. Furthermore, upon the proposal of the Council of Europe through CDESR – the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research[7], the deadline for approval (self-certification) of the national qualifications framework has been extended until 2012 in most of the 46 countries of the Bologna Process.

In general, the current positive information in the European context on the implementation of the Bologna Process in Romania should be treated restrictively and each time on comparative basis. Progress in the implementation of the Bologna Process is not an exclusive feature of Romania, but rather a general dominant feature of the national systems integrated in the process[8].

As regards the ***higher education future challenges that Romania will manage from a national and especially European perspective***, we should mention: the completion of the National Qualifications Framework in Higher Education; the external evaluation of all higher education institutions in accordance with European quality standards; improved access to education for disadvantaged and underrepresented groups (poor, rural); increased European competitiveness of Romanian universities and more foreign students from the European and international areas.

4. Academic Statistics

4.1. Demographics and academic flows

The Romanian universities not only are not listed among the best higher education institutions in the European or global ratings, but they are also missing from the top 5 study destinations for students of any European country. An exception is the Republic of Moldova, understandable situation, given the Romanian policy of providing special study places for Moldovan citizens. *The figures on foreign students choosing the Romanian higher education system is still low compared with European countries* - in such hierarchy, Romania stands on a backward position. This makes us ask question both the competitiveness and openness of Romanian universities to the European area of education and their ability to create / provide the conditions needed to host foreign students; all in circumstances of higher education under-

degree of implementation of the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of diplomas and certificates obtained in higher education in European countries. Also, Romania has made significant progress as regards the degree of international participation in quality assurance and implementation of ECTS.

7   Coordinates the national qualification framework in higher education.
8   See European University Association, Trends V, 2007.

funding from public funds.

The number of foreign students who choose the Romanian higher education system is still low compared to the European countries - in such hierarchy, Romania stands on a low position. This makes us ask question both the competitiveness and the openness of Romanian universities to the European area of education, and their ability to create/provide the conditions needed to host foreign students, all in terms of higher education under-funding from public funds.

Romania and Bulgaria have the lowest rates of participation in training programs and professional development of employees among all European countries (1.3% versus 29.2% - Denmark, the highest value recorded in Europe). This is hardly encouraging, given that for Romania, the level of professional employability of the population from 15 to 64 years old was 59% in 2008, compared to the EU27 average of 65.9%.

As regards the quality assurance mechanisms, *there is a gap between the national external system of quality assurance, positively evaluated at the European level, and the universities' capacity to implement mechanisms of quality assurance and improvement.* Many of the Romanian universities do not have active committees of internal quality assurance, and they have difficulties in providing data and information for quality certification, including those required by ARACIS on quality assurance. Our universities suffer from a chronic lack of functional data collection, processing and reporting systems regarding the flows of students and their activities.

The guidance systems for student career and employment on the labor market are still very poorly developed in universities, despite the fact that the academic staff assumes the social function of training graduates for employment.

Romania follows the aging and population decline global trends reported in Europe and worldwide. Against this background, the role of higher education is crucial in enhancing employability on the labor market, not only for youth, but also for adults.

Beside the overall diminution of the Romanian school population, *higher education has undergone an intense massification process after 1990.* Thus, for example, in just 10 years, from 1998 to 2007, the population of students has increased almost 3 times. This extremely fast increase of student population has at least two characteristics:

1. *the massification process has not been correlated with a proportional increase in resources* (under-funded system);

2. *the massification process has not been uniform in the study fields:* some fields had an inflation of candidates, while others faced depopulation.

These two features of the massification process generated a number of contradictory effects on the system.

First, there was an overall *gap between the number of students and the number of academic staff.* The increase in the number of students was much faster than the increase in the number of teachers. This made the ratio between the number of students and the number of teachers increase from 13.8/1 in 1990/1991 to 25.7 /1 in 2006/2007. In other words, in 16 years, the average number of students per teacher almost doubled.

This figure refers to the average. In some universities and study programs, the ratio is well above it, such as 320/1.

Secondly, universities have developed at least two types of behavior. Some chose massification because of under-funding, to cover their costs by *attracting more students paying fees* (well above the 2007 average of 25.7 students per teacher). Some faculties which experienced depopulation have chosen, mainly because of underfunding, to *apply for research grants.* Of the two described behaviors, it appears that the dominant one is attracting fee-paying students.

Thirdly, because of depopulation, the majority of universities chose to relax the admission conditions for candidates in order to fill the places brought to competition.

The higher education system is characterized by a *gap growing every year between the number of students enrolled in the system and the number of graduates.* For instance, while in 1990/1991 there were 25,927 graduates out of 192,810 students enrolled; in 2005/2006, there were 112,244 graduates out of 716,464 enrolled students. This annually increasing gap can be interpreted following two directions. First, it can be argued it has significant negative effects: ineffective use of resources; increase of the study period; increase of dropout trend. In other words, the result can be seen in a black light: the resources allocated to train a graduated are increasing accordingly. Moreover, it can be argued that this gap indicates other things. For instance, many students choose to work during their studies, which cause them to lack time to achieve their studies. Beyond these interpretations, one thing is certain: careful monitoring and accurate data are necessary on the causes leading to this gap between the number of students enrolled in the system and the number of graduates.

As regards the organization forms of higher education, *distance learning has been following in recent years a trend of accelerated growth.* For instance, if in 1999/2000 only 2% of the student population used this form of education, in 2006/2007, the percentage grew to 23%. It means an almost 12 times increase in just 6 years. The consequence of this development is that distance learning must become a reference focus of academic quality assurance, as long as the practice of academic and professional diploma equivalence for day courses, and part-time courses and distance learning are maintained. The academic and professional equivalence should be associated with equivalent quality standards.

The expansion of education organized in forms other than day courses is supported by figures regarding the ratio between the number of students and the number of academic staff. For example, in 2006, the ratio of full-time students per teacher was 17.6 /1, and the ratio of part-time students per teacher was 8.1/1. Therefore, more than one third of the students per teacher came from education forms other than day courses (distance learning was predominant). The consequence is that the teaching types are diverse and ever more demanding, which equals to *an increase of time spent teaching/assisting to the detriment of other activities such as research.* Under such conditions, an important component of the university mission, and thus of academic quality in higher education, is inevitably adversely affected.

4.2. Public Funding

The CNFIS figures show *a higher education characterized by public under-funding.* In this context, public universities only partially cover their current expenditures for basic activities through

budget allocations (for example, in 2005, the baseline funding covered 80% of staff and 20% of material costs and services[9]). The deficit caused by the insufficient budgetary allocation was covered by the public universities out of their own incomes, particularly through the dual system of free and paid education. In other words, in this context, the private fees collected from paying students, contributed to reducing the effects of underfunding in public higher education. Increasing the number of paying students - as a way of covering the ***gap between the universities needs and the insufficient budgetary allocations,*** was associated with an increased ratio of personnel expenses, and a decrease in the share of material costs, in absolute value, in the overall basic activity expenditures. In other words, universities tend to increase expenditures on wages, some even the wage levels (considering the growing share of teaching activity, coupled with the growing number of paying students), and to reduce the material costs (including investment in materials[10]).

The annual reproduction of underfunding in higher education, despite the increase in absolute levels of the funds allocated to universities, has the following direct effects: deterioration of physical assets; low level of equipment of laboratories and classrooms; lack of specialized administrative structures to support university management; lack of information resources (libraries, in particular) or lack of additional resources required to ensure quality.

Given such underfunding, quality assurance in universities is under question. Maintaining high quality standards and implementing internal systems of quality evaluation and monitoring require additional financial efforts and public resources, in parallel with a diversification of funding sources, including private sources.

4.3. Research

Research seems unattractive for many universities also for financial reasons: the incomes generated by research do not supplement the budgetary allocations in the same manner as the fees paid by students, and have a lesser effect on the individual incomes of researchers.[11] For this reason, but also for others (such as, the research projects evaluation practices or the deficient institutional systemic management of research funds), just 6 accredited higher education institutions out of a total of 85[12] have obtained more than half of the public money allocated for research (51.14%), and 3 universities (i.e.: Babes-Bolyai University in Cluj-Napoca, Bucharest Polytechnic University, University of Bucharest) have won almost one third of the funds (32.36%)[13]. In addition, about 20% of the Romanian universities have collected more than 90% of the research funds through competition. Another aspect is that of the top 20 universities that have obtained

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9   "Continuing the expenditure analysis by types of basic activity, it was noted that budgetary funding covered 80% of the personnel costs in 2005, while these are otherwise covered out of their own incomes. Furthermore, only 20% of the material expenses and service costs were covered from the baseline funding in 2005, otherwise they were covered out of their own incomes." (CNFIS, 2007, p. 25)

10   According to CNFIS, 2007, Higher Education Funding in Romania, CNFIS View Point, pp. 25 – 26, available on www.cnfis.ro

11   See CNFIS, 2007, p. 26.

12   According to Gov. Decision no. 749/2009 for approval of Classification of fields and structures of higher education institutions and of their specialized/university study programs accredited or authorized to provisionally operate, published in the Romanian Official Gazette, Year 177 (XXI), no. 465, pp. 7 – 90, available on: http://www.aracis.ro/uploads/432/HG_749-2009.pdf

13   It is about the research funds granted through the programs PN II – HR and Ideas, RO4096 – components I & II, CNCSIS (2004 - 2008) & NOW Pilot Fellowship Program Romania grants.

research funds, only 7 have a general profile, while the remaining 13 have a specialized profile (techniques, agricultural science, veterinary medicine, medicine and pharmacy, and economics).

While 90% of the public money allocated to research goes to 21 accredited higher education institutions, from a total of 85[14] in our system, we may wonder to what extent the research activities[15] still constitute a challenge for all the higher education institutions which argue, without exception, to be Humboldtian universities, with education and research activities.

The hierarchy of universities on the basis of the research funds received is associated with the distribution of the number of articles indexed in international databases. Thus, 16 universities that are among the top 20, according to the number of ISI[16] indexed articles criterion, are also among the top 20 universities as regards the obtained research funds. And the top 3 universities that have obtained the largest research funds also stand in the top 3 for ISI indexed articles, with a total of 38% of the articles. ISI publication activities revolve around a small group of universities: 5 universities provide over 50% of the total number of ISI indexed articles. Moreover, only 20 universities provide over 90% of the ISI indexed articles.

The lack of research incentives and the under-funding of public education programs have trapped universities in logic ***of survival in which emphasis is rather laid on the communication of knowledge*** - teaching, **than the production of knowledge** - research. On the other hand, it should be mentioned that if no answer is provided to questions like: for whom and for what is research carried out, who commands it, which pays and who uses it, beyond the number of published articles, the mentioned negative effects will get worse. According to some academics, the grouping of the research projects and funds between a relatively small numbers of universities is also a consequence of the uncertainties associated with the social standing of university research, and also of the fact that the universities with good performance in scientific research are published in journals with visibility. The concentration trend will be maintained if research will continue to be seriously underfunded, also due to the lack of interest of the private sector – a general European characteristic, which is aggravated in Romania by a systematic destruction of

14   It is about the total number of state and private accredited HEIs.

15   Thus, we operate at the text level by allowing equivalence between carrying out research and access research grants. Categorically, the fact that universities apply for research grants is an indication of their intention to carry out research. Obviously this is not the only indicator measuring the research activity taking place in a higher education institution. On the other hand, however, this is the only indicator that we could measure to make system/generalized/normalized comparisons. Therefore, we assume this limit of data presentation in the report. And, we also point out that the references we make to the research activity of universities should only be seen from the perspective of their access on competitive basis to the research grants allocated through the above mentioned research programs.

16   The number of ISI indexed articles, considered as a criterion to measure scientific research (see also centralization of ISI indexed articles and methodology of building university hierarchies following this criterion - www.ad-astra.ro) is, in some often mentioned ways, questionable. However, in the absence of other forms of centralization of the scientific contributions of the academic staff in professional, national and international journals, this indicator is used with at least two meanings. First, as a form of comparison between the number of research grants obtained and the number of scientific articles published. Then as a way to indicate a university trend in this regard. In the future, to the extent to which we will also have available other data sources to allow a centralization of the articles published by the academic staff in international databases, we will use it as a complement to the hierarchy generated by the ISI indexed articles criterion.

the manufacturing industry after 1990.

Extending the implications, we can say that the lack of incentives to adopt practices to improve quality and the implementation of quality assurance procedures, makes **universities to have a rather reactive than proactive strategy in developing a culture of quality.**[17]

5. Distribution of Perceptions about Higher Education

5.1. Employers Perceptions[18]

According to employers, there are three main factors in the process of selection and employment of graduates: **the reputation of the university they graduated from** (which acts as an indicator of the potential knowledge of the graduate), **the employment history (**graduate's work experience, which should be specialized and Romanian) and the **candidate's capacity "to sell himself/ herself" during the employment interview.**

The main aspects the employers are concerned about regarding a university graduate have little connection with his or her academic studies. In a hierarchy of "things" employers look for in a graduate, the first 4 positions are poorly connected with the academic characteristics: the graduate's ability to work in a team, to organize his or her work, his or her punctuality, morality and communication skills - with peers, superiors, customers, etc.

Of these, the first four aspects employers are most satisfied about (and therefore most interested in) as regards a new graduate are poorly connected with the university: computer skills, morality, punctuality and teamwork. The qualities and skills directly related to university studies rank lower in the employers' satisfaction. In addition, the dissatisfaction of employers about the aspects they consider important in a graduate's employment record is not significant. By default, we infer that employers are moderately satisfied with the new graduates they employ.

The employers' opinions on the value of the degrees are diverse: 40% consider that a BA is not a guarantee of quality graduates, while 36% think otherwise. In addition, **employers perceive the graduates as better trained in theory than in practice** (51% of employers believe that graduates have a good theoretical training in the field, and only 27% are convinced that graduates have a good practical training).

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17   Here we consider that higher education institutions become interested in quality assurance practices only when confronted with the institutional/study programs accreditation process (reactive strategy).

18   In the data collection process the perceptions of employers from various fields were measured (industry, construction, services, trade), different types of companies (state owned, private Romanian, private foreign), different company sizes (under 10 employees, between 10 and 49 employees, between 50 and 249 employees, and over 250 employees).

More than half of employers (54%[19]) find *public universities better than the private ones.* Also, **most employers (42%) would prefer,** under similar training, *graduates of Romanian universities, rather than of universities from abroad.* And over 51% *would prefer graduates of the undergraduate courses of 4 (respectively 5 years), rather than graduates of the Bologna system.*

The employers' opinions on the responsibility of training graduates for employment are divided: 33% believe that this responsibility belongs to universities, 33% believe that it belongs to the graduates, and 28% believe that it belongs to the companies employing them.

Over half of the employers (56%) believe that the academic knowledge of the newly employed university graduates must be supplemented. Therefore, they provide vocational training inside or outside the company.

5.2. Students Perceptions[20]

The 4 most important factors *determining the student preference for a particular college are:* their interest in the field, their desire to acquire knowledge, to have high incomes, and the public prestige of a faculty.

The success in life is not determined either by academic studies, or by social recipes. Only 29% of students find to a large and very large extent, that to succeed in life one must complete university studies. This information is consistent with the more general social perception diminishing the importance of education in the social success equation. On the other hand, it is surprising that half of the surveyed students (50%) do not find social relationships to be a decisive criterion for success in life. This information contradicts a more general social perception according to which the use of social networks to access resources (acquaintances, friends etc.) is a key to success. This "surprise" can also be considered in relation to the success models offered by the media – and particularly by the television – which induce and strongly support this perception.[21] Today, there are no extensive study to show how sustainable is the success in life and society of those without university education.[22]

The general evaluations of the surveyed students regarding the quality of the faculty where they are studying are extremely positive. Thus, 24% of the respondents found that they are studying in a top faculty, and 62% find that they are studying in a good faculty.

The students opinions about the educational process are generally positive, where the 5 best appreciated aspects refer rather to structure and form, than to the courses content and to the work of the academic staff : the library and other services provided are of good quality; the courses, seminars and laboratories are not canceled without rescheduling; the student evaluation criteria are clear; and the changes in schedule are timely announced. Against this positive background,

19   The result does not imply in any way that the remaining 46% is an irrelevant percentage.

20   In the data collection process were measured the perceptions of students from both state and private educational institutions; from accredited and authorized study programs. The students included in the sample came from the following fields: science, engineering, social sciences, law, military science, humanities, economics, medicine and pharmacy, agronomy and veterinary medicine, arts, architecture and sports.

21   It should be mentioned that this is only one of the possible explanations to be considered.

22   We mention that a career track project for university graduates is under implementation by UE-FISCSU – CNFIS.

there still are some aspects with a consistent percentage of dissatisfaction: 27% of the students interviewed find that their teachers are not available for advice when needed, and 19% believe that the information and comments they receive from the academic staff and assistants are not very helpful.

Regarding the contribution of educational institutions to the integration of graduates in the labor market, students find that the faculties are concerned to offer them *scholarships* (69%) and *internships (*57%). Only 42% of the interviewed students claimed that their faculty *has invited employers to provide them information on the existing jobs* and only 39% **mentioned their faculties organizing internship programs.**

The students are rather optimistic in terms of finding employment upon completion of studies. Thus, 48% of the respondents believe they will not have problems in finding a job, and 45% believe that upon graduation they will be able to find the job they want. The students' optimism is based on their confidence in their faculty and in its educational offer. Thus, 50% of the respondents believe that their faculty provides "all abilities and skills they may need at their workplace" (vs. 40% who think the contrary), and 66% believe that internships are truly useful in their training. In addition, only 38% of the students believe that the university courses they attend do not address the practical problems they will face at work (compared with 50% who think the contrary).

Regarding the *usefulness of the educational offers,* 69% of the respondents believed that the faculty they are attending provide them with the necessary knowledge to become specialists in their study field, and 61% believe that faculty provides them with the necessary skills for understanding related fields. Interestingly, 41% of the students surveyed are much and very much convinced that *the training offered by the Romanian higher education is at least as good as the one offered in Western Europe.* However, this is not the dominant perception among the student sample, as there is an equal percentage, 41%, who believe the contrary. The students from state universities have better educational results, higher aspirations for future careers, and are more likely in the final years of study to be more critical to the quality of the academic programs they attend.

The responsibility of training for the labor market belongs, according to students, primarily to the faculty (42%), and then to the graduates (35%). Only 18% of the respondents find companies responsible for training graduates for their entry in the labor market.

In terms of skills and knowledge required to work, most students found that university studies contribute to form the abilities to synthesize the received information (71%), to think analytically (67%), to work as a team (65 %), and an effective organizational capacity (64%). In other words, these are *the characteristics students believe are formed mainly within their university study program.*

The study degree is highly valued by the students included in the sample: 69% find that the degree they will obtain is an indicator of the knowledge and skills acquired in college, while 57% much and very much believe that it will help them to easier obtain a job.

The continuation of studies through cycle II – Master's is a preference expressed by 88% of the students (75% Masters Degrees in Romania, and 13% abroad), while 43% of respondents are also considering attending doctoral studies.

Regarding corruption[23], 68% of the respondents believe it is much and very much spread in the private universities, and 60% in public universities. Only 25% of the students considered corruption to be much and very much spread in their faculty, and only 30% in the university in which they are studying. This data generates two implications: *a) private universities seem to be more corrupt, in general, than the public ones; b) the students are more virulent about other universities/faculties, than they are about their own university/ faculty.* However, we note that the answers are often not based on their own findings, but on "hearsay", and sometimes they are influenced by the way the questions are formulated.

5.3. Academic Staff Perceptions[24]

The perceptions of the academic staff about the content and form of the educational process developed within their academic department are extremely positive. For instance, 91% of the academic staff find that the feedback provided helps students to better understand the field, 89% believe that students always receive feedback on their work, 89% believe that teachers are available for advice when students need it, 87% believe that courses intellectually stimulate students, etc.

Also, the academic staff perceptions about the organization of the educational process are equally positive. For example, the teachers find that: grading criteria are clear from the very beginning (94%); exam grades are always correct (94%); courses and labs are not canceled without rescheduling (92%) etc.

The same very positive perceptions persist regarding the resources needed in the educational process. The interviewed teachers find that students can access IT resources when needed (85%); library and its services are of good quality (82%); and that students may use specialized equipment when necessary (80%).

The evaluation of all courses by students is a procedure used on a small scale by the academic staff and their departments. Only 33% of the surveyed teachers said they ask their student for evaluations on all courses held and only 43% claim that in their academic department the assessment of all courses is mandatory. Slightly more than half of the surveyed teachers (52%) said that in their academic department the course evaluations made by students are used to a large and very large extent as criteria for designing programs and allocating courses to the faculty. The reverse consequence is that in the other cases, student evaluation is unnecessary. Student evaluation regarding the courses held by teachers is to a much lesser extent practiced in private universities.

In developing courses, the academic staff said they take into account the future qualification profile of the students (92%); obtaining good student learning results (91%); and student motivation to learn (88%). This information appears to be slightly contradictory, as Romania has experienced delays in the development and implementation of the National Qualifications Framework in Higher Education.

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23   The empirical investigation has not provided a definition of corruption and therefore what was measured was a vague concept with various meanings assumed by the respondent. Still, the meaning is generally negative.

24   During the collection of data were measured the perceptions of the academic staff who worked in state and private higher education institutions, and in accredited or temporary authorized study programs. The fields of the sample academic staff were: science, engineering, social sciences, humanities, economics, medicine and pharmacy, agronomy and veterinary medicine, arts, architecture and sports.

The teacher perceptions of how the university educational process prepares and guides students for employment are extremely positive. The teachers believes that their academic department helps students to acquire the necessary skills and competences for work (90%); that internships during college are truly useful in training students (88%); that courses address practical problems that graduates may encounter in the workplace (68%); and that upon completion of studies the students will find it easier to find a job (67%).

7 out of 10 teachers much and very much believe that what is taught in their academic department and what is required at the workplace are similar things, and only 2 out of 10 teachers believe that the research publications are an important career aspect.

As regards the responsibility to prepare students for employment, 63% of the academic staff find it belongs to universities, 21% find it belongs to students, and only 10% believe that it belongs to the recruiter enterprises.

The degree students are conferred upon graduation is highly valued by the academic staff, as 84% of the latter find it is an indicator of the knowledge and skills that students obtain during their university years.

As regards the knowledge and skills generated by universities for the labor market, a hierarchy can be build based on the distribution of the teachers responses, in which the first four positions are held by: the ability to synthesize the received information (80%), the analytical thinking (79%), the ability to use computer/new technology (79%), and the ability to convincingly argue a point of view (77%).

The dominant view among the academic staff is that the Romanian higher education is at least as good as that of Western Europe (59%).

6. Gaps and Differences in Education Quality

In assessing the status of higher education quality we found *differences in the intensity* and, sometimes, even *differences in the perceptions, representations and attitudes expressed by students, teachers and employers.* These differences and divergences are distributed on at least two levels.

A first step on which quality assessment gaps/differences stand is inter-contextual. As mentioned above, there is a difference between the positive image of higher education in the European context – the external context in terms of the Bologna Process, and the largely negative image generated by the data related to demographics, funding and research in higher education – the internal context. Here, the difference between the external context and the internal context is based on objective, system data.

A second step on which quality assessment gaps/differences stand is intra-contextual. It is about the divergences within the internal context, between the objective data of university statistics and the perceptions of the three groups directly concerned with higher education:

employers, students and academic staff. In other words, there is a discrepancy between the perceptions of different groups and how things objectively are. Moreover, even between the perceptions and attitudes of the three mentioned groups of stakeholders, gaps are identifiable in the representation of the condition of education.

We will not insist too much, as we did earlier, on the inter-contextual divergence. We recall, however, a decisive cleavage between the application of the formal/nominal Bologna Process principles, and the actual objective, statistic situation in education: *Romania's progress is externally recognized in the implementation of specific indicators of the Bologna Process, but this progress, unfortunately, is not found in the university statistics and especially in the actual, substantial and institutional university practice. We tend as much as possible to export a positive image, but we are still striving in the interior to follow practices which do not fully meet this idyllic image. In other words, we have the appropriate university policies, but their implementation has not yet reached optimal parameters.*

We shall insist on the disparities and differences found in the intra-contextual step. As seen in the section for the submission of academic statistical data, the aspects related to higher education are rather negative, in terms of demography, education, and funding and research[25] (with some slightly positive accents). These negative aspects are opposed to the employers, teachers and students perceptions, which are predominantly positive after aggregation by group type. In other words, despite objective and comparative records, we tend to believe that the quality assessment of our higher education is good, worthy of our positive appreciation. Next, we will define the gaps/ divergences of perception between employers, students and teachers. These gaps/divergences of perception are actually a variation of the positive content intensity, which decreases from the teachers, to the employers.

1. *The gap in perception between the academic staff and the students on the content, the organization and the resources needed in the education process.* Although both categories of stakeholders positively perceive the educational process, the weight of the positive[26] perceptions of the academic staff is higher than that of their students.

    As regards the educational process content, the largest gap is found between the perceptions of the academic staff on the assignments/essays that students must complete. This gap[27] scores 40 (89% of the academic staff claim that students constantly receive feedback for their assignments/essays, while only 49% of students agree on this).

    As regards the learning process organization, the largest gap is found between the perceptions regarding the fairness of the exam grades. This gap scores 51 (94% of the academic staff say exam grading is always correct, while only 43% of the students agree).

    As regards the necessary learning resources, the largest gap is found in the perceptions on the availability of specialized equipment. This gap scores 37 (80% of the academic staff claim

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25   A negative aspect of higher education seen through the education statistics, is the ratio number of students/per teacher, which has an annually increasing dynamics.

26   As perception frequency.

27   The gap represents the module difference between the two percentage values, measured for the same item, but in different groups. The gap variation occurs on a closed interval 0, 100, where 0 means the absence of any difference of perception (perfect convergence), and 100 means a total divergence of perception.

that the students can use specialized equipment when they need it, while only 43% of the latter agree) [28].

2. ***The gap between the academic staff and the students' perceptions on how the educational process prepares and guides graduates on the labor market.*** As for the previous gap, the share of positive perceptions of the academic staff is higher than of the students'. [29]

For example, the largest gap is found in perceptions about the degree to which faculty helps students gain the skills and abilities they need to work. This gap scores 40 (90% of the academic staff think that faculty helps students gain the skills and abilities they need at their workplace, while only 50% of students agree with it).[30]

3. ***The gap between the perceptions of academic staff, students and employers regarding the responsibility to train graduates for the labor market (see Graph. 1.1.).***

Graph no. 1.1. Perception gaps regarding the responsibility to train graduates for the labor market
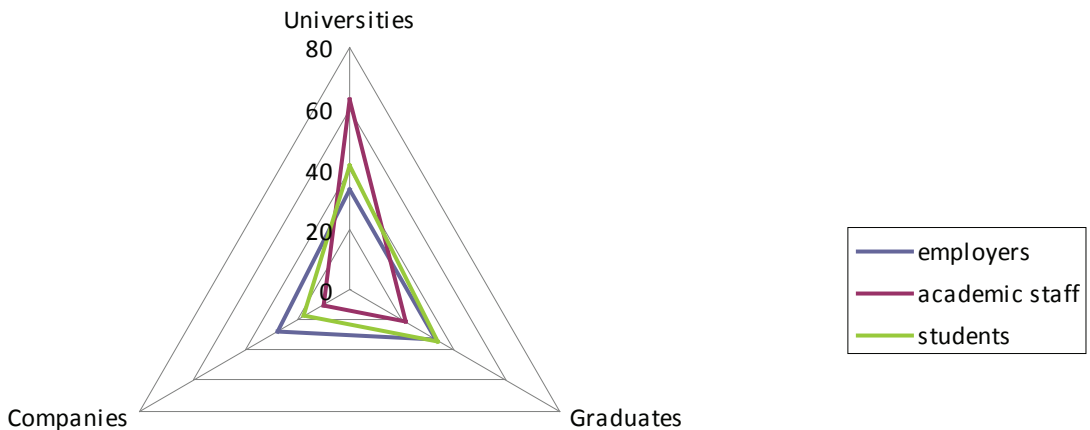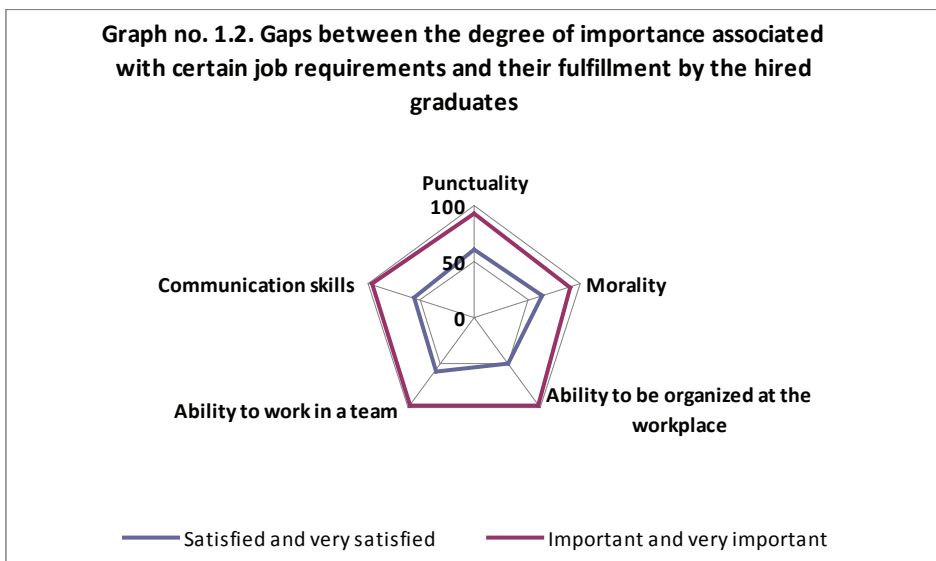

Analyzing the basic pairs, one may note that the larger perception gap is between the academic staff and the employers: 30 (63% of the academic staff believes that universities have the responsibility to train graduates for employment, while this opinion is supported by only 33% of the employers). Moreover, the highest gap in perception between academic staff and students is found for the same type of response: 22 (63% of the academic staff supports the responsibility of universities, compared to only 41% of the students).

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28   The remaining gaps can be found in tables no. 6.1.#, 6.2.# si 6.3# of the Report.

29   Such gap is significant as we assume a student-focused learning process. Therefore, students' signals can represent a guide to the training and teaching conducted by the academic staff. As there are significant differences between the perceptions of academic staff and students on, for example, the useful-ness of feedback provided by teachers in completing assignments, then we can assume the absence of communication between the two categories, and the existence of possible deficiencies in the educational process.

30   The remaining gaps can be found in Table no. 6.4.# of the Report.

4. ***The gap between the perceptions of academic staff, students and employers about the study degree functions.*** One significant gap in perception scored 15 and showed that 84% of the academic staff believed that a degree is an indicator of the knowledge and skills acquired by a student, while only 69% of the students share the same view. The difference in perceptions between the academic staff and the employers on the value of degrees is much higher: 44 (only 40% of the employers find the degree a guarantee of the graduate's training). Consequently, the degrees significance diminishes from academic staff to employers.

5. ***Employers perception gap between the importance they associate with certain requirements and their satisfaction expressed over the way in which the hired graduates meet these requirements***[31]. As mentioned in the previous section (distribution of perceptions about higher education), there are a number of requirements that employers find very important in the selection and hiring process: ability to be organized at the workplace (97% -- important and very important), ability to work in a team (96%), communication skills (96%), punctuality (93%), and morality (90%). Although most employers are satisfied with how the graduates meet the requirements defined as important at work, however the level of satisfaction is much lower than the importance associated to it.

Graph no. 1.2. Gaps between the degree of importance associated with certain job requirements and their fulfillment by the hired graduates

As per Graph. 1.2., the gaps in perception between what seems important to employers and the extent to which the hired graduates satisfy these requirements are significant. Thus, 97% of employers find the ability of employees to be organized at work as important and very important. But only 51% of the employers are satisfied and very satisfied with how the hired graduates meet this requirement. Therefore, in this case the distance is 46. Distances/ gaps also exist for other requirements. For instance, punctuality - 93% important and very important, and only 61% satisfied and very satisfied, morality - 90% important and very important, and only 65% satisfied and very satisfied, ability to work in a team - 96% important and very important, and only 59% satisfied and very satisfied, communication skills - 96% important and very important, and only 58% satisfied and very satisfied.

6. ***Perception gap between employers, students and academic staff on the graduate profile provided by universities***

One of the existing priorities at the European and national level is adapting higher education to the needs of the labor market. In this regard, the university graduates profile must approach as much as possible the one required by employers. The collected data rather seem to indicate a gap between the two profiles. Thus, the academic staff find that the top 5 knowledge and skills to which faculty training and teaching much and very much contribute are: the ability to synthesize the received information (80%), analytical thinking (79%), ability to use computer and new technologies (79%), ability to convincingly argue a point of view (77%) and ability to put into practice the acquired knowledge (75%). Moreover, according to employers, the top 5 knowledge and skills a graduate should have are: ability to be organized in the workplace (97%), ability to work in a team (96%), communication skills (with colleagues, superiors, customers etc.) (96%), punctuality (93%) and morality (90%). Although academic staff assumes the function of training graduates for employment, the proposed types of graduates do not match the ones employers want (in terms of the 5 most important knowledge and skills).

Analyzing the student perceptions about the knowledge and skills they are expected to acquire during their faculty years, we find that they partially overlap both with the mix of knowledge and skills mentioned by employers, and with the one proposed by the academics.

Table no. 1.1. Hierarchy of the most important knowledge and skills according to students

Top 5 hierarchy of knowledge and skills	Rank in the employers hierarchy	Rank in the academic staff hierarchy
1. Ability to synthesize received information (71%)	7	1
2. Analytical thinking (67%)	6	2
3. Ability to work in a team (65%)	1	6
4. Ability to be efficiently organized in the workplace (63%)	2	8
5. Critical thinking (63%)	10	10

Therefore, the graduate profile students expect to acquire for the labor market is a combination of the profile proposed by the academic staff and the graduate profile required by employers.

The presented data could lead us to invoke the extremely favorable perceptions of the academic staff on the study programs ability to provide graduates fit to the needs of the labor market. For example, 90% of the teachers and 50% of the students think that the faculty helps students to acquire the skills and competences they need to work.

7. ***Difference of perceptions between employers, students and academic staff on the type of training graduates receive during their studies.*** Only 27% of employers believe that the graduates have a good practical training in the field. This information diverges from teachers and students perceptions on the practical dimension of the courses and the university capacity to train for work. In this regard, the following figures are significant. ***66%***

of the students considered that the practical component of the topics taught in courses is emphasized to a large and very large extent, and *68% of the academic staff* believe to a large and very large extent that university courses address the practical issues that graduates may face at work.

Although a large majority of academic staff assume the university role of graduate training for the labor market, employers' behavior seems to indicate a different perception of the university function and implicitly of the study programs. Thus, over 50% of the employers said they organize professional training courses for the new graduates employed (either at the workplace, or through specialized programs). The employers call to enhance graduate training through special courses can be interpreted in at least two ways. First, an interpretation would be that employers are not very satisfied with the training provided by universities, as 33% of employers believe that the duty to prepare graduates for employment belongs to universities. The second way of interpretation is that the companies' requirements and needs are so specific that university courses should be supplemented by special courses organized shortly after recruitment. Thus, 28% of employers considered that the responsibility for preparing to work belongs to the employers, and not at all to the universities.

Both the above interpretations show that the perception of academic staff and employers about the training requirements of the labor market are not compatible, given that 70% of academic staff considered that between what is done in an academic department or faculty and what is required at the workplace there are no significant differences. One of the reasons is that on the one hand, neither the academics, nor the employers have yet seen all transition effects of the Bologna structure, and on the other hand, the employers perceive graduate training as a burden or additional duty, and not as business policy - as it is in countries with advanced economy, and in powerful companies in which their activity quality is a priority.
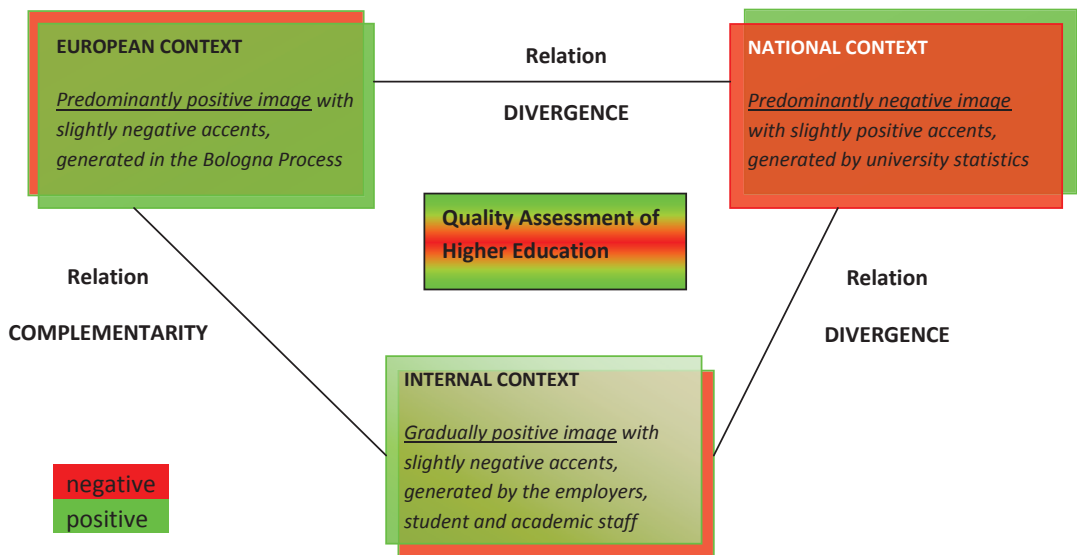
8. *The perception gap between academic staff and students on the competitiveness of the Romanian higher education.* This gap shows an overestimation trend among academic staff of the Romanian education in relation to Western education. Thus, 59% of academic staff believes that Romanian education is at least as good as that of Western Europe, while only 41% of students support such view. Comparing this situation to the European universities, the first percentage of 59% is more credible, at least in areas related to training in professions such as: medicine, engineering etc.

7. Gaps and Differences on Perspectives and Relations

The presented gaps indicate a *trend among academic staff to predominantly positively evaluate the educational content quality. The positive content of the perception of higher education academic quality decreases as we shift focus from the academic staff* (who are more positively oriented in relation to education) *to employers* (which, although they do not find in graduates the things they value as most important, one may say they are moderately satisfied with the training level of university graduates).

The gaps and divergences distributed on two steps (inter-contextual and intra-contextual) can now be synthetically represented in the form of the below chromatic map:

Graph no. 1.3. Chromatic map of gaps and divergences

EUROPEAN CONTEXT

Predominantly positive image with slightly negative accents, generated in the Bologna Process

Relation

DIVERGENCE

NATIONAL CONTEXT

Predominantly negative image with slightly positive accents, generated by university statistics

Quality Assessment of Higher Education

Relation

COMPLEMENTARITY

Relation

DIVERGENCE

INTERNAL CONTEXT

Gradually positive image with slightly negative accents, generated by the employers, student and academic staff

negative
positive

8. Representations on ARACIS

ARACIS activity is carried out by 1542 external evaluators[31] who come from almost all institutional academic communities. Consequently, the agency is a product which follows both the positive and negative characteristics of the academia. Despite the representativeness of the relationship between ARACIS and the academia, the activity profile of the Agency (purpose, objectives, operation mode etc.) *has a rather low or at most moderate visibility among the academic staff in higher education.* Thus, only 50% of the academic staff say the aim and operation of ARACIS are clear to them. This percentage is quite low and indirectly shows that the universities efforts are still insufficient in terms of implementation of both internal control and quality assurance mechanisms, and in terms of disseminating information regarding the external quality assurance system in Romania (to which ARACIS belongs).

ARACIS is expected to improve its public communications strategy and the promotion of its activity profile. This is substantiated by the fact that only 47% of the academic staff can assess the degree of differentiation between ARACIS and CNEEA. According to the data, the academic staffs who know ARACIS specifics and nature are and have been involved in internal or external quality assessment of certain university study programs.

Most academic staff has no option regarding the functions that ARACIS should have. The lack of information accounts for the fact that almost half of teachers (43%) do not have an option regarding an extension or restriction of ARACIS functions. Most of them are young academics, recently employed in higher education and without managerial positions.

The relative majority of those who have expressed a viewpoint (29% of the sample) are in favor of maintaining the current functions of ARACIS. But there are some differences to be mentioned. Thus, 17% of academic staff think that ARACIS functions should be increased (this is supported in particular by people who have participated in ARACIS program evaluation activities). And 10% believe these should be reduced (most of them are from private universities, from the fields of social sciences, law, police and military).

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31   In accordance with the evaluators register structure by BA study fields, set on 1 May 2009 and available at: http://www.aracis.ro/comisiile_ro

9. Final Conclusions

This report is the first ever of its kind, regarding the state of quality in the Romanian higher education system. Moreover, it is the first of a series of reports to come on a yearly basis. The final report of the series will be drafted in 2011. Summarizing the findings outlined at this stage, we can say the following:

1. So far quality assurance in the HE system and in many HEIs has been predominantly *focused on inputs* (i.e.: student flows, knowledge transmission and reproduction etc.) and to a much lesser extent on learning and research outcomes. The option to focus on results, as the regulatory fabric of quality assurance in higher education, has not yet been widely implemented. Therefore, there is a risk of awarded degrees and diplomas inflation which is to be far from being proportional with the professional skills available on the labor market and which a more productive and competitive economy would need.

2. Our universities are *qualitatively distributed on hierarchical layers,* in line with their well differentiated learning and research outcomes. Most, if not all, of our universities present themselves as the Humboldtian type of universities, in which learning is based on high research performances. However, according to some estimates, still insufficiently substantiated, only just over 20% of the universities, in the generous version, and less than 5%, in a less optimistic version, reveal internationally competitive results in research and produce nationally and especially European competitive graduates.

3. *HE is publicly underfunded and the existing public funding provides insufficient incentives for the development of an institutional competitive quality culture.* The basic principle of public funding of HE – "resources follow the student"- used in almost all EU countries, was also introduced in Romania in 1999. Since 2002, the weight of quality indicators in the funding formula has become increasingly significant, and is currently reaching 30% of the baseline funding, the highest percentage in Europe. While governmental baseline funding provides, through its mechanisms and not through the overall amounts, quality incentives for the higher education institutions, additional funding should be even more differentiated according to quality criteria. Such proposals have been made several times by CNFIS, but still not implemented. The consequences of such a delay are rather negative when considering the development of a differentiated institutional quality culture.

4. Even though our HE image abroad, particularly with regard to the implementation of the Bologna principles and objectives, is a positive one, *we are concerned to a lesser extent with the promotion and especially with the rigorous implementation of institutional policies and mechanisms of quality assurance and quality management.* ARACIS is largely perceived as an agency meant just to apply complacency strategies of external quality evaluation, and that in a system where institutional quality is evenly distributed among universities; the deviation from this stereotype is strongly and publicly criticized by those who would not find themselves in such ad hoc and ante-festum established charts.

5. The Romanian higher education is heavily loaded with *various divergences and large gaps between the contents and orientation of academics' and students' representations*

about the state of quality in HEIs. One may easily add to this various divergences and gaps between employers and academic communities. A public higher education area saturated with divergences and gaps also creates a state of confusion that regards the construction and implementation of quality assurance principles and standards.

Our academic system is diversified de facto, but uniform de jure. Unless an appropriate correspondence between the state of affairs and the normative legislation is assured, we may risk presenting to the public a distorted image of the higher education system and institutions, providing little information relevant for the future careers of the prospective students, and especially keep on wasting the public resources allocated to higher education.

We find ourselves at a crossroad: either we admit that the time has come for initiating vigorous action to identify and foster academic quality, where it exists, and penalize, guide and improve quality, where needed, or else keep a status of auto-satisfaction and complacency, which may sink us in homogeneity without prospects for competitiveness.