

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES IN THE ASSURANCE AND IMPROVEMENT OF SERVICE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

the twenty-first century, human resources stand at the basis of the society's economic and social development. After all, man is in control of all the other production factors, finding new means of exploiting the primary resources and continuously improving the technical capital. Indeed, man leads development. With one condition: to have the knowledge, abilities and experience to use the rest of the resources as efficient and effective as possible.

Thus, man also needs to learn, to improve, to experiment. And what place would be more adequate to do all these and many more than universities, as institutions of science and knowledge? In a society in which individual personal and professional performance is seen as being determined by the provision of high quality education services, quality assurance and improvement initiatives are not only necessary, but rather mandatory for maintaining the competitiveness of public and private universities alike.

The current paper aims to present and analyze the main opportunities and challenges of service quality assurance in the Romanian higher education, providing a specific focus on the tourism higher education – a domain which has undergone significant change during the last decades and which currently strives to comply with the standards and requirements set by both foreign institutions of tourism higher education as well as by professionals and other stakeholders in the hospitality and travel industries.

KEYWORDS

ervice quality, university education, performance, quality assurance

JEL classification

H42, I23, I28, L15, L84

Introduction

Romanian universities, founded much later than those in Central and Western Europe nevertheless asserted themselves as *generators of scientific value and knowledge*. As a matter of fact, numerous personalities in the fields of culture, science, economy and politics developed and formed as specialists in the Romanian university environment: Nicolae Iorga, A.D. Xenopol and Gh.I. Brătianu at the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iași; George Emil Pallade at the University of Bucharest, Herta Muller at the West University in Timișoara, Mugur Isărescu at the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, Iuliu Hațieganu at the „Babeș-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca.

However, the fact that several well-known personalities have graduated from Romanian universities is *not enough to ensure continuous performance*. In the past two decades, as the young population has been constantly decreasing and a large number of high-school graduates have been leaving Romania in order to study abroad, improving the service quality of higher education has become a permanent challenge for the Romanian university education system – hence the necessity to ensure that the

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services provided by higher education institutions meet the requirements of both students and employers on the labour market.

The need for service quality assurance is even more intense for programmes addressed to students who will, upon graduation, provide personal services to a wide variety of customers, as the quality of these services will definitely depend on the quality the education. We will therefore proceed to analyze several characteristics of service quality assurance in the tourism higher education, a field which has followed a particular course of development ever since its emergence.

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1. Challenges in ensuring and improving service quality in the Romanian higher education system

Quality is an essential characteristic of an organisation’s competitiveness; thus, a competitive university will deliver high quality services to its consumers (Todorescu, L.L., 2009, pp.219). The quality of university programmes, understood as the degree to which the students’ needs are satisfied, calls for permanent efforts to adapt to the rapid changes in the economic environment and the requirements of the labour market.

The structural changes undertaken in the Romanian economy, the restructuring of industrial mammoths and the transition to a market economy have demanded the profound transformation of the Romanian university education system. Most universities understood the economic tertiarization and adapted their curricula to the new external environment.

Furthermore, improving the quality of higher education became absolutely necessary as the competition between universities constantly grew; state universities lost their monopoly on the delivery of specialized education and training services; the labour market expanded to international dimensions; the mobility of students and professors increased; and the struggle for finding a workplace offering real opportunities for personal development became more fierce.

An important aspect in undertaking this structural transformation is the understanding of the fact that *education is a service in itself*, which is delivered by universities, in the benefit of students. However, in broader terms, the clients or beneficiaries of the services provided by universities may include other categories of consumers, such as companies, research institutes and even the local community in its entirety.

The beneficiaries are the ones demanding high quality services – services which should be able to satisfy high order needs, such as education, personal and professional development, creativity and innovation enhancement. They are entitled to decide upon the quality of the service, based on how well their needs have been satisfied – thus, students, professors and other stakeholders define quality standards and assess whether these standards have been met. Quality assurance in the higher education system may be rendered, therefore, as a *broad assessment process, from different perspectives and on various institutional levels* (Miroiu, A.; Crăciun, C.; Florian, B., 2007, pp.5).

However, if most universities in Romania have already been externally assessed by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in the Higher Education System (ARACIS) – assessment which resulted in the assignment of global grades, expressing the reliability of various study programmes – very few universities have conducted internal assessments. Thus, the students’ opinion as to whether their expectations have been met or not is rarely consulted, which demonstrates that universities are frequently focused on the institution rather than on the beneficiaries or stakeholders (Iosifescu, C.S., 2009, pp.87).

This results in the feedback necessary for improving the quality of education services being rarely sufficient. Therefore, the study programmes offered by universities are designed upon the considerations of the provider instead of the consumers' expectations. As a consequence, the students' level of satisfaction is sporadically measured, which makes quality improvement objectives even harder to achieve. Moreover, even if the students' satisfaction is assessed in what concerns the professors' activity and the quality of university life, the input is not always used to improve and maintain the quality of study programmes or to assess the academic personnel.

Service quality assurance in higher education is mandatory in order to respond to the challenge posed by the youth's *transition to the labour market* – which is currently very complex, very long and determined by the attainment of practical competences rather than theoretical knowledge. Moreover, these practical competences are dictated by the new qualitative approaches to labour force development, which are focused on the level of education and professional training (Aceleanu, M.I., Adam, A., 2010, pp.87).

Another challenge related to the transition from school to an active life is the temporary or permanent emigration of young graduates – which are discouraged by the grim employment perspectives on the national labour market – abroad, where they are employed on positions for which they are overqualified or where they are compelled to attend requalification courses (Pîrciog, S., Zamfir, A., 2010, pp. 78).

Thus, universities must focus their efforts on providing the practical competences which are most demanded by potential and actual employers, so as to facilitate a better inclusion of students on the labour market. In fact, *becoming successfully employed may even be regarded as an indicator of a study programme's quality and reliability*, as high quality education services should be able to ensure the employment of young graduates, as well as their future development as aspiring professionals.

Therefore, the challenges are numerous. However, they can be transformed in opportunities. This transformation implies a change in mentality, a transition from a reactive approach – in which higher education institutions are expected to adapt to the external environment – to a proactive approach, based on creative solutions, resulting in new and higher quality services being initiated and delivered.

2. Opportunities for service quality improvement in the Romanian higher education system

A concept frequently associated to quality is "performance". The correlation between quality improvements – expressed as the degree to which consumers are satisfied by the services they are provided with - and performance – as an expression of the results obtained by academics, students and researchers - is particularly strong.

In economic practice, an increase in the performance of human resources is often followed by performance rewards, which further motivate and enhance a particular behaviour leading to superior results. This system is partially applied in universities. For example, the students obtaining the highest grades are rewarded with scholarships. Furthermore, students participating in scientific competition have the opportunity to be awarded with prizes or year-long studentships. But is this enough to reward performance?

Quality assurance and improvement does not only mean obtaining high grades. *Quality improvement implies enhancing personal initiative and creativity, entrepreneurship and innovation* – competences which can rarely be measured in grades. Thus, quality management systems should also account for active participation in extracurricular projects, scientific research activities or cultural projects.

Furthermore, as the quality of education services is not only reflected in the results obtained by students during their bachelor or master programmes, but also in the performance of graduates on the labour market, it is essential for universities to promote the acquirement of practical knowledge and skills. But which are the skills that employers expect graduates to have?

In order to provide an answer to this question, universities may draw upon a marketing strategy, which should also include market studies among potential employers (Avram, E.M, Neagoe, C., Avram,

R.M., 2010, pp. 5). The information collected could be later used to adapt the study programmes to the changes in the economic and social environment. So as to allow a broad application of results, universities from different regions could collaborate in the elaboration of market studies, stimulating the active participation of both academics and business representatives.

Last but not least, the *introduction of internal assessments*, which measure the beneficiaries' satisfaction with regard to the services of higher education, is highly necessary. Even more indispensable is the assessment made by former Erasmus students or other beneficiaries of mobility grants, which had the opportunity to experience the services provided within a foreign higher education system and are thus more capable to objectively identify the strengths and weaknesses of Romanian universities, while formulating sound quality improvement proposals.

International students' opinion is particularly important taking into consideration the efforts to implement the Bologna Treaty into the Romanian higher education system and adapt the domestic study programmes to the performance standards set out by universities in Western Europe and the United States of America. A relatively inexpensive measure would be to add an additional proposal form to the questionnaires that an Erasmus student is expected to fill out upon his return to his home university.

The information collected from students as well as from academics with international experience may be used for the elaboration of *best practice manuals*, which should provide the basis for a *comprehensive quality assurance and improvement strategy*.

A university's performance and implicitly the quality of the services it offers are reflected not only in the students' results, but also in those of the academic personnel. In the last decade, the professional development of academics and research personnel became a major preoccupation for most Romanian universities. Thus, numerous universities now have specialized departments responsible for the continuous training and development of academics.

Furthermore, an increasing number of bachelor and master students are interested in a professional career within the higher education system. However, the small scholarships available for PhD candidates and the absence of programmes stimulating their involvement in the projects undertaken by academic personnel determines many Romanian students to search abroad for PhD funding opportunities. Therefore, it is necessary for quality assurance initiatives to focus on *retaining high potential graduates within the university and engaging them in academic and research projects*.

3. Quality and performance demand high standards

Last but not least, quality assurance and improvement in higher education services demands *exactingness and exigency in relation to the results obtained by students and academics*, continuously maintaining or even increasing quality and performance standards. As an Erasmus student, before the start of my study mobility, I was repeatedly told that „West Europeans never study as hard as we do!”. Completely wrong!

As a student within the University of Groningen, the Netherlands, the efforts necessary for obtaining high exam grades were much greater than in Romania. The professors' exigency, the participation of business environment representatives at lectures and seminars and the influence of the grades obtained during the studies on the possibility to work as an intern within a multinational company clearly determines a high level of motivation and, implicitly, high performances.

Furthermore, in order to reach the desired performance outcomes, *exactingness needs to be applied starting with the universities which presently demand minimal admission criteria* and performance standards – the private Romanian universities which have failed to create value – creating instead certificates and diplomas. The first step was already taken, by elaborating a classification of universities and study programmes, according to the results obtained in previous years. Quality assurance and improvement implies however a continuous and permanent effort, and the simple publication of university hierarchies is currently insufficient to bring all the study programmes to the quality level desired by employers and partner universities from abroad.

An alternative would be *the implementation of internal assessment and quality assurance systems*, by both public and private university, in conformance with the EU standards for internal quality assurance for providers of education services. According to the European legislation, such systems would include the establishment of criteria for the assessment of students and academics alike, the implementation of curricula monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, the setup of data basis with relevant information with concern to the management of study programmes, as well as the periodical publication of objective and updated information regarding study programmes and curricula (European Commission, 2009).

The elaboration by the responsible ministry of a *reliable set of performance indicators* should also be taken into consideration, the indicators thus providing a basis for public financial allocations. The indicators should be provide a clear and concise image of the university's level of service quality and should be easily measurable. For example, a fairly objective indicator would be the percentage of graduates employed in the field they were trained for, within a year from graduation.

These mechanisms would ensure that best practice models are rewarded, while stimulating institutions with previous poor performance to strive for a better quality assurance and improvement system. The adoption of such a set of indicators would encourage universities, either public or private, to adapt their services to the market requirements, so as to ensure a greater adequacy between the study programmes and curricula and the employers' expectations, while facilitating the comparative analysis of higher education service quality (Drăgulănescu, N., 2006, pp.6).

4. Service quality assurance in tourism higher education. theory and practice

So as to integrate themselves in the labour market, graduates must be able to work within teams, to lead a team, to allocate resources and coordinate activities. In fact, academics agree that the transition from university to professional life has become longer and more difficult than ever (Pirciog, S., Zamfir, A., 2010, pp. 78). Thus, practical competences and theoretical knowledge are equally important, which makes internships highly necessary in higher education programmes, either bachelor's or master's. This requirement is even more stringent in the tourism higher education, where students need to acquire highly specific skills and competences.

First of all, in order to be successful in the travel or hospitality industry, a young graduate needs to be familiar with strategic as well as tactical and operational aspects. Thus, a young manager in a hotel needs to know how a bed is supposed to be made or how a room is supposed to look after being cleaned; a restaurant or events manager needs to know how to set and arrange a table, whereas a travel consultant should know how to use a global reservation system.

Secondly, travel and hospitality are industries which demand wide-scale interaction with clients and other stakeholders, such as tour-operators or airlines representatives. Therefore, graduates of higher tourism education institutions should be good communicators and excellent facilitators and negotiators. This requires long-term practice, as communication skills are not always inborn.

Thirdly, tourism requires specific competencies to be acquired in an interdisciplinary manner. Many competencies improve through trial and error. Other competencies require demonstrations. Yet others – such as the ability to use reservation systems - can only be obtained through practice; students learn as they make reservations, invoices and reports by using specialised software.

Therefore, the possibilities that students have to practically apply the knowledge gained during courses may be considered an indicator of quality in higher tourism education. A tourism university or any other tourism higher education institution thus needs to provide students with the opportunity to better connect with the business environment.

A possible solution to this pressing issue would be the promotion of students' *involvement in the activities of training firms*, as well as participating in training firms' fairs, both in Romania as well as abroad. An alternative to training firm is represented by *professional placements or internships* in real companies, according to the curricula based on which the study programme was designed. Apart of providing students with the opportunity to practice what they have learned, internships also make it

possible for undergraduates to meet and learn from various tourism professionals, thus becoming part of industry-wide relationship networks.

Internships are clearly a determinant of the successful employment of bachelor and master graduates in the public or private sector, as they facilitate the attainment of practical skills. In this respect, external financing opportunities for projects facilitating the transition of students to a professional career should not be overlooked or underestimated. Internships, training firms, as well as studies conducted among employers with the aim of adapting bachelor or master programmes to the requirements on the labour market may be financed under the „Human Resource Development” Operational Programme, 2007-2013. The funds may be accessed either by universities or by partnerships between universities, companies and training associations.

In order to facilitate the integration of practical competences and theoretical knowledge in a unitary higher education programme, independent institutions of higher education in tourism have been established in several EU, Asian and American countries. The most representative example is probably Switzerland, with its numerous hotel institutes – private and public bodies which provide specific training for young professionals in the hospitality and travel industries.

Thus, the tourism higher education institutions function separately from other universities. Although these institutes are entitled to afford bachelor and MA certificates – just like any other higher education institution, the study programmes are adapted to the specific requirements of the industry. In many cases, at least one third of all activities are practical and many universities require students to do an internship of at least 6 months in their final year of study.

Still, in other states, quality assurance in tourism higher education is strongly related to the universities’ affiliation to different associations or forums, which set specific standards and norms. Such is the Association for Tourism in Higher Education (ATHE), which is the subject association for tourism in higher education in the United Kingdom. ATHE encourages high standards in learning, teaching and research, working with different quality assurance bodies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency and the Higher Education Academy; it is a Learned Society of the Academy for the Social Sciences.

Other similar institutions are the Association for Tourism and Leisure Education (ATLAS) and the Council for Australasian University Tourism and Hospitality Education (CAUTHE), which not only promote high standards in tourism education, but also the development of more responsible and sustainable travel and tourism behaviours (Association for Tourism in Higher Education, 2012).

In Romania, tourism higher education is still in its beginnings. However, we have do have what theorists of economic growth call “the advantage of backwardness” – an opportunity which may have positive results if properly exploited. However, this does not automatically imply transferring and replicating the development models followed by foreign institutions of tourism higher education, but rather elaborating step-by-step benchmarking strategies, based on best practices identified internally and abroad and adapted to the Romanian business and education environment

Conclusion

Despite the difficulties which the Romanian university system has faced throughout the past two centuries, the perspectives are however optimistic. Prestigious universities, such as the University of Bucharest, the Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies, the „Babeş-Bolyai” University in Cluj-Napoca, the West University in Timișoara and the „Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University in Iași have gone beyond their popular denomination of „schools”, becoming research institutions and incubators of economic and social development.

As a matter of fact, this is also the conclusion reached by ARACIS following a study conducted in 2010, which showed that the Romanian higher education system is characterised by a relatively high level of service quality. However, a more comprehensive analysis shows that the system is rather self-centred than consumer-focused, being little involved in society and having very few connections with the external environment.

Thus, the assurance and improvement of service quality in the Romanian higher education system remains a permanent challenge, which cannot be overcome unless performance is enhanced, according to the needs of the students and the requirements of the business environment. This is especially true in the case of the tourism higher education, which requires a constant interaction with industry professionals and consumers of tourism services. Higher education does not only refer to knowledge, but also to practice and skill development, demanding an interdisciplinary approach and a permanent contact with the business environment.

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