

THE NECESSITY TO IMPROVE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION SERVICES. CASE OF ROMANIA

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Abstract: This paper is about the necessity to establish a quality management system in universities capable to improve the performance of these ones and to achieve the excellence in their current activities. The research objectives were to analyse the main trends of higher education services in Romania and to propose future strategies in line with the current orientations at the European level. The results of our research stress the necessity to improve the quality inside the higher education institutions as the education market become smaller year by year mainly due to the demographic changes. In this respect the EFQM Excellence Model could be used in the development of the Quality Management System.

Keywords: higher education, quality management, labour market, excellence, EFQM model

Introduction

The importance of the higher education services is recognised in all national and international strategies for a sustainable development of the society. Following their dual mission, of education and development through research and innovation, the universities could enhance the economic and social development. The graduates with a high level of competence in their professional fields can also contribute to the improvement of quality management systems of the organisations they are going to work for.

In Romania, the higher education field has had in the last twenty years a strong attractiveness for the entrepreneurs so that a lot of universities have been established offering a diversified range of educational services. Thus the competition has increased, every institution being interested to get as many students as possible. The interest of the foreign universities in Romanian market has also intensified the competition. In this context, the improvement of quality of the service providing process becomes crucial for the future thriving.

Starting from the above mentioned issues, the objectives of our research are to analyse the main trends of higher education services in Romania and to find possible strategies that could be practiced by the higher education institutions in order to succeed on the market. Based on the previous information, the hypotheses of the research are: the market of higher education services in Romania is in decline due to a decreasing of the number of potential students; the unemployment rate among graduates is quite high and an improvement of education services is needed.

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Literature review

Educational quality is one of the most important goals of every higher education institution, which should be focused on the creation of a quality culture assumed by the entire academic community [4]. Quality assurance as the exponent of the quality culture is considered in a direct relationship with the quality evaluation, which is regarded as one of the key factors which can lead to the creation of the European Higher Education Area [2].

At the EU level, the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) has been established having as mission to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education [16]. The EQAR does not intend to centralise the decision regarding the quality assurance system, one of its main purposes being to recognise the central responsibility of higher education institutions for quality development. The role of external evaluation institutions in this process is focused only on an objective, transparent and responsible evaluation of the actual processes performed inside the institutions in accordance with some common standards agreed at the national and European levels [9].

These objectives are in line with the EU's strategies, like "EUROPE 2020- A strategy for smart, sustainable and inclusive growth". This one aims to help member states to overcome the effect of economic crisis and to improve the level of employment, social cohesion and productivity. According to this vision, there are three mutually reinforcing priorities: developing an economy based on knowledge and innovation (Smart growth); promoting a more resource efficient, greener and more competitive economy (Sustainable growth); fostering a high-employment economy delivering social and territorial cohesion (Inclusive growth) [8]. The main objectives of this strategy, which need to be fulfilled till 2020, as they have been proposed by the European Commission, are [8]:

- 75 % of the population aged 20-64 should be employed.
- 3% of the EU's GDP should be invested in R&D.
- The "20/20/20" climate/energy targets should be met (including an increase to 30% of emissions reduction if the conditions are right).
- The share of early school leavers should be under 10% and at least 40% of the younger generation should have a tertiary degree.
- 20 million less people should be at risk of poverty.

Putting in practice these strategic goals needs a high involvement of higher education institutions at the national level, which have to develop the graduates' employability skills taking into account the expectations both from employees and employers. The students have to benefit from modern and innovative teaching methods, but also from tools meant to develop their employability [3]. Such initiatives could help companies to solve their decisional problems such as the selection of personnel and can contribute in ensuring the perennial of organizations

in an effective and efficient manner, as far as the selection of the right person for the right place becomes a much more sophisticated process [5]. All these strategic goals for both employers and graduates (as job applicants) could be achieved through a high commitment of higher education institutions to quality improvement. In this respect, an important role is also played by the programs co-financed from The European Social Fund, which offers many opportunities for quality development and students' involvement in gaining practical competences [6]. Such kind of projects should be customer oriented, having as final results a higher level of customer satisfaction [1].

Issues regarding the higher education in Romania

The education system in Romania is regulated by the Ministry of Education, the latest law being published in the Romania's Official Gazette, January 10, 2011. Higher education in Romania is organised according to Bologna Process and it is also aligned onto the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The Law of National Education in Romania aims at promoting an education based on values, creativity, cognitive and action-based capacities, fundamental knowledge and skills, knowledge and abilities of direct usage, in the profession and the society. It also aims at forming by means of education the mental infrastructure of the Romanian society, in accordance with the new requirements imposed by Romania's EU membership and by the existence within the context of the globalization. It is aimed at obtaining a sustainable generation of highly-competitive national human resource, capable of functioning efficiently in the present and future society. In the context of this law, the mission of the higher education is to generate and transfer knowledge to the society by basic and continuous training at academic level, and by scientific research, innovation and technologic transfer [13].

According to a report of the Council of the European Union published in 2013, the agenda of the Romanian education law is not yet fully operational. For a successful implementation of the education reform the necessary financial and human resources will have to be devoted to building up administrative capacity and policy making. Romania faces a major challenge in raising the quality of its education and training system. Mismatches between skills and labour market demand are characteristic of a large proportion of vocational and tertiary education programmes. The high unemployment rate among tertiary graduates and the rate of over-qualification make a further alignment of tertiary education with the labour market a high priority [11].

The issues regarding the insertion of the young people and the graduates of various education levels on the labour market benefit of a high attention from the EU officials. The level of unemployment among these categories of people is very high in many member countries, especially those affected significantly by the economic crisis. Some figures about the unemployment levels in EU countries are presented in Figure 1.

According to the figures delivered by EUROSTAT, only three EU members had the unemployment rate among young people (aged between 15-24 years) lower than 10% in 2011. These countries are Germany, Austria and Netherlands. A large part of EU members (12 countries) recorded in 2011 youth unemployment rates between 20% and 30%. There are also countries with higher youth unemployment rates, such as Slovakia, Lithuania and Portugal (between 30% and 40%) as far as the highest values were recorded in Greece (44.4%) and Spain (46.4%). Romania is counted among the countries that recorded levels of youth unemployment between 20% and 30%, which reflects the need of a significant improvement in the quality of education at all levels in order to increase the employability of young people.

Youth unemployment rate
(15-24 years) in 2011

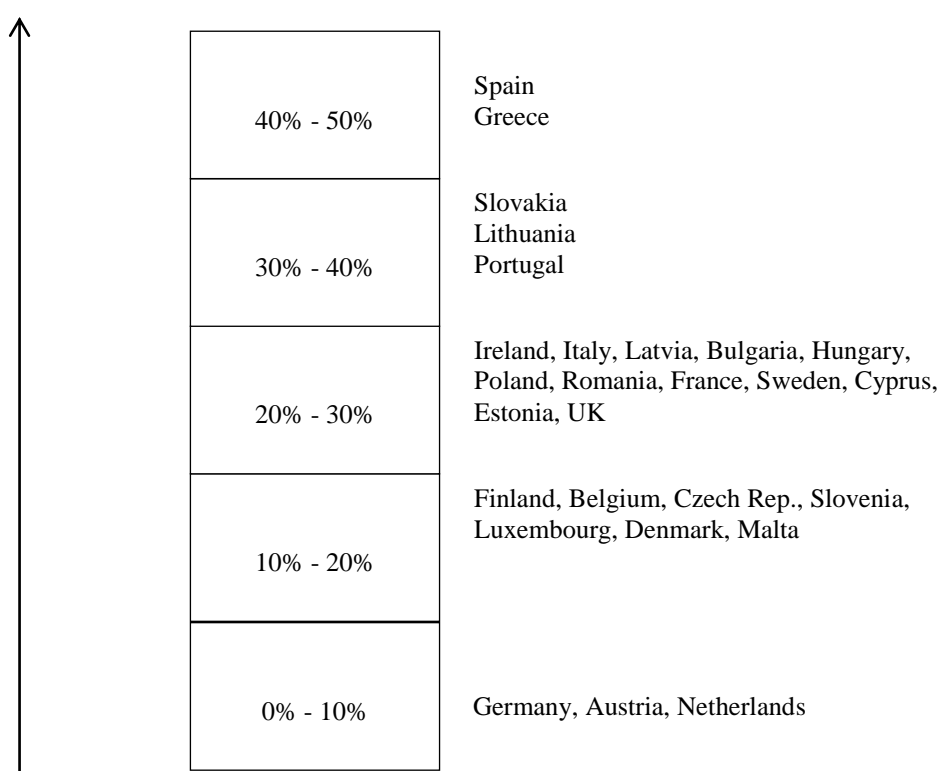


Figure 1. The youth unemployment rate recorded in 2011 in EU countries

*Source: Author's elaboration based on EUROSTAT data published at
<http://www.eurofound.europa.eu/pubdocs/2012/54/en/1/EF1254EN.pdf>*

Regarding the evolution of the Romanian higher education services, we can notice the decline that appeared starting with the academic year 2008-2009, which is

overlapped on the economic decline evolution (see Figure 2). The number of students in the academic year 2010-2011 was with 25% lower than in 2007-2008.

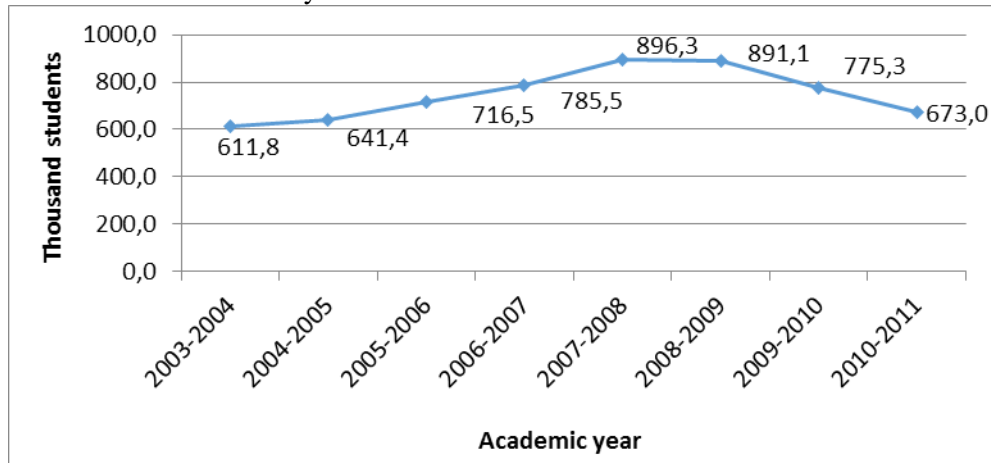


Figure 2. The evolution of the students' number in Romania between 2003-2010

Source: Author's elaboration based on The Institute of Education Sciences – Romania, Annual report concerning the status of higher education in Romania, 2011

This decreasing trend should be taken into consideration by the universities in their efforts to improve the teaching activity. On another hand, the demographic evolution in the last period does not encourage the future of those universities that are not fully involved in the quality management of the entire academic activity: teaching, research and administration.

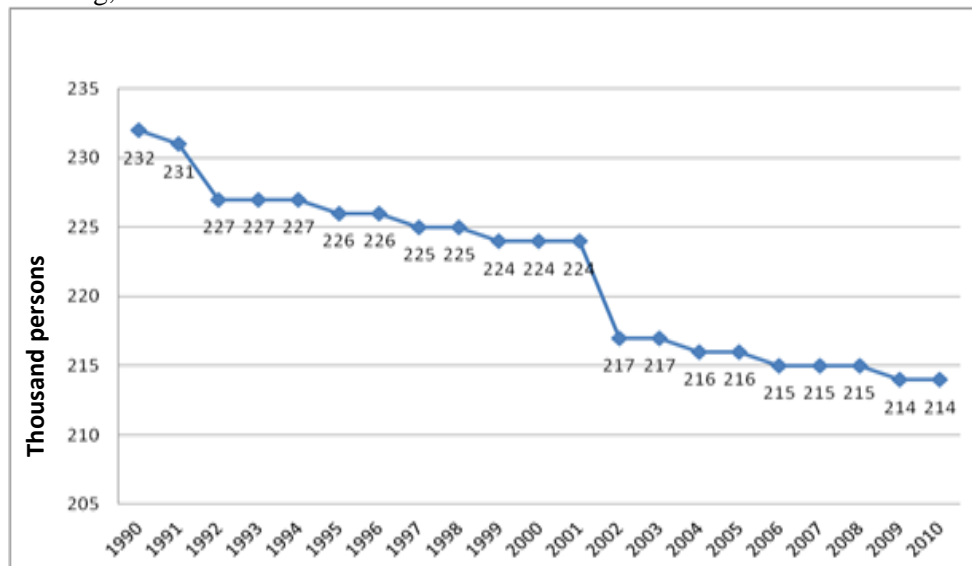


Figure 3. The evolution of the birth rate in Romania between 1990-2010

Source: Author's elaboration based on National Institute of Statistics-Romania, Statistical yearbook 2011

In Figure 3 it is presented the evolution of the birth rate in Romania between 1990 and 2010. We can notice a decrease in the birth rate which makes the target segment of the universities lower year by year. On another hand, the difference between the number of students in the analysed period and the number of young people that were expected to follow bachelor programs is quite high. Thus, we can appreciate that about two-thirds of the students comes from other age levels (older than 20 years), a high part of them being people that are in the process of completing their studies. But this segment is decreasing as the most people with middle age have been completed their university degrees. This is another threat faced by the higher education institutions in Romania.

EFQM excellence model

The EFQM Excellence Model was developed in the early nineties by the European Foundation for Quality Management, which was founded by a large number of European companies in order to help the organisations to become more competitive. The EFQM Excellence Model have been designed as a holistic framework than can be applied to any organisation, regardless of size or sector. It is periodically revised and improved having as main objective “to increase the competitiveness of European organisations and support the sustainable development of the European economies” [14].

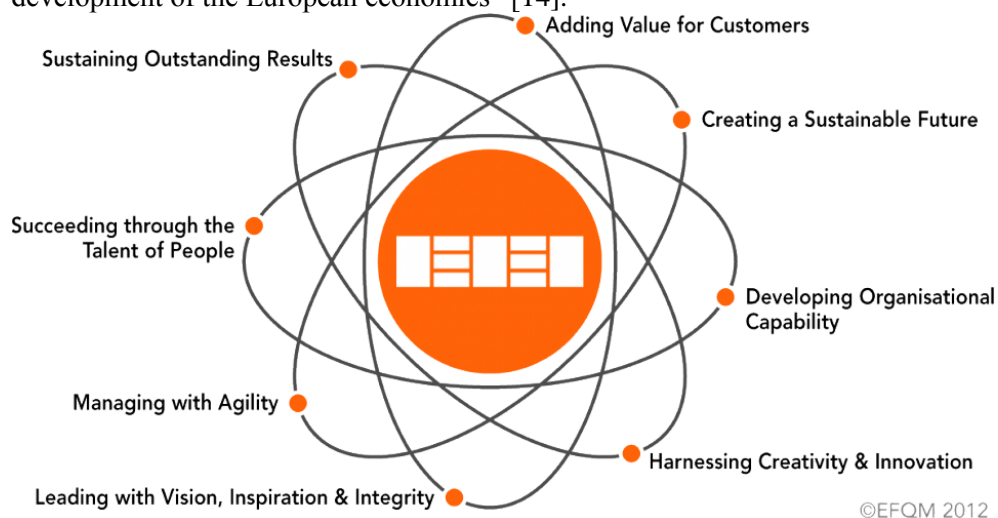


Figure 4. The EFQM Excellence Model for 2013

Source: <http://www.efqm.org/efqm-model/fundamental-concepts>

The EFQM Excellence Model is presented in Figure 4. According to this model the excellence is defined as the capacity of an organisation “to achieve and sustain outstanding levels of performance that meet or exceed the expectations of all their stakeholders”. Thus, the organisation should add value for the customers and the community in order to create a sustainable future; it enhances its capability by

managing organisational changing and continuous improvement based on creativity and innovation; the management of the organisation is oriented to the future and leads with vision, inspiration and integrity; the organisation is managed with agility in order to respond effectively and efficiently to opportunities and threats, its success being based on the talent of the people employed. Putting in practice all the above concepts the organisation will achieve outstanding results that meet both the short and long term needs of all their stakeholders [15].

In this model the role of higher education is crucial, as the universities' missions are oriented towards research, creativity and innovation, which become prerequisites of the quality management orientation. On one hand, the role of universities is to educate the students in the spirit of quality management and to create the competences that these ones need for their future activities inside various organisations. On the other hand a university have to create for itself a management system which complies with EFQM Excellence Model. Keeping in mind these two roles, a university could achieve the excellence.

Summary

Taking into account the results of the above analyses, we can conclude that the Romanian higher education institutions need to re-engineer their activities in order to obtain a sustainable growth based on a strong competitive advantage. The competitive advantage will help them to fulfil the requirements of the present and future students in accordance with the general needs of the society. Only those institutions that will succeed in understanding the needs and behaviours of all their stakeholders could survive on the market on long run.

In their future strategies the institutions have to focus on value, which should be delivered to the customer in order to persuade them to choose a certain service [7]. As the higher education market in Romania is narrowing, the value perceived by customers becomes crucial. Thus, there is a strong need for the improvement of the quality management systems inside the higher education institutions. Such systems have to start from the needs of customers and all other stakeholders with the aim to obtain excellence trough outstanding results. This aim is in line with the recommendation made by the Council of the EU and with the future strategies established for the European education.

The shortcomings identified at the level of Romanian education sector are common for the majority of the European countries as the official statistics indicate a high rate of the unemployment of youth people aged between 15-24 years old. In this context, the EFQM Excellence Model represents a strong tool that could be used by the universities in order to establish an outstanding quality management system based on a quality culture and the entire organisation commitment to achieve the quality objectives. But the quality culture should be established for the self-development of the institution using the principles of Total Quality Management (TQM) and it is not subordinated to the quality assessment process. Those institutions that manage their processes only for the purpose to obtain a

certification from a certification agency will fail to obtain performance and to fulfil the customers' needs.

Taking into account the results of our research we can appreciate that the objectives have been met and the hypotheses have been confirmed.

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KONIECZNOŚĆ PODNIESIENIA JAKOŚCI W WYŻSZEJ EDUKACJI. PRZYPADEK RUMUNII

Streszczenie: Artykuł ten porusza zagadnienie konieczności ustanowienia systemu zarządzania jakością w uczelni, który może poprawić jej wydajność i pomóc w osiągnięciu doskonałości w jej bieżącej działalności. Celem badań była analiza głównych trendów usług szkolnictwa wyższego w Rumunii, i zaproponowanie strategii na przyszłość, zgodnie z aktualnymi kierunkami na poziomie europejskim. Wyniki naszego badania podkreślają konieczność poprawy jakości wewnątrz instytucji szkolnictwa wyższego, jako że rynek edukacji staje się mniejszy z roku na rok, głównie ze względu na zmiany demograficzne. W tym zakresie można wykorzystać model doskonałości EFQM w celu rozwoju Systemu Zarządzania Jakością.

Słowa kluczowe: wyższa edukacja, zarządzanie jakością, rynek pracy, doskonałość, model EFQM

必須改善高等教育質量服務。案例羅馬尼亞

摘要：本文是關於有必要建立質量管理體系，能夠提高這些的性能，並實現了卓越的其當前活動的大學。該研究目的是分析在羅馬尼亞高等教育服務的主要趨勢，並在歐洲層面提出未來策略與當前方位線。我們的研究結果強調有必要提高高等教育機構內部的質量逐年較小的教育市場成為主要由於人口結構的變化。在這方面，EFQM 卓越模型可以在質量管理體系的開發中使用。

關鍵詞：高等教育，質量管理，勞動力市場，精益求精，EFQM 模型。