QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE ROMANIAN HIGHER EDUCATION
- RECENT DEVELOPMENTS -

*The highest quality will be achieved in **education** and **training** and **Europe** will be recognised as a world-wide reference for the quality and relevance of its **education** and **training systems** and institutions*

(Detailed work programme on the follow-up the objectives of education and training systems in Europe, COM (2001) 501)

SUMMARY

1. HISTORICAL OVERVIEW

I. *Introductory remarks*

In Romania, quality assurance in education was and continues to be considered a very important criterion in the process of contributing to the European Higher Education Area.

The main arguments in favour of the quality assurance framework development were:

- The necessity of creating a trustworthy environment on long and medium term, regarding the capacity and performances of Romanian higher education institutions on the European and world market of higher education, in the context of intensifying the competition for students and resources.

- The necessity of harmonising the standards, the procedures and the practices of Romanian universities with those used in the EU member states with the aim of automatically recognising the degrees and diplomas delivered by Romania higher education institutions, of creating the EHEA and of assuring the free movement of Romanian people in Europe.

- The necessity of adapting the higher education programmes to the economic agents needs and demands.

II. *Previous steps: 1990 - 2004*

The problem of quality assurance in higher education became evident after 1990 with the explosion in the number of private universities and programs. Two laws have governed accreditation and quality measures of higher education in Romania for many years: Law 88 of 1993 established the National Council of Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA), which accredited new programs and institutions. Law 144 of 1999 extended the role of the CNEAA.

The National Council for Academic Evaluation and Recognition

It is a public institution controlled by the Parliament, lawfully set up in 1993. The evaluation committees for each domain/profile/specialization are CNEAA

subordinates. CNEAA members are appointed by a Government Decision for a 4-year period; MoER nominates the candidates taking into account the university senate suggestions.

The main responsibilities of CNEAA are the evaluation of university subjects with a view to starting or ceasing their recognition in all higher education institutions in Romania, institutional education, institutional monitoring, ongoing evaluation of each subject matter.

MoER elaborates and submits the list comprising the subject matters with permanent or temporary recognition to the Government approval or initiates law projects concerning the setting up of higher education institutions.

Because the main focus of CNEAA activities has been the evaluation of educational standards, research and management oversight has been neglected. In the case of CNESS, institutional and program evaluations, if successful, lead to a provisional license from the government after recommendation from the CNEAA. After three years, provisionally licensed programs or institutions that meet all the standards required by law are then recommended by the CNEAA for accreditation. Parliament then determined, by an act of law, the establishment of a new university or program. Reassessment occurs every five years. In addition to the CNEAA, there were commissions for external evaluation.

Until now, by this law CNEAA is responsible for quality assurance in higher education.

Legislation related to the creation of a national system of quality assurance has in the meantime been approved, defining the general framework, promoting advanced European systems of quality assurance and disseminate best practices. "The newly created structure will cooperate with higher education institutions in Romania and abroad, as well as with other European institutions in order to support the efforts of assuring quality of higher education in Romania at the level of EU requirements."

1. UNIVERSITAS 2001

The PHARE project "**UNIVERSITAS 2000**" (RO 9601) was a project aiming at supporting the Romanian Government, especially the Ministry of Education and Research, in designing and implementing the reform of academic management. It went together with the general reform programme of the Romanian Higher Education as financed by the Romanian Government, the European Union and the World Bank in three lines of action: (1) The management of higher education; (2) Tertiary and continuing education; (3) Post-graduate education and research.

The "**UNIVERSITAS 2000**" project in Romania offered the opportunity of getting informed on the operational mechanisms of the strategic plans to persons

responsible for strategies in MEC, in universities and faculties during visits in France, England, Italy and Germany.

One of the main tasks of this programme was the setting up of the quality assurance system in the higher education – by establishing professional systems of quality assurance (bodies, methodologies, standards etc) and by putting together the expertise acquired in the Tempus projects at national level.

This goal was added after the visits in Western Europe universities and enriched its significance after the Minister of National Education signed the Declaration of Bologna (June 1999). The project intended to coagulate in a national movement the outcomes of the existing Tempus projects in the field and to set up quality assurance pertaining instruments (bodies, methodologies, standards etc).

Another goal was the formation of an institutional culture with respect to quality in three main directions: the quality of the educational process, the quality of the academic research and the quality of the administrative services. The methodologies needed to evaluate these three aspects are different, but they all aim at improving education and study conditions offered to students.

2. CALISRO PROJECT

The Ministry of Education worked with international partners on *CALISRO* and MATRA, two research programs looking into the quality of higher education in Romania by identifying measures for improvement and harmonization with the European model. The aim of the projects was creating a model as possible basis for the future quality-assurance structuring bodies at the national and institutional level.

The Ministry of Education and Research financed the research programme for the quality of higher education in Romania *CALISRO*, which contributed to setting up the bodies responsible for quality assurance at institutional and national level. Each institution is considered responsible for assuring the quality of all its activities at all levels, according to the benchmarks. Each higher education institution created or is creating its own intern system of quality assurance having as objective the intern processes of quality assurance, including self evaluation at all levels, according to the standards and the preconditions of external quality assurance systems.

3. MATRA

In 2001 has been promoted an extended project for quality, financially supported by MATRA, with the aim of giving a stronger impulse to the setting up of a quality assurance system in higher education. The basic idea for this project was that we cannot implement a real and efficient policy for quality assurance without the quality culture, with no concrete actions promoted bottom up.

Quality assurance leads to the trust of the public in the final products of higher education, in its accordance with the demands of the labour market and in the education process as a whole. The process of quality assurance is part of the quality management as a whole range of measures aiming at improving the universities capacity to plan the final result of the quality assurance process, to identify the appropriate indicators, to measure it and to prove the result obtained.

III. 2004-2005

Romania has made major steps towards the European Higher Education Area by reorganizing the entire spectrum of university programs. A new higher education structure of the higher education cycles has been adopted following the discussions that occurred within the National Rectors Council in November 2003 which have shown a general consensus regarding the adoption of this structure.

The Declaration of the National Higher Education Conference released on 5 November 2003 expressed the commitment of all academic representatives (Universities, National Rectors Council and Ministry of Education and Research) to sustain the objectives stated in the Bologna Declaration and in the Prague 2001, and Berlin 2003, ministerial meetings.

The new legislation of June 2004 (**law no. 288/2004**) stipulates the reorganisation of university studies in three cycles (Bachelor, Master, and Doctoral). Starting with the academic year 2005-2006, Romanian higher education structure is as follows:

• First cycle (180-240 ECTS) – **Bachelor** degree;

• Second cycle (90-120 ECTS, exceptionally 60 ECTS) – **Master** degree;

• Third cycle (3 years and in special situations 4 or 5 years) - **Doctoral** degree.

According to the new law, the applying of the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) is mandatory to all universities and these will mandatory issue for free, including in a foreign language of widespread circulation, the Diploma Supplement, whose content is in conformity with the European provisions, starting with 2005/2006 academic year.

The **Government Decision no. 88/2005** has established a new structure of study fields in accordance with the principles of Bologna process.

The new law no. 287/2004 on setting-up university consortia allows universities to voluntarily set up consortia, on the basis of a partnership agreement, in which they can include research and development units. These consortia should promote in a more efficient way an European and international attractiveness of EHEA in content of programmes and funding.

Romanian higher education in EU context. It will be ensured the harmonization of Romanian education system with European education systems and it will be encouraged the increase of international cooperation trough:

- Introducing the new forms of international cooperation: the extension of joint activities; associated curriculum; joint research units; double degrees; student enrolled in two European universities; teacher nominated in two European universities;

- Increasing teaching staff and students mobility through national and international exchanges;

- Developing new forms of cooperation between Romanian universities, both public and private.

The higher education structural reform aims to: reduce the number of university specializations, increase the participation in master and doctoral programmes and stimulate the emergence of university consortium.

2. EUROPEAN FUNDAMENTALS

Education and training are decisive in order to achieve the strategic objective set by the Member States at the Lisbon European Council, that of making the EU the most dynamic and competitive society in the world based on knowledge. In March 2000, the Lisbon European Council set the ambitious strategic objective of the European Union in order to become by 2010 "the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world capable of sustainable economic growth with more and better jobs and greater social cohesion".

Admitting that the Union has been confronted with a "quantum shift resulting from globalization and the challenges of a new knowledge-driven economy", the European Council has underlined the fact that it is necessary "not only a radical transformation of the European economy", but also "a stimulating program for modernizing the social assistance and the education systems". The Council launched a call to "a general reflection regarding the concrete objectives of the education systems" and also "for a yearly substantial increase of the investment in human resources per capita".

It was underlined that the future of the European society and economy will depend on the qualifications of its citizens and, that these qualifications need a continuous updating, specific to knowledge society.

The present trends in the European Union regarding the quality assurance in education and training are based on a holistic approach, taking into consideration:

- ✎ Policies elaboration (eg. Legislation, social dialogue, investments),
- ✎ Institutional issues (eg. Governance, management, partnerships, administrative capacity and human resources),
- ✎ Research programs (eg: pedagogy, curricula, content, materials)
- ✎ Services (information and counseling) as well as
- ✎ The certification of the procedures and processes.

The management of quality assurance is based on various factors: tradition and culture, investments, legislative framework, relations with various actors, mutual trust, conditions on the labor market, human resources and the capacity of institutions).

The main challenges for the quality of education and training include restructuring the process of facilitating the life-long learning, the optimal use of resources and ensuring the social inclusion[1].

As it is underlined in the **Quality Guide in Higher Education** (CALISRO project)[2], the importance of education is unanimously recognized, in general, and, especially that of the higher education in shaping the future status of a nation. The higher education institution is the main source generating the core of cultural diffusion.

The teachers and trainers at all levels, from pre-school to post-university, the majority of politicians, those who lead the state institutions, the organizations and the process from the social-economic environment, all have received the relevant academic and professional mark of the university, during the course of their formation as intellectuals. The higher education is now training the specialists and politicians who, in the near future, will lead the Romanian society and economy, integrated in the European Union.

Quality assurance of the higher education systems represents a necessity imposed by the more and more competitive market and by the emergence of the knowledge based society.

This is the reason for which some of the Member States of the European Union have elaborated political signals that are adequate for defining the European Knowledge Area, based on the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area.

The *Bologna Declaration in 1999* regarding the defining of the "European Higher Education Area", initially signed by 29 countries, and afterwards by 40 countries, included among other objectives

"promoting the European cooperation in quality assurance related to the idea of developing comparable criteria and methodologies"[3].

Consequently, *the Communication of the Berlin conference of Higher Education Ministers,* 2003, notes:

"the quality of higher education proved to be the central element in creating the European Higher Education Area. At the European level it is necessary to have, by 2005, agreed sets of standards, procedures and guidelines for external evaluations carried out by quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies. The agencies

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[1] *Cynthia Deane, Elizabeth Watters, Toward 2010 – Common Themes and Approaches across Higher education and Vocational Education and training in Europe, Background Research Paper, Irish Presidency Conference, February 2004.*

[2] *Sorin Popescu, „Oportunitatea şi importanţa asigurării calităţii în instituţiile de învăţământul superior românesc din România", Ghidul Calităţii în Învăţământul Superior,Editura Universităţii Bucureşti, 2004, p.8.*

[3] *"Spaţiul Învăţământului Superior European" - Declaraţie comună a Miniştrilor Educaţiei din Europa convenită la Bologna, 19 iunie 1999*

themselves should be subject to some form of monitoring or peer review in order to ensure their independence and trustworthiness."[4]

Quality assurance in higher education has been on the agenda of the European institutions. In 1998 it was elaborated a document which is not binding, but constitutes a defining element, relevant for setting the orientations for the Member States.

The Council Recommendation from the 24th of September 1998[5] regarding the European cooperation for quality assurance in higher education recommends to the Member States:

„a. **Support and, where necessary, establish transparent quality assurance systems** with the following aims:

- to safeguard the quality of higher education within the specific economic, social and cultural context of their countries while taking due account of the European dimension and of a rapidly changing world,

- to encourage and help higher education institutions to use appropriate measures, particularly quality assurance, as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning and also training for research, another important part of their task,

- to stimulate mutual exchanges of information on quality and quality assurance at Community and world level and to encourage cooperation between higher education institutions in this area.

b. Base systems of quality assurance on the following features:

- autonomy and/or independence in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State for the bodies responsible for quality assurance in their choice of procedures and methods,

- adaptation of quality assurance procedures and methods to the profile and aims of higher education institutions, while respecting their autonomy and/or independence in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State,

- targeted utilisation of internal and/or external aspects of quality assurance adapted to the procedures and methods used,

- involvement of the different parties concerned according to the purpose of the quality assurance,

- publication of quality assurance results in a form which is appropriate to each Member State."

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[4] *"Formarea Spaţiului European al Învăţământului Superior" - Comunicat al Conferinţei Miniştrilor responsabili pentru învăţământul superior, Berlin, 19 septembrie 2003*

[5] *COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (98/561/EC)*

On the basis of the Council recommendations was set up the European Network for Quality Assurance in higher education **(ENQA),** transformed in November 2004 in European Association for Quality Assurance in higher education which has as main objective to initiate European policies in the field of quality assurance and establishing national agencies for quality assurance**.**

In 2004 the European commission has elaborated a report[6] regarding the European cooperation in the field of quality assurance on the implementation of Council Recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998. Based on the success of this recommendation in achieving the objectives in the field of cooperation on quality assurance in higher education, the Commission drafted a **new proposal of recommendation on 12 of October 2004**, considering necessary to continue the measures taken in order to improve the transparency of European higher education systems with the view of becoming an attractive area for both European and wide world citizens.

The new recommendation[7] foresees:

1. To encourage all higher education institutions to introduce or develop rigorous internal quality assurance mechanisms;

2. To encourage all quality assurance or accreditation agencies to be independent in their assessments, to apply the features of quality assurance laid down in Recommendation 98/561/EC and to apply the common set of general standards and guidelines adopted in Bergen, for assessment purposes;

3. To encourage representatives of national authorities, the higher education sector and quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with social partners, to set up a 'European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies' (European Register) based on national review, that takes account of the principles set out in the Annex, and to define the conditions for registration and the rules for management of the register;

4. To enable higher education institutions active within their territory to choose among quality assurance or accreditation agencies in the European Register an agency which meets their needs and profile, provided that this is compatible with their national legislation or permitted by their national authorities;

5. To allow higher education institutions to work towards a complementary assessment by another agency in the European Register, for example to enhance their international reputation;

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[6] *REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS on the implementation of Council Recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, Brussels, 30.09.2004*

[7] **RECOMMENDATION OF THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT AND OF THE COUNCIL** *of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (2006/143/EC)*

6. To promote cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust and the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation assessments, thus contributing to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country;

7. To ensure public access to the assessments made by the quality assurance or accreditation agencies listed in the European Register,

3. RECENT DEVELOPMENTS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN ROMANIA

Promoting a system for quality assurance and accreditation

The quality assurance and the accreditation proceedings are priorities of the Romanian higher education system. For this purpose, the following aspects have been referred to:

- the evaluation and accreditation committees: they have already been functioning for several years and they have helped the maintaining of professional standards; what is to be noted is that they are responsible for the private universities system, too;

- the periodic accreditation system: it ensures the long term quality, but it also verifies how the higher education institutions manage to develop and to correlate their educational provision with the market requirements;

- initiatives for new evaluation systems (external evaluation on a peer assessment basis); they represent an additional step forward; the first external audits are to take place soon.

In Romania, the issue of quality assurance has received a new, stronger, impetus, in 2005 by establishing a quality assurance legal framework in accordance with the European recommendations in the field.

Consequently, there have been adopted

- the ***Emergency Ordinance no. 75/12th of July 2005***, regarding the quality assurance in education,

- the ***Order of Minister no. 3928/April 2005*** – implementation of the internal quality assurance mechanisms in universities (following the recommendations of the EU, as well as the commitments endorsed within the Bologna process),

- the ***Order of Minister No. 5393/3rd of November 2005*** for appointing the members of the Interim Council of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, based on the Government Decision no. 1257/2005 regarding the approval of the Regulation for organizing and

functioning of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS).

The Minister Order 3928/April 2005 on the quality educational services in higher education institutions aimes at ensuring the continuous improvements in terms of quality of the educational services, both for students and for the other beneficiaries of initial and continuous training. ***The documents provides for every higher education establishment to develop internal quality control mechanisms by the end of the academic year 2004 – 2005*** and ***to apply from 2005 – 2006 their own quality assurance system***, different according to cycle and study programme.

The Emergency Government Ordinance no. 75/2005 on quality assurance in education regulates the assurance of the quality of education and its provisions are applied to all providers of education.

The Law 87/10 April 2006 approved the Emergency Government Ordinance no. 75/2005 on quality assurance in education. This law has a trans-sectoral approach of quality assurance by covering all the providers of educational services in Romania.

The Law on quality assurance in education includes:

- The <u>methodology</u> for quality assurance in education;

- <u>Quality assurance at institutional level</u>;

- <u>External assessment</u> of quality education;

- <u>Institutional arrangements</u> involved in quality assurance.

The law on quality assurance in education aims, *inter alia*,

- ✍ to increase quality education,

- ✍ to provide reliable and coherent information on the quality of educational services,

- ✍ to protect the interest of the beneficiaries,

- ✍ to develop a quality culture among the providers of education services,

- ✍ to carry out trans-institutional assessment of university programmes with a view to ensure differentiated funding based on the quality of the programmes,

- ✍ to offer a complementary support for educational policies and strategies.

Quality assessment is carried out through a series of transparent actions of designing, planning and implementing educational programmes which comply with quality standards.

Quality education is ensured through the following means:

1. effective planning and achievement of quality learning outcomes,
2. monitoring of outcomes,
3. self-evaluation,
4. external evaluation of outcomes and
5. continuous improvement of learning outcomes.

The mechanisms for quality assurance and assessment in education are mainly focused on the learning outcomes and their application is based on the qualifications awarded. The national framework of qualifications must be compatible with the European one so as to facilitate recognition of degrees and mobility of workers.

Ensuring quality education at institutional level

According to the Law, each educational provider has to establish a Committee for quality assurance and evaluation. The committee must have among its members representatives of the main stakeholders.

Quality evaluation and assurance at institutional level envisage the institutional capacity, the educational effectiveness and quality management system. These fields are considered in terms of educational unit strategies and mechanisms for quality assurance; objective and transparent criteria for the evaluation of learning outcomes; common evaluation of the teaching staff; ensuring adequate resources; data bases on internal quality assurance; transparency of programmes, diplomas, certificates and qualifications awarded.

External evaluation of quality education

External evaluation of quality will be carried out in Romania by two bodies:

o **Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education**

o **Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-University Education.**

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education is an autonomous public institution with competencies in accreditation and external quality assessment.

As regards quality assurance and evaluation, **the Agency establishes and revises periodically the national standards and performance indicators for higher education**.

It collaborates with other institutions to develop and promote policies and strategies for quality education, provides transparently its own procedures and mechanisms for

external quality evaluation, has the right to use international experts and provides its own register of evaluators.

In order to inform the stakeholders, the Agency:

- Makes public the reports of external evaluations,
- Evaluates on the Ministry of Education and Research request the quality of higher education institutions and programmes,
- Publishes a Memorandum on its activity every year, and
- Provides every four years an analysis of the quality of the entire higher education system.

The Agency will be functioning based on its own funds coming from contracts with the Ministry of Education and Research, HEIs from Romania and abroad, or other institutions or bodies, accreditation and external evaluation fees, external non-reimbursable funds, donations, sponsorship, other sources.

Romanian HEIs may ask for external evaluation of the quality of their educational services to be carried out by any agency recorded in the future European register of quality assurance agencies in higher education.

The law will be implemented from 2006 – 2007 for the whole education system.

The higher education structural reform aims to increase the mobility of the students, improve their chances on the labour market, reduce the number of university specializations and increase the participation in masters' and doctoral programmes.

4. CONCLUSIONS

We are aware that Bologna objectives mean not only to promote legislative changes but also to enhance the institutional autonomy and accountability and ensure adequate funding and a reliable quality culture in each HEI. Therefore, in designing and implementing the legislative package and regulations, the Ministry involved various think-tanks, the National Rectors' Council, the National Council for Educational Reform, representatives of the student's federations and of the trade unions active in the sectors of education.

The creation of the quality assurance systems becomes one of the main objectives for the European integration, not only for the academic communities in the European Union, but also for the accession countries.

The quality assurance criteria are closely related to the objectives of each institution correlated to the needs of society and the labor market; the quality assurance procedures have to take into consideration the nature of each institution. Defining the objectives, at department or institutional level, represents an essential condition in this regard.

The quality system does not represent an aim in itself, but a mean through which the higher education institution is oriented to performance. By this, it is developed a culture of quality among the personnel and the students. The European Union has set a series of recommendations in the field of quality assurance, without creating supranational institutions. Quality assurance is the responsibility of each country in the Union. What has been agreed at the European level is the putting together of recommendation and best practices in the field. It is a system of procedures of quality assurance and assessment, compatible at the European level and applied (as far as its principles are concerned) in all the Member States.

The application of the *Bologna Process* in higher education has brought many reforms and changes in Romania. A distinct law for higher education field is foreseen in the close future. In this respect, a nationwide debate with the stakeholders from public and private universities has started. However, the national legislation for the master and PhD studies has still to be improved. The Romanian higher education institutions have to assume new responsibilities and prepare for the competition with European universities when the admission process to the European Union will be fulfilled. Some more progress has to be done to ensure the public trust that the assumed reform will work.

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