

The 6th International Conference Edu World 2014 “Education Facing Contemporary World Issues”, 7th - 9th November 2014

The forgotten side of quality: Quality of education construct impact on quality assurance system

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Abstract

The paper probes the hypothesis that the quality of education construct used in the design and management of the quality assurance system led to its ineffectiveness and additional negative side-effects on the whole higher education.

An alternative construct for the quality of education is submitted, to be used as a foundation for an improved quality of education law and quality assurance practice. The construct takes into account the needs of both beneficiaries and providers of education programs and also, the fact that some of the needs may not be fully acknowledged.

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Peer-review under responsibility of The Association “Education for tomorrow” / [Asociatia “Educatie pentru maine”].

Keywords: Quality of Education; Quality Assurance; Higher Education.

1. Problem statement

The current quality assurance system for Romanian higher education was set up after the Law for Quality in Education was passed by Romanian Parliament in 2006 (Parlamentul României, 2006).

It inherited the infrastructure, most of the people and also procedures, values and attitudes from the former National Council for Academic Evaluation and Accreditation. The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS) has been established within one month after the law being passed and became active in conducting quality assessment sessions beginning with the 2006-2007 academic year.

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The longer this system was active in assuring quality, *the more frequent* have been formulated critical remarks on the quality of higher education. Such remarks came even from a Commission appointed by the President (România educației, România cercetării, 2007), and from President of Romania himself.

We have in a number of studies (Lisievici, 2009; Lisievici, 2011; Lisievici, 2013) analysed the impact of the quality assurance system on the Romanian higher education and found no evidence of beneficial impact effects. We have found that this quality assurance system favoured control versus support, uniformity versus diversity, centralization versus academic freedom. We have also found that it diverted large financial, human and time resources from teaching, scientific activity and research. Instead of promoting an "evaluation culture", it generated a culture of preparing documentations and reports and rigging procedures for better scoring. Last but not least it did not provide support that would have been instrumental related to the demands is formulated.

This study analyses the conceptual foundations of the quality assurance system, as we suspect that at least part of this lack of positive impact can be explained by faulty constructs.

2. Weak conceptual foundations

2.1. The construct of Education

The Law of Quality in Education 87/2006 (Parlamentul României, 2006) in the second paragraph, defines education in terms of "programmes and activities" for academic or professional development.

This is an over-simplifying and confusing construct. For example, even in the Romanian educational literature, the concept of education has been defined in a much complex and accurate manner, sometimes using different levels of generality (Lisievici et al., 2005).

The concept of education used for building up the quality assurance system in Romania actually covers "formal education". For this fraction of the larger education concept, there are other denominations currently in use in domestic educational literature, like "învățământ".

2.2. The construct of Quality of Education

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has been active in conducting quality assessment exercises beginning with the 2006-2007 academic year.

However, one cannot find a *definition for the "quality of education"* in its main methodological document (ARACIS, 2006, E).

Let us presume that the institution uses the construct included in the Law of Quality in Education 87/2006. The definition associates the quality in education with meeting the "expectations" of the "beneficiaries" and the "quality standards". The law goes on to stipulate that there are "direct" beneficiaries, like the persons enrolled in education programmes, and "indirect" beneficiaries, like employers, employees, families of beneficiaries and, to a larger extent, the "whole society".

This construct is undermined by large number of issues, out of which we shall outline just a few.

Expectations versus needs

Most of the international and domestic reports and studies on the quality of education prefer to use the concept "needs" (OECD, 1989, Lisievici, 1997, Lisievici, 2009, EUA, 2013). Defining the quality of education as meeting the "expectations" of beneficiaries raises a serious validity problem: Expectations are highly subjective and involve *cognitive skills* like perceiving accurately, values clarification, making sound predictions and decisions. The existence and levels of development of such skills become critical for the quality of "expectations". For example, the "society" did not expect that a new vision of the universe, with the Sun in the centre of it was needed and might be developed, and Giordano Bruno was burned at stake for providing it, while Galileo Galilei narrowly escaped the same fate. At different points in time, "direct and indirect beneficiaries" of education did not expect that objects heavier than air would ever fly or that trains would ever go faster than 20 miles per hour.

Expectations might also be unreasonable, irrational, immoral or antisocial. Individuals may have "expectations" which, should they be met, would certainly not conduct to any progress regarding the quality of

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