

Chapter 11

Evaluating International Competitiveness: A Study of the Application of External Quality Assurance Performance Indicators in Romania

Kathleen Voges

Texas A&M University – San Antonio, USA

Constantin Bratianu

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Alina Mihaela Dima

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Romania

Daniel A. Glaser-Segura

Texas A&M University – San Antonio, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter addresses the need for improvement in the development of quality assurance indicators to evaluate progress related to the implementation of the Bologna Process. There is noted room for improvement, as well as an interest in engaging feedback from key stakeholder groups, namely employers. The authors propose that the use of the Global Competitiveness Index with specific attention to the measures provided in Pillars 11, Business Sophistication, and Pillar 12, Innovation provide a transparent and trust-worthy indicator. The measures capture both the absolute and relative standing of a nation's international competitiveness. Using a case study approach that illustrates implementation efforts in Romania, the authors present how the measures might be incorporated into quality assurance indicators at both the national and institutional level. they provide propositions and suggest a future research agenda to advance an understanding of how the use of these indicators can advance convergence of higher education practices in the EHEA.

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INTRODUCTION

The implementation of the Bologna Process targets the convergence of institutional practices in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) to make Europe the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world, capable of sustainable economic growth (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). Simply stated the overarching objective is to achieve a high level of international competitiveness for the European Union. The associated Bologna Declaration presented in 1999 is the by-product of an overall attempt to move toward European integration initiated with Common Market efforts developed from steel and coal industry governance shifts in the 1950s. Further, the focus is predicated on the acknowledgment that highlighting the importance of cooperative education reform is paramount to the development of stable, peaceful democratic societies. In all, the Declaration is reflective of recognition that the European economy is knowledge-based and that higher education systems are the cornerstone for the generation of knowledge.

Implementation of the Bologna Process is a herculean task consisting of strategic and tactical activities in a multi-dimensional context to achieve transferable, relevant and credible degrees intended to promote the borderless transference of knowledge throughout the European Union. The Declaration had no legal obligations; it is left to each nation's legislative system to generate a suitable framework from which to implement the intent of the Declaration. The Process impacts 4,000 institutions of higher education representing 16 million students (Adelman, 2009).

At its most basic level the Process called for a significant shift in European university paradigms from a continental management style to that of the entrepreneurial university (Bratianu, 2009; Bratianu & Stanciu, 2010). Among many other outcomes, the envisioned results are for a European higher education system in which a student would be able to easily transfer academic credit

from one institution to another, secure access to 'borderless' financial aid programs, and be assured of possessing credible and universally recognized education credentials in the labor market. As such, the Process is oriented toward the accomplishment of three overarching objectives, 1) the introduction of a three cycle system (bachelor/masters/doctorate), 2) quality assurance, and 3) recognition of qualifications and periods of study. The Process has been amended since its inception to integrate other policy themes such as lifelong learning, the support of credit transferability across national boundaries and a social dimension oriented toward the goal of increasing diversity of the student population (Adelman, 2009; Bologna Through Student Eyes Report, 2009).

The interest presented in this paper is focused on the second overarching objective: quality assurance. The implementation of quality assurance includes both internal institutional assessment as well as external assessment. An outline framing suitable approaches is provided at the EU level and is found in the Standards and Guidelines of Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Nations meeting ESG thresholds are certified into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and listed on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). As is similar with other directives related to the implementation of the Bologna Process, the ESG does not prescribe specific procedures but rather promotes institutional autonomy in the development of relevant and transparent measures. Further, there is expressed interest in developing a balance between internal and external quality assurance programs with recognition that the focus on the need for external quality assurance be fit for its purpose placing an 'appropriate' burden on institutions to assess the achievement of its objectives. According to the Bologna Process Implementation Report (2012) while there have been 'impressive changes' since the Bologna Process was initiated over a decade ago there is still considerable room for improvement of quality

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