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**AN INTEGRATED MODEL FOR THE QUALITY
ENHANCEMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION:
A ROMANIAN APPROACH
WITH GLOBAL APPLICATIONS**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Summary.....	1
Table of contents	11
List of figures and tables.....	13
List of abbreviations.....	15
CHAPTER I. INTRODUCTION.....	17
1.1. Background	17
1.2. Research Questions.....	19
1.3. Research Contribution.....	20
1.4. Overview of the Thesis.....	21
CHAPTER II. THE BACKGROUND.....	23
2.1. The University: A Dynamic Role and Place in Society.....	23
2.1.1. Vision, Mission and Strategy.....	29
2.1.2. The University in the Knowledge Society.....	32
2.1.3. The University as a Public Good.....	33
2.2. The Romanian Higher Education System.....	40
2.2.1 Typology of Romanian Higher Education (HE).....	40
2.2.2 The Structure of Romanian Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).....	43
2.3. A Historical Overview of HE in Romania.....	45
2.3.1. Post-1989 Higher Education Development and Reforms.....	48
2.4. Institutional Governance and Academic Structure.....	52
2.4.1. University Institutional Structure.....	52
2.4.2. University Institutional Management.....	53
2.4.3. Institutional Responsibility and Accountability.....	57
2.5. Academic Staff and Research.....	57
2.5.1. Employment of Academic Staff.....	58
2.5.2. Teaching Load.....	61
2.5.3. Academic Mission and Work.....	63
2.5.4. Promotion and Career Development.....	63
2.5.5. Evaluating Faculty Performance.....	64
2.6. Students and Graduates.....	65
2.6.1. Curriculum Development.....	68
2.6.2. Learning Assessment and Learning Outcomes.....	69
2.6.3. Graduates and the Labour Market.....	70
CHAPTER III. CORE ISSUES: BENCHMARKING, QUALITY ASSURANCE AND QUALITY CULTURE.....	73
3.1. The New Vision: SDG 4 and the Quality of Education.....	73

3.2. Conceptualizing Benchmarking and Quality Movement.....	75
3.2.1. Success Factors for Successful Benchmarking.....	78
3.2.2. Universities and Effective Benchmarking Exercises.....	83
3.3. Quality Assurance and the Search for a Quality Culture.....	90
3.4. The Performance Framework of Quality Assurance (QA).....	99
3.5. The Triangulation of QA, Quality Management (QM) and Total Quality Management (TQM).....	104
CHAPTER IV. QUALITY ASSESSMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS: A THEORETICAL MODEL (QEIM).....	112
4.1. The Anatomy of Quality Assessment.....	112
4.1.1. A Critical Assessment of QA Systems of HE in the World.....	122
4.1.2. Dissecting QA; A Critical Review.....	132
4.2. The Filter of Our Discontent: Shortcomings of Previous QAs.....	136
4.2.1. Engagement of DOs and DON'Ts.....	136
4.3. Effective Mechanisms to be put in Place: Towards a Model.....	138
4.3.1. QA and Graduate Employability.....	145
4.3.2. QA and University Ranking.....	147
4.3.2.1. International Ranking Patterns.....	150
4.3.2.2. Total Quality of the University Product.....	166
4.3.3. QA Systemic Approach.....	169
4.3.4. Individuation.....	171
4.3.5. Merging Internal QA (IQA) and External QA (EQA).....	173
4.4. IQA Procedures.....	175
4.4.1. Positioning IQA.....	176
4.4.1.1 Effects of IQA Tools on Teaching and Learning.....	178
4.4.1.2 Effects of IQA Tools on Graduate Employability.....	179
4.4.1.3 Effects of IQA Tools on Management.....	180
4.5. An Overview of the Quality Enhancement Integrated Model (QEIM).....	181
CHAPTER V. GUIDELINES FOR APPLICATION AND IMPLEMENTATION OF THE QUALITY ENHANCEMENT INTEGRATED MODEL (QEIM) AT ROMANIAN UNIVERSITIES.....	183
5.1. On the Effective Application of the QEIM.....	183
5.2. Guidelines for Effective Implementation of the QEIM.....	187
5.3. Quality Assessment/Enhancement in Romanian Universities	190
5.3.1 General Background and Legislation.....	190
5.3.2. Current challenges.....	194
5.4. University Rankings and the QEIM.....	196
CONCLUSIONS.....	205
WORKS CITED.....	213
SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	235

SUMMARY



Debating the role of a university in society has been, over the last decades, the topic of numerous studies, peer-reviewed articles and books, all calling for new and wider reflections on the critical role that higher education (HE) must play in modern society today. In various forms but echoing one voice, these reflections have acknowledged the major role of higher education institutions (HEIs) as knowledge generators and repositories, with an obligation to equip each generation with skills for viable employment and to provide rational, enlightened and opportune criticism and appraisal in major sectors of social, public and economic life. Additionally, higher learning institutions serve as leading bodies in civil society and the state in forming both cohesive and tolerant communities. Even if the value of a university degree might depend on to whom the question addressed, the ideal role of the university must be understood beyond institutional reforms, teaching tools, teaching approaches, modernization, economics and diversity.

In the context of sustainable development, forging an education system that is apt to address the demands of a multidisciplinary and holistic approach that contributes to producing skilled, socially, environmentally and economically responsible individuals represents a social contract that joins universities to society. This approach nonetheless needs constant redefining in a context of ever-growing global competition. Providing a quality education is therefore the basis for creating sustainable development. As a multi-dimensional process, quality is represented both institutionally in terms of the university's image, and its internal dynamics as well as external support, and individually, in its client stakeholders (students, employers, community) to whom it must deliver according to established high standards. Fundamentally, quality assurance (QA) is about ensuring that standards are at all times clearly specified as well as consistently met. As the world develops and economic realities change, ever more is required from HEIs, as centres of knowledge transfer, innovation and community development.

Problem Statement and Research Questions

The current thesis is premised on the posit that ensuring the quality of HE is predicated on the establishment of a QA system, the purpose of which must be, in our vision, characterized by accountability and quality enhancement /improvement.

Our study takes stock of a wide range of different interpretations that quality in HE is subject to, depending not only on how stakeholders address their specific vision and interests, but also on other factors, including the consideration that:

- HE represents a multi-layered, extremely complex environment forged by the interconnectedness of teachers and students alike. Its functionality rests on the intersection of inputs, throughputs, and output variables that are difficult to grasp. Unlike in manufacturing, it is often a parallax as to whether the graduate is the product offered to the society and labour market or whether the student is the client and/or the program of the product.
- Quality rarely depends on one variable but usually a mix of indicators that are used for achieving the objectives for the input, process, and output stages. As such, it is expressed in numbers, cost, time, rates, ratios, measured competencies or favourable external opinion.
- Quality is more than just meeting a fixed numerical standard at a given moment in time, especially if the focus is on input rather than verified output.
- Quality differs from efficiency. Since it is possible to do wrong things efficiently, quality is more about achieving the required level of quality at an acceptable cost.
- Quality is not absolute; its meaning depends on context, stated objectives, and intended results.
- Quality is a shifting target that requires the continuous pursuit for QA purposes: quality enhancement / improvement and accountability.

As massification in HE increases and students become more heterogeneous, the demands and pressures on both HEIs and course provision grow proportionally more diverse.

The central objective of the thesis is to bring new contributions regarding the differing QA mechanisms, the search for a quality culture and the quality enhancement processes applicable in the Romanian HE sector. This will have a high positive impact also in the enhancement of a dynamic role and place of the university in Romanian society by reviewing the quality assessment theories and practices in Romanian HEIs and by proposing a

quality enhancement integrated model (QEIM) apt to maximize the quality enhancement landscape of Romanian HE.

Overview of the Thesis

The thesis is organized into five Chapters, followed by a Conclusions section.

CHAPTER ONE is an introductory section of the thesis, with preliminary remarks on the quality of learning and teaching as well as QA issues in the HE sector. It includes both the problem statement and the research objectives of this study and outlines the contribution of the proposed model to enhancing the evaluative culture of a Romanian university.

The SECOND CHAPTER, in one of its main directions, rests on a review of the dynamic role of the university in the KBS, a review that is made by examining the centrality of the university as a traditional site of learning, scholarship and teaching that is committed to nurturing creative, ethical and informed citizens dedicated to the common good. We show HE to be both a public good and a cardinal priority for nations to achieve advanced knowledge. We also reflect seriously on both the traditional and modern role of a HEI by looking at it from a student-centred and a resource-based perspective. The argument regarding the public good/private commodity dichotomy is examined not as a binary opposition, but as a distinction between “shades of privateness” and “shades of publicness” with the understanding that HEIs combine both characteristics, albeit in different forms and to different extents. The presentation of the structure and characteristics of the Romanian HE system comes in this section as a natural and logical focus narrowing towards the medium and scope of our research. Such an examination takes stock of all reforms undertaken for the modernization of the Romanian system of higher learning, boasting a rich tradition stretching back over 350 years. Several core areas at the heart of the academic staff, student and system development allow for a comprehensive overview of both the current situation of administration and governance of Romanian HEIs and the relationships between stakeholders and the existing variety of educational goals. The Romanian university is described as one providing an increasing integral and robust foundation for the individual to form the basis of the collective and individual productivity in the Romanian society as a whole.

CHAPTER THREE, entitled *Core Issues: Benchmarking, Quality Assurance And Quality Culture*, aims to bring to the fore several success factors for effective benchmarking exercises and conceptualizes Quality Assurance in what regards its twofold performativity framework (Internal and external QA (IQA and EQA)) and its triangulation with Quality

Management (QM) and Total Quality Management (TQM). Our main set of arguments is introduced and developed by first looking at the core issues and mechanisms of QA, quality culture and benchmarking. This more complex level of examination called for a more in-depth approach. Against the backdrop of the UN-supported Education 2030 Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, benchmarking is examined as a key instrument for performance improvement. We also review the success factors for benchmarking practices in universities and pointed out the advantages incurred by each benchmarking type and methodology. Benchmarking exercises are also shown to successfully contribute to enhancing HE system performance for all countries that are sharing the same concerns regarding their systemic performance and are interested in assessing their systemic strengths and weaknesses as well. The conceptualization of benchmarking has pushed us into the more pressing necessity of defining the *culture of consultation* that remains in our view, the main component of a quality culture in the public as well as private sectors. We show that any attempt at developing institutional quality cultures pursuing ideals of improvement must take into consideration the existing cultures that are already serviceable and in place, which is why the concept of quality culture cannot have the same make up and dynamic for every organization/institution, it rather provides a shared starting point for each. From such a perspective, it becomes easier to understand that quality culture is more a matter of embedded context than a range of set processes and methods hence the concept can be both an analytical tool and a method for reviewing institutional principles, strategies and practices with a view to establishing the basis for future enhancement. This approach facilitates a better clarification of QA in what regards its twofold performance framework (IQA and EQA) and its triangulation with QM and TQM.

CHAPTER FOUR entitled *Quality Assessment of Higher Education Institutions: A Theoretical Model (QEIM)* reviews our most consistent arguments regarding QA and quality enhancement in a Romanian HEI and provides the necessary background for the emergence of our model. It begins with an overview of several QA systems of HE in the world pointing to potential vulnerabilities, thereby exposing more areas to be explored and more effective mechanisms to be put in place. The proposed model (QEIM) emerges relative to graduate employability, to a more systemic approach to QA, to ranking, individuation, IQA procedures and their effects on management and teaching and learning. Its preliminary section details the quality concept and takes stock of its wide array of meanings, interpretations and usages. Then, starting from some of the main global factors that have determined a more substantive regard for the quality of education such as the increasing social demand, structure and

expansion of HE systems; the shift to market and consumer-driven HE; diversification of HE providers; and increased competition arising from globalization and internalization of HE, we provide a more robust approach shaped around accreditation and an examination of several current QA systems that have different yet converging institution-driven and agency-driven mechanisms for QA. Next, this approach has enabled us to pursue a threefold perspective on quality assessment development: a) the institutionalization process and degree of quality assessment; b) the tension faults and c) the conflicts emerging from varying goals, practices and stakeholder interests. Since the main focus of this Chapter rests on our proposed QEIM, the mechanisms for internal QA within universities must be considered outside a more systemic inter-related perspective, which is why we have opted for a part-of-the-whole descriptive type of presentation that serves at once as a rationale and an explanatory background for our model. It is within this matrix that QEIM emerges as a necessity and a working solution relative to graduate employability, to a more systemic approach to QA, ranking, individuation, IQA procedures as well as in what regards its effects on teaching and learning, management processes and practices. We show that the main difficulty concerning QA implementation in a university lies with working with big data and information and using it effectively for analyzing and generating knowledge. Ideally, for achieving a successful QA system implementation, we underscore the necessity for information systems to be strategic and hence to integrate strategic management, process management as well as monitoring-measuring systems. This further leads to the description of a model that, in fact, operates on the basis of the interaction between the external factors and the university's quality assurance system.

In CHAPTER FIVE we come full circle in our approach by further suggesting a methodological framework for the effectiveness of our model application and implementation. Based on all principles and guidelines described, we show QEIM to operate similarly to a core business development plan that can be adjusted according to the university's own vision, values and mission, yet be operationalized within the guiding principles of QA in Romania. HEIs can therefore come up with their own strategies, objectives, and timelines on how to implement the QEIM and transform it into an organic strategy, which is both flexible adaptable to new realities and emerging international trends. We stress the fact that the SIS of QEIM is predicated on institutional autonomy to effectively implement a model that can realistically relieve both management and governance structures and bodies of a certain bureaucratic pressure that has to date characterized the Romanian HE sector and its major quality reforms. Two consistent subsections of Chapter FIVE clarify the

advantages of the model; on the one hand, within the current challenges in Romanian institutional quality enhancement and assessment and on the other, within rankings that are positioned amongst the top-layer external factors of our model and help to differentiate QA responsibilities, its actors' role and their involvement levels.

The current thesis presents a model that harmonizes the strategic information system, the managerial and internal processes of a university through a continuous flux of communication. This flow of information allows the QEIM to monitor the degree to which graduate learning results are achieved and how internal QA systems can measure the relevance of programs in alignment with national development trajectories. It also allows for the QEIM to monitor and determine the relevance of research and services to the society including the value for money of study programs for both learners and society. Our model contributes to building the capacity of university staff (faculty and administration alike) to handle the ever-changing environment of HE and, through its simplified and effective structure, allows for the adoption of emerging (and necessary) modifications into its built-in systems. In our view, the QEIM ensures the effective and efficient governance and management of a university, its accountability as well as the impact of QA on financial performance, on teaching and learning methodologies, on student assessment and enrolment patterns.

The immediate benefits arising from implementing the model include:

- Stream-lining the management and internal processes through administrative systems;
- Improving information flows and data centre operations;
- Outsourcing tasks; and,
- Re-designing both development and support mechanisms;

We hold that the most important advantage of the QEIM is its potential to enhance the evaluative culture of a Romanian university and stimulate decision-making actors towards more evidence and result-based processes.

Original Contributions

The higher education landscape is changing fast and concepts and models for QA must and will too. The current work will enrich the current body of knowledge and add a new innovative framework to the continuing dialogue of quality enhancement models available to higher education institutions around the world in their common pursuits of providing a quality

higher education for their ever-changing body of learners and communities. The original contributions of this thesis are:

Theoretical and conceptual

- approaching the University as a place of higher learning within the Knowledge Society;
- synthetic critical analysis of the university and the public good/private commodity dichotomy;
- systemic monographic approach of the HEIs in Romania, informed by the first Monograph of HE that I co-authored in 2011;
- conceptualization of the performance framework of QA;
- clear definitions of the concept of benchmarking and the triangulation of benchmarking, QA and quality culture;
- critical analysis of quality assessment and QA;
- multi-level approach on QA systems of HE in the world;
- multi-level approach on quality and its sustainability;
- critical assessment of shortcomings of external quality assessment and their impacts on resource reallocation and teaching and learning;
- critical analysis of the limitations of university rankings;
- approach and critical analysis of several national alternative solutions (national ranking and regional rating systems) developed in response to international rankings;
- critical examination of the Total Quality of the University Product;
- a critical analysis of current challenges in QA in Romanian HEIs;
- identification of the necessity and usefulness of developing QA effective mechanisms by the university that include IQA of HEIs, EQA of HE and QA of external QA agencies;
- systemic approach of quality assurance;
- identification of several ranking instruments as core elements in building institutional QA;
- identification of current challenges of institutional quality enhancement and assessment in Romania;
- identification of the necessity of developing a model that maximizes the effectiveness and efficiency of governance and management of a Romanian university;

Methodological and instrumental

- elaboration of the quality enhancement integrated model (QEIM) as a dynamic tool that binds strategic information systems, the management process as well as the internal processes (and structures) of a Romanian higher education institution;
- elaboration of the QEIM Guidelines set that ensures effective application of the model;
- elaboration of Guidelines for effective implementation of QEIM;
- inclusion of rankings as a core element in the model, as vector in building institutional QA;
- retention of two QA core aspects in the proposed model: *constant improvement* and *management commitment* in which QA operates as a top-down process;
- design of QEIM micro-management indicators for university structures;
- design of an architecture of adjustable parameters that takes stock in our model of a university's own development patterns and pace that makes it applicable to any Romanian-wide private or public HEI.

The QEIM ensures a progression from QA to QE through its mechanisms that demonstrate how quality in a Romanian university is continuously improved and not just simply maintained. It relies on measuring internal processes against several external quality standards and factors and enables Romanian university managers to establish their own best practice, to prioritize their own opportunities for enhancement as well as to streamline their own performance relative to their unique stakeholder expectations. The novel elements outlined by the current doctoral thesis as well as their added value and new opportunities will benefit both educational practitioners and theoreticians for long-term institutional quality-led performance models.

Regarding the dissemination of the research results during the doctoral training program, 13 scientific papers and 55 keynote speeches in international conferences, world forums and global summits have substantiated the research and contributed to raising awareness of the importance of QA in the HE sector.

Future research directions

The research directions that this thesis will open are multi-dimensional and wide in scope. They are policy-oriented and concern different layers, covering the following key perspectives.

Policy oriented directions

In the common pursuits of universities, QA agencies and stakeholders to provide a quality HE for their ever-changing body of learners and communities, more policies and quality enhancement standards and models will be embraced as a collective effort for the collective public good of HE. The thesis enriches the current body of knowledge and contributes to the ongoing and future dialogue of quality enhancement models available to HEIs around the world that are based on solid internal institutional QA. As internal institutional QA will continue to be the driving force for any national QA system, validated rather than controlled by central agencies or bodies, we anticipate that more refined QA policies and frameworks will take account of the diversity of individual QA models based on core internationally recognized mechanisms.

Institutional-oriented directions

It is within each institution's responsibility to design their own unique model for enhancing the quality of education that should marry with individual missions, values and objectives. Every Romanian university can adjust and develop, on the basis of our model, their own particularized methodology for measuring the QA indicators embedding not only new theoretical-conceptual but also additional methodological criteria that help maximize the sustainability of QA mechanisms and processes in Romanian HE. Institutional leaders together with their internal and external stakeholders will refine and develop their QA systems and approaches to meet their stated goals and strategies.

Practical implications

The necessity for a revised and updated monograph on Romanian HE emerges from the pages and the critical analyses undertaken by the present thesis. Romanian policy makers and

stakeholders in education are in need of a rigorous account of the major bodies of the HE system, fast-changing legislation and the challenges that the Romanian HE system is facing on its path to modernization and consolidation of its QA mechanisms and structures.

In conclusion, the thesis reaffirms the necessity for a collective effort for the collective public good of HE that must engage all stakeholders – students, academic faculty, administrative staff, institutional leaders, employers and policy makers. The QEIM model - presented as a new holistic approach – must be fully empowered by external validation bodies that are essential in ensuring that the process is bottom up and that the integrated approach is at once organic, secures academic freedom and institutional autonomy, and operates within an ethos of accountability to ultimately rejuvenate and pollinate the Romanian HE system.

