The Importance of Quality in Higher Education in an Increasingly Knowledge-Driven Society

Adina-Petrișa PAVEL
University of Economic Sciences
Bucharest, Romania
Dimitrie Cantemir Christian University
Bucharest, Romania
E-mail: adyna_pavel@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT The world has realized that the economic success of the states is 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. In the past decade higher education institutions have been buffeted by a complex set of pressures all over across the globe. Foremost among them is the growing importance of knowledge-led economies that have placed higher education at the centre of national competitiveness agendas. Higher education institutions are increasingly viewed as “economic engines” by policy makers and are seen as essential for ensuring knowledge production through research and innovation and the continuous education of the workforce. Tertiary education policy regarding quality in higher education is increasingly important on European and national agendas. The widespread recognition that tertiary education is a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy has made high-quality tertiary education more important than ever before. The imperative for countries is to raise high-level employment skills, to sustain a globally competitive research base and to improve knowledge dissemination to the benefit of society.

KEY WORDS Quality, knowledge, higher education, knowledge based economy, human capital

JEL CODES I23, I25, O1, O3

1. Introduction

General Overview of Higher Education in the European Space

The last decade of the XX century has revealed a new vision for learning and continuous education. The process of globalization, the global economic crisis, the developments in communications and information technology engaged some crucial social issues, which affect both individual and wider social and economic movements. The "learning society" denotes a range of issues and concerns including the followings:

- the mass higher education became already a reality and it looks that in the new century will be the norm;
- educated workers became crucial players in economic performance;
- more and more jobs demand high level skills and qualifications;
- lifelong learning became an investment in personal learning and growth that is compatible with corporate investment and growth.
• regionalization and the globalization of knowledge induced the emergence of a common culture of knowledge with shared aspirations;
• business orientation of the academic institutions has increased the nation wide and international competition in the field.

The two main European policies are the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy, including the Modernization Agenda for Universities – and have been translated into new national policies affecting principally governance, autonomy, funding, research and external quality assurance.

The main objective of the Bologna Process since its inception in 1999 was the creation of a European higher education space, in order to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched along with the Bologna Process’ decade anniversary, in March 2010, during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference. There are 47 countries in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the situation is different in every of these countries.

EHEA countries have to implement reforms in very different contexts. Student numbers vary enormously. In addition, while demographic changes are of concern to most countries, some face relatively big increases in the student population, while others can anticipate a decrease. Such differences can have an impact on the main goals and the speed of higher education reform.

If we analyze the change in the total number of student enrolled in tertiary education, we can notice that the situation is rather mixed. The number of students grew considerably in Albania, Romania, Cyprus, Turkey, Slovakia and Liechtenstein and registered an increase of more than 40%. There was a slight decline in student numbers in six countries in these six years, while in general, the student population increased by more than 10.4% in half of the EHEA countries in this period.

![Figure 1. Change in the total number of students enrolled in tertiary education between 2003/2004 and 2009/2010](source: Eurostat, UOE and additional collection for the other EHEA countries.)
Differences also exist regarding the orientation and funding of higher education institutions. While all higher education institutions are funded primarily from public sources in some countries, there is a larger proportion of private institutions in others. In addition, levels of public expenditure also vary within the EHEA. Similarly, responses to the recent economic crisis also differ in the region: while public expenditure increased considerably in some countries after 2008, there have been significant budget cuts in others. Yet, the result of the crisis has been an overall decline in public higher education expenditure.

**University rankings** have gained importance around the world. The first important step was made in 2003 when Shanghai Jiao Tong University published the results of the first global university ranking. At present, there are several university rankings in the world.

In the world’s top 100 universities ranked by reputation alone, based on the largest international survey of academic opinion ever undertaken, the first 10 universities are:

1. Harvard University US
2. Massachusetts Institute of Technology US
3. University of Cambridge UK
4. Stanford University US
5. University of California Berkeley US
6. University of Oxford UK
7. Princeton University US
8. University of Tokyo, Japan
9. University of California Los Angeles US
10. Yale University US

We can notice that some of the universities are a part of the European Higher Education Area, but the majorities of them are from US. The rankings of the top universities across the globe employ 13 separate performance indicators designed to capture the full range of university activities, from teaching to research to knowledge transfer. These 13 elements are brought together into five headline categories, which are:

- Teaching — the learning environment (worth 30 per cent of the overall ranking score)
- Research — volume, income and reputation (worth 30 per cent)
- Citations — research influence (worth 30 per cent)
- Industry income — innovation (worth 2.5 per cent)
- International outlook — staff, students and research (worth 7.5 per cent).

### 2. The Importance of Higher Education

Higher education has an important role both for the student, as an individual, and also for the society in which he lives. Higher education represents an aid for the growth and the development of the students and a key for a better life. For the society, higher education institutions can contribute to the creation of ideal citizens, who will help in keeping the society peaceful.

In school, students very rarely get to experience life. When the students get enrolled in college, they are first of all away from their families, so this makes them independent, and thus, they learn how to be on their own. During the college years, if the students have the right attitude, i.e., they really want to learn and study, the scope for it is unlimited. They can increase their knowledge by reading lots of books or by attending the lectures given by the experts in the fields.
The college life is such that it teaches the necessary life lessons to a lot many students. Students get the opportunity to explore a lot of things and basically 'find' themselves, in true sense of the word, in these four years of college.

With globalization taking place, the job market has become even more competitive. Now, a person not only has to compete for a job with the people from his own community or country but also with the people who emigrate from other countries. So what is it that will distinguish you from all your competitors? Of course it is your additional skills, knowledge and a college degree. It is a well-known fact that people who have a higher degree tend to earn more. According to a research done by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the average earnings become high and the level of unemployment falls, with each education level acquired. Also, people with higher education are more likely to get jobs which give lots of health benefits as well as pension benefits to the individual, in his or her old age. Thus, a college degree is the key to a better life.

People, who are well educated and well paid, are more likely to live fulfilled lives. They make better partners, parents and employees. They believe in following the societal norms and seldom indulge in anti-social behavior. Educated people are more tolerant of other people, and thus, help in keeping the society peaceful. Higher standards of living, peace, good family life - all these things help in strengthening the country as a whole.

Studies have shown that people who have a higher degree, which translates into a good satisfied life, are more likely to do social work and volunteering. Such behavior does benefit the society as a whole, as the underprivileged get taken care of too.

Substantial reforms are taking place in tertiary education systems mainly aimed at encouraging institutions to be more responsive to the needs of society and the economy.

Tertiary education contributes to social and economic development through four major missions:

- The formation of human capital (primarily through teaching);
- The building of knowledge bases (primarily through research and knowledge development);
- The dissemination and use of knowledge (primarily through interactions with knowledge users); and
- The maintenance of knowledge (inter-generational storage and transmission of knowledge).

3. The Knowledge Society

The term "knowledge society", which the academic Peter Drucker used for the first time in 1969, came into its own in the 1990s, in particular with the detailed studies by researchers such as Robin Mansel and Nico Stehr. A knowledge society is a society that is nurtured by its diversity and its capacities.

Every society has its own knowledge assets. It is therefore necessary to work towards connecting the forms of knowledge that societies already possess and the new forms of development, acquisition and spread of knowledge valued by the knowledge economy model. The idea of the information society is based on technological breakthroughs. The concept of knowledge societies encompasses much broader social, ethical and political dimensions. There is a multitude of such dimensions which rules out the idea of any single, ready-made model, for such a model would not take sufficient account of cultural and linguistic diversity, vital if individuals are
to feel at home in a changing world. Various forms of knowledge and culture always enter into the building of any society, including those strongly influenced by scientific progress and modern technology. It would be inadmissible to envisage the information and communication revolution leading—through a narrow, fatalistic technological determinism—to a single possible form of society.

The importance of education and critical thinking underscores that, in building real knowledge societies, the new prospects held out by the internet and multimedia tools must not cause us to lose interest in traditional knowledge sources such as the press, radio, television and, above all, the school. Most of the people in the world need books, school textbooks and teachers before computers and internet access.

A knowledge society requires:
- just-in-time delivery of knowledge that is up to date and appropriate to the task at hand;
- skills at knowledge search and retrieval;
- thinking skills and creativity;
- lifelong readiness to learn and unlearn.

The knowledge economy is a particular knowledge driven stage of capitalist development, based on knowledge, succeeding a phase marked by the accumulation of physical capital. Knowledge thus viewed is in the process of taking the place of the workforce, as Marx had foreseen in the middle of the nineteenth century, and the wealth created is being measured less on the output of work itself, measurable and quantifiable, and more and more on the general level of science and the progress of technology.

Institutions of higher education are destined to play a fundamental role in knowledge societies, based on radical changes in the traditional patterns of knowledge production, diffusion and application. Over the past 50 years, these institutions—modeled for the most part on the European university—have experienced an explosive growth in student numbers, described by some as a “massification” of higher education.

4. Quality in Higher Education in the Knowledge-Based Society

Quality in higher education is a multi-dimensional, multilevel, and dynamic concept that relates to the contextual settings of an educational model, to the institutional mission and objectives, as well as to specific standards within a given system, institution, programme, or discipline. Quality may thus take different, sometimes conflicting, meanings depending on:
- the understanding of various interests of different constituencies or stakeholders in higher education (e.g. students; universities; disciplines; the labor market; society; a government);
- its references: inputs, processes, outputs, missions, objectives etc.;
- the attributes or characteristics of the academic world worth evaluating; and
- the historical period in the development of higher education.

There has always been an individual and social need to improve the quality of people’s life, including the quality of what they learn over many years of organized schooling, how they learn it, and why they learn it.

Concerns about the quality of higher education are also not recent, being an intrinsic part of any discussion on the subject. Over the years, various developments have taken place relative to the assessment, monitoring, and improvement of the quality of different components of higher education (its governance, its contents, its forms of pedagogy, the services offered etc.). What is
new refers to those developments which are related to quality assurance and its management. Concepts such as “quality assessment”, “quality evaluation”, and “quality assurance” are widely used today within the wider processes of managing quality.

Any higher education organization must follow an external evaluation procedure in order to assess its quality and to acquire the provisional functioning authorization, followed by its official accreditation, as well as the accreditation of its study programmes. Generally, this requirement is compulsory for all higher education institutions (HEI) or organizations providing higher education programmes and activities and entitles HEIs, upon successful completion, to use the name “university” or other similar legally recognized names. Also, HEIs have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance. Higher education institutions may differ in size, quality, resources, number of teaching staff and students, etc., as successful HEIs generally have to find a balance between often conflicting stakeholder demands and institutional values. HEIs can therefore be local or global; elite or mass-oriented; specialized or transdisciplinary, and may foster either an academic culture (characterized by knowledge creation, scientific excellence, academic freedom and freely shareable results) or a business culture (characterized by profit creation and individual appropriation of social wealth).

At the Bergen meeting of May 2005, ministers adopted the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG). These standards and guidelines are designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in Europe, and aim to promote mutual trust while respecting diverse national and institutional contexts and subject areas. In 2008 followed the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). EQAR is a register of those agencies that substantially comply with the ESG. The 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué also stresses that quality assurance will remain a priority in a landscape where new tools, mechanisms and initiatives are increasingly being designed to provide information about higher education institutions.

Research is an important component of Master’s and Doctoral study programmes. The quality of research can be assessed through:

- articles, books, monographs, publications, participation to conferences;
- research staff (teaching staff and students);
- transfer of knowledge and applications of research in the practical field, in the social, economic and industrial fields.

The institution should ensure a "research culture" within the programme, with full participation of students. They should be permanently encouraged by publication of results, participation in seminars and workshops, the granting of diplomas or other types of recognition etc.

5. Romanian Higher Education as a part of the EHEA

The Romanian higher education system is in line with the Bologna Agreement. As a result, most Bachelor’s programs take 3 years to complete. However, some programs last longer – for example, some technical fields, medicine and architecture. Master’s programs take 2 years beyond the Bachelor’s degree. Master’s programs are a prerequisite for admission to Ph.D. programs. Ph.D. programs usually take 3 years to complete. Under special circumstances, the duration of study may be extended by 1 or 2 years.
Like many ex-socialist states, post-1989 Romania witnessed a period of strong expansion of the academic offer. The number of tertiary education institutions increased from 46 in 1989 to 56 in 1992, 102 in 1997, 126 in 2001, 117 in 2004 and then to 108 in 2009-2010 (Figure 2).

The number of enrolled students grew from 215,226 in the academic year 1991/1992 to 503,152 in 2000/2001, then soared to 907,353 in 2007/2008 for all levels of education\(^1\). The demand for higher education programmes was very high in the first decade after the revolution, prompting entrepreneurs to provide diversified services (alternative types of education, such as distance education) to an expanding market and the suffered a small decrease.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>117</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Data taken and processed by NSI 2011 Statistical Yearbook of Romania Bucharest.*

Figure 2. Tertiary education institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>742</td>
<td>770</td>
<td>755</td>
<td>631</td>
<td>617</td>
<td>624</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Source: Data taken and processed by NSI 2011 Statistical Yearbook of Romania Bucharest.*

Figure 3. Faculties

**Quality assurance** as a concept was introduced in Romanian higher education with Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 and subsequently regulated under Law no. 87/2006. The existing legislative framework refers to two major objectives of quality assurance: quality control and quality enhancement. Furthermore, the law makes reference to the freedom of education providers to select and enforce the most relevant measures and standards, as well as to the need of each such organization to comply with a pre-determined set of relevant standards for a set of criteria.

The Law on Quality Assurance no. 87/2006 introduced a series of legislative changes by means of which the concept of quality was rendered endogenous, that is, assumed by higher education organizations rather than imposed from the outside. Thus, the law provides for a culture of quality, for the responsibility of educational organizations in quality assurance etc. The introduction of the institution of internal quality assurance, which materialized in the establishment of quality evaluation and assurance commissions (CEACs), was a fundamental initiative. Moreover, the establishment of the registry of experts in external evaluation based on peer-review procedures was another important step in the direction of quality assurance. Consequently, two basic principles were instituted: internal quality assurance and assuming the latter at the level of educational organizations and peer-review-based processes for purposes of external evaluation.

---

6. Conclusions

The importance of higher education can be judged from the way it benefits a person financially, emotionally, socially, as well as intellectually.

In addition, the current economic crisis has had a negative effect in many countries: some have had to cut their education budgets while student demand to enter higher education or to stay on for additional qualifications is growing. This, in combination with mounting pressures on public funding, has led to debate on the issue of tuition fees and free admission to higher education in some countries.

The new EU member states, however, have had access to specific streams of funding (e.g., European Structural Funds, World Bank). This has buffered them from the full impact of the economic crisis and supported the implementation of higher education reforms in which the Bologna Process played an important role as a driver and a framework for institutional change.

The emergence of a new culture of university research, teaching and learning, focused on the acquisition of teaching and learning as well as on research performance, is absolutely necessary. Such a culture may be promoted through the establishment of several important targets at system level:

- improving quality and raising universities’ responsibility and responsiveness; higher education institutions should be stimulated to become more sensitive towards students’ needs and expectations;
- institutional diversification, individualization of universities’ and adoption of specific missions operationalized in development strategies.

Education has a very important role in our lives. There is a rapidly growing demand for a higher education in the world today and some of the rewards are self-improvement, job insurance, a development of character and social improvements.

References

5. *** http://www.ec.europa.eu/eurostat/
6. *** http://www.insse.ro