

THE TYPOLOGY OF THE QUALITY MEASURES ON HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract: Quality in higher education has become an interesting problem and subject to reflections for the greatest part of the higher education national system partners. These reflections have led to multiple initiatives, all having as declared objective the improvement of the quality in higher education. The observations and the documentations made in order to clarify the different types of initiatives leading to quality improvement, or which could be categorized as initiatives focused on quality, have led to the determination of four major types: quality through certification, quality through accreditation, quality through improvement initiatives, and quality through national or international systemic pressures.

In this article are presented their characteristics by positioning them on two axes of analysis: (1) Institutional – national – international (by the pressure responsible for the emergence of the initiative) and (2) Internal control – External control (by the way chosen of implementing the initiative).

At the end of the article, a series of conclusions regarding the contextual use of the four types of initiatives are presented.

The general context of the design and implementation of quality assurance programs exerts various, sometimes contradicting, intensities and orientations pressures. This occurs as the concept of quality has a real functionality and it can be a generator of organizational reactions only in a certain context: “Quality represents a concern only for the organizations whose survival is subject to social existential pressures associated to the exchanges carried out as supplier”. [Nestian Andrei, 2004]. The quality management systems are organizational responses to the strong market pressures. For this reason, the creation of similar pressures is necessary in the universities where they do not naturally exist. [Nestian Andrei, 2007].

The quality of the higher education became an issue of concern and a reflection topic for most of the partners involved in the education systems. These reflections led to more concrete measures, all having the increase of the higher education quality as a declared objective. The observations and the documenting conducted in order to highlight the various types of measures leading to a quality increase or which can be considered as measures having quality as main concern led to the pointing out of four major types:

1. Quality by certification
2. Quality by accreditation
3. Quality by improvement measures
4. Quality by national and international systemic pressures

These four types of measures present significant differences when we position them in a bidimensional analysis matrix (figure 1), having an axis revealing the pressure source determining measure taking and an axis revealing the measure implementation manner. The two dimensions are:

1. **Institutional – national – international** (according to the pressure source determining the measure taking): quality increase measures can be determined by a strong internal or external pressure, therefore we can find isolated actions undertaken by certain universities considering quality as a priority or national or international actions, undertaken at ministry and superstate level, inducing reactions of all the universities in the system.

2. **Self-control – enforcement** (according to the measure implementation modality): this axis shows the manner in which the measure implementation is conceived, not which is the initial source causing the measure taking. Thus, some measures are autonomous, carrying out based on self-control and self-enforcement, others call on external enforcement sources, for instance certifying organisms, in order to exert pressures and to control the proposed measures.

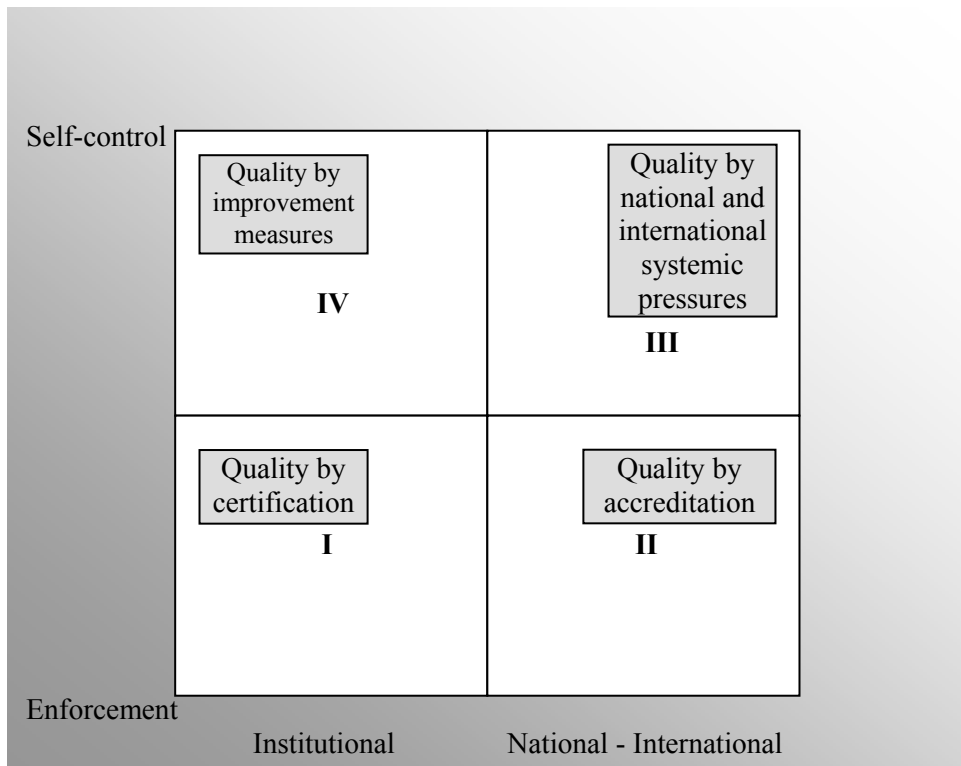


Fig. 1: Measures regarding quality differentiation on Self-control-Enforcement and Institutional-national-international axes

In order to substantiate such classification and to locate the four measures categories within the matrix, a series of analyses of concrete examples as well as conceptual delimitations have been necessary.

1. Certification and accreditation

Thus, in the Ordonance no. 38/1998 on the accreditation and infrastructure for the conformity assessment, the terms provided in the national standards are expressly defined, namely:

a) **certification** – procedure by which a third party gives a written assurance that a product, process or service is in accordance with the specified conditions;

b) **accreditation** – procedure by which a body with relevant authority officially recognizes the fact that a body or a person is competent to carry out specific tasks [Governmental Ordonance no. 38/1998].

Of the two, the certification is the widest concept, the most general. Although it is not included as obligation in the definition of the notion, in order to guarantee its objectivity, the certification needs to be made by a third, independent, party. Accreditation is a form of certification carried out for an entire body, as a whole, conformity being searched for the manner of carrying out the specific tasks.

Although, in the ISO standards we cannot find a definition of the quality certification, we could say that the same, in addition to the quality assessment are subordinated to the concept of quality assurance. By means of the quality certification, the customers receive assurance with regard to meeting the quality –related requirements by the certified product, service, process or organization. The assessment is a concrete modality by which the necessary information can be obtained in order to confer this confidence.

In the proposed classification, the certification measures are differentiated from the accreditation measures by the manifested pressure source. Thus, the accreditation measures are enforced by legal provisions, for instance by the ARACIS regulations in Romania, while the certification measures are self-undertaken, out of own will, to offer a quality guarantee in the relationship with the customers, the certifier being an independent entity. The quality certification bodies are specialized organizations which enter into partnerships with the companies or the institutions wishing to obtain such a certification, trustworthy and achievable in the relationship with the customers. The certification bodies need not be the authorities having created the standards in use. At their turn, they can be accredited by the organizations which created the standards, in view to carry out direct relationships with the organizations to be using these standards.

At university level, the certification variants may be:

- certification of a lecture, of a field of specialization or of a program of study;
- certification of a faculty/university or of a certain administrative processes;
- certification of personnel in the field of quality.

2. The national and the international pressures

From the beginning, I noticed that the concern for quality occurs only within the organizations whose survival is subject to existential pressures associated with the exchanges carried out as supplier.

The issue the higher education faces is that of the systemic absence of such pressures. The public universities are entities which do not disappear following bankruptcy, they are entities financed by the state in order to provide with a public service of general interest and they do not experience the fight for survival in their daily operations, but the need for a better living. How can we make the higher education system, a system in which the quality concept applies, as it is defined by the enterprises? What is needed to have a similar system?

The answer can be found starting from the cause of the existential pressures' inexistence in the public universities: the unconditioned providing of the subsistence means by the state. Otherwise, the state substitutes in the relationship with the universities, to the client in the enterprises' similar relation. But this behavior is not as

similar as the customer's decision whether to purchase a product or not, as there is a much more complex power relation between the ministry and the universities.

The power is related to the possibility to establish control on a certain uncertainty area. In other words, that entity having the possibility to control such an area becomes irreplaceable, creating a dependence of the others to it. [Livian Yces-Frederic, 1987]

The fundamentals of power were defined as follows:

1. *Coercion*: the power to give a punishment or a penalty for failure to observe the defined requirements
2. *Reward*: the power to give a reward, prize following observance of the defined requirements
3. *Persuasion*: the power to induce a behavior, only by the call on the possible use of coercion or reward, irrespective of whether these can or cannot be really exerted.
4. *Knowledge*: the exclusive power offered by the superiority or uniqueness of the knowledge or information held.

The Ministry could use a wide enough range of concrete means by which the power relations are modified:

1. *Application of rules*: it has the power to execute legislative proposals which modify the system operation rules and it can issue decisions with immediate internal applicability.
2. *Assignment of means and resources*: it can decide on the financing assignment rules for the teaching and research activities.
3. *Modification of partnerships*: it can reorganize the current structures on new bases, it can create new entities (committees regarding quality, etc).
4. *Use of knowledge and information*: it can offer limited or unlimited access to certain information sources (for instance, it can offer/create a grading system of the universities and following distribution, it could exert public persuasion in the universities).

Within them, the ministry can use as tactical fundament, as necessary, one of the four fundamentals of power. Thus a new rule, a new law can be created, whose application by the university base either on a coercive or a rewarding mechanism. All the instruments or the methods which the ministry uses for the influencing of the higher education system towards the development of the concerns in the field of quality can be considered national systemic pressures. In a wider horizon, the European integration creates the premises of international systemic pressures, but which have an identical substantiation from the point of view of the power relations.

As it resulted from the analyzed examples, the application of these systemic pressures aims at the creation of a framework in which the universities develop positive behaviors related to quality. The enforcement of standardized measures was most often considered too restrictive for the academic environment in which the concept of autonomy has a great resonance. Instead, those measures which attempted to avoid the creation of strong resistances to change were more successful by providing opportunities which can be voluntarily used by teams which are motivationally and behaviorally prepared to embrace the conceptual and instrumental framework of the quality management. The emergence of initiatives regarding quality is approached, in these cases, from bottom to top, which diminish the strength to change and create the premises of health measures, fully undertaken by those participating in their implementation.

3. Quality improvement with no call on referentials

The quality improvement measures with no call on referentials or with no systemic pressures can be considered, by their essence, the quality improvement classic measures: the ones in which the customers' pressure is directly recognized and it is used as starting point in defining and adjusting the current activities.

In the universities, quality is not achieved only under the conditions of declared quality management systems, accredited or certified. The University of Harvard has a quality tradition dating long before the emergence of quality management systems or the setup of QAA – Quality Assurance Agency – in Great Britain. The quality can be achieved and improved outside of the measures in which we talk of quality assurance systems or total quality.

As Nonaka said, the organizations' knowledge can be explicit or tacit.[Nonaka, Takeuchi, 1995]. The situation is not different when we talk of the knowledge regarding quality. The setup of operation rules of the teaching, research or administrative processes, which are carried out in the universities, starting from the idea of customer and meeting his needs can be catalogued as a measure regarding quality. The introduction of the teaching processes assessments by the students is an example. Another category of actions which can be considered measures regarding quality are the reunions or projects to solve certain issues. The setup of teams dealing with the systematic solution of the problems within a department or training unit represent an example of measures aiming at the quality increase.

Such punctual actions occur on a permanent basis in the universities, contribute to the good carrying out of the current activity and can be considered implicit quality measures. They are not recognized as classic measures of quality management and this is due to the fact they are not concerned with quality management but with problems' solving.

The total sum of the current activity improvement by such measures led to the quality level found in the universities which do not have a definite, explicit policy on quality.

In addition to such measures, well structured actions on quality are initiated, similar to those in the enterprises, emerged either as logical solutions to problems which the university faces or as transpositions in facts of a certain type of organizational culture and of a favorable context. The effects of the introduction of an explicit policy and of some declared measures on quality are usually stronger than of the policies and activities in which implicitly deal with quality. As a noteworthy difference compared to the other three types of measures – accreditation, certification or answer to the national pressures – the measures which do not call on external referentials and which are not carried out under national or international systemic pressures enjoy a stronger adherence and a better involvement of the persons concerned, creating thus the premises of much better results.

Their sporadic emergence represents a negative signal with regard to the distorted and weak mode in which the customers' pressure is felt upon the higher education in Romania.

4. Positioning the four types of measures

Quality by certification stays in the first box (figure 1) on account of the following reasons:

- The measures aiming at certification are usually *self-enforced, having the internal initiatives as origin*, at institutional level. The essential pressure source is the customers' requirements and not the ministerial strategies.

- These measures *call on implementation at an external enforcement*, by the call on a third party acknowledging the reached qualitative level and observance of requested specifications. The causes leading to such an approach are either the absence of a sufficient adhesion to the idea of quality, which implies that an external entity will play the role of the change force (the representatives of the certification bodies), or the institution customers' express requirement to present a recognized quality management system, which implies the call on a certification acknowledged by the same. Irrespective of the cause, we can say that the emphasis in implementation will focus on enforcement, self-control and the volunteer involvement being insufficiently present in order to be prevailing.

The quality by accreditation stays in the 2nd box within the matrix because:

- It is a method of assurance a minimum level of quality by national and international enforcement.

- It is a measure which each university needs to undertake in part at institutional level but which is a part of a national or international strategy. The accreditation system of the universities is defining for the extreme points of the two axes: *enforcement* of a minimal quality at *national or international level*.

The quality by improvement measures stays in the fourth box on account of the following reasons:

- By improvement methods we delimited in this case those measures which do not call on external referentials and they are not answers to pressures of the state institutions. These *are measures answering directly to the customers' pressures*.

- The improvement measures represent own initiatives, carried out by each university or by its components.

- The improvement measures are carried out exclusively in autonomy and self-control conditions, the internal motivation being enough for their implementation.

The quality by national/international systemic pressures holds an intermediate position between the 2nd and the 3rd boxes because:

- The systemic pressures, either national or international are conceived as to induce changes at the higher education institutions' level. They do not enforce measures, but, more frequently, they create the framework for the emergence of autonomous initiatives of those institutions which are more careful and more reactive to the foreseen opportunities or threats. Therefore, we find a mixture of *enforcement and autonomy* in which the national or international systems can evolve towards a higher quality. Depending on the situation, either prevalence of enforcement or autonomy can be identified.

5. Conclusions on the analyzed measures regarding quality

As a result of the research on the measures with impact on quality in the higher education, we reached the following conclusions:

- The measures on quality can be successfully applied in the higher education and may result in important positive changes in the activity and the behavior of the teaching and administrative personnel.

- As they imply deep psychological adjustments for most of the involved actors, an important condition for a measure to be successful is choosing a change rhythm considering the real adaptability of the individuals.

- The measures regarding quality are adjusting measures, therefore they are always carried out only under an external pressure. The creation of a type of pressure where they do not really exist is thus necessary.

- The pressures can be exerted by three categories of actors: the students, the organizations employing graduates and the representatives of the State (Ministry of Education and Research of Romania or ARACIS). The creation of balanced structures between the pressures exerted by these three sources will lead to important impulses for the purpose of implementing quality systems.

- The resistance showed against all the change measures in the higher education institutions, therefore against the measures of introducing new concerns on quality needs to be removed by limiting the “top-down” type direct interventions and by the application of structures creating methods which allow for the development of the “bottom-top” type initiatives with regard to quality.

- In order to have the most successful chances, the measures on quality in the higher education needs to base on constant organizational change pressures, both internal and external, equilibrated at the level of each individual by responsibility increase mechanisms, volunteer involvement and personal initiative.

- For the improvement of the processes carried out within the higher education, the visions can differ, the measures range on quality being very wide: from the simple assessment of certain processes, undergoing internal teaching assessment and institutional accreditation, up to reaching self-certification or external certification, ISO 9000 type. The most improving measure needs to be chosen depending on the context of its possible application.

- The quality assessment and certification are activities which are present in the higher education and which are used for multiple purposes, at organization level, national or international level: guaranteeing a minimum quality level, nationally, the enforcement of organizational changes, the creation of a quality culture, at national and university level, the quality improvement of the internal process carried out and the increase of institutional competitiveness etc.

- Accreditation is a form of certification associated usually with an imposed national certifier (CNEAA initially, currently ARACIS in Romania) but the term may be also encountered in some independent certification systems (the accreditation systems for the MBA).

- The essential advantages which the higher education institutions certification and assessment offers are related to the prior presentation of their commitments in the relationship with the customer, in the form of a document guaranteeing a specific quality level, recognized and appreciated by the customer.

- The higher education systems currently consist of, in all the world countries, national institutions aiming at the enforcement of minimum quality standards for the higher education. At the same time, there are international and regional networks created by these national institutions, which act in order to reduce the differences and spread the good practices.

- The existence of these national and international institutions is due to the necessity of preserving the public concern with regard to the training of the future

specialists to be contributing to the social and economic development of the respective countries. By their activities, these institutions enforce the maintenance of a reasonable minimum quality level. The forms of pressures exerted in order to compel the institutions to be subject to assessment and certification are either of legislative nature (it is mandatory for the higher education institutions to be accredited, under the law, in order to operate), or of financial nature (the correlation of the financing with the quality level).

- A different vision is adopted considering that the quality certification is an objective necessity for all the universities which are oriented towards an improvement of the quality of the educational and research services that offer. The perspective is no longer to enforce a quality minimum level but to offer more learning opportunities to the students and higher satisfaction to the other concerned actors (employers, ministries etc.). This is the case of the accreditation international systems for the MBAs.

- In this perspective the focus is on the continuous and volunteer improvement of the internal processes and of the external relationships. For the organizations having such a vision forms of assessment and certification based on free initiative are available, by the call on certification institutions and standardization bodies providing such services, most of the time against payment. The said bodies can be at their turn, national or international.

- The main question mark which the call on a certification or accreditation institution raises is related to the extent to which the standards applied by the same represent expressions of the explicit and implicit employers' needs, which translates in the valorization of certification or accreditation by them by appreciating the graduates' competences. If for the mandatory national accreditations this issue is not clearly highlighted, for the independent certifications or accreditations, it is the key point of assessing the investment in such a measure and the modalities to recover it.

- Each higher education institution call on certification (or accreditation) and assessment processes. The differences are given by the fact that the pursued certification strategies are defined depending on a complex of factors which decisively influence them. These factors are of cultural and human, financial and relational nature.

- Among the cultural and human nature factors we mention: the organizational values, the level of resistance to change, the level of knowledge and the experience in quality management existent in the university, the involvement of the management in supporting the measures on the quality management.

- The financial factors are important in strategies differentiating depending on the certification costs, relatively important when calling on certification international bodies. They are also important when strong, implicit and explicit correlations exist between the quality and the financing level.

- The relational factors depend on the structure of the power relations existing between the institutions involved in the measure, in particular when we have to deal with strategies conceived at national and international level. The inducement, the enforcement or volunteership are, from this point of view, the three modalities to manage the relationship between the institution at national level and the universities with regard to the quality management. At the same time, holding and use of information and knowledge tends to become an important element of the power relations between the actors involved in the higher education.

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