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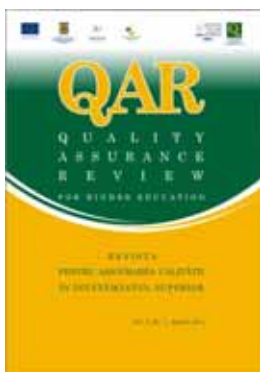
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### Relevant Aspects of Quality Management in Private Higher Education Institutions

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# Relevant Aspects of Quality Management in Private Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract:** *The paper aims to explain the way to implement the normative acts that regulate education quality assurance at institutional level and to identify the characteristics individualising each (private) university in the national and international higher education environment. It is true that higher education has contributed in time to the creation of a nation, to training its elites, to consecrating the most important scientific and cultural values, to building its identity. In the past few years, education has undergone internationalisation and globalisation processes, which imposed a series of structural and functional changes in universities at all levels – conceptual, institutional, managerial and didactic. In this context, universities should improve their capacity to provide educational services, whose outcome is an educational ‘product’ – the graduate, respectively, the knowledge and competences provided by the school and acquired by him during the learning process.*

**Keywords:** *quality management, private higher education, internationalization.*

## 1. Introduction

In order to outline the relevant aspects of quality management in the field of private higher education, several preliminary stages which scientifically substantiate this endeavour need to be covered.

Firstly, the concepts of quality and quality management must be defined, from their first occurrence and to their use in the educational field in general and in the academic one in particular.

Secondly, the genesis of the academic environment must be captured, starting from the premise that even though it appeared as early as the Middle Ages, the university as such was assimilated to the concept of quality, its historical evolution combined with the challenges of modernism caused essential changes in its perception and, implicitly, in its operation.

Thirdly, the Romanian academic environment must be described since its beginnings to the present, capturing the essential elements at the basis of the development of solid higher education institutions, which have a long tradition, many of which becoming Alma Mater and also of those that had a major impact on the establishment and development of private higher education institutions.

Fourthly, we position the national higher education system in the European Higher Education and Scientific Research Area, referring to the community documents that notify as to education quality, to overcoming its purely instrumental view.

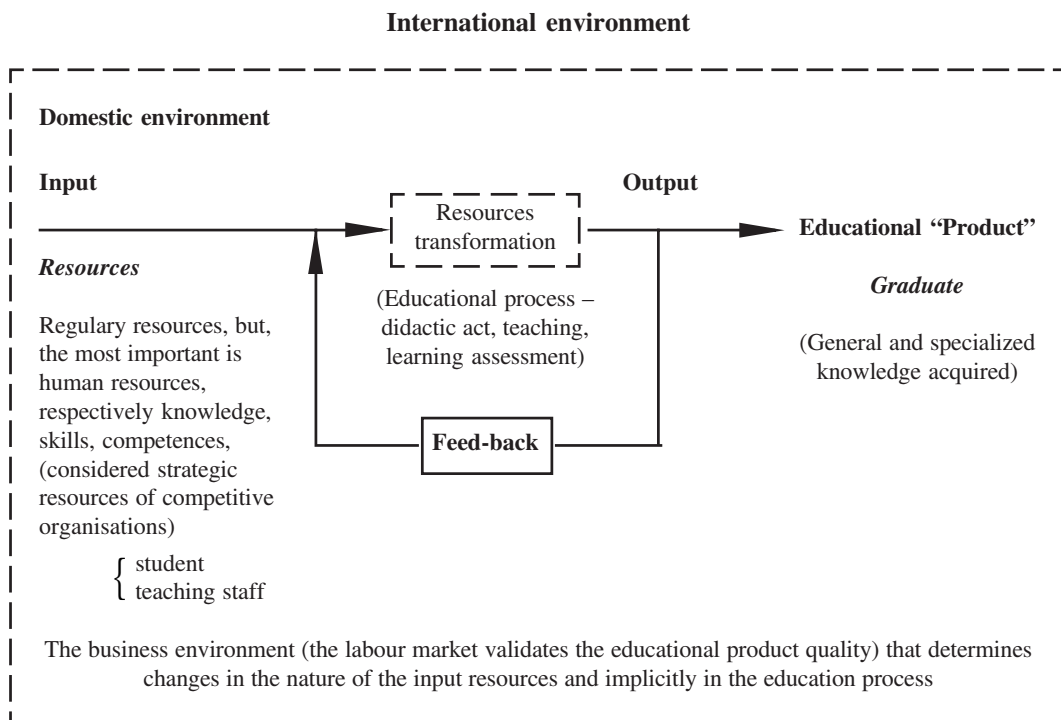
Fifthly, we describe the way to implement the normative acts that regulate education quality assurance at institutional level and we also identify the characteristics individualising each university in the national and international higher education environment.

Beyond the logical succession of this endeavour, it is worth identifying the following aspects:

- An accredited private higher education institution is part of the national education system
- A higher education institution by nature of its activity is integrated into the services sector because it provides educational services, and the outcome is an educational “product” – the graduate, respectively, the knowledge and competences provided by the school and acquired by him during the learning process.

- The transfer of the *quality* and *quality management* concepts crystallised, applied and developed in the industry, in the area of finished products, in the material, tangible area, in the educational services field, in the higher education field, in the field of the teach act and its outcome, respectively in the intangible area, must be taken into consideration and refined, starting from the specificity of this type of service, the nature of the resources, activities and results gravitating around the human resource.

**Figure 1:** The framework structure of strategic academic management, of professional, effective management based on quality management principles



## 2. The genesis of the academic environment, of quality and quality management

Established in the Middle Ages as educational services offer reserved to “the economic elite” of the time, universities were the result of a paradox: an international cultural offer with local economic support. The progress from the city-state specific to the Middle Ages, to the city-nation in the context of the establishment of national states, assigned new responsibilities to the university as institution, changing it into a true national symbol. Consequently, the educational offer initially without border was “nationalised” and subordinated to the imperative of creating a collective mentality with national specificity, the economic support being provided by the actors holding the state power in collaboration with those at regional and local level (except for the American universities which, due to the USA specific history, appeared as private universities)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Buzărnescu Ștefan – *Managerial Practice in Higher Education*, Univers Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, pages 231-233.

In the Middle Ages, the university was perceived as a source of good quality science/knowledge. In other words, at the beginning of academic education, quality was an inherent element of the very concept of university. Academic education quality was given by the notoriety of the teaching staff and it was acknowledged by the authority approving the operation of the university.<sup>2</sup>

The second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century generated structural changes in the economic flows with the following effects on the educational offer:

- a. **technological:** information communication technologies promoting the collective model for managing and solving problems in the form of the human society as digital society;
- b. **economic:** multinational companies become the new power centres, asserting themselves as great protagonists in economic, political, social negotiations and even in initiatives of financing certain academic programmes with international coverage.
- c. **social:** the modular labour organisation requires fundamentally different manners of making educational offers by focusing it on the aspects of flexibility and programmatic adaptability to shifting integrative requirements. If traditionally the investment in education aimed at training specialists in three sectors, at present, the fourth sector – the creation of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – is that of leader. The academic communities are faced with a new challenge: the progressive digitisation of all the social space segments generates mutations in the content of all activity types, to which the university must find pragmatic answers.

In the '60s and '70s the emphasis was on capacities among which training was dominant, starting with the '80s the emphasis was on training specialists capable of covering a wide range of activities, the '90s brought the imperative of valorising the professionals' action competence, the dynamic, progressive school belonging to a globalised, knowledge-based society being opposed to the static, essentialist and conformist education of the previous interval.

From the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, one of the fundamental missions taken on by universities was that of providing the intellectual elite of society, respectively well-educated graduates who serve in the secular and religious institutions of the time, as well as in the positions provided by the modern state (healthcare, education, defence, etc.). In the public perception, universities that were financially supported entirely by the national authorities provided their students with quality education and training (otherwise it did not make sense that the state should invest in them). At international level, the first private higher education institutions appeared as a quality alternative at least equal to the state-funded universities.

Education quality was proved both by the graduates' professionalism and by nationally acknowledging the scientific knowledge performance of the active teaching staff in the respective institutions.

In other words, higher education quality has become in the modern age one of the defining values of life inside the university citadel (Alma Mater) and of asserting the university in society.

At European level, in the years following the Bologna Declaration signed in 1999, the universities and their academic communities understood better and better that:

- it is to their interest to strengthen the internal quality assurance
- they should promote the transparency of their own quality increase measures expressed as learning outcomes
- they should develop a new communication strategy with the stakeholders outside the academic environment, drawing them into developing institutional strategies, into designing new curricula that better and more visible meet their requirements.<sup>3</sup>

The community documents notify as to “*overcoming the purely instrumental view of education*”, and recommends the development of the following basic competences in the curricular redesign of the educational offer:

<sup>2</sup> Korka Mihai, coordinator – *Quality Education for the Labour Market*, Universitară Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, page 10.

<sup>3</sup> Korka Mihai, coordinator – *Quality Education for the Labour Market*, Universitară Publishing House, Bucharest, 2009, pages 10 – 11, 15.

- **Learning to know:** training and developing the critical spirit, exacerbating the distributive attention, the logical memory as well as cultivating convergent and divergent thought;
- **Learning to do:** involves placement into educational contexts which require identifying, selecting and using significant information for concrete objectives, taking risks, managing consequences, communication and teamwork;
- **Learning to live together:** it focuses on the capacity to understand diversity, to accept common objectives and to train for critical situations management while respecting the plurality of options;
- **Learning to be:** the capacity to remain ourselves in any situation, adopting innovative and customised behaviours even related to standard community issues.

Equally, the conceptual framework of quality has evolved during the human society development. Thus, the *quality* concept appeared in the first philosophical system – *Aristotle’ Logic*. In time, it was structured from a formal point of view at the same time with the technological development and implicitly with the risks associated with it. From the industry, the concept was also adopted in the field of services, enriching its semantics.

**Quality management** is a modern world theory. Born in the USA in 1942, it found highly favourable terrain for development in Japan beginning with the 1905s. Through the contributions made to quality management development, names such as Shewhart, Deming, Juran, Feigenbaum, Crosby and Ishikawa, Taguchi and Peters remain at the top of the list of great qualityologists of the world. Among them there is also Joseph M. Juran, an American of Romanian origin.

- **The first quality assurance department** was established in 1924 in the American company „Bell Telephone Laboratories – BTL”, in order to optimise production, while aiming to meet the customers’ needs.
- **The first association** that will play an important part in quality management expansion was established in 1947 – „American Society for Quality Control” (ASQC).
- **The first standard** that introduced the concept of quality assurance (which then performed two functions: building and checking) was an American military standard (1959).
- **The first magazine in the quality domain** appears to be the monthly Japanese magazine „Hinshitsu Kanri” (statistical quality control) coordinated by Juse.
- **The first quality award** was given in Japan in 1951 – „Deming Prize”. The award is known worldwide as the highest honour for quality management.
- **The first European quality award** was given in 1992.
- **The first Romanian quality award** „J.M. Juran” was given in 2000.<sup>4</sup>

The historical stages covered by quality management were successively directed to the product, process, worker and customer, the basic principles being customer orientation, the management’s commitment (leadership), the staff’s commitment, the process approach, the systemic approach to management, continuous improvement, fact-based approach to decision-making, mutually advantageous relationships with suppliers. Quality is equally ensured (according to the Deming cycle) by the following processes:

- Planning and actually producing the expected results
- Monitoring the results
- The internal assessment of the results
- The external assessment of the results
- The continuous improvement in the results.

The domains and criteria that quality assurance refers to are:

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<sup>4</sup> Paraschivescu Andrei Octavian – *Quality Management*, 2nd edition revised and completed, Tehnopress Publishing House, Iași, 2008, pages 13, 26.

- a. The organisation's capacity to ensure product/service quality through: the organisational structure, the material basis and the human resources
- b. Effectiveness
- c. Quality management through: strategies, procedures, functionality, accessibility, transparency and documents.

The quality assurance methodology is based on:

- a. *Criteria* – which represent a fundamental organisation and operation aspect
- b. *Standards* – they describe the requirements that define the minimum compulsory level of performing an activity
- c. *Reference standards* – they describe the requirements that define an optimum level of performing a certain activity based on the good practices existing at national, European or global level
- d. *Indicators and performance indicators* – tools used in measuring the degree of performing a certain activity by an organisation by comparing it to standards, respectively to performance standards<sup>5</sup>

Based on the legal provisions in force<sup>6</sup>, *in the field of education, quality and quality management are conceptualised*, as follows:

**Education quality** – is the set of characteristics of a studies programme and its supplier, through which the beneficiaries' expectations as well as the quality standards are fulfilled.

**Education quality assessment** – consists of the multi-criterion examination of the degree to which an education supplying institution and its curricula meet the standards and the reference standards. (...)

**Education quality assurance** – is achieved through a set of actions to develop the institutional capacity of elaborating, planning and implementing studies programmes which build the beneficiaries' confidence that the education provider meets the quality standards. (...)

**Education quality control** – involves activities and techniques with an operational character, systematically applied by an inspection authority established on order to check that the pre-established standards are met.

**Education quality improvement** – involves the continuous assessment, analysis and corrective action of the education supplying organisation, based on selecting and adopting the most adequate procedures, as well as on selecting and applying the reference standards.

According to the same normative act, the education quality assurance methodology is based on the relationships established among criteria, standards and reference standards, performance indicators and qualifications, quality assurance referring to institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management.

Quality management has as main purpose to direct a higher education institution, in all its activities, towards performance. It is based on *an internal organisation system* (called Quality Management System), whose fundamental elements are:

- direction towards meeting the requirements and expectations of students, employers and other stakeholders;
- the proactive attitude of the institution's management to quality, which is expressed in creating an environment that is adequate to performance;
- approaching the quality issue in strategic terms: mission, values, principles, policies, strategies, objectives, etc.
- maintaining under control and continually improving the training processes;

<sup>5</sup> Paraschivescu Andrei Octavian – *Quality Management*, 2nd edition revised and completed, Tehnopress Publishing House, Iași, 2008, pages 58 – 59.

<sup>6</sup> Law no. 87/2006 for the approval of the Government's Emergency Order no. 75/2005 regarding education quality assurance.

- involving the staff and making them more responsible;
- identifying relevant quality indicators and introducing internal assessment mechanisms thereof;
- documenting the system in order to provide objective proof that builds confidence.

*In assuring education quality* three *fundamental domains* are considered: *institutional capacity, educational effectiveness and quality management*. Higher education institutions apply and inform the public opinion about the mechanisms for its own approval, periodical quality assessment, checking/monitoring of studies programmes and procedures preceding the award of qualifications. These mechanisms become transparent by<sup>7</sup>:

- a. Presenting the set of knowledge and competences that the graduates of a studies programme acquire;
- b. Monitoring the application of curricula and syllabuses;
- c. Establishing procedures for the periodical review of curricula and syllabuses, including the consultation of specialists in the field of education, as well as from among the employers, the labour market representatives or of representative professional organisations;
- d. Involving the best students and graduates in the periodical curricula and syllabuses revision process;
- e. Monitoring the results/progress made by the students in acquiring knowledge and competences;
- f. Adopting measures to improve the curricula and teaching-learning activities quality.

Consequently, particularising quality and quality management from the area of production to the area of services in general and education in particular was made formally through the results of the educational process certified on the market, time being the only one that will demonstrate if its objectives have been achieved, if the academic environment managed to adapt, to particularise, to innovate and render quality management operational, managing in a balanced and adequate manner the relationship between view, values and results.

### **3. Relevant aspects of quality management in the field of private higher education**

From a conceptual point of view, quality management as a science makes no difference between ownership forms, between public and private. In addition, an accredited private higher education institution is a private law and public utility legal person, component of the national education system, according to the law.

The public-private differences thus derive from the ownership type, from the manner of funding, more concretely from the access to public funding only for public institutions, from the specificity of exhibiting academic autonomy and performing academic management.

Yet, we may talk about particularisation in the following context:

- At the level of the national educational system, quality management has become clear and it was regulated beginning with 2005, therefore, scientifically, its operationalization meant both pioneering work, challenge and responsibility for all the “actors” involved (ministry, universities, primary and secondary education institutions, education consumers, direct and indirect beneficiaries, including here the business environment, the employers as ‘real institutions’ validating the education quality).
- Quality management, from a structural and process-oriented point of view is identical, the differences appearing at level of operationalization and not necessarily among the public and

<sup>7</sup> Annex to the M.Ed.C. Order no. 3928/21.04.2005, *The Quality Assurance System at the Higher Education Institution Level*, paragraph 3.

private education institutions, but within the same system (among the state education institutions and, similarly, among the private ones). Yet, it is important to remember that these differences which may appear in quality management operationalization must particularise the respective university in a positive manner, position it competitively, as a natural result of the institutional strategic management, giving it the competitive edge.

– Private universities are young entities, benefiting from specific advantages, also in terms of quality management, at least at the following levels:

- structural and processual flexibility as compared to the institutions with a long tradition and where organisational, managerial, structural, processual and mental redesign, in addition to being a challenge, are difficult to achieve in real terms;
- creativity and innovation;
- managerial view, strategic management and leadership;
- organisational culture.

Another advantage results from the fact that the models according to which the private higher education institutions were created are successful national and international models, designed in a modern, contemporary view, alternatives to the state education, based on a value system that allows for the establishment of a positive organisational culture and at the same time on performing effective strategic management.

Quality management operationalization at higher education institutions level in the above-mentioned context, together with the consultative and constructive dialogue between the ministry, ARACIS, authorised institutions in the field of quality at national and European level, universities, the business environment, direct education beneficiaries, customers, educations consumers have led to positive changes in the field of education and its results.

In order to particularise, the specific elements in quality management operationalization at the Romanian-American University level, which may be examples of “good practices”, are mainly the following:

- Students are recruited by means of competition, based on a multi-criterion system, both for the bachelor studies and for the master’s programmes, considering that the input resources’ quality level significantly influences the quality of the education process and its results;
- The organisation of the education process in a single academic centre, in our own academic campus, considering that territorial dispersion dilutes the quality;
- All the study programmes are accredited by ARACIS (no programmes approved by the University Senate have been organised, although the law has been permissive in this respect), for the full time and part time education form, considering that at present, for the distance learning form major changes in the society’s mentality are necessary, and there is the risk of non-compliance in the organisation conditions;
- The existence of the tutorial system, since the establishment of the University in 1991 (until the national regulation, it was called institutional mentoring), internally regulated and operational also in terms of the students’ career guidance and counselling;
- The assessment of the competences acquired by the students during the learning process, based on the attendance and performance criteria, assessment system which is internally regulated and applied since the establishment of the University;
- Distinctive characteristics of the teaching staff recruitment, selections, employment, assessment and promotion process, starting from the need to assure the input resources quality for the education process quality and implicitly that if its results;
- The development of a real and specific teaching staff – student institutional partnership, the parties taking responsibility for achieving the learning results;



- Organisational communication process particularised at institutional level – which facilitates communication among the same hierarchical levels or among different hierarchical levels, in all its forms and by decreasing the distance between management and execution;
- Particularities in performing academic management, (also at the level of quality assurance, respectively, in designing the Quality Management System and ensuing its functionality).

## Conclusions

It is true that higher education has contributed in time to the creation of a nation, to training the elites, to consecrating the most important scientific and cultural values, to building its identity. In the past few years, education has undergone internationalisation and globalisation processes, which imposed a series of structural and functional changes in universities at all levels – conceptual, institutional, managerial and didactic. In the context specific to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, knowledge becomes the strategic resource of any type of organisation, key variable of the knowledge economy, globalisation substantially changing the old education systems and, implicitly, the academic systems, new value systems appear, the gap between the students' dreams and the final possibilities for professional commitment increases. In order to meet the requirements of a globalised society, with a culture based on democracy values, in the process of formulating the strategy, a higher education institution must assimilate the concept of quality which will become a characteristic of the institutional identity, ensuring the achievement of at least certain minimum standards for each activity it performs and aiming at the continuous improvement thereof, excellence being its desideratum.

Academic education quality is a topic of major importance not because the labour market imposes new requirements, but because at present, a diploma no longer guarantees employment in the graduates' field of study, yet, as a reflection topic for those in charge of education at nation level, there may be the strategic reorganisation, in a way in which, by giving up mass education, by refining and professionalizing the quality and quality management concepts in the education domain, a diploma will become the guarantee of the acquisition and at the same time of the capacity to operationalize general, specialised, cognitive, functional-action competences accompanied by professional values, beliefs, attitudes and behaviours in the spirit of the acquired values.

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