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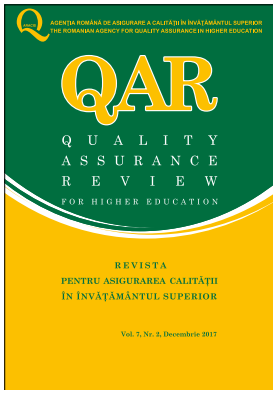

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Considerations on the New Quality Assessment Standards for University Education in Romania

Alain Buzelay

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education, Vol. 7, No. 2, 2017, pp. 27 – 32

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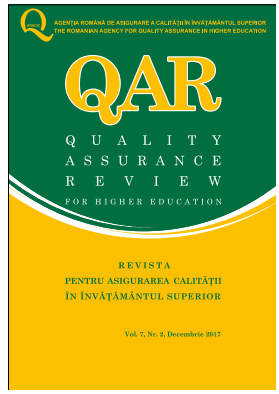

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Considerations on the New Quality Assessment Standards for University Education in Romania

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Abstract: *The university is involved in the creation of human investment, indispensable for growth. The evaluation of its effectiveness requires the use of a large number of criteria on quality, called standards, which allow establishing performance indicators differentiated between countries.*

For the higher education institutions in Romania, we have to limit ourselves to basic criteria relevant to a triple logic: cognitive, educational and democratic.

For several years, the use of a set of standards to guarantee the quality of higher education has increased considerably worldwide. In the European area, the Tempus program, which encourages intra-community academic cooperation, proposes such indicators.

Initially a source of knowledge for the few initiated, universities have progressively become a vector of social advancement for a certain bourgeoisie. Today, they are conceived as an industry of knowledge meant to produce ever more intellectual capital or human investment for the sake of development and economic growth.

This is why there is greater need to assess the quality of higher education institutions on the basis of more standards and indicators.

Keywords: *efficiency of universities, assessment standards, performance indicators, higher education institutions in Romania*

I. A Larger Number of Assessment Standards

A. A Very Diverse Offer of Standards

To assess the quality of university education, assessment agencies rely on quality repositories which are internationally known as standards. They may be more or less numerous according to the field concerned. They refer to quantitative, qualitative, minimal, average or excellent norms which are mandatory to be matched.

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Most often evaluated are the areas regarding the administrative and financial organisation of the institutions, program offer and program quality, real estate and scientific infrastructure, number and capacities of the teaching staff, the amount of research and its results, possibilities regarding working life and internationalization as well as the students' knowledge and motivation level.

Each area is assessed using a more or less high number of standards to appreciate indicators which are considered to be significant[1].

For instance, assessing questions concerning the students means evaluating admission requirements and selection criteria of each course, the equality of opportunities regarding gender and sociocultural origin of the students, the progressivity of knowledge that is given and the knowledge that is acquired, the support the students have to integrate, the institution's consideration for the evaluation of the teaching staff, the non-attendance rate and the adequacy between the courses received and the individual expectations.

Concerning the evaluation of the teaching staff, their qualifications and capacity are assessed in relation to the objectives set, their availability and their commitment to the institution. For both teachers and students, it may be useful to understand their sense of belonging to the institution. This feeling and the cohesion that comes from this feeling are sources of efficiency.

B. Evaluation Standards Represented by Performance Indicators

The analysis of university statistics under established standards makes it possible to obtain performance indicators measuring the effectiveness of the training unit. Indicators are called "to be effective" if they relate to the degree of achievement of the targeted objectives, such as the number of graduates compared to the number of enrolees, the percentage of those who found a job within a year, etc. Indicators are called "efficiency indicators" if they refer to an optimal use of resources to achieve objectives related to the pedagogical supervision of the students enrolled or actually present, the university's operating costs, the utilization rate of the university buildings, the average duration of graduation etc.

In the United Kingdom[2], the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) has identified a large number of indicators applied to five evaluation areas as follows:

1. Student recruitment;
2. Their drop-out rate after one year of study;

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1 See in this regard: Youcef Berkane et Baghdad Benstaali : Évaluation de la qualité des enseignements dans les établissements universitaires, Séminaire de formation pour les Responsables d'Assurance qualité – Commission Nationale pour l'Implémentation de l'Assurance Qualité dans l'Enseignement Supérieur (Ciaques, Algérie).

2 Cf. HEFCE – UK Performance Indicators in higher education – http://www.hefce.ac.uk

3. Success rate per year and at the end of the curriculum;
4. The proportion of graduates who have obtained a job corresponding to their training within six months after graduation;
5. Research results. In this area, for example, the indicators are related to the ratio between the number of doctorates awarded and variables such as the cost of academic staff or the amount of funding allocated to research.

In France[3], the indicators used concern ten areas, called objectives, within which they can be organized in more specific objectives.

For each objective, the indicators measure the results obtained or to be achieved from the user's point of view – in this case the student, as well as the citizen's and the taxpayer's point of view. The ten areas or objectives selected are:

1. The achievement of higher qualification objectives (from the citizen's and the user's point of view);
2. Improved success at all levels of training (from the perspective of the citizen and the taxpayer);
3. Control of the training offer (from the taxpayer's point of view);
4. Giving higher education a continuing education function (from the citizen's point of view);
5. Increasing the attractiveness of higher education on a European and international scale (from the point of view of the citizen);
6. Optimization of the access to documentary resources (from the user's point of view);
7. Research of the highest level of scientific production on a global scale (from the citizen's point of view);
8. Encouraging the dynamism and reactivity of university research (from the citizen's point of view);
9. Increasing the attractiveness of French research (from the citizen's and the taxpayer's point of view);
10. Development of research for the purpose of improving national competitiveness (from the citizen's and the taxpayer's point of view).

[3] Cf. loi organique relative aux lois de finances (LOLF), Domaine de l'Éducation et de l'Enseignement supérieur, site du Minefi (Ministère de l'Économie et des Finances), France – http://www.enseignementsup-recherche.gouv.fr/cid61599/le-budget.html
– documentation citée et reprise par Youcef Berkane et Baghdad Benstaali (cf. note 1).

II. Evaluation Standards Less Numerous but Appropriate to Romania

A. A Proliferation of International Performance Standards and Indicators

At the international level, the quality assessment of higher education institutions is considerably broadened by taking greater account of the research field, integrating the autonomy of students and the continuing education.

Academic research is the product of the capital or human investment that is essential for growth. This material or immaterial investment results from the higher education system (Weber and Duderstadt 2013). Hence the need for indicators of the level of equipment needed, in particular new information and communication technologies.

These offer a set of resources, knowledge, methods and standards that facilitate the academic research and increase learning capacity.

There are also indicators to assess the level of synergy between researchers based on their teamwork or networking; to know their sources of funding, the number and geographical coverage of their publications – the volume of which must be assessed in terms of the number of effective researchers and not the size of the university, contrary to the interpretations of Shanghai.

The learning autonomy of the student is linked to his independent and critical mind, to his discernment, to his speed of adaptation to societal changes, especially professional changes. In order to ensure this capacity, the standards of general culture contained in the learning programs are applied to standards of transdisciplinarity. This is contrary to an hermetic approach to disciplines that we often see in the universities. By releasing their possible interdependence, it strengthens the power of analysis and discernment.

We also use standards of "international openness" based on the number of cross-border university cooperation, the geographical mobility of students and teachers.

The offer of continuing education by higher education institutions is now perceived as very important since it guarantees lifelong training, thus facilitating professional changes which are increasingly frequent. Obtaining a job that is as close as possible to their expectations and promoting the minimum of mobility in the social scale that may reduce its segmentation (according to Jean-Hervé Lorenzi (sous la direction de): Choc démographique et rebond économique, publication de la Chaire «Transitions démographiques, transitions économiques», Descartes & Cie, juin 2016, pp. 103-113) – quoted in Chusseau, 2017. These huge standards of evaluation can be very numerous in this field. In addition to the capacity and diversity of the qualification paths offered, these standards can measure their impact on the level of jobs obtained and remuneration, labour productivity and national competitiveness.

B. Basic Standards Subject to the Three Academic Goals

While the areas of evaluation adopted have become common to the different agencies, the standards and indicators used remain diverse and numerous depending on the economic and cultural context of each country.

In Romania, the consequence of the multiplication and diversity of higher education institutions, stimulated by the opening of the 1990s, offers academic programs of very unequal quality. Among these establishments, some constitute only "facades university" erected by the need of prestige or enrichment of their owners. Such a disparity requires that we limit ourselves to basic criteria that obey the three main academic logics (Buzelay, 2014).

1. A cognitive logic that recommends to the university to produce academic information in order to constantly expand the field of knowledge. The Lisbon strategy (2000) calls for the European Union to become the leader of knowledge and innovation in the world. This is confirmed by its "2020 Strategy", focusing in particular on competitiveness and productivity. The productivity of an economy is directly linked to the quality of its education and to the number of those who benefit from it.
2. A pedagogical logic: responsible for producing knowledge, the university must also transmit it in such way that it can be assimilated. This transmission of knowledge is closely linked to the methods of its acquisition, its interpretation (theoretical analysis) and its application (know-how).
3. A democratic logic: the problem of the cost of higher education arises in most countries according to budget strategies, the development of private or privatized institutions and the financial constraints of the students. Some of them will want to or will have to reconcile their studies with a more or less monopolizing remunerative work. The same thing is true for some teachers who want to increase a salary deemed insufficient by working many overtime hours, sometimes fictional, or by working outside the university. Absenteeism and/or the resulting lack of availability are contrary to the expected benefits of their function.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of a higher education system and the standards of its evaluation, especially in Romania, depends on the successful completion of a double transition:

1. The shift from initially factual and technical education to a basic education, more fundamental, making it easier to acquire advanced training and a base of knowledge and analysis in order to satisfy the evolution of hiring needs and being able to benefit from professional mobility.
2. The transition from a centralized organization, resulting from socialist culture, to a decentralized organization, thus replacing personal responsibility with state constraint.

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