The higher education quality assurance system in our country is not completely developed yet. That is why higher education institutions must take the responsibility of assuring the quality of all of their activities, at all levels, according to the standards.

In order for this process to take place in all higher education institutions, an internal system of quality management was created, or is being developed. The quality management system in a higher education institution focuses on quality assurance and self-assessment at all levels according to the standard, but also to the requirements of the external systems of quality evaluation. The implementation of the quality management system in higher education institutions involves both an internal institutional development and an external one, that is, certain mechanisms of institutional control that can somehow guarantee for the quality of the educational process.

Quality, leadership, client, university

According to the ISO 8402-95 standard, quality management system: “guarantees the scientific leadership of the university, the understanding of the tasks and responsibilities by all employees, and the continuous improvement of all activities. The quality systems contribute to maintaining the control, stability and capability of the university in order to determine it to continually improve its overall performance.”

The quality systems in a higher education institution are, in the case of external evaluation, based upon the existence of a model of reference or of a system of criteria (the quality assurance function) and of an internal organization guide (the quality management function). The reference model is chosen exclusively by the higher education institution, by its top management. When implementing such a reference model the university must consider “the objectives set, the government regulations and the experience it has in the field.”

From the structural models mentioned, ISO 9000:2000 is the one easiest to apply as its requirements can be extrapolated to the higher education establishments. It can also constitute the first development stage of a culture of quality. In what follows we shall present the EFQM system of organizational excellence introduced in 1991 and revised in 1997 and 1999 by the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM). This model aims at helping European organizations improve their performance. The analysis of the EFQM model should begin, in my opinion, with the presentation of its eight fundamental principles:

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results orientation; customer satisfaction; competitive business leadership; constant purpose and objectives; management by processes and facts; people development and involvement; continuous improvement and innovation; partnership development based on shared advantage; corporate social responsibility.

Fig. 1.1 illustrates the EFQM model criteria applied to the higher education facilities. The system was suggested in 1999 by Expert Group HBO, associate member of EFQM.

After analyzing the model, the following conclusions can be drawn:

a) Leadership - reflects the attitude and resolutions in which the university management choose to sustain excellence;

b) Policy and Strategy – reflects the set objectives and how they are accomplished with the help of strategy;

c) Staff management - the university policy regarding staff planning, development, involvement and motivation;

d) Resources – it refers to the way in which the university manages its resources for optimal results;

e) Key Process Management - in the case of education, the following processes are considered: planning-developing, executing-implementing and study programs support. The processes corresponding to research and assistance – consulting can also be added to the model.

f) Financial results – it refers to the results measurable in terms of: net and gross profits, cash, and costs per student. Other operational indicators that can complete the model are: the medium studies’ duration, the abandon rates, students-professors ratio, etc.

g) Customer Satisfaction - involves defining the various categories of clients, their importance and setting up questionnaires in order to establish their level of satisfaction;

h) Staff Satisfaction – involves identifying the various categories of university staff, their demands and expectations, and an adequate method of measuring their level of satisfaction

i) Impact on society – involves identifying the opinions of third parties regarding the relevant contribution of the university to social development

The implementation of a SMQ after the EFQM model and its evaluation are not easy tasks. The criteria mentioned above are not equally important when it comes to the general evaluation. There are also a great number of descriptors. The share of the criteria mentioned as well as the corresponding descriptors differ depending on the maturity stage reached.

The implementation of the quality assurance system in universities will pose a great challenge since the cultural change required is incredibly hard to reach. We hold as extremely important the creation of a so-called work culture, of a quality culture in universities so that all actors on this stage understand how important the quality of their work is to the overall performance of the organization.

The EFQM model of organizational excellence applied to universities illustrated below was adopted by Romanian universities in a form specific to the internal organizational environment. Nevertheless, it undergoes constant changing and improving processes in order to adjust to their external environment.

What is characteristic of the model illustrated in fig. 1.2, compared to the excellence model criteria for the European Quality Award, is the importance of leadership that drops from 10% to 5%. The idea is that the election system of the academic top management generates interruptions and changes of policy and strategy depending on the new leadership.

What we like about this model is that the main factor in obtaining quality performance in the case of higher education is the organizational culture, the quality culture (50%). It consists of: human resources (20%), information resources (10%), policy and strategy (10%) and material and financial resources (10%). Another aspect we would like to deal with is Results, which is the image of the university in the academic and business worlds in both internal and external contexts, image that resulted from the performance the university managed to produce.

In any given organization, quality management implementation generates an essential cultural change that, like any other cultural change, faces strong resistance from the part of the staff and of the existent structures. Specialists appreciate that this resistance to change is not specific to the higher education institutions and that it can be encountered in all organizations, but what needs to be highlighted is the force with which universities resist to change. The conservatism specific to universities “has a positive aspect since universities are also the keepers of a nation’s long lasting values, and a negative one that resides from the need for these institutions to generate change and adapt to the dynamic society.”

The approach to the educational quality issues was possible by means of processing and transferring concepts from the economic sector to the public sector. This transfer presented a few difficulties, but most important thing is that the educational environment has some distinct features:

a) It is impossible to make a distinction between all that elements and activities that have an impact on the quality system and to quantify their contribution, due to the fact that there has not been reached a consensus over which methods are efficient and which are not;

b) Academic management and the decision-making processes vary from university to university and are established by the top management.

c) The formative processes that take place within a university are considered to be complex, non-sequential or dependent, non-linear. They can be frequently encountered in situations in which certain people or programs within the same university compete against each other for the same costumer, which makes the management of resources, ideas or information even more intricate;

d) In higher education institutions the delegation of authority is extremely rigid. “The delegation of prerogatives within faculties and departments is inviolable when it comes to teaching and research. If academic freedom were not protected, the very notion of university would decay and disappear.”

e) Faulty communication, the lack of transparency, the absence of useful and correct information concerning the academic activity, lead in turn to low performance. “The university is the one that creates stores and conveys knowledge, but at the same time lacks a coherent informational system regarding its status.”

All these features make the implementation of a quality management system in universities more difficult and differentiate it from the implementation of such a system in the economic sector. Still, all universities are conscious that the quality management system is necessary, and acknowledge the advantages it offers them when it comes to competitiveness on the educational market.

The development of collaboration between the Romanian higher education and the European and international academic environments requires an adequate structure of the offer and a certain quality. European integration in the field of education and research obviously involves the implementation in universities of certain quality assurance systems in order to achieve a “compatible academic quality, common values and practices that can increase the level of confidence between the organizations that collaborate in order to achieve some purpose, and that can also provide a context for loyal competition.”

The importance of education in general and of higher education, in particular, for the future of a nation, is common knowledge. Higher education institutions are “the main generators of cultural diffusion nuclei.” The university of the 21st century must conceive a quality management that takes into account all opportunities “continuous, temporary and incidental.” The university has to deal with numerous challenges related to quality thus becoming a University of Total Quality.

Juran believes that quality oriented behavior is the “vital element in attaining a thriving economy. It is also a an essential requirement of Romania’s European integration process and it is in agreement with the declaration of the meeting of the European Ministers in charge of Higher Education that took place in Berlin on September 19, 2003.

We can say that universities have completed their mission (of meeting the specific educational and individual professional development, and the social and economic development needs of the community) only when manage to satisfy these needs to a high quality standard that can allow the individual and the society to achieve performance in an environment dominated by globalization and competition. These quality standards can only be established and maintained when higher education is performance oriented.
We can say that a higher education institution is “performance oriented when it constantly improves its offer and results and the staff adopts a responsible attitude”\(^\text{134}\).

The European Ministers in charge of higher education decided in September 2003 at the conference from Berlin that until the following meeting which was to take place in May 2005 in Bergen introduce in their countries a series of reforms. One of these reforms was the implementation of a higher education quality management system. In all documents related to realizing the European Higher Education Area quality assurance plays an essential part. when we analyze the position of the European Union towards this issue we notice that its importance increases constantly. While the Bologna Declaration of 1999 states that “the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies is necessary,” the Berlin Declaration of 2003 says that “The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. Ministers commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level. They stress the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance... Therefore, they agree that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include: a definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved; evaluation of programs or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results; a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures; international participation, co-operation and networking.”\(^\text{135}\)

Thus, as I have already highlighted in this chapter, thinking out and implementing the quality assurance systems is one of the main objectives for European integration, not only for the academic communities within the EU, but also for the countries that are still in pre-adhesion stage. Under academic autonomy, the quality issue is a problem that has to do with strategic management as the university is the one who should decide which road to take, which place it intends to occupy at national level, what measures it should adopt in order to achieve its objectives. Out of these measures, the ones referring to quality management are among the most important. Quality management has as starting point “the standards set by the university itself to develop towards applying the best practices, and then towards comparing the various standards which existen at international level.”\(^\text{136}\)

We are all aware of the fact that higher education is not a simple service. Specialists say it is a “nursery for creativity and critical sense, the source for renewing society with all of its services.” The increased competition, market expansion and globalization made higher education quality assurance become a major objective of the European University Association (EUA). This objective was expressed in all of the European declarations and treaties: The Sorbonne Declaration (1998), The Bologna Declaration (1999), The Salamanca Statement (2001), The Berlin Declaration (2003), The Bergen Declaration (2005) and has become an important criterion in determining the competitiveness and attractiveness of any given European university. Nowadays, quality assurance is therefore fundamental to the EUA and to the great majority of European universities.

Romanian universities through their latest activities demonstrate they have fully understood the new trends and requirements in the European area and that they have realized that the universities with a saying in international competitions of scientific research, which have earned numerous qualifications and served the environment, began long ago developing internal mechanisms of evaluation and quality promotion.

Beginning with the importance of quality and quality management in higher education institutions we considered that a SWOT analysis of quality management in universities would be very useful. Then, based on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and constraints identified we outlined the general and specific


objectives of the Romanian universities on half-term and the strategies that can be adopted to meet these objectives.

Strengths: the B.A., M.A. and Ph.D. degrees and faculty staff promotion regulations, the enforcement of the ECTS regulations; the generous offer for study programs; the implementation of a new method of academic training; orientation towards activities specific to various groups of clients; the decreased exodus of university teachers to private universities; the development of the teaching methodology evaluation; the didactic laboratories’ equipment; various foreign student and teachers exchange programs.

Weaknesses: the quality assurance policy is not shared by all members of the staff; medium-level managers did not include the entire staff in the quality assurance strategy; bad communication and low feedback regarding quality assurance; reduced interest towards new teaching and learning methods; the ECTS is less functional in the case of intra-institutional mobility; the student evaluation system must be improved by introducing evaluations all along the semester through projects, papers, etc. and not only through questions that involve simple reproductions of information.

Opportunities: universities should depend less on the central government, financially speaking; decisions should be taken by each faculty and each department; international evaluations; implicating the university in quality assurance projects.

Threats: the absence of a coherent quality management strategy at national level; the education bill is going to affect seriously the academic autonomy and the higher education institutions will be less proactive.

Following this SWOT analysis of academic quality management the general and specific objectives of the higher education institutions regarding quality management and the suggested strategies can be outlined.

General outlines

Romanian universities aim at accomplishing the following objectives regarding quality assurance:

- Developing the Quality Assurance System in all universities and its implementation in faculties and departments;
- Change in the institutional culture that encourages the involvement of the entire faculty and administrative staff and taking on the continuous quality improvement ethics;
- Continuous infrastructure developing;
- Evaluating quality by participating in projects and joining international networks of quality assurance in the field of higher education;
- Continuous improvement of teaching capabilities by faculty staff;

Specific objectives

- The development of a suite of internal procedures for quality assurance, that are precise and easy to apply to all faculties, departments
- Developing a program of internal audit
- Keeping track of and rewarding quality and excellence in teaching, scientific research and services brought to the society
- The creation of structures specialized in quality assurance at all levels and establishing the responsibilities of each structure
- Constant feedback by students and other client groups (employers, community)
- Changing the institutional culture so that quality self assessment become part of the organizational culture
- Training and certifying internal auditors and specialists in quality management
- Personnel training
- Adding on the web page a series of good practices (e-forum) regarding teaching quality

Suggested strategies

- The use of all available resources (departments, services) for the quality assurance of the activities organized by the university
- Continuing the investments in laboratory equipment

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Developing training courses for persons in charge with quality management and for the other employees (administrative and teaching staff) and developing support materials
Evaluating students’ knowledge at regular intervals
Adapting the educational offer to the market requirements (employers, students)
Adopting quality oriented programs and making them public

In conclusion we can say that quality higher education can only be achieved in an environment in which all parties take up full responsibility for the quality of their contribution.

**Bibliography**

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