

Chapter 21

Convergence of Quality Assurance Paths in Romanian Universities: Drafting a Set of Indicators

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to the quality of education, despite the general adhesion related to its importance, one can notice a number of opinions frequently contradicting themselves. The intention of delimitating, systemizing, and prioritizing the multitude of quality facets simply enhances the criticism. These circumstances prompt a more thorough analysis of the quality in education. Focusing on the perspective of the European Higher Education, this chapter proposes a set of convergence indicators that are able to capture the relationship toward which universities evolve. The indicators are then tested against the opinion of several experts from Romanian Higher Education Institutions, analyzed, and subjected to careful revision based on the respondents' answers.

INTRODUCTION

According to Australian Learning and Teaching Council, ALTC, (2010), the perspective from which higher education is analyzed has undergone change. Currently, it is considered an economic product, and that, as all economic goods, raises an obvious interest to be fully followed, especially regarding its purchase, which is represented by graduates hired. Hence, there is a growing interest from governments and funding agencies

to measure students' employability through the measurement of learning outcomes and hiring processes.

The frame is that of the Bologna Process whose primary objective is to promote transparency, mobility, employability and student-centered learning (Bologna Declaration, 1999). However, engaging governments in cooperation and development of compatible and comparable higher education systems translates into the need for transparent national and international criteria and quality

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standards, which leads to setting up different goals, objectives, structures, curricular features, etc., of the various higher education institutions.

Moreover, Bologna's last report (Trends V) debates the measures that must be taken after 2010. These measures focus on transferring attention from governmental and legislative actions to implementing reforms in institutions, enhancing the employability of graduates, opening a dialogue and improving partnerships with stakeholders, and ensuring that the new structures are taken into consideration by employers (European University Association, 2007).

Given that most European countries have universal enrollment for primary and lower secondary education, policies that improve the quality of schooling in terms of students' cognitive and non-cognitive skills could provide long term benefits.

There is a positive relationship between attending school and the employment rate, proven by the records of Eurostat and the European Commission: the higher the degree of education is, the higher the employment rate (Eurostat Yearbook 2010, Commission of the European Communities, 2009). This reality could be undermined only by the quality of the education. Thus, according to Institute for Research in the Sociology and Economics of Education, IRSEE, (2007) and European Commission Education and Culture, ECEC, (2006), the quality of education, measured in terms of student performance in cognitive and abilities tests, produces substantial gains in the labor market, both for the individuals and for society.

All of these resulted in an inclusion of the convergence of different quality assurance systems associated with the European Higher Education Systems on the Bologna's list of debated topics.

The challenge has proven to be a great one: not only that identifying quantitative indicators able to adequately capture the qualitative evolution of the quality management systems is a difficult task, but also the cornucopia of possible approaches of the quality, important not to be neglected given their interrelated actions and effects, makes the mission rather difficult.

Therefore, in an attempt to facilitate the better understanding of the above presented subject of interest and also to tap a possible solution under the form of a set of indicators, the present paper analyzes the convergence of quality assurance paths. This analysis, which is the result of research limited to the Romanian universities, is broadly presented below.

QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

With the majority of the Bologna Process primary objectives converging toward a harmonization process, most European countries have opted for the introduction, in several stages, of a standard quality evaluation procedure set (accepted as the main tool for quality assurance in the evaluation of the teaching-learning activity within the higher education units) (Bornmann, Mittag, & Daniel, 2006). Generally speaking, this procedure takes into consideration three different perspectives of Higher Education, namely its strategy for quality management, its relation with regional development, and also the relationship between the Higher Education Institution and the labor market. All of these raise the same set of issues: the measures likely to be developed, the most appropriate indicators capable of capturing the real situation without over-generalizing or falling into formalism, the most frequent barriers to putting into place the convergence measures, and the official caretakers.

Equally, all of the three dimensions were not exempt from criticisms related to which direction is more important, the most appropriate type of measure and its time span of application, what and how to measure so that the measurement is valid, the possibility of overcoming the obstacles, and nevertheless, whether the present caretakers are the most suitable.

In what the indicators are concerned, according to ALTC (2010), Cave et al have achieved, back in 1997, a rating of indicator types, classifying them into simple indicators, performance indicators,

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