# Quality Barometer - 2010

## The State of Quality in Romanian Higher Education

### - Summary -

# Contents

# Introduction

In the context of the strategic project "*Quality assurance in Romanian higher education in the European context. The development of the quality of academic management at the systemic and institutional level*" – ACADEMIS[1], POSDRU contract /2/1.2/S/1, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) undertook to report yearly, between 2009 and 2011, on the state of Romanian higher education. Thus, in the first year of implementation of the project's Activity 2 (*Quality assurance in higher education*), ARACIS presented the *Quality Barometer 2009: Statistical distributions, interpretation and options on the state of Romanian higher education*[2].

The first Barometer represented an analysis of the state of Romanian higher education as a system, and was based on subjective data (perceptions and representations of students, teaching staff and employers on activities and outcomes in higher education), as well as on objective information concerning inputs, processes, and outcomes of the educational system. On the one hand, the *Quality Barometer 2009* intended to put forward comparisons between data and information about the Romanian higher education system and other European systems. On the other hand, its goal was to identify successes and achievements, but also problems or critical situations, so as to open substantive discussions on the future dynamics of Romanian higher education and higher education institutions.

The *Quality Barometer 2009* is followed and supplemented hereby in terms of methodology (an institutional approach), as well as content and theme. This document, the *Quality Barometer 2010: The state of quality in Romanian higher education*, is the second-year report resulting from the implementation of the ACADEMIS project. The *Quality Barometer 2010* provides an analysis of the operation and the consequences of fundamental higher education *institutions*[3]: *quality assurance, university lifestyles and autonomy*.

The data supporting the *Quality Barometer 2010* were generated by using a complex set of qualitative and quantitative methods (questionnaire surveys administered to representative samples of students, teaching staff and employers,

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1    Detailed information on the project's content and results is available at  http://proiecte.aracis.ro/academis/despre-proiect/

2    Available for reference at http://proiecte.aracis.ro/academis/asigurarea-calitatii-invatamantului-universitar/rezultate/

3    We use the term *institution* in the sociological sense to refer to rules, standards, formal or informal procedures, imposed by rewards and/or sanctions which determine relatively stable behavioural patterns. Universities, governmental agencies and other collective actors with legal personality will be called *organisations*. They are established and operate on the basis of social institutions, namely a legal, procedural, normative framework.

in-depth interviews with experts from quality commissions within ARACIS and CNATDCU[4], focused interviews with students and teaching staff concerning university lifestyles).

Another novel element in the *Quality Barometer 2010* is the analysis of the data collected by ARACIS as a result of an experimental benchmarking exercise[5], the first of its kind in Romania, carried out on a representative sample of 29 public and private higher education institutions. The experimental benchmarking exercise was conducted between 2009 and 2010 and aimed to measure *input, process* and *outcome* indicators in order to establish the first benchmarks for the Romanian higher education system.

The *Quality Barometer 2010: The state of quality in Romanian higher education* is a research report comprising:

- ✓ *Quality Barometer 2010: The state of quality in Romanian higher education – A Summary;*
- ✓ *The academic practices of quality assurance and evaluation;*
- ✓ *The student-centred university;*
- ✓ *Opinions of students (in bachelor degree programs), teaching staff and employers on the state of Romanian higher education.*

The **Quality Barometer 2010** report presents an analysis of the operation and consequences of fundamental higher education institutions: quality assurance, university lifestyles and autonomy. In social science terms, the analysis below is usually referred to as an institutional approach.

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4    National Council for the Attestation of University Titles, Diplomas and Certificates.

5    For a detailed presentation of the *benchmarking* concept but also of ARACIS's objectives in carrying out the benchmarking exercise at the level of the Romanian higher education institutions, see the following documents: *"Proposal on performance indicators for a benchmarking process at the level of the Romanian higher education institutions", "Primary and secondary indicators for the evaluation of quality"* and *"Bilingual Glossary (Romanian - English) of terms in higher education"*. The documents are available at

http://proiecte.aracis.ro/academis/indicatori-de-referinta/rezultate/.

## Institutional Analysis

Institutional analysis[6] (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; North, 1990) is a type of research in the social sciences that aims to reveal the effects of formal policies, informal rules, and interpretations associated to representative practices in a specific social area (in our case, higher education) on the organisations in the respective field (in this case, universities). The analysis emphasizes the ways in which various *social institutions* – legal standards, regulations, procedures, and meanings associated to them – put forward and activate material or symbolic incentives (reputation, confidence, accreditation); and how these incentives generate configurations of processes, strategies and academic practices. Therefore, we do not intend to study the individual characteristics of the organisation of universities, but the ways in which policies and actions articulated at the practical level influence the manner in which universities operate. The consequences of the policies and actions of the state and its associated agencies on the ways in which the universities operate may be *intended* – consistent with a previously established set of objectives –, or they may be *unintended* (in which case they may prove to be dysfunctional and have perverse effects) or constitute latent functions unanticipated by the decision-makers who projected them.

This type of analysis is firstly concerned with the institutional design (rules, procedures, structures) formally imposed by political actors. It focuses mainly on explaining the ways in which formal (legal) institutions operate, and the consequences they bring about at the level of educational organisations. Secondly, the analysis also addresses the emergent informal practices or rules in higher education, specifically teaching and learning processes and quality assurance. For this, we consider routine actions carried out throughout daily university life by academics and students, actions which are taken-for-granted, accepted as such, and reproduced unintentionally based on conceptions shared as ad-hoc mental schemes.

This *Report* makes reference to one or another of these directions of institutional analysis, particularly following two types of processes

- quality assurance, and

- teaching and learning configurations,

as they function under the conditions of operation and internalisation of the principle of university autonomy.

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6 The institutional analysis we propose must not be mistaken for the evaluations carried out by ARACIS concerning the quality of a specific higher education organisation (institutional evaluation). Our analysis addresses higher education organisations and does not refer to the state of the quality at the organizational level.

Social institutions, specifically laws, regulations, procedures and practices, have several generative sources:

- the state, governmental actors (Government, Ministry of Education) and associated councils (ARACIS, CNFIS[7], ACPART[8], CNCSIS[9], CNATDCU), European organisations in the field of professional regulation;

- the behaviours and practices of universities which are commonly perceived as prestigious or highly successful;

- the professions.

Beside the consequences that the regulations and actions of the central decision-makers have on the operation of universities, we also consider the mutual influences of universities which belong to the same academic field. The trend whereby emergent universities copy the ways in which studies are organised in universities that are perceived as prestigious brings about what we refer to as *structural isomorphism*.

The institutional approach briefly sketched above provides the basis for this *Quality Barometer 2010*. We do not consider here the individual performance of universities, though we try to provide relevant suggestions on the operation of the entire system, given the set of constraints, significations, and artefacts present at the systemic level.

This report's objective is to provide a basis for substantive discussions on the future dynamics of Romanian higher education and higher education organisations. Thus, we aim neither to glorify the successes, nor to generalise on the system's critical condition, but rather intend to submit for debate some possible solutions in terms of the *policy implications* resulting from the analysis herein. Starting from the premises of the analysis we propose, we draw attention to the fact that certain critical conditions are not imputable either to universities in general or to central organisations individually considered. The institutional analysis indicates the way in which social rules and practices interact in order to generate a set of incentives that determine the development of universities. Most of the time, the final consequences of applying a set of rules are different from those anticipated. As such, we will try to identify inconsistencies among the formal policies that are promoted and the actual practices of universities. Their identification has a series of practical implications and, consequently, we suggest some policies for a more efficient institutional design.

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7    The National Council for University Funding.
8    The National Council for Higher Education Qualifications and Partnership with the Economic and Social Environment.
9    The National Council for Scientific Research in Higher Education.

## Methodology

This analysis was produced with a complex set of quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection:

- *questionnaire survey* addressing the opinions and perceptions of teaching staff, students and employers concerning the operation and performance of higher education; representative samples were used at the national level, both for the student population, and for the teaching staff and employers;

- *in-depth interviews* with experts from the ARACIS and CNATDCU quality commissions, addressing the operation of academic quality assurance commissions and recruitment processes in higher education;

- *focused interviews* with students and teaching staff about university lifestyles;

- *secondary analysis* of the information included in universities' (self) evaluation quality reports and strategic documents.

The instruments used (questionnaires, interview guides, documents' analysis grid) and other methodological details (procedures for the selection of subjects, interviewing methods etc.) are presented in the appendices to the *Quality Barometer 2010.*

# General View of Romanian Higher Education

*The perceptions of academics, students and employers suggest that the general view of Romanian higher education is that it is a high-quality system.* Nevertheless, when considering the system's goals the resulting picture is essentially that of a self-centred system. It is the *perception of a system whose connections to the environment are insufficiently explored and analysed, which follows its own coherent logic* but is not really *involved in society* but relatively disconnected from it.

The data collected during the quantitative research carried out last year and the data collected this year generate contradictory images that can only represent different angles and rapports to the same system. Thus, students, teaching staff and employers continue to have an overall positive image of the state of quality in the higher education system. But the positive perceptions of the state of quality are doubled by insistent mentions of the decreasing confidence in universities, especially in what their relation to the labour market is concerned. This apparent paradox between the positive valuing of the overall image of quality and the lack of confidence in the capacity of universities to reach certain ends may be explained by an ambiguity related to the social functions of the university. *We still find ourselves in a society where the university is regarded as a provider of general academic training whose services should be accessed only by the best (the nostalgia of admission exams is still widespread) and whose main purpose is to prepare elites.*

This perception of the university in rather academic, selective terms is also suggested by the following: the teaching staff are relatively critical of the quality of students. Whereas in 2009 the answers indicated that good students represented almost half of the students' total, in 2010 the figure decreased substantially[10]. Moreover, the academics' dissatisfaction with the quality of candidates burdens the relationship between the university and the pre-university educational systems. On the one hand, the university teaching staff expect high school graduates of higher quality. On the other, the decrease in students' quality appears natural and objective if one considers the relevant demographic developments: the increase in student numbers against the background of progressively smaller cohorts in the

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10    According to the quantitative survey report, in 2009 42% of the teaching staff said that more than half of their students were "good". In the 2010 sample, the figure decreased to a considerably lower 19%. Thus, in 2010 only 4% of the respondents indicated that good students represented more than three quarters of those they were working with, 15% stated that good students amounted to between a half and three quarters of their students, 33% said that good students represented less than a half, and the relative majority of the teaching staff (46%) indicated that the share of good students was lower than one quarter of their students.

age groups relevant for higher education (as a result of the decreasing birth rate after 1990) generates students of lower average academic quality. The teaching staff's negative perception is subjective and triggered by their relatively high standards.

This conservative perception contrasts with the strategies adopted by universities stimulated by the current funding scheme, which encourages the enrolment of larger numbers of students in order to guarantee basic funding. On the one hand, given this funding policy, universities should be encouraged to set coherent strategies of attracting students according to their own missions and aspirations. The current tensions, as far as perceptions are concerned, result from the inconsistencies between the tacitly and/or explicitly assumed mission and the practical strategies promoted. On the other hand, the funding methods should be diversified in order to enable differentiation and diversification of the services provided by universities.

Another tension related to the representations of the system's quality derives from the *overall perception of its capacity to prepare graduates for the labour market*. Employers adopt a relatively neutral position. However, in the employers' perception there is also an important gap between the required and the actual level of graduates' competences. On the other hand, a substantial majority of university teaching staff credit the academic system with much or very much confidence when it comes to its capacity to provide the labour market with high-quality graduates. *These two types of actors – employers and academics – entertain opposing views of the university, with the academics' image being much more positive*. Overcoming this tension is essential to the *social involvement* of the higher education system, which otherwise runs the risk of losing contact with the labour market and of determining a significant deterioration of its image in the future. However, one should not ignore the fact that the labour market is not properly structured either. There is no national long-term development programme to guide universities in establishing their strategies. The higher education system is not required to react only to the current state of the labour market, but especially to the its state as foreseen over the coming three, four or even eight years. The current economic crisis has deepened the uncertainty regarding the subsequent development of the labour market.

The employers' lack of confidence also stems from the fact that, as revealed by the *Quality Barometer 2009*, work experience is considered by this type of actors a criterion more important than the grade point average or the reputation of the program attended by the graduates. Most employers prefer graduates who worked either part-time (40%) or full-time (26%) during their studies; only 7% of the employers would rather have graduates who did not have a job during that time. Also, employers prefer MA graduates and, when it comes to bachelor degrees, they favour pre-Bologna graduates (in both cases valuing the longer

study period). Furthermore, public universities are preferred to private ones.

Beyond these somewhat contradictory perceptions with respect to the overall image of the quality of higher education, a more careful examination of data also indicates significant differences relative to the personal features of students and teaching staff. Thus, *seniority within the system* differently influences the way academics and students perceive the system's overall quality. If, as far as students are concerned, their opinions about quality grow more negative as they advance in their studies, teachers tend to have a more positive attitude to the higher education system as they advance in their teaching careers. In particular, lecturers are the most critical, associate professors somewhat less critical, while full professors have the most optimistic views among the teaching staff.

Nevertheless, this paradox is not difficult to explain for both categories, i.e., students and professors. As far as students are concerned, as they approach the end of their academic experience they get progressively estranged from the university, feeling less and less a part of it, finding themselves increasingly under the pressure of their future insertion on the labour market. Therefore they tend to become more critical. On the other hand, this may also be an instance of a *fundamental attribution error*[11]: as they advance in the years of study, students become more aware that their initial expectations were not entirely met and tend to put the blame on the system (and less on their own errors in choosing). In the case of the teaching staff, as they move ahead in their careers and titles academics increasingly identify themselves with the higher education institution. Therefore expressing negative opinions about the latter would be a form of self-criticism. In order to avoid such a *cognitive dissonance*[12] between their personal image and the image of the institution, the full professors' opinions are essentially positive.

Furthermore, interviews with experts from the CNATDCU commissions reveal another interesting fact which underscores the closed-system image of higher education: *university endogamy*, i.e., universities practice of recruiting an overwhelming proportion of the new teaching staff from their own graduates. This shows, on the one hand, that the labour market for teaching staff recruitment does not work, and that there is not enough trust in external certifications and no valid information about the future employees' competences. Universities would rather rely on their internal resources from which they can obtain, through references but especially by direct knowledge, much more valuable and valid information. However, current university practices are reproduced through the

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11   *Fundamental attribution error* is a term in social psychology referring to individuals' tendency to explain personal successes by their own qualities and to attribute personal failures to external causes.
12   *Cognitive dissonance* is a term in social psychology which refers to an individual's discomfort caused by holding conflicting opinions and ideas simultaneously; the discomfort is overcome by changing these attitudes, conceptions, beliefs.

initial professional socialisation of future employees within the same institution, while the ability to attract diversified human capital is limited. At the same time, the university's communication with the wider social and academic environment is reduced, and the innovation potential is likewise limited.

# Differentiation in The Teaching and Learning Processes

The analysis below places learning in a wider context. We shall refer to the learning processes within the university, facilitated by the formal curriculum, as well as to non-formal education, to the processes whereby students become graduates, future employees with an academic degree. To this end, we were mainly interested in the students' opinions about the educational processes and their quality, but also in the ways in which students spend their leisure time, in their lifestyles in general and their values.

## Time Allocated to Learning

In order to empirically show the necessity of a holistic approach to learning, let us start with an interesting and significant result: the manner in which students spend their time in a standard work-and-leisure week. On average, for Romanian students this week is 59-hour long. Within this week, they allocate 19 hours to courses and seminars/laboratories at the university, 9 hours to individual study, 8 hours to productive activities, 6 hours to household activities and 17 hours to leisure time. If one took Bologna curricula as a standard, the number of credits would be calculated on the basis of an effort of 8 hours per day, which means 40 hours a week. However, in reality the Romanian students spend 28 hours for study at most (19 hours in course and seminar rooms and 9 hours of individual study) – even less in fact if one takes into account the fact that, out of the 19 hours dedicated to attending courses and seminar/laboratory classes, pauses (not only the formal ones) ought to be subtracted. Even if these data are subjective, as they represent students' own representations of their own time, they still suggest a *gap between the formal standards – curricula, syllabi – and the proper learning activity*. Then again, formal standards are subject to a continuous negotiation process that is often poorly regulated. The "negotiation" carried between students and the university on the time allotted to the studying is a recurrent theme in the students' discourse. With leisure time as a real concern, students do their best in rendering the imposed timetable *more flexible* and in adapting it to their own plans. On the other hand, if they are to take into consideration the students'

rational strategies, universities would need to enforce more strictly the minimum conditions for passing exams, including attendance to courses and seminars. The problem is that enforcement that is too strict runs the risk of alienating a significant number of students and, implicitly, an important source of funding for the universities.

Although the gap between the formal study plans and norms, on the one hand, and real learning strategies, on the other hand, is widespread within Romanian academia, significant differences are likewise noticed in the characteristics of the universities that students attend: the time allocated to school attendance is longer for students in public universities compared to those in private institutions. Moreover, the time allocated to school attendance increases with the size of the university. In universities with over 15,000 students the average time allocated to attendance is 20 hours, while for students in universities with less than 1000 students the average is a mere 13 hours. In addition, there are differences triggered by students' subject areas. For example, students in exact sciences, engineering, medicine or agronomy programs allot more time to attendance by comparison with students of social sciences, humanities and economics.

Furthermore, a significantly greater number of hours spent in the university is reported by the public university students on state-funded scholarships (21 hours), by those in the fourth year of study (22 hours), by the unemployed (21 hours), by those who entered the university after an admission exam (21 hours), and by those who are involved in volunteering activities (21-22 hours). These categories of students also devote more time to individual study. The above-mentioned organisational factors (size, public/private ownership, year of study, subject areas) and personal factors (with or without scholarship, involvement in productive activities, involvement in volunteering activities) positively correlate with a higher rate of attendance, thus providing premises for higher academic quality.

## Quality of Teaching

In relation to the qualitative aspects of the teaching process in universities, in the survey we carried out students were asked to grade several items which may be grouped into five important categories: (1) teaching, (2) assessment and feedback, (3) academic support, (4) access to learning resources, and (5) process management. The grades are relatively similar for all these indicators, with significant differences between the public and the private academic environments. Students in private universities tend to appreciate to a greater extent all these aspects (an approximate grade of 8, with 10 being the highest), while students in public universities give lower grades (around 7, with 10 being the highest). At the same time, there are significant, although not very substantial, gaps between the

assessments of students and of the teaching staff, the latter being more positive in evaluating the above-mentioned indicators.

The evaluation of the processes in question is subjective. Taking into account the fact that the students in private universities have lower rates of attendance of courses and seminars/laboratories, the higher grades they provide for the educational processes in their own universities may be explained by their lower interest, but also by a more superficial knowledge of the issues assessed. However, this could also be the result of a cognitive dissonance: they want to prove that the school they chose and for which they paid is good, while public university students are convinced that the state should always offer more than it actually does.

As for the contents of courses, the dominant opinions are that "the information provided in courses is of interest" but that too much emphasis is placed on memorizing, while the practical side is neglected. Too much emphasis placed on theory by comparison with practice, and the lack of the capacity to contextualise knowledge and to apply it to specific social or technical situations are recurrent complaints in students' discourse and are shared to a certain extent by the teaching staff. The main differences lie in the fact that, while students strongly blame this state of affairs, academics tend to consider it normal and significantly adequate for the university's mission. The great majority of teaching staff (81%, a growing proportion compared to last year's 75%) consider that "the practical side of knowledge is learned at the work place" – an opinion trend which is very homogeneous and diametrically opposed to students' expectations.

At the same time, a longitudinal rather than simply a transversal analysis shows an interesting trend: even if divergent, the opinions of students and those of the teaching staff tend to "converge" with respect to the quality of the educational process. Thus, the opinions of students in the 2010 sample are more favourable than those of the students in the 2009 sample whereas, in the case of the teaching staff, the comparison indicates significant changes in the opposite direction. In other words, we are dealing with a convergence of the two groups' opinions, even if students continue to appear less enthusiastic than teaching staff in their assessment of the quality of the educational process.

Approximately half of the students maintain that the Internet is used for exchanging information related to courses – especially the online course support platforms –, but also for communication between the teaching staff and students and among students. Although almost half of the students declare that they use electronic libraries to have access to books and academic articles, the Internet is much more frequently used to access semi-academic services, such as Wikipedia or "online newspapers" (over 60% of students declare that they use the Internet for such resources).

# Good Students, Good Teachers: What Lies Behind a Label?

In the quantitative survey, we considered it useful to introduce an open question which addressed both the students and the teaching staff: they were asked to list several defining characteristics for the *good student* and the *good teacher*, respectively. Open answers were subsequently codified. In the students' opinion, communication and dialogue with students, professional qualities and the ability to explain represent, in this order, the basic qualities of a *good teacher*. Thus, the pedagogical abilities are emphasised, namely the *trainer* abilities (the capacity to communicate and explain), and the abilities of a good professional in the field only come next. In relative opposition, the teaching staff's opinions about the defining qualities of a good teacher focus on professionalism and scientific research and only then on the communicational and pedagogical skills.

The passion for knowledge, seriousness and discipline are, in the academics' opinions, the defining characteristics of the *good student.* For the students, these characteristics are more fragmented, as traditional values like course attendance, seriousness and discipline are still dominant. Apparently, the passion for knowledge is not as important from the students' point of view. Nevertheless, the students' answers are much more varied, because they appreciate characteristics such as studying outside courses, researching for information and additional bibliography, availability to learn, to understand, but also team work, cooperation, and respect. Similar to the data from the quantitative survey, the outcomes of the in-depth interviews carried out as part of the qualitative survey indicated that students define a "good student" less by his or her intrinsic quality, namely the quality of participant/partner in the educational academic process, and more *by his/her lifestyle and by a set of qualities and competences associated to this lifestyle. The ideal image of the educated, intelligent, creative student, concerned with intellectual pursuits, is replaced by the model of a student endowed with social competences and abilities, with preoccupations regarding both academic life and leisure time outside it, who manages to strike a balance between the two*.

## Do we have a student-centred university?

Beyond the quantitative figures, which suggest a duality of the conceptions of the main categories of actors – academics and students – concerning the teaching and learning processes, the qualitative survey aimed at outlining these conceptions in a more articulated way in relation to the question: do we have a student-centred university? The conclusion resulting from the research is that *we are dealing with a rather self-centred university, concerned with its own financial survival, students being important especially as bearers of financial resources*

*(either they pay taxes, or they benefit from state scholarships)*. The qualitative survey report refers to a **double alienation** – on the one hand, teachers justify the low quality of the teaching process in terms of the low quality of students (such a tendency appears in the teachers' perception of the quality of students and is validated by the quantitative data); on the other hand, students find their lack of involvement in academic activities legitimate, as they often cannot draw any advantage from the latter.

The current generation of students is defined by the search for **yardsticks**, expecting the university as an institution to supply them with certainties in terms of specialisation, of training for a future career in a well-defined, specific labour sector. Nevertheless, a closer look at the strategic plans of our universities reveals that there is a significant gap in relation to the defining expectations of the current generation of students. Specifically, most of the organisations in higher education have defined, at the level of strategic documents (i.e., strategic plans and operational plans), mostly activities designed to improve and develop the infrastructure: the development and modernisation of facilities, the rehabilitation of the existing premises and the construction of new ones, equipment for laboratories etc. *There is a gap between the materialist objectives of universities and the students' post-materialist preoccupations and interests: their search for meanings, significations, objectives, and direction in personal development*. The gap is acutely felt and, within the existing institutional framework, the trend is to generalise the low level of involvement and even apathy caused by students' dissatisfaction with the university, on the one hand, and the teachers' dissatisfaction with the system (and especially with the severe lack of funding), on the other.

*The relative alienation of the university from its students should also be looked at in terms of the way in which incentives are allocated, of the essential resources for the survival of universities, namely funding and accreditation. These by no means encourage a focus on students.* Here is why:

1) There is a serious external constraint, namely the chronic underfunding of universities, which makes them focus on their own survival, which depends mostly on the student flows and less on students' academic wellbeing.

2) In the evaluation of universities and in granting them symbolic incentives, such as accreditation and/or recognition as a good university, emphasis is placed on research rather than on the teaching processes or on the students' achievements. Consequently, universities are compelled to give research indicators a greater weight than to indicators measuring students' current concerns and needs. A university's focus on teaching and consequently on students is the social expression of the fact that it cannot reach high research standards, which is equivalent to a "sanction" on its reputation.

Therefore, once students enter the higher education system, their **discourse**

on the **future strategies** and long-term plans reflects a pattern that leaves little room for individual variations. In future strategies, the university appears only as a **threshold that has to be passed** in order to guarantee a better future[13]. This happens not only by virtue of the competences they create, but also due to the diploma received at the end of the bachelor degree cycle. The society of certifications has become a reality not only in Romania but in the entire world. Everything depends on obtaining a higher education degree, since occupational allocation is certainly based on certification. Therefore, the students' preoccupation with getting the certification is a rational and widespread strategy. Nonetheless, students' expectations from the university are not limited to certification. The paucity of practical training is doubled by the lack of orientation, the anxiety caused by the uncertainty of finding a job and by the perception of the university's disinterest in students' future. The students' view of higher education organisations is that *the university is not an institution that generates meanings or provides directions*. Thus, students appear alone in the face of uncertainty and insecure about the type of education they receive in academia.

## Students' Values and The Social Environment – Alienated by Colleagues, Relatively Intolerant, But Close to God

As for establishing relations with colleagues, the first characteristic of students is *individualism*. They feel alienated not so much in relation to their colleagues but especially in relation to the university as an environment which does not favour cooperation but rather competition for being noticed. Students try to make themselves noticed to teachers for rather pragmatic reasons: getting good marks and consequently, in the case of state-funded public universities, scholarships.

The data in the questionnaire shows that students' most frequently invoked leisure activities are going to pubs, bars and terraces, shopping and clubbing. At the opposite end of the spectrum they selected going to the theatre, museums and the opera. On the other hand, a strong argument to support the findings related to student individualism is the fact that only some 11-12% of the students are involved in volunteer work. The incidence of volunteer work is significantly higher among state university students compared to private university students.

As for their *values*, students are as **intolerant** as the population as a whole, a

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13    There was a significant increase in the number of students who consider that "the degree is useful only because it allows students to get a job more easily", from 57% in 2009 to 69% this year. On the other hand, the motivational mix consists of the extrinsic component of access on the labour market to better remunerated jobs, as well as of the intrinsic motivation: almost half of the students say they attend the courses of a faculty in order to "have better knowledge", while an equal number of students say that their motivation is their desire to obtain a "job that pays better".

fact which reveals the insignificant contribution of an academic education in this respect. Approximately 55% of the respondents would not want Roma persons or individuals of a different sexual orientation as their neighbours. At the same time, students are religious persons, much like the rest of the Romanian population: at the level of the entire sample, the average score for how important God is in their lives, on a scale from 1 ("Not at all important") to 10 ("Very important") is 8.3, indicating that students consider religious belief very important. Students are more flexible when it comes to the boundaries between right and wrong. These boundaries clear and applicable in every situation for a mere 23%, while for 42% straying may be justified in certain situations. Some 36% consider that there is no clear limit between what is right and what is wrong.

All this indicates that *students are atomized to a great extent, having relatively few value yardsticks within the society and that, if the latter exist, they are rather transcendental. The data seem to suggest that the university does not accomplish its mission of civic, scientific and social education, limiting itself to being an authority granting academic certification.* On the other hand, one must mention that students' values should not be ascribed only to the university, as it is structured by the family, influenced by primary and secondary education as well as by the mass-media and other social authorities.

# University quality assurance practices

Quality assurance as a concept was introduced in Romanian higher education with Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 and subsequently regulated under Law no. 87/2006. The existing legislative framework refers to two major objectives of quality assurance: quality control and quality enhancement. Furthermore, the law makes reference to the freedom of education providers to select and enforce the most relevant measures and standards, as well as to the need of each such organisation to comply with a pre-determined set of relevant standards for a set of criteria. We have, in this respect, two opposite quality assurance philosophies: one in which quality is associated with institutional objectives (*fitness for purpose*), and another one in which quality is tied to a set of pre-determined and universal standards (*standardization*). The first philosophy focuses on the external audit/ evaluation and is based on the elaboration of recommendations for quality enhancement. The second outlook focuses on external control and accreditation. The second is more prescriptive and thus more coercive. Although the law's preamble explicitly mentions both directions, the most important subsequent legislative provisions tie the Romanian system of quality assurance to the second philosophy. Moreover, as far as comprehensive universities are concerned, the

standards are universal[14], practically operating with a single reference class for all universities. Differentiation is carried out only vertically, function of the extent to which universities attain reference standards which are higher than the minimal ones according to various criteria specified in the national legislation.

## The Historical Context of Quality Institutionalisation

Like many ex-socialist states, post-1989 Romania witnessed a period of strong expansion of the academic offer. The number of higher education organisations increased from 46 in 1989 to 63 in 1993 and then to 126 in 2000. The number of enrolled students grew from 215,226 in the academic year 1991/1992 to 503,152 in 2000/2001, then soared to 907,353 in 2007/2008[15] for all levels of education. The demand for higher education programmes was very high in the first decade after the revolution, prompting entrepreneurs to provide diversified services (alternative types of education, such as distance education) to an expanding market. The problem identified starting with 1993 was the safeguarding of consumers' interests. The consumer was in a traditional position of asymmetric information[16] vis-à-vis public and, especially, private providers of education services. The state needed to assume the role of consumer protection agency, so the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation (CNEAA) was established, with the role of accrediting universities and imposing minimal quality control.

The Law on Quality Assurance no. 87/2006 introduced a series of legislative changes by means of which the concept of quality was rendered endogenous, that is, assumed by higher education organisations rather than imposed from the outside. Thus, the law provides for a culture of quality, for the responsibility of educational organisations in quality assurance etc. The introduction of the institution of internal quality assurance, which materialised in the establishment of quality evaluation and assurance commissions (CEACs), was a fundamental initiative. Moreover, the establishment of the registry of experts in external evaluation based on peer-review procedures was another important step in the direction of quality assurance. Consequently, two basic principles were instituted: internal quality

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14    There are different standards for the specialized universities (art, medicine etc.) but they are common within the respective field, regardless of the university's objectives/mission.
15    http://www.insse.ro/cms/files/pdf/ro/cap8.pdf
16    Informational asymmetry represents a decisional situation in transactions where one of the parties has systematically more information than the other and uses this information to its own advantage. Markets operate defectively in such situations and governmental intervention is required to reduce the information gap between the two parties. The example of the higher education is paradigmatic in this respect: given the nature of their investment (whose benefits are only visible on long term) students have systematically poorer access to information about the quality and performance of the universities they want to enrol in; universities, as rational actors, tend to hide unfavourable information and promote only the positive information. By standardizing certain indicators, the state compels universities to provide comparable and relevant data for the customers.

assurance and assuming the latter at the level of educational organisations and peer-review-based processes for purposes of external evaluation.

# The Internalisation of The Quality Assurance Principle

The quantitative data collected this year seem to suggest that the innovations of Law no. 87/2006 were internalised and assumed by the members of the professoriate. Most of them (more precisely 52% of the academics) believe that the university or faculty should be the decision-maker in quality assurance (assuming responsibility for quality at the organisational level), while a comparable percentage of 48% still indicate the ministry and central agencies as the main entities responsible for this process. At the same time, academics consider that the most efficient way of evaluating the quality of the educational programmes is "on the basis of a national system of performance indicators" (41%) but also by "considering the opinions of those involved in academic life" (26%). These data suggest that the professoriate has internalised the unitary system of indicators and standards as well as the *peer-review* principle. However, when asked about the most important criteria for quality evaluation the majority of respondents referred to input indicators: human resources, course content, and material assets.

One can state that, in the professors' perception, the new quality assurance concepts have begun to develop and the process of change is in full progress. Nevertheless, at present the potential for change under the current legislative framework (law and evaluation methodology) seems to be exhausted. Although the institutionalisation of this model definitely had the positive effects mentioned above, in the current stage of development of the higher education system the unintentional effects are starting to show. Some of these unintended effects are dysfunctional in relation to the goals of quality assurance. Therefore, one of the important problems today is designing institutions for quality assurance that should prevent the emergence of such effects.

# Dysfunctional Forms of Quality Institutionalisation

What follows is a brief account of how these *dysfunctions* have been generated. We will consider two critical resources that universities depend on: funding and accreditation. Both are granted depending on the fulfilment of standards which are defined in detail by strongly prescriptive methodologies. Accreditation depends on fulfilling the minimal standard levels with respect to a set of criteria grouped in three main areas (institutional capacity, educational efficiency and quality management). It is a well known fact that a thorough specification of the

standards and indicators by means of which universities are assessed involves methodological problems. The reporting parties have more information than those conducting the evaluation, and consequently evaluators are in a position of informational asymmetry in relation to the evaluated. The problem becomes even more serious as the number of standards and indicators increases, especially when they specifically address process- and input-related issues. When the stake is very high (accreditation is perceived as a critical resource) and the adoption of semi-illicit behaviours cannot be sanctioned, *standard imitation* is a rational behaviour. Preventing such behaviour *by control alone* is almost impossible at the systemic level under the given conditions (external evaluation resources are limited). Thus, in the present form, the law tends rather to reward *formalism* and *compliance* with the standards, and does not support to the same degree an endogenous process of developing an internal system of quality assurance.

Homogenisation is manifest in the missions of universities (codified in university charters), in internal mechanisms and procedures of quality assurance (the operation of CEACs as academic technostructures) or in other internal regulations (for instance, those regarding university ethics), as well as with respect to the ways in which programs and teaching and learning processes are organized (academic operational structures). Emergent universities tend to copy the organisation models developed by the universities with a certain tradition and reputation in order to diminish the uncertainty and anxiety related to recognition and accreditation. Therefore, if we consider the institutional structures for internal quality assurance alone, the background of our higher education comes to be dominated by copies of the same model, with few *sui generis* solutions responding to different needs.

Of course, in some cases – such as the regulated professions (or even the technical higher education, psychology etc.) – compliance with certain standards, sometimes defined at the European level, stimulates quality enhancement by setting the bar very high. Compliance with these standards, provisions, and regulations plays the same role of legitimizing the activity of universities which provide programmes of this type.

There are several reasons to consider homogenisation a negative trend. On the one hand, it inhibits institutional creativity: universities are not stimulated to offer varied learning options adapted to the diversity of customers' needs, as traditional solutions tend to be rewarded instead (by ensuring accreditation). On the other hand, homogenisation puts institutional autonomy at risk, by promoting a unitary model of organisation and operation. Even if reference indicators offer institutions options to vary in their processes, universities are not particularly concerned with individualisation and rather too concerned with formal similarity, which reduces the uncertainty of accreditation and financing. The end result is strong structural isomorphism in formal respects and an informal diversity expressed in academic practices which frequently do not converge.

Isomorphism and homogeneity are associated to another institutional phenomenon: the trend of *decoupling* the common practices from the formal rules, which are instantiated but inoperative. It is this decoupling that best characterises the internal quality assurance procedures and mechanisms within universities. According to the qualitative survey, the CEACs' operation may be characterised as *ritualistic* – these structures are (re)activated on the occasion of the authorisation, accreditation or periodical external evaluation of the university or its study programmes. Accreditation, authorisation or periodical institutional evaluation are the occasions on which the internal (pseudo-)evaluation is carried out. The latter is most of the time reduced to checking that the paperwork was adequately compiled. The CEACs do not provide professional services of quality improvement within the university, for example by establishing an internal methodology, by elaborating and internally debating practices, criteria and reports, by organising training sessions etc. They operate in a discontinuous and quasi-formal manner, limiting themselves to prior control of technical conformity before the documentation reaches the central  evaluating body (ARACIS). The inability of quality commissions to provide substantial quality enhancement services also results from some objective data: in most universities, a single employee is responsible for the quality assurance of sometimes as many as 50 study programmes. The *CEACs are poorly professionalized in terms of their staff*, with their personnel being recruited in part-time positions from among the members of the teaching staff and "benefitting" from ad-hoc training.

One conclusion based on the empirical evidence gathered from the subjective and objective data is that the current quality assurance standards, procedures, and methodologies have engendered the premises but have so far failed to determine the creation of local cultures of quality in all universities. Many universities do not employ internal evaluation as a management instrument in current quality enhancement activities, but treat it as a formal institution disconnected from daily operations, whose main function is the official recognition before accreditation bodies. *Internal evaluation does not fulfil, in most of the cases, a function in quality assurance*, but is a technical, preliminary stage in the process of accreditation and external evaluation. Quality assurance remains a centralised function, at the level of the university, playing only an auxiliary role in the organisational techno-structure and remaining external to the operational area, to the real teaching and learning processes.

# Conclusions

The Quality Barometer 2010 puts forth a dual image of Romanian higher education: mostly positive, but plagued by concerns about specific goals. A similar trend was recorded in 2009 and confirms the gap between the general perception and the satisfaction with respect to specific ends and goals of higher education. This duality is the result of the ambiguity of goals: the missions and objectives of the universities are not assumed in operational terms, they are weakly differentiated and, most of the time, the strategies are not conducive to them. For instance, as shown in the report, almost all Romanian universities claim a national vocation but fail to develop concrete action plans related to their assumed mission. Moreover, scientific research is mentioned by almost all universities but scientific production (expressed in completed doctorates and articles) is very low in most of the cases.

The gap between the mission, the objectives and the current strategies and practices in universities is mainly the result of the unproductive allocation of incentives function of formal input and process indicators; and of the promotion through the legislative framework (the law and methodology of quality assurance) of the single, quasi-generalised, taken-for-granted model of the traditional university which tends to be copied by most universities, be they renowned or emergent. On the other hand, the financial incentives under the current system of budgetary allocation per student push in the direction of increasing the number of students. The number of students is only an *input* indicator and, without other types of policies to address the *output*, universities are not stimulated to become more sensitive to students' needs or their accomplishments after they leave the system. Increasing access to higher education is, on the other hand, an objective in itself, assumed by Romania within the Europe 2020 Strategy. This indicator must not be dealt with separately but should rather be correlated with the system's performance measured in terms of graduates' performance, but also in terms of students' satisfaction with academic life.

The data collected through qualitative methods (interviews) for this *Barometer* suggest that we do not have a student-centred university, but rather a university concerned mainly with its financial survival in a hostile environment, an institution which is self-centred and keen to benefit from the critical survival resources (financing and accreditation). Conversely, the students' world suggests they are on a continuous quest for meanings and yardsticks, especially concerning their professional orientation, career and role as future active citizens. The university offers too little in this respect and is still much too "academic" in demands and poor in achievement. More clearly formulated, more realistic and more feasible objectives, at the level of the university and its study programmes, could be the solution for universities' greater responsibility and responsiveness. Allocating the financial and symbolic incentives (accreditation, recognition) according

to the extent to which universities/study programmes manage to achieve their own objectives, and not just the standards which are imposed from the outside and more or less relevant for one university or another, could be a solution to diversifying higher education institutions, to achieving greater individualisation and focusing on students' needs.

At the same time, the data show that we are dealing with a new learning culture, a culture of pragmatism and personal comfort: students invest only in order to obtain a certification, leisure time is values, as are life and learning experiences outside the school. The student-centred university cannot ignore such realities and is called on to innovate in terms of curriculum and methods in order to demand a greater share of students' time, especially since students' current involvement in the academic world is rather low. Therefore, we need a new teaching culture, centred on training and knowledge facilitation. What is especially needed are institutional mechanisms encouraging universities to assume such a culture.

The study also reveals that students particularly value communication competences and the teaching staff's pedagogical skills, while the latter appreciate especially professional competences in their own research field. In students' opinion, a good student is able to strike a balance between academic obligations (attendance, good marks etc.) and his/her lifestyle and involvement in leisure and social activities. The students' preoccupation with learning and professional development and the professors' preoccupation with scientific production (more precisely with fulfilling the indicators on scientific production) are not always fully convergent. There are gaps resulting from the ways in which incentives are allocated: universities and teachers are evaluated according to their scientific production (easier to quantify and account for) and not according to their achievements in the teaching processes, measured either subjectively – by the students' degree of satisfaction, or objectively – by students' performance.

If students' academic performance is less important in the formal evaluation and university accreditation processes, non-formal education and students' personal and social development are completely ignored. Although non-formal and informal education are in themselves strategies of personal development that are complementary to the academic one, students seem to be atomized and alienated from the university, as well as from their own colleagues, trying to find other types of yardsticks, mainly outside the university. Universities should be encouraged to stimulate students' participation in the academic community.

Unfortunately, the current national legislative framework for higher education – the provisions on quality assurance and accreditation, as well as those on funding – does not offer solutions to these problems and tensions. The framework of our academic system is not conceived so as to stimulate institutional diversity, to reward innovation and encourage social entrepreneurship, but rather supports a classic

model of academic development, generalising standard quality conditions for an increasingly greater number of beneficiaries of educational services. Universities attract students by an inflation of specialisations included in the reputable subject areas, but the educational offer is not really diversified and designed according to students' needs and interests.

As far as the two quality assurance philosophies described at the beginning of the previous chapter are concerned, the current quality assurance system in Romania is centred on accreditation and provision of certifications. Briefly, it can be characterized as

- prescriptive, coercive;
- centralized;
- focused on control and accreditation;
- focused on input and process indicators.

Such a system proved useful in the period of uncontrolled expansion of universities, which mainly took the form of an entrepreneurial capitalisation on an incipient but very dynamic higher education market. And it is still useful considering the fact that the social responsibility of universities remains low. Currently, new internal functional quality assurance institutions and the creation of a genuine culture of academic quality are needed to a greater extent than state control and paternalism towards education providers and customers. When taking into account the existing tensions between the perceptions of students and academics or the recent changes in students' lifestyle and ethos, it becomes clear that we are dealing with a new academic reality which requires the application of another philosophy of quality assurance.

# Policy Recommendations

The diagnosis above suggests that we need policies that should determine the repositioning of higher education with respect to the new realities. The emergence of a *new culture of university research, teaching and learning*, focused on the acquisition of teaching and learning as well as on research performance, is absolutely necessary. Such a culture may be promoted through the establishment of several important targets at system level:

- improving quality and raising universities' responsibility and responsiveness; higher education institutions should be stimulated to become more sensitive towards students' needs and expectations;

- institutional diversification, individualisation of universities' and adoption of specific missions operationalised in development strategies.

We suggest three policy lines by means of which the above-stated targets could be promoted. These policy lines are hardly exhaustive. We offer them as proposals which, together with others but also though a wider debate with representatives of the academic environment, could lead to a consensual strategy on the future design of quality assurance institutions:

(1) Elaborating instruments by means of which the processes of quality adoption and quality improvement would be stimulated to become endogenous, decentralised, and initiated from the bottom up. One should start by raising awareness and acceptance among the teaching staff, students, and university management. The academic ethos suggests that the premises for the success of such an approach do exist. *Decentralisation* and *empowerment* of teaching staff, of departments and faculties, are urgently needed, as are incentives to encourage quality adoption, creativity concerning internal mechanisms and procedures, and the rewarding of relevant good practices. Assuming viable internal quality assurance and evaluation procedures would make the university more sensitive to students' personal development needs and more focused on them. Encouraging diversity, creativity and curricular innovation may be carried out by moving the focus from external evaluation to the *internal adoption of quality and to external assistance for quality enhancement*.

(2) Universities' missions should be defined in operational terms and assumed by relevant academic communication. Establishing purposes, objectives, missions should not remain a formal exercise, but should coalesce in a medium- and long-term development programme. Creativity and innovation in formulating academic missions as well as the individualisation of universities may be encouraged through the *(non-*

*hierarchical) classification of universities* in a manner which provides incentives for complementary routes of institutional development and avoids the standardisation of processes, functions and models which characterises the current legislative framework.

*(3) Revising the quality assurance philosophy* is also necessary. It would be desirable for the *quality-policing* principle to coexist with the *quality-enhancement* principle and for the latter to gradually become dominant as the internal institutionalisation of quality increases. ARACIS's functions could change gradually from *hard* ones, focused on control procedures, to *soft* functions focused on facilitation and elaboration of recommendations, presentation of good practices etc. Concrete measures would include:

- revising the methodology of external evaluation by ensuring decentralisation and more focus on *quality enhancement* and less on control; auditing internal quality assurance systems, encouraging and supporting universities in establishing such systems;

- technical assistance from ARACIS in professionalising quality assurance services at university level: training sessions, promoting good practices, assistance in designing quality assurance instruments etc. Thus, ARACIS would undertake to a considerable extent the role of a quality facilitator;

- external evaluation should mainly focus on outcomes;

- maintaining a more flexible accreditation system imposing minimum quality standards to organisations and programmes, and differentiated standards for authorisation and, respectively, accreditation.

*Quality Barometer 2009: Statistical distributions, interpretation and options on the state of quality in Romanian higher education* and ***Quality Barometer 2010**: The state of quality in Romanian higher education* shall be followed by a summary report in the third year of implementation of the strategic project "*Quality assurance in Romanian higher education in European context. Development of the academic quality management at system and institutional level*" – ACADEMIS.

This report shall, on the one hand, present the dynamics of Romanian higher education as recorded by the annual quality barometers; and, on the other hand, provide a series of references on the possible future trends in Romanian higher education in European context. Moreover, within this summary report the first benchmarks will be reported for the level of Romanian higher education organisations. These benchmarks will enable the development of classifications of higher education organizations (by means of institutional quality assurance

indicators), as well as of study programmes (by means of tertiary quality assurance indicators).

Furthermore, in the third year of the project's implementation a *policy paper* shall be drawn up, comprising the quality enhancement policy proposals at system level and function of institutional types; these proposals will be substantiated empirically by longitudinal analyses carried out within the ACADEMIS project.

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