



UNIUNEA EUROPEANĂ



GUVERNUL ROMÂNIEI
MINISTERUL MUNCII, FAMILIEI
ȘI PROTECȚIEI SOCIALE
AMPOSDRU



Fondul Social European
POSDRU 2007-2013



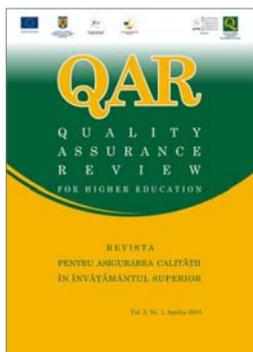
Instrumente Structurale
2007-2013



MINISTERUL
EDUCAȚIEI
CERCETĂRII
TINERETULUI
ȘI SPORTULUI
OPOSDRU



AGENCIA ROMÂNĂ
DE ASIGURARE A
CALITĂȚII ÎN
ÎNVĂȚĂMÂNTUL SUPERIOR



Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Quality Assurance is a Process of Growing Up

Koen Geven

Quality Assurance Review, Vol. 2, Nr. 1, Aprilie 2010, p. 30 – 31

Publicat de: Consiliul Agenției Române de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior - ARACIS

Locul publicării: București, România

Tipul publicației: tipărit, online

Quality Assurance Review este editată în cadrul proiectului „Asigurarea calității în învățământul superior din România în context european. Dezvoltarea managementului calității academice la nivel de sistem și instituțional”, Contract POSDRU/2/1.2/S/1, cod proiect 3933.

Pentru a reproduce un text din revistă este necesar acordul scris al colegiului de redacție al revistei Quality Assurance Review.

Răspunderea pentru textele scrise aparține autorilor.

Conținutul acestui material nu reprezintă în mod obligatoriu poziția oficială a Uniunii Europene sau a Guvernului României.

FONDUL SOCIAL EUROPEAN

Investește în
OAMENI

Quality Assurance is a Process of Growing Up

Koen Geven

Former Chairperson, European Students' Union

J. D. Salinger's 'Catcher in the Rye' is an American novel about the problems of growing up. In the book, a young boy is struggling with the exciting chances that adolescent life offers and the sacrifices he has to make to enjoy them. Through his adventures, the boy learns the differences between childhood and adulthood. Having read this book after my term as a chairperson of the European Students' Union, it reminded me of many of the struggles of fellow student representatives and of myself growing up with a sense of responsibility over higher education. In Romania, where the quality assurance process is almost entering its adolescence, I believe the book raises some interesting themes for the wider quality assurance community as well.

The problems of identity-formation are important, as studying is increasingly becoming one more step in growing up towards adult life. More and more young people attend the university before seriously attempting their luck on the labour market, so the institution will inevitably play a larger role in the formation of our society's identities. We find expressions of this process all around Europe, in the many different student associations, student subcultures and the definition of students as a core market for all kinds of companies. In Romania, where the brand-market has quickly adapted itself, "the" university, perhaps paralysed by that very growth of the student body, seems to have some trouble coping with that new role. In my experience, its stakeholders still largely see the education it provides as something anonymous and hierarchical. Students have a hard time identifying with that system, and try to find all kinds of ways expressing themselves.

And by and large, students are still *starting* to express themselves in the Romanian higher education system. While student unions have been around for some time, and their activities have often made it to the press, it did not mean that their message would resonate with the ears of policy-makers and university administrators. Indeed, they still often feel that they have to shout louder to get the feeling that they are being listened to. In my eyes, ARACIS has taken some important steps to change that situation, supporting the inclusion of students in quality assurance processes, both in its own activities and "on the ground", in universities. Since I first evaluated ARACIS in August 2008, on behalf of the European Students' Union, I have seen a plethora of initiatives to improve the position of students in higher education. To name a few, student representatives attend ARACIS meetings, a student-evaluators pool is being created and trainings are organised for students who try to improve their universities.

Student unions, of which there are quite a few in Romania, play an important role in these activities. Bringing together the representatives of students from all kinds of backgrounds, they can educate and select those students who will have certain legitimacy in expressing their views. Viewed through this lens, it becomes clear that the involvement of students in the improvement of higher education first of all has an educative component. If taken seriously, young people will learn to be responsible, feel ownership of changes and learn that improvement doesn't happen over night. This latter point is important, as change will always take time, and interaction with all who need to change.

If students are allowed to play their role autonomously, they will moreover bring new voices into debates, providing both feedback and creative solutions on the problems in higher education. Autonomy of student unions is a sensitive issue, as allegations of impediments are sometimes made. Indeed, in my experience, student unions' independence can easily be - and often is - put under pressure by various political players. It is particularly fragile, because students are still defining their identities, finding their view and place in the society's landscape. As student unions bring together students with differing political views from different fields of study and universities, they facilitate a

process to develop both a personal and a collective student identity. Although this doesn't happen in an isolated 'black box', it can all too easily be manipulated by politicians or policy-makers who have the experience and resources to do so. And if so, the potential for new views will be stymied by the reproduction of established opinions, leading to the loss of the reasons for involving young people in the first place. In a quickly changing economy and political system this receives a '*force majeure*', as it can be doubted if the students will be helped much in their future lives by mimicking those who are currently in charge.

In the Bologna Process, student representation – and the wider inclusion of so-called 'stakeholders' - has been established as a pillar of the European Higher Education Area. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Romania, which sees its accession to Europe as one of its main political achievements, has quickly and positively adapted itself to this discourse. But for whatever reason, it is clearly visible that those in charge of higher education in Romania are increasingly supporting student participation. Often, they cite the European Standards and Guidelines, where it is written that students should be involved as equal partners, which has been the basis for some critique of quality assurance in higher education. The ENQA panel, which visited ARACIS in March 2009, of which I was a part, concluded that ARACIS has made positive steps forward, but that there are serious problems in universities themselves. Often, the procedure of students is rather formalistic and is forgotten soon after an external evaluation has taken place. This fact shows that student involvement doesn't only rely on the opinions and attitudes of those at the top, but depends on the many people on the ground as well. Teachers, university administrators and politicians have to be equally interested in hearing students' views. And that will still require quite some work!

Perhaps it is possible to find more arguments for student involvement, by taking a look at the criticisms. For those who are used to lecture students, rather than work with them on an equal footing, it can be hard to see why they should listen to these 'undisciplined little kids'. Also, student representatives often express their views in non-conventional ways such as spontaneous actions or 'overcritical' views in the press, making it even quite annoying to try to listen. One of the arguments against such reasoning must be that students cannot learn to behave responsibly if they are never given the chance to do so. Indeed, one of the themes of Salinger's book – the dialectic between responsibility and freedom – is something that every adolescent must go through. Secondly, education should become more interesting once the hierarchy in the classroom changes. More discussion will take place, and the teacher will often be challenged in his or her views. This requires some experimentation and provocation from the side of the educator to engage in a constructive dialogue. Flattening the hierarchy is however also a question of resources. Classrooms filled with hundreds of students can hardly be interactive. This means that the step towards a student centred higher education system must be made consciously by those holding the purse, directing extra resources to increase teaching resources and working conditions. This can be an extra argument for those who would like to change. However, if quality assurance remains focused on the ground, convincing those who are doing the daily job of higher education, this might be achieved quicker than might be expected.

In a way, quality assurance in Romania is also entering in a stage of adolescence since ARACIS has started its activities in 2005. Increasingly, it is becoming clear that there are no quick fixes, that closing down institutions is not the main course of action. Instead, in my view, improving quality assurance is a task that requires daily dedication and work with those on the ground with the clear aim of improvement, rather than control. Just like all experts in quality assurance, students learn through responsibility, while being involved and being taken seriously. "Catcher in the Rye" explains us that this is the important challenge adolescents. Somewhere near the end of the book, the kid learns that while children want to sacrifice themselves towards the greater good, adults will humbly dedicate their lives to improving it in small steps. And that is something that I would encourage ARACIS and the people involved in its activities to do even more.