

POLICIES ON EDUCATION QUALITY WITHIN THE EUROPEAN UNION

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Abstract: *The world has realized that the economic success of the states are directly determined by the quality of their education systems and that the most effective factor of production is human capital expressed in knowledge, skills, creative abilities and moral qualities of individuals in society.*

The specialists consider that in the economy of the 21st century the education system became a priority branch of production, being regarded as an occupational field, as a profitable investment sphere. This conception concerning the mission of education will dominate the educational policy of most countries in the world in the next period.

Improving the quality of the education and training systems is one of the core components of the cooperation between Member States by creating academic networks, study visits and partnerships. The communication from the Commission of the European Communities¹ emphasizes the role of universities and research programs in the Europe of knowledge.

The cooperation regarding the policies in the education and training field began with the adoption of the White Paper on education and training "Teaching and learning - Towards a Learning Society", by which the European Union defines itself as moving toward a learning society based on acquiring new knowledge and lifelong learning.

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¹ Communication From The Commission of the European Communities, Brussels, 05.02.2003, COM (2003).

Nowadays we are witnessing a growing interaction at the economic, social, political and cultural level between nations and people, that does not take into account the geographical boundaries. It became popular the concept of "global village" that comes to emphasize the interdependencies of all inhabitants of the Earth (Tiron, 2001).

The process of globalization is underway. This process was accelerated by the events and the developments that took place recently and which have substantially altered the structure of the world as a whole, namely, the technological revolution and the dramatic political changes related to the end of the Cold War.

The technological revolution contributes in a greatest extent to transform the Earth into a global village. If before the images and messages would take days and weeks to traverse the oceans, today it occurs in fractions of a second. One of the impacts of the technological revolution has been to emphasize the priority of intelligence, education and training, in other words, human capital formation.

The evolution of science and technology occur at an accelerated pace. New information and communication technologies have an increasing influence on education, on the organization of educational institutions, the teacher's role and its relations with students, the development of student autonomy.

One of the dimensions of globalization is the globalization of culture, including education. The rapid spread of new forms of cultural expression, the education performed worldwide through "virtual" universities are features of globalization. There is a strong cooperation of universities in international scientific networks that do not take into account the borders.

In today's Europe there is a risk of weakening the social cohesion of several causes, among the most important are the unemployment of a considerable part of the population and especially young people, public distrust in democratic institutions, nationalism, corruption, violent conflicts taking place in some parts of the continent and the growing gap between rich and poor.

Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen social cohesion at various levels, especially to ensure the equality of all citizens in terms of access to education, social dialogue between different groups and nations, the active participation of all citizens in social, economic, cultural life and decision-making processes.

In European countries the societies are very different due to the presence of different ethnic and cultural minorities, immigrant

communities and increasing mobility of people. This increasing diversity is not without risks, as life becomes more complex, social relations become more diverse, and the school is faced with the presence of foreign pupils and students, as well as an increase in manifestations of violence. All these have determined that currently the European educational policies and strategies are directed primarily towards education for democratic citizenship and social cohesion.

The education systems must cope with various challenges, developments and issues related both to their own field of education, and society as a whole. Under these conditions, the role of education as a crucial factor that contributes to social cohesion is increasing.

The education can contribute in various ways in democratic citizenship and social cohesion. An education for active and aware citizenship begins in school and continues throughout life by promoting the following core values:

- Inclusion, not exclusion;
- Tolerance, no propensity for conflict;
- Sense of responsibility, not passivity;
- Reason and objectivity, not subjectivity and irrationality.

However we must be aware that education is not a universal panacea, it can not

Solve alone all the problems of a society.

The European Union has a long tradition of cooperation with third countries based on a set of policies and instruments in which higher education is playing an increasing role. Cooperation agreements with partners around the world often include support for infrastructure and cooperation programs in higher education, as well as frameworks for policy dialogues in this field. Cooperation in higher education also features prominently in multilateral cooperation frameworks such as the Union for the Mediterranean, the Northern Dimension or the Eastern Partnership. (EU Official Journal, 26/05/2010).

Today, the education is not confined to youth. Lifelong learning is another fundamental requirement. Vocational training and lifelong learning are essential elements of the educational system. The educational process is increasingly trapped in a space-time point, as was once. The problem for many students is not the place of study. Today the major problem is "why and how to learn?" and the issue of talent development of each person. For this reason in the education sector the emphasis is more on the demand than the offer. (Bratianu, 2001).

The employment is the first factor of social integration. Today, however, the labor market is more dynamic and flexible. It appears increasingly that there is no guarantee of lifetime appointments. These mutations have the effect not only to cause the extinction of many trades, but also affects character and organization of the work. Labor market requires the acquisition of new skills at both individual and enterprise scale, which leads to the need of continuous updating of skills.

There have been introduced or are being developed new teaching methods, based on education autonomy and development of schools and universities as "managers" of knowledge and information.

Today the school and university are not the final destination on the educational path. They are on the path of integration into a system of continuous education and training.

In general, it believes that the education must stop the social disintegration. But all countries are currently faced with the problem of early school failure and abandon of studies. According to some surveys on an international scale, the percentage of dropout in some educational systems is quite high. Or, the non-attendance of educational institutions and dropout is often the first form of rupture with the social structures and these events may lead to social exclusion (I. Antonesei, 2000).

It believes that this diversification can be achieved by (G.M. Atanasiu, 2000):

- an education less academic and more innovative, based on new teaching methods that promote the learner autonomy through the use of new information and communication technologies;
- a school for the community that knows how to combine the educational, cultural, sporting and social tasks in close collaboration with external partners. This type of settlement or rather an "educational center" could remain open at night and during week-ends and would propose all kinds of activities to parents and community members. Social workers who have to deal with young people, officials and a professional staff, paid by local authorities, could provide special services which would allow to keep the school's educational mission;
- "schools for the second chance" to offer an education to young people and adults who have left school without sufficient qualifications.
- differentiated educational pathways, such as vocational training through partnerships with companies because combining work in the enterprise with theoretical training could attract young school leavers.

Therefore the main issue is to ensure that young people do not leave school without basic qualifications. A second problem is to provide sufficient possibilities to pursue higher studies to enhance job opportunities.

At this moment, the main issues are quality, equity and effectiveness in education. Improving the quality and evaluation process of the education system is the central issue in the educational sphere.

To function well, the whole education system must be based on a very high quality level. In any developed society, quality allows everyone to discover, enhance and use their own skills. Without quality, access to education has no meaning.

The decision No 1298/2008/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 16-th of December 2008 established the Erasmus Mundus 2009-2013 action programme for the enhancement of quality in higher education and the promotion of intercultural understanding through cooperation with third countries. The Tempus IV program (2007-2013) supports the modernization of higher education in the partner countries of Eastern Europe, Central Asia, the Western Balkans and the Mediterranean region, mainly through university cooperation projects and partnerships. Other programs, such as the cooperation programs with industrialized countries, or Edulink, Nyerere and Alfa, cover academic cooperation activities with other regions of the world. The Marie Curie actions under the Seventh Framework Program for Research and Technological Development promote excellence and mobility in European research and provide broad support for the development of dynamic world-class human resources in the European research system, taking into account the inherent international dimension of research. (EU Official Journal C 135, 26/05/2010).

Public authorities have the role of guarantor of the education system quality, they must ensure compliance with quality standards by each educational institution.

It is acknowledged by all that equity is a precondition for social cohesion, and the lack of equal opportunities to education would have as result the exclusion, which means undermining social cohesion. Every citizen has the right to benefit from high quality education. However, in education the equal opportunities remain a fundamental problem (E. Joita, 2000).

For integration in Europe, new skills are needed for both individuals and society as a whole. Some of these important skills are: (S. Tiron, 2001):

- Entrepreneurial spirit;

- spirit of cooperation;
- communication skills
- ability to solve problems
- capacity to organize their work autonomously
- ability to cooperate with colleagues of different cultural backgrounds
- The ability to use new information and communication technologies
- language skills.

The competencies listed above must be acquired within the general education and vocational training. The school and the university must also enable young people to gain entrepreneurial and participative skills.

Today it is recognized that the emphasis should be on skills rather than on formal degrees or certificates. In the future, it could arise a so-called "skills academies", authorized to release a "training passport" that contains the description of attended training and the acquired skills.

The increasing demand for highly qualified and diversified workforce is a real problem for the education sector. The trend of diversification of this sector has been accentuated by the opening of short training courses. However, as a result of this diversification process, governments are faced with new issues such as recognition of short study cycles, the definition of profiles, the character of diplomas and certificates, acquired skills assessment during professional experience, the relationships with entrepreneurs and the financing of the studies.

State higher education institutions must face the competition from private institutions present on the "market", offering other educational channels, but also must face the phenomenon of globalization ("virtual" universities), sustained by growing demand for training and by the prospects offered by new information and communication technologies (RB Clark, 2000).

The policy of an organization and especially the quality policy is intrinsically linked to the institutional culture of the organization, while strategy is linked to strategic management. This nuance is important for those organizations that are characterized by strong institutional cultures. (C., Bratianu, 2001).

There are various conceptual approaches for defining quality policy of a university, particularly in relation to its strategy. The management policy is considered by some authors a strategic result, thereby giving a more pragmatic statute and closer to the real life of the organization. It

appears as part of the strategy, that reflects the manager's view, depending on the specific conditions existing at a given time.

For other authors, the policy is a unit and the strategy is considered a component part. The strategy takes pragmatic attributes. The policy has a wider scope, showing how it intends to reach the quality organization, how it intends to achieve what they want in this area.

Whatever the theoretical approach to this problem, the difference between strategy and policy becomes clearer if we change the reference system. The strategy represent a explicit and well defined option that decedents of superior management had took it, based on criteria and comparative analysis which incorporate intelligence and creativity. The strategy is anchored in the future and defines the development direction of the organization. The valoric system used by the management decedents in a strategic analysis is created from two fundamental concepts: competition and performance (C. Brătianu, 2001).

In fact, competition represents an operational structure which requires a responsible and dynamic attitude from the universities. It is an existential matrix of inputs and outputs, with winners and less winners. It is a reality that can not be ignored, although there are still many universities which seek to return to the egalitarianism of the past, an Orwellian egalitarianism¹, where some people are more equal than others.²

The performance is the valoric result which distinguishes, promotes and validates the competition. The pperformance is generated by the strategic capitalization of the intelligence potential, creativity and densified work in a totally different value system from the one we were forced to live almost 50 years.

National and international competition requires a quality approach in higher education and performance can be achieved only there where the quality policy becomes a core element in the university life. A culture of mediocrity which has flourished in some of the Romanian universities must be replaced by a culture of excellence, which can distinguish the

¹ "**Orwellian**" describes the situation, idea, or societal condition that George Orwell identified as being destructive to the welfare of a free society. It connotes an attitude and a policy of control by propaganda, surveillance, misinformation, denial of truth, and manipulation of the past, including the "unperson" – a person whose past existence is expunged from the public record and memory, practiced by modern repressive governments

² George Orwell, *Animal farm*, 1945.

authentic values by non-values and to promote them in the new hierarchical systems based on performance metrics.

Quality policies are motivation and strength fields which can be generated by the superior segment of decidents from our country and by the academic management in each university. These policies are structured by institutional goals and by organizational culture objectives. In the first case, structures and procedures are followed and in the second case valoric systems, evaluation metrics and creation of new behavioral attitudes (C. Brătianu, 2001).

The ISO 9000 family of standards define the quality policy as the objectives and general orientation of an organization, in terms of quality, as they are formally expressed by top management. In the same context, quality management is defined as all general management activities, that determine quality policy, fundamental objectives and responsibilities of the organization and which are implemented in quality systems by specific means such as: quality planning, quality control, quality assurance and quality improvement.

Entropy policies. In case of the entropy policies, the higher education system is regarded as a well established system and is characterized by a set of parameters that are defined in each university and by the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports. These parameters can be evaluated based on criteria and correlations. By evaluating all the parameters it can be obtained the system status at a given time. Any value variation of this parameters leads to a change of the university system situation.

Each status of the system is characterized by a specific entropy which reflects the degree of system organization. The development and the implementation of a policy that changes the system entropy on the meaning of its restructuring or its structural optimization leads to a systemic statement, different from the original one. In other words, through an entropy policy it can be changed the status of the university system in order to match with the new requirements (C. Brătianu, 2000).

Quality assurance is an activity that may take place if the system has the necessary institutional mechanisms. If those mechanisms do not exist, these must be created. This means a modification of the institutional organization, so, a change in the university system at micro and macro level. The result of this transformation is constituted by a clear change of the entropy status of the system. Entropy policies are system policies and are reflecting the control of the state in the development of university

system, concurring with the educational policy. The control is achieved through accreditation and certification system.

In Romania, the accreditation is done in accordance with Law no. 87/2006 on quality assurance in education and the Law 1/2011, the National Education Act.

Quality education is a combination of characteristics of a study program and its provider through which stakeholders' expectations and quality standards are met. Ensuring quality of education expresses the ability to provide educational programs in accordance with the standard set. An organization which provides education is an educational institution. Government Ordinance (GO) no. 75 of 12 July 2005 and Law 87/2006 established the principles of the national policy for Quality Assurance in Education for the entire national system. Quality policy aims to provide a National Framework for Quality Assurance (CNAC) for organizations providing education in Romania, framework that meet European requirements and comply with best practices at European level. This Ordinance of Romanian Government confirms the results of the experimental implementing measures carried out with support by Phare multiannual programs of EU.

The certification is based on international standards of the ISO 9000 family or on country specific standards. ISO 9000 standards have been developed for commercial and industrial companies, but they can be adapted to the educational system, so, this system can be able to optimize, in an entropic way, the quality level of the educational process and to be able to obtain international certification, based on these standards. The principles underlying the use of these standards for certification are:

- quality is not an accidental result, it is the result of an intelligent process;
- quality should be each person's preoccupation;
- an activity should be well done from the beginning;
- quality is the result of continuous improvement activity of teaching process;
- quality can be achieved through a process of communication and cooperation.

In this context, quality assurance process has four basic steps:

- the elaboration of the documents based on standards and materialization in the form of procedures and documents to the entropy policies that are addressed;

- the implementation of procedures in each component of higher education institution;
- the organization and the achievement of the audit;
- the adoption of the educational process improving measures, in underdeveloped areas, based on recommendations made during the audit.

Incentive policies. Incentive policies are policies of field, in the sense that the Ministry of Education, Research, Youth and Sports did not forcibly introduce quality assurance in universities, referring to the ISO 9001 quality standards, it creates a motivational field for the development and implementation of quality management systems.

Incentive policies can be correlated with the effort of other the organizations that are interested in improving the quality of the university education process. These policies are specific for those educational systems where the university autonomy is totally, from managerial and financial point of view. Universities from U.S.A and UK are significant examples, from this point of view.

Quality assurance in American universities is part of the American concept of realizing the quality of products and industrial processes, in a world where human values are appreciated along with the material value in terms of performance. In U.S.A, the labor market, respectively the dynamic of its evolution represents the dominant forms of activities coordination in higher education. The competition represents the basic characteristic of activity in this area and, at the same time, is the motivation for quality assurance and improvement in all components of the educational process.

Field type policies are specific to American life because federal government has transferred educational responsibilities at States and states had transferred educational responsibilities to the universities that have a real and full academic autonomy. Quality assurance system in American universities is a control process through auto regulation provided by a number of agencies and offices of regional or national accreditation. The accreditation of institutions of higher education is a process of private type made by a number of specialized agencies in scientific domains, such as: Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business etc.

The accreditation in the USA is an optional process and is not imposed by the federal or state government. For a university, this process becomes necessary if is desired to be recognized by the academic community, and also receive funds and human performances. The

accreditation process of an institution in the USA is considered as a form of quality in the university environment and that is realized on the base of minimal standards. The coordination mechanism of the regional activities and of the specialized agencies that accreditate the universities, has been modified in order to adapt to the requirements of the educational market. At the same time, the American universities have developed total quality management (TQM). There have been made some special efforts in order to create a culture of professional excellence by introducing the Malcolm Baldrige quality award¹ (I. Nica, 2000).

Comprehensive policies. In recent years, the reform in superior education system has an emphasize on de-centralization and university autonomy. The design of a real and functional university autonomy is limitate by the implementation of entropic politics of quality. At the same time, the autonomy is not sufficiently developed and doesn't dispose of an experience that could offer robustness and efficiency. From this point of view, for the Romanian higher education, the approach of the incentive policies is premature (C. Bratianu, 2001).

For Romanian higher education an approach of a comprehensive policies is imposed to ensure the quality and to take over the necessary elements from entropic and incentive policies. Such a policy exists in Sweden and its application of results confirms the efficiency of such thinking.

A comprehensive policy to ensure the quality in higher education system means:

- defining the control role of the state and the concrete way to realize it.
- the use of accreditation and qualification concepts and procedures.
- using the concept of university autonomy and defining the role that the university has to play.
- the use of the strategic management concept and its correlation with the university autonomy.
- the use of the quality management concept and its correlation with the university autonomy and the strategic management.

¹ The Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award recognizes U.S. organizations in the business, health care, education, and nonprofit sectors for performance excellence. The Baldrige Award is the only formal recognition of the performance excellence of both public and private U.S. organizations given by the President of the United States.

- defining the statement between the role of the state in quality assurance and the role of the university to use its managerial liberty of organizing the quality system.

- the development of an institutional culture of promoting the academic excellence and the quality management.

An important part inside this comprehensive policy returns to the rectors, pro-rectors, deans, pro-deans and head of departments in order to understand the importance of the problem and the responsibility they have. The policy of quality and assurance management has three fundamental concepts: accreditation, evaluation and certification.

An important part of the comprehensive politics is based on the development of organizational culture. Without the development of such a culture, the implementation of any system of quality can be doomed to failure. Organizational culture creates a psychological reliance and the necessary motivation for academics and students in order to accept the rigor of quality and to make efforts for a correct appliance. It also decreases the resistance created by human mentality, especially when things change. For Romanian people, the mentality is a serious obstacle in front of a reform, so we must pay attention to the organizational culture in the domain of quality management in higher education (C. Brătianu, 2001).

The university's culture is a difficult term to define in a paragraph or two. However, physical and behavioral environment of university is the one which defines the commitment of constituent persons from the university's mission and which describe interpersonal and organizational relations. The human component of culture depends on the guiding principles and by people's skills which creates work value, ethics and interpersonal chemistry. The management should ensure itself that the university's environments have correct relationships between values, vision and outcomes.

The systems of education and training contribute significantly to promoting social cohesion, to active citizenship and to personal achievement in European societies. They have the potential to promote upward social mobility and breaking the cycle of poverty that represents social disadvantage and exclusion. Their role could be strengthened further by adapting them to the diversity of citizens origins in terms of cultural wealth, knowledge and existing skills and learning requirements.

Due to the quality of higher education in Europe, of the variety and the elaborated level of studies, these institutions are very attractive for the

international academic environment, as study destinations, but also as partners for educational and research projects.

But also the success registered in Europe, in what concerns the creation of some instruments such as the Common Frame of Reference, through is realized a correspondence between the system and the national staff based upon a common European reference (European Qualifications Framework).

The international cooperation programs and politic dialogues with third countries in the educational area facilitate the transmission of knowledge in a more freely way, also contributing to improve the quality and the reputation of European academic education, stimulating the research and the innovation, increasing mobility and intercultural dialogue, but also promoting the international evolution according to the EU objectives in terms of foreign policy.

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