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Quality Assurance in Higher Education - The Key to Performance

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ABSTRACT

Quality assurance is part of the quality management, which stands for an entire assembly of measures that aim to plan the achievement of quality by the universities, to set its parameters, to measure it and to present the following result.

Quality assurance, that is the incurring of the public trust in the processes that are in progress in the universities, would consist in the external evaluation. The external evaluation should come to the conclusion that there are mechanisms of quality management which work.

The quality of the higher education proved to be the basis for the establishment of the European Space of the Higher Education. The strategy of the European Union Europe 2020 sets a vision of the social market economy of Europe for the 21st century, with an important stress on the competences and on the principle of long life learning.

KEYWORDS : quality assurance, quality management, standards, competition

INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance relates to the win of trust from the public's side, it means that the national higher education system meets the expectations, do what it is intended to do, spends the public money in a proper (making something logical happen) and efficient way (not spending on activities more than they really worth). The reasons that motivate this decision are connected to the new condition of the university, in the mass education environment, facing the facilitating of the international labor force circulation that involves the recognition of the diplomas, and also connected to the European systemic convergence.

Why could the higher education not be a service, just like any other?

Because its mission is related to the issuance of new ideas, new information, the existence of critical appeals with regard to the present background. the most important thing to do is a strategic analysis to establish the direction we are heading.

No society can resist in time without values, their impairment causing the decrease of the citizens' solidarity. Nowadays, the university has adopted in its own structure the idea of intellectual competition, of democracy, pointing to the forum ideas that are opened to the entire society.

The higher education is a major public service, which is offered to the society by means of a national system based on units of different types and profiles. It has a great impact on the personal development of a large number of citizens, due to the fact that it offers them the chance of a greater personal autonomy, of a greater social mobility, of professional and international mobility, of higher incomes and of higher personal empowerment.

The report drafted by the European Association for the Quality Assurance in Higher (ENQA), by means of its members, after consulting and cooperating with the European Universities Association (EUA),

ESIB and EURASHE and discussing with different relevant networks, stands for the answer that can help to develop an established set of standards, procedures and orientations with regard to quality assurance and to explore the ways for the delivery of an adequate evaluation system for quality assurance and/ or accreditation by the agencies or organisms.

The main results and recommendations of the report are:

- the existence of the European standards for internal and external quality assurance, as well as for the agencies of external quality assurance;
- a cyclic analysis for a period of five years, issued by the European Agencies concerned with quality assurance;
- the existence of the European Register of the Agencies concerned with Quality Assurance;
- the establishment of the European Consultative Forum for Quality Assurance
- the existence of an European register of the Committee that will action as a cover in order to include the agencies in the register.

The report contributes to the establishment of a set of common values which constitute the basis of the good practices, with regard to the quality and quality assurance, by the institutions and agencies in European Higher Education Area (EHEA). In Europe there are many bad signs that point to a general decrease of quality: the "massification" of the university.It is said that the bad image of a university is given by its academic atmosphere, which can arise from the mentality on which the institution was founded, if it is a new conception, or one coming from a decadence process, caused by a weak management, complaisant recruitment, and unprofessional orientation or to some bad external conditions. The higher education institution must be helped in its process of change by the authorities, whose influence will respect the autonomy of the university, but will not tolerate the weak performance towards the society.

THE CONCEPT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

The evolutions of the latest years on the international and national backgrounds pointed out to the necessity of building a national management and quality assurance system. In the educational system, the quality of the educational process has turned into a national priority. In order for one to investigate the quality of an education institution and of its educational services it is necessary to understand first of all the concepts that are used: quality, criteria, quality indicators, standards or descriptors.

The concept of "quality assurance" was firstly applied in the field of economy, inside the profit-oriented organizations: to produce and sell as much as they could, operating in a strongly competitive environment. The quality is produced by the seller on the market, but it is defined after all by the customer, not by the producer.

The quality of an education institution is determined by the quality of the processes and by the quality of the rendered educational services. For the education process, the quality is not produced and defined solely by the university, as a provider of educational services, but also by the beneficiaries and the clients of education. These must be given a permanent consultancy, and their level of satisfaction must represent a real concern for the education institutions, in order to generate a competitive system.

The achievement of the goals is assured by the didactic process, the educational activity and a various range of services specific to the education institutions. The quality of the educational process depends on the quality of these three components. The managerial competence of the management board is decisive.

From a managerial point of view, with regard to the orientation of the education institution towards organizational quality, there are two types of argument: the creation of a conservatory education institution or of an innovative one, the difference being the way of perception of

the quality.

In the case of the conservatory education institution, the quality is measured only in terms of the results of the didactic activity, the pupils/ students in terms of the acquired knowledge and of the facilitating measures for diplomas and living conditions, whereas the financial organisms are evaluated in terms of the expenses of the existent resources.

In the case of the innovative higher education institution, there is a process during which the institution is permanently adapting to the new environment, it is concerned with the improvement of its developing processes and rendered services.

Furthermore, an important element in the management approaching way is represented by the client, in this case the receiver of the material product offered by the provider.

The practical application of a quality-oriented strategy is being made through the quality management, that is defined as an assembly of activities related to the function of management, which determine the politics in the field of quality, a client-oriented politics, with an important stress on the objectives and responsibilities that are implemented inside the quality system by means of: quality planning, quality control, quality assurance and quality improvement.

The promotion of a client-oriented politics inside a quality system may be done by developing some specific procedures aiming the identification of the clients' needs, through the elaboration of some standards and procedures, as well as by measuring the extent to which the results achieved by the education institution are in accordance with the set goals.

When adopting the "a client-oriented" politics, it is absolutely necessary to establish some denominate procedures of consultation/ participation of pupils/ students and parents, of employers at the elaboration of the strategic goals, the concrete programs and actions, the actual functioning of the higher education institution, at making the relevant decisions, evaluation etc.

The systems and the quality assurance procedures are related to:

- The projection and planning of the higher education institution. This is supposed to set the mechanism of establishment of the development strategies and the strategic goals, which are the responsibilities, the mechanisms and the decisional procedures, who is involved in the decision making process, how are those decisions presented to the community and how it is created the consensus around these strategic goals;
- The implementation of the agreed programs and actions along with the observation on the functioning of the higher education institution is based on the following specifications: who is responsible and who is taking part in the implementation of the actions and programs, which are the methods and the instruments of observation and feedback, how is assured the participation of the "interest bearers" at the observation, how is their feedback processed;
- The evaluation of the way of functioning and developing of the higher education institution, on reviewing the projects, programs and the optimization of the current functioning. In this case, there must be determined: methods, instruments and evaluation procedures, the participants on the evaluation and there must be a certain information regarding how is everyone participating, which are the procedures for the programmatic documents' review and who is taking part in this process, which are the early warning mechanisms.

The quality evaluation system must be conceived in such a manner that it should guarantee the realization of *the main functions of evaluation*, which are:

- **the improvement of the current activity** - the evaluation must be opportune, to stop the apparition of some major dysfunctions and, at the same time, to show very clearly what has been good and what has been a failure in the previous activities;
- **the assurance of the feedback for the significant interest groups** - the results of the actions must be known by the students, parents, professors, managers, by the entire community, in order for all these groups to be able to judge if the "investment" they made (financial, but not only) has lead to the expected impact and if it worth to continue it or not;
- **the reviewing and optimization of the educational politics and strategies at the organization level** in order for these to better serve the assumed mission.

In the last few years, in Romania and in the European Union as well, it is more and more mentioned and promoted, by the educational politics, the necessity of an auto evaluation culture. The self evaluation is considered to be a fundamental dimension of the "organization that teaches".

CONCLUSIONS

As a conclusion, we must be aware of the fact that the education, the research, continuous learning maintain the civilization's development and lead to the increase of the standard of living for our nation.There is a strong temptation that affects different representatives of the higher education institutions and even responsiblepersons at a national level, that of reducing the complexity of the quality processes, considering them a burden, even harder if one thinks about the bureaucracy, all the papers and statistics. This temptation is felt due to the stress that is put on indicators and standards, on regulations and administrative decisions. There is on the other hand the temptation to use the quality as an instrument of power and control.

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