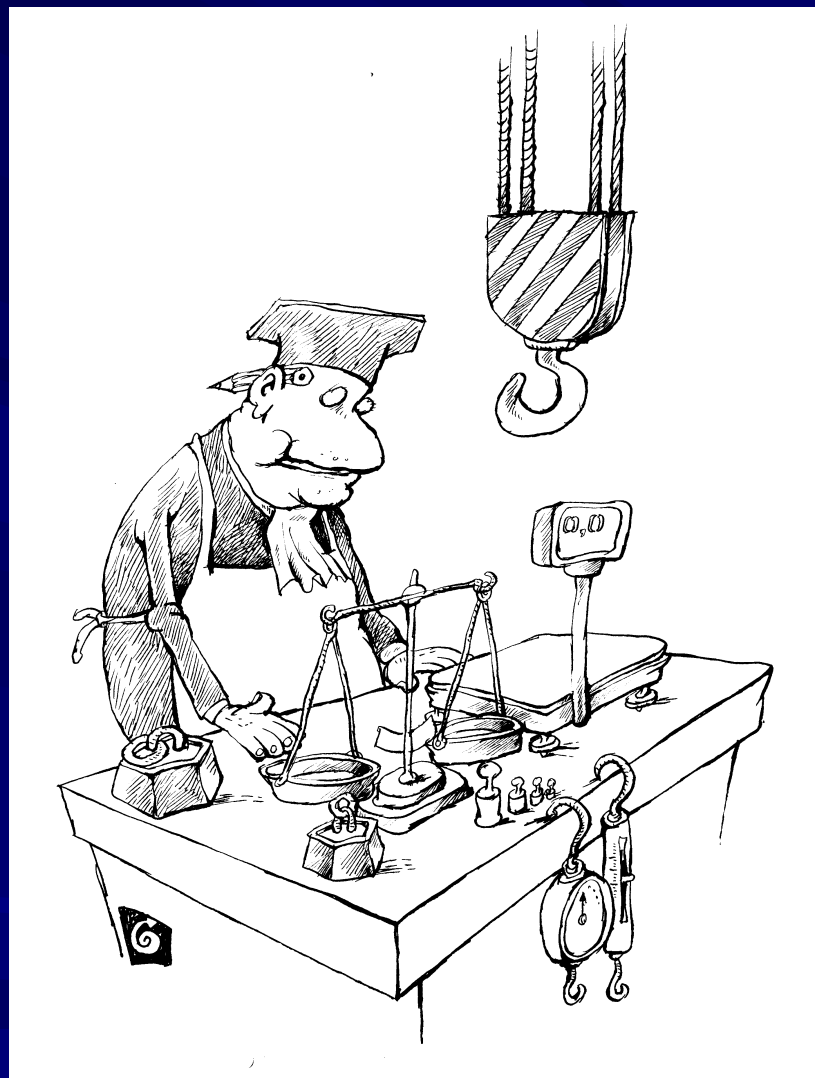




Performance, Assessment and Quality in Higher Education

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This paper will present a few instruments to be used in designing curriculum and evaluation (standards, descriptors) and few instruments for the assessment of educational activities. It is important that faculty and staff agree on the meaning of terms that will be used in assessing courses and programs. Promoting clear definitions of terms and initiating a dialogue on a few problems related to the common understanding and practice of academic assessment will contribute to a better understanding of the mechanisms of evaluation in higher education and of the way these may lead to the promotion of better quality assessment practices and institutional management.



This paper aims to present a part of a more ample research regarding *evaluation management* (the evaluation of educational programs by the managerial team, made up of the department and the faculty's council) and *quality assurance* (the evaluation of student performance, producing and piloting content descriptors for certain subjects), accompanying the selection of theoretical considerations on evaluation with a few *instruments produced within the faculty*.

1. The evaluation of educational programs. Instruments to be used

The evaluation of the educational programs is a complex activity including the analysis of the curriculum and of the strategies and learning activities.

Taking into account the necessity of a supportive culture of teaching within a faculty, we plan to develop and to experiment a few evaluative strategies:

- we will plan a program of collegial participation to selective educational activities conducting the observation with special instruments like the one presented in Table 1, and we will ask the assisted professor to evaluate this work using the same instrument.
- the representatives of the department or the faculty board will participate in the educational activities using a different instrument (see Table 2) and encouraging the reflective activities and constructive discussions.

2. The evaluation of students' learning

The observations and discussions that have been carried out over the past three years and that refer to the evaluation of students' performances within our faculty have shown the following:

- when assessing the competences of their students, professors are not concerned with the validity (the degree to which you are measuring what you are supposed to, the accuracy of your measurement) and reliability (the degree to which an instrument measures the same way each time it is used under the same conditions with the same subjects) of their assessments;
- in most cases, professors do not apply any assessment theory to their evaluation work;
- it is generally agreed that students should be informed about the conditions of their evaluation.

The use of these modes and instruments could have different advantages and outcomes for students and the faculty:

a. the use of content standards/descriptors is *important for students because:*

- each student will have a clear image of the final performance required by each discipline;
- the evaluation will be made through reference to a well-defined model that is known by students, and not to the performances of the group to be evaluated;
- this means that students will not compare themselves to their colleagues, but the nature of the quality of performances will be defined by standards of performance, thus limiting the scope for subjectivity and making possible a correct self evaluation;
- the evaluation will give students a criterion for their preparations, helping them understand what they need to do, which are the skills/competences they still have to work on.

b. The use of content standards/descriptors is important both for **the faculty and for the processes of quality assurance** because:

- evaluation is more correct than before, as the level of subjectivity is diminished;
- evaluation is more credible for the institution, as well as for the community;
- it could lead to a detailed planning of a learning activity who will have as result the improvement of grades by remaking the activities that had not been properly finalised;
- educational programs could be improved by correlating students' results with the evaluation the students make of those programs.

3. Conclusions

- a. Quality is not synonymous with standards. Using standards refers to fair, conservative and measurable performance targets, but universities' approaches to quality may include also the processes of dealing with the consequences of applying standards, of learning from experience and of improving systems. This means that quality is not synonymous with standards. At the same time, we cannot speak about quality without standards, which is why formulating some standards/descriptors is one of the first steps a faculty must make to ensure quality.

b. The increase of the positive backwash effect.

Using adequate instruments for evaluation activities can influence learning processes through the manifestation of a tendency for the formal curriculum and the evaluated curriculum to overlap, thus determining the manifestation of a positive backwash effect and limiting or excluding the negative backwash effects.

c. Changing the evaluation system for higher education in Romania.

The evaluation system in higher education is closer to primary school evaluation (where it is operated with 5 marks), as only 6 grades are actually used in hed. Evaluation in high school is made with grades from 1 to 10 (which gives more possibilities for nuances than in higher education, where 1, 2, 3, and 4 have the same value). Maybe it is time to change the evaluation scale in higher education (using a system of 20 or 30 points).

d. Quality assurance, Total Quality Management (TQM) and Total Quality Improvement (TQI).

TQM is focused on becoming more productive-reducing costs and improving quality. TQM is a system of continuous improvement employing participative management and centred on customers' needs. Key components of TQM are employee involvement and training, problem solving teams, long-term goals and thinking, and recognition that the system, not people, produces inefficiencies. TQM should be seen as a process, not a program. It should be integrated into ongoing operations, and the focus should be on how an organization can better accomplish its goals and objectives.

The TQI approach is applied to an individual course and reviews its key elements, customer focus, student involvement, and continual improvement.

TQM and TQI are processes to be thought by the faculty even we cannot say that the mechanisms and the general process of quality assurance have been implemented.

e. Benchmark statement.

Activity-based benchmarking is considered a methodology in which a selected number of activities (typical or representative) are analyzed and compared with similar activities in other selected institutions.

Assessment is one of these activities and thus it must be carried out in such a manner as to make the comparison not only possible, but also relevant from a quality assurance perspective. Subject benchmark refers to professional standards, describes what we expect of a graduate in terms of the abilities and skills needed in order to develop understanding and competence in the subject.

So we cannot practice benchmarking without improving our assessment activities.