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Quality Management in the Romanian Education System in a Post-pandemic Context – New Perspectives

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Abstract: *The problem of the quality of education is becoming more and more acute in the modern age. A society developing rapidly in all areas needs education with adequate quality, as the high levels of development impose educational requirements with adequate quality at these levels. The quality of education cannot be obtained without obtaining quality in education, without obtaining quality in the educational system! The SARS COV-2 pandemic has pushed education systems worldwide to unprecedented uncertainty and entropy. These forced transitions also affected two aspects of education: the quality of education (at the level of the classroom, and school) and also the quality of education (quality in the entire educational system). In this paper, we will expose some aspects of the new approaches to quality in the Romanian education system after the powerful impact of the previous pandemic on education systems.*

Keywords: *quality of education, quality in education, educational system, management, pandemic*

1. Introductory Aspects Regarding the Current State of Quality Assurance in the Romanian Educational System

Quality assurance of education/in education is an approach initiated by the Bologna Process, 1999¹.

This approach brought absolute novelties in the educational (university) environment based on a shared link - *the concept of harmonization of education systems in the 48 participating countries, through which:*

- *”to introduce a three-cycle higher education system: bachelor's, master's, and doctorate*
- *ensure mutual recognition of qualifications and training periods completed at other foreign universities*

¹ Bologna Processes - The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (1999). Source: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_ro

- *to implement a **Quality Assurance System**, to strengthen the quality and relevance of the learning and teaching process."*².

The introduction of a "Quality Assurance System" involved the use of complex mechanisms and procedures to create the necessary conditions to achieve this fundamental goal: "quality assurance" of education ("to strengthen the quality and relevance of the learning and teaching process."³). Putting the approach into practice meant, in reality, the implementation of specific elements of quality assurance (CA) at the level of the educational system, *Top-down!* In the following sense: a legislative-normative package was elaborated at the level of the educational system that would regulate the AC approach and implicitly, the establishment of entities whose primary purpose would be the "management" of the approach in the Romanian educational system: ARACIS – RAQAHE⁴ and ARACIP - RAQAPE⁵. It should be noted that in the Bologna process and all meetings of education ministers in the EU-16 Member States held after the Bologna period, there was no mention of the need to set up an entity dedicated to QA in the pre-university education system. Universities were recommended to know and apply some practices of the business environment involving quality assurance models, methods, techniques, and tools (for example, PDCA Cycle, ISO 9001 Model, EFQM Model, etc.). Romania was among the few European countries - perhaps even the only one - that set up, for the two major educational subsystems (university and pre-university), two distinct entities, previously mentioned: ARACIS - RAQAHE and ARACIP - RAQAPE.

In the 17 years of operation, the two agencies have conducted thousands of evaluations in the education system, developed standards and evaluation methodologies, reports, and periodic analyzes on the outcome of evaluations in the system. Nevertheless, in this period - relatively long - they failed to initiate a fundamental process, established even by the Bologna Process (1999):

*"-To implement a **Quality Assurance System**, to strengthen the quality and relevance of the learning and teaching process."⁶(AN: in other words: "to internalize the quality assurance of education").*

Because this process is specific to each educational entity (school, university) and depends exclusively on the management and resources of the entity, independent of the rules imposed "top-down"!

² Ibidem

³ Ibidem

⁴ RAQAHE - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, <https://www.aracis.ro/en/about-aracis/>

⁵ RAQAPE - Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education, <https://aracip.eu/>

⁶ Bologna Processes - The Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (1999). Source: https://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/higher-education/bologna-process-and-european-higher-education-area_en

In addition, numerous signals have been launched in the literature that the understanding and applying concepts specific to the quality assurance process has differed from country to country without harmonizing these concepts between the educational systems participating in *the Bologna Process*.

From this perspective, we appreciate that in Romania, there is *a double distortion* of the understanding and application of these concepts:

- *One* compared to the specific concepts of Quality Management, a well-established, validated, and perfectly functional field for over 80 years in the business world (including Romania), by reinventing or redefining them to achieve an imaginary specificity in the field of education;
- *Another* is generated by the confusion, prejudices, and significant errors of translation or understanding of these concepts at the level of different educational systems (Tser, 2007⁷).

Therefore, the whole approach to quality assurance of education, clearly stated in the Bologna process and reiterated in the next meetings of education ministers in European education systems, was addressed with these two significant dysfunctions from a conceptual perspective.

In the Romanian education system, in addition to the two aspects mentioned above, *quality assurance of education* was achieved mainly only at the level of the national education system - from top to bottom, by implementing a dedicated normative legislative package:

- *a law* on quality assurance in education;
- *standards for institutional evaluation, standards for the evaluation* of study programs in the university educational subsystem;
- *standards for the simultaneous* assessment of educational establishments and the levels of education/specializations/qualifications provided by them for authorization, accreditation, and periodic evaluation.
- For both subsystems, to describe the optimal level mentioned in the law, the concept of *the "reference" standard* was introduced - an obvious pleonasm, in our opinion⁸!

In conclusion, the quality assurance approach in the Romanian educational environment focuses on introducing requirements, rules, and norms (officially called "standards") that educational entities in pre-university and higher education subsystems have the obligation - by law - to meet. Furthermore, to maintain them

⁷ Tser, Claire, From the Bologna Process to the LMD: an analysis of the French translation of quality assurance, source: https://www.academia.edu/1612645/Du_Processus_de_Bologne_au_LMD_analyse_de_latraductionfran%C3%A7aise_dequality_assurance?email_work_card=title

⁸ AN: The name in the common law of "reference" is an obvious pleonasm since the standard is referential that cannot be of "reference"...

in the educational system.⁹ From this perspective, it results that the Romanian legislation should have considered the implementation and certification of a quality management system at the level of the educational entity (school/university).

In other words, in Romania, *quality assurance* in the educational environment is regulated (while in the business environment, it is generally a voluntary field, with some exceptions).

Specific essential components of Quality Management were neglected, although, at the declarative level, they would have been included in the "quality assurance system". We refer to *quality planning, quality control, and quality improvement*, which, together with quality assurance, make up quality management (ISO 9000:2015)¹⁰!

In addition, the quality assurance of education implemented in Romania "insisted" on the responsibilities of educational organizations (schools, universities) to meet the requirements of standards developed at the top of the education system and less on the results (and their quality) *obtained from teaching processes and learning*, mentioned in the Bologna Process!

2. New Perspectives on *Quality Assurance of Education* in the Context of the Pandemic Caused by the SARS COV – 2 Virus

The year 2020 will undoubtedly remain a significant year in human history through the major impact on the entire human society and on all areas of activity caused by the effects of the pandemic generated by the SARS COV - 2 virus.

The educational environment was one of the most affected, the effects of the pandemic on this environment over several years still need to be discovered from the perspective of their depth on educational processes. However, what is certain is that the pandemic caused, in a sudden way, a reset of all educational processes and a reset of the relations between school and pupils/students, school - family.

In this context, it is difficult to assess the quality assurance *of education* during the pandemic.

The solutions we adopted aimed to "save" the educational process by passing it predominantly in the online environment, education being, thus, much less oriented towards obtaining specific performances in the conditions imposed by the virtual space!

The perspective *of quality assurance* approached in the Romanian educational environment, translated by highlighting the responsibilities of schools/universities to offer only curricula to the requirements of standards in the field, highlighted the

⁹ AN: "Shades" are significantly different for entities from different financing systems. In the following sense: if public entities are abolished with great difficulty, the same cannot happen with those in private education, which, for not fulfilling the requirements of the standards, can be abolished by simply applying the provisions of the law without problems!

¹⁰ Quality management, source: ISO 9000:2015, <https://www.iso.org/obp/ui/#iso:std:iso:9000:ed-4:v1:en>

fact that this goal is no longer realistic, because compliance with existing standards was no longer possible, in a pandemic context! The existing standards do not include provisions and requirements (criteria, indicators) corresponding to the educational processes carried out in the conditions of the pandemic, in the online environment, with the restrictions and rules imposed at the community level.

Quality assurance in education was and still is severely disrupted during the pandemic. At the time of this work, there are no concrete possibilities for a return, at least at the previous stage or close to it.

Nevertheless, regardless of the evolution of the pandemic and the reactions of human society to the challenges posed by it, quality assurance of education is increasingly necessary, as the evolutions and technological leaps of today's society require *high-quality education!*

In this context, we will analyze two initiatives carried out in Romania by the two specialized agencies in the field of quality assurance of education (ARACIS-RAQAHE and ARACIP - RAQAPE), whose results should be applied to start with the current school/university year (2021/2022).

These initiatives should outline new perspectives on education quality assurance insofar as they fully / partially respond to the challenges posed by the pandemic, which not only has not ended but is spreading in successive waves.

2.1 The ARACIS Initiative on Quality Assurance in the University Environment through the QAFIN Project

QAFIN - Improving public policies in higher education and increasing the quality of regulations by updating quality standards¹¹ (QAFIN, 2021), is a complex approach that aims, as seen in the title, "updating quality standards".

Initiated in 2017 by ARACIS, the project had an implementation period of 2017–2020.

The stated objectives of the project clarify its importance for university education:

- "a. *Providing the necessary tools, methodologies, and guidelines on external evaluation of the quality of higher education, respectively classification and ranking of higher education institutions, respectively study programs, to inform decisions on how to allocate money for higher education institutions and curricula studies they organize,*
- b. *clarifying the role and mandates of the institutions involved in the quality assurance processes in higher education.*"¹²

Some of the results of the project are aimed at the quality assurance of education:

- "• Methodology and guidelines regarding the external evaluation of quality in higher education in Romania;

¹¹ QAFIN - <https://www.aracis.ro/despre-proiect-qafin/>

¹² Ibidem, page 1

- Study on data and good practices at the European level on quality assurance and classification in higher education, as well as on the impact of current practices in the field at the national level;
- *Manual of procedures regarding the role and competencies of the MEN¹³, and the subordinate councils, respectively ARACIS, regarding the quality assurance, and the way of collaboration between the two institutions.*"¹⁴

For example, let us look at some aspects of the project results: "*Methodology and guidelines on external quality assessment in higher education in Romania.*"¹⁵

The paper includes seven chapters on external evaluation of the quality of higher education institutions and the quality of study programs at the levels of studies in university education (bachelor's, master's, doctorate, psycho-pedagogical training programs to certify skills for the teaching profession), as well as the principles quality assurance in higher education and their application in the Methodology developed by ARACIS in this regard.

According to the paper's authors, the quality assurance of education is approached based on the three areas of the law on quality assurance of education¹⁶: A. Institutional capacity; B. Educational effectiveness; C. Quality management.

An analysis of the paper from the perspective of Quality Management highlights, from our point of view, much confusion regarding the concepts used in the construction of the newly formulated standards (QAFIN, 2021)¹⁷:

Although the mission and the "strategic" vision are mentioned in the IPA.1.1.1 standard (QAFIN, 2021, 25)¹⁸ In its content, there are only mentions regarding the mission and objectives assumed by the higher education institution (IIS)!

Although the "strategic vision" is mentioned in the IPA1.1.4¹⁹ standard, its content mentions the strategic plan of the IIS without references to the vision!

¹³ MEN - Ministry of Education, <https://edu.ro/>

¹⁴ QAFIN, page 1- <https://www.aracis.ro/despre-proiect-qafin/>

¹⁵ AN: "Methodology and guidelines on external quality assessment in higher education in Romania". This work was registered under a dedicated ISBN code, having its first edition printed in 2020. Therefore, its partial/total reproduction is subject to copyright law. Source: <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Result-1.-Part-I-Methodology-ARACIS-February-2021.pdf> , page 2

¹⁶ The three domains are established by GEO no. 75/2005, with subsequent amendments and completions (approved by Law no. 87/2006).

¹⁷ Areas, criteria, standards and performance indicators, page 15 of the paper "Methodology and guidelines on external evaluation of quality in higher education in Romania", source: <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Result-1.-Part-I-Methodology-ARACIS-February-2021.pdf>

¹⁸ Source: The paper METHODOLOGY AND GUIDELINES REGARDING THE EXTERNAL EVALUATION OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN ROMANIA (PRINTED EDITION, 2020) was registered with the ISBN code 978-973-0-32888-2, <https://www.ar-content/uploads/2021/05/Result-1.-Part-II-Evaluation-Guide-IIS-February-2021.pdf>, page 25

¹⁹ Ibidem

A detailed analysis of the standards formulated in the methodology “reveals” numerous confusions in formulating the terms specific to the field of quality assurance of education and implicitly, their use in the evaluation processes of higher education institutions (Drăgulănescu, 2007)²⁰.

In Chapter 3 of the paper entitled "Quality Assurance and Accreditation in Higher Education" (QAFIN, 2021, 11)²¹, we find that, in the authors' view, "*accreditation is the process of ensuring and improving academic quality*" by authorization and subsequently by accreditation.

Although, in Quality Management, the two essential components: *quality assurance* and *quality improvement* are treated separately, in the Romanian approach to these concepts, quality assurance, and improvement are approached under the same "dome" of the *quality assurance* concept!

Nevertheless, what interests us, from the perspective of this paper, are the new approaches of the competent institutions (in this case ARACIS - RAQAHE), regarding the quality assurance of education through the stated standards (for example), in the context of a prolonged pandemic that generated and further generated numerous confusions regarding the efficient and effective conduct of educational processes.

If carefully analyzing the new proposals of ARACIS materialized in the results of the QAFIN²² project, we will notice that:

- The proposed standards for institutional evaluation and curricula refer to the organization, functioning of higher education institutions (IIS), and, at most, the development of educational processes from *their external perspectives*. The proposed standards do not highlight *the interior of educational processes* - direct interactions between teacher and student - where education is created (as a product!);
- The proposed standards do not address the current situation - regarding the partial/total "move" of the educational process in the online environment. Standards for distance learning (ID) are developed but this type of education (ID - as it was regulated, organized, and conducted in Romania a long time ago) cannot

²⁰ The aspect of confusion and misuse of specific terms in the field of quality in the process of ensuring the quality of education has been mentioned and reported in numerous articles by specialists in the field, of which the most important is the work of Prof. N. Dragulanescu: Myths, confusions and reluctance in implementing ISO 9000 standards, source: <http://www.ndragulanescu.ro/publicatii/CP57.pdf>

²¹ Methodology and guidelines regarding the external evaluation of quality in higher education in Romania ", source: <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Rezultatul-1.-Partea-I-Metodologia-ARACIS-February-2021.pdf>, page 11

²² QAFIN - <https://www.aracis.ro/rezultatele-proiectului-qafin/>

be assimilated with the educational processes carried out entirely online (in the conditions of the pandemic and other restrictions imposed by it) and vice versa (Stauffer, 2021)²³.

- The proposed standards have a structure and approach similar to those existing before the pandemic, which means that, as formulated, they cannot generate "external quality assurance" of education because they do not capture, from our point of view, the reality of the phenomena current. For example, the misuse of the concept of "stakeholders" creates significant confusion about staff involvement in the evolution of IIS. We refer to the IP.A.1.2.1 standard in the IIS External Evaluation Guide (QAFIN 2021, 25)²⁴. It is known from the literature that there are significant conceptual differences between stakeholders and customers of an organization²⁵. Out of the desire to avoid the concept of "internal customer" - a term too "tough" for education, in the opinion of some analysts in the field - the one of "stakeholders" was used - apparently more "friendly"! (Douglas McNab, 2011)²⁶. The confusion stems from the fact that "internal stakeholders" are, in reality, the internal customers of that educational organization. Students are external clients of the organization (as well as graduates, employers, creditors, etc.)! Because students directly benefit from the "educational products/services provided by the organization, through its "educational processes"! Although the language has "industrial nuances", the reality is still the one presented in this point of view!

2.2 ARACIP - "RAQAPE Initiative on the Development of New Standards for the Evaluation of Pre-university Schools

ARACIP - The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education (RAQAPE)²⁷ is the institution "responsible" for quality assurance in pre-university education.

Among the numerous attributions, ARACIP "*elaborates the standards, reference standards and, performance indicators*" for evaluating the schools from the pre-university education system, to authorize, accredit and periodically evaluate these units. Following the series of first standards developed and approved in 2007 and 2008, in 2020 (at 13 years "distance"!) Were approved the new normative acts

²³ Bri Stauffer: What is the Difference Between Online Learning and Distance Learning?, <https://www.aeseducation.com/blog/online-learning-vs-distance-learning> and E-learning VS Distance Learning, <https://www.skillsacademy.co.za/e-learning-vs-distance-learning/>

²⁴ Guide for external evaluation of higher education institutions <https://www.aracis.ro/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Result-1.-Part-II-Guide-evaluation-IIS-February-2021.pdf>, page 25

²⁵ AN: The differences are that stakeholders do not directly benefit from the organization's products but are interested in its evolution.

²⁶ Emily Douglas-McNab, Customers vs Stakeholders in Education, 2011, <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/opinion-customers-vs-stakeholders-in-education/2011/12>

²⁷ ARACIP - <https://aracip.eu/>

aimed at introducing the new philosophy of the agency regarding quality assurance in the pre-university education system²⁸.

Considering the "size" of the normative documents and the object of the present paper, we will limit ourselves only to the analysis of the new "ARACIP" standards from the perspective of their approaches in a post-pandemic context.

Accreditation of schools is mentioned in the quality legislation as an *essential part of quality assurance*. Therefore, obtaining the status of an accredited school at one or more levels of education is the minimum proof of the achievement of quality assurance by that school.

Through the new normative acts²⁹ elaborated, the "new standards" for evaluating schools are introduced to be authorized and accredited for optimal functioning. Analyzing the aspects related to the new standards, we notice an improvement in terms of their definitions compared to the approaches from the old normative acts. Although even in these normative acts, the definitions established for the term "standard."³⁰ Are not observed, we still notice a considerable improvement in the fact that, regarding the accreditation/authorization procedures, the standard is made up of requirements. Compared to the previous, incorrect and unproductive use of "authorization standards/accreditation standards", by which the standard was made up of standards;

- The requirements of the standard are better correlated with the quality level induced by its application to the establishment and operation of a school/operation at an optimal level chosen by the school³¹;
- Some activities have been decentralized by transferring them to school inspectorates. However, the effect of this may be particularly detrimental as the assessment, in this case, needs to maintain its objectivity. We refer to the fact that an objective evaluation is a third party performed by independent people who are unrelated to the organization or not active in the system.

Returning to the subject of this paper, analyzing the "new standards", we find that they do not contain requirements regarding the development of educational processes in the online environment or regarding the functioning of schools in the

²⁸ AN: It is about GD no. 993/2020 on the approval of the Institutional Evaluation Methodology for the authorization, accreditation and periodic evaluation of education providers and GD 994/2020 on the approval of the provisional operating authorization standards and the standards of accreditation and periodic external evaluation in pre-university education, accessible at <https://aracip.eu/categorii-documente/functionare-legala>

²⁹ AN: These are GD 993/2020 and GD 994/2020

³⁰ AN: The definition of "standard" is given in the ISO / IEC 1996 Guide: "a document, established by consensus and approved by a recognized body, which provides, for common and repeated use, rules, guidelines or characteristics for their activities or results, in order to obtain the optimal degree of order in a certain context."

³¹ AN: See the explanations regarding the evaluation of schools concerning the "reference" standard.

pandemic/post-pandemic context. The structure of these standards is maintained, with some adjustments, the same as the structure of the old standards, without showing a significant adaptation to the current situation.

It is important to note that many requirements of the "new" standards become obsolete, even inapplicable, as the context to which these standards refer is outdated and non-existent during and even after the pandemic.

For example, **Requirement B: 9 of the accreditation standard:** “Reduction of absenteeism and, as the case may be, of early school leaving / school dropout, in the period since the last external evaluation” (GD 994/2020³²).

Such a requirement is inapplicable in a pandemic context as the phenomenon is not redefined, and no clear rules are established to configure this phenomenon in the context of online education. In the following sense: through the new technologies, the student can be present in the course from anywhere, exclusively from outside the school. In this situation, he cannot be considered in the situation of "early school leaving or school dropout".

Another example is requirement B34³³ from the accreditation standard: “Compliance with the maximum schooling capacity defined based on regulations/instructions issued by the Ministry of Education and Research or by ARACIP”. This requirement should, in our opinion, be revised/adapted to online education, as the content of the requirement is related to the "physical" spaces of the educational institution and not to the virtual spaces.

Last but not least, the requirements regarding “well-being” (B.76, B.77³⁴) are obsolete and irrelevant since "well-being" is not defined in the normative acts specific to the educational environment. In contrast to those described above, the essential criterion in the standard, c) *Employability, indicator 13*³⁵ is the least detailed! Furthermore, the chapter "quality management" comprises irrelevant requirements without any connection to the field itself!

3. Conclusions

The phenomenon generated by the SARS COV-2 virus, the global pandemic, which persists in society, has accelerated the reconfiguration of many aspects of quality management in the education system. *On the one hand*, the requirements of a high-quality, increasingly stringent education, including the new conditions imposed by the pandemic. *On the other hand*, the urgency of an ultra-accelerated implementation of new technologies in the management of educational processes will shake the classical paradigms regarding “teaching-learning-evaluation”. The role of the

³² GD 994/2020, page 3, source: <https://lege5.ro/gratuit/gm4tkmjwg43q/hotararea-nr-994-2020-regarding-the-approval-of-the-standards-of-authorization-of-provisional-operation-and-has-standards-of-accreditation-and-periodic-external-evaluation-in-pre-university-education>

³³ Ibidem, page 7

³⁴ Ibidem, page 12

³⁵ Ibidem, page 13

teacher will be reconfigured in the new "educational" conditions, emphasizing more and more the role of facilitator of learning. The learning process will shift its focus to the student's ability to sustain an extensive process of self-instruction in an environment away from direct interactions with the teacher. There is more and more talk about the aggressive expansion of the "Ed-Tech" industry (Rice, 2021)³⁶ on the status of the school, in the sense of "threatening" the classic status of the school to the detriment of an industry that is flourishing day by day. Therefore, a rethinking of the quality assurance process) of education is inherent under the enormous pressure of the factors described above. New standards appropriate to the specific conditions of the pandemic and post-pandemic, focused, in particular, on the development of educational processes in the online environment, are extremely necessary and very fast to adopt.

We appreciate that many of the concepts specific to the quality field will have to be rethought and consensualized according to the new conditions imposed on the global educational environment.

In our view, efforts to return to the previous state will have the opposite effect: a significant slowdown in adapting the education system to the new conditions imposed by the global pandemic caused by the SARS COV-2 virus ***because the return is impossible!***³⁷

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³⁶ AN: Ed-Tech - Educational Technology. A "new" industry whose growth is estimated at over 12 per cent per year. See Mae Rice. 2021. Education Technology: What Is Edtech? A Guide, <https://builtin.com/edtech/edtech-companies>

³⁷ AN: Paraphrasing Marin Preda's book: The Impossible Return, 1985, "Cartea Românească" Publishing House

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