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**QUALITY ASSURANCE IN SECONDARY EDUCATION - "A
BRIDGE TOO FAR"?**

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Abstract

The year 2005 meant a paradigm shift in Romanian education. Over the existing status at that time, something new was placed: quality assurance. This new and unique element ought to propel the system "energy levels" higher than those existing at the time. 12 years have passed since the new element was placed in the Romanian educational system, with inherent effects on the evolution of the system and especially on the educational entities that make up the system. The essential objective of this approach was to achieve, at the educational system level, what we call "quality assurance in education". At the same time, at the level of each educational component (school, faculty, and university) the expectation was the achievement of quality assurance at the organization level. Which means quality assurance „of education” - other than quality assurance "in education" (at the level of education system). The fundamental question is obviously: Has that goal been achieved? Where we are? Quality assurance in education and, respectively, quality assurance of education succeeded or became a bridge too far? Our work attempts to analyze this situation and to pray what it really means to ensure quality in education. "A Bridge to Far" is a story about a memorable failure in a global clash. Is there a similarity between the two approaches? We'll see!

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1. Introduction

Pan - European events held at the level of education ministers in the European countries since 1998 have increasingly highlighted the need to implement, in the educational systems, a successful and successful approach in the economic and business fields: quality management. The moment "t₀" can be considered, in our opinion, the Bergen Meeting (2005), as it has set out the main milestones in implementing the specific concepts, methods and elements of quality management in European education systems. It was preferred to adopt this approach as "quality assurance of education/in education" (China, 2015), although quality management is, according to the literature, clearly more comprehensive, quality assurance being only a part of it. In Romania, it was implemented hastily, "Quality Assurance in Education", about the same time as those set out in the abovementioned meeting.

At European level, educational benchmarks have been developed (CQAF – EQARF, EQF, Europe 2020 Strategy, etc.) with the main goal of a coherent approach to quality assurance in all education systems across Europe. At the same time, specific legislation on quality assurance in education has been developed in Romania, inspectors - evaluators have been trained in the application of this legislation, over 7000 schools (in the pre-university education system) have been evaluated for authorization / accreditation.

However, the qualitative leap regarding the evolution of the Romanian educational system following the implementation of this approach for 11 years was almost insignificant. This is visible through simple comparative analyzes of the results obtained by Romania in international tests - important benchmarks in education (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, 2018). In this paper we analyze some of the causes of this approach, which, in our opinion, failed in relation to the initial objectives and the requirements established at EU level in the field. At the same time, we propose concrete solutions to eliminate the identified causes.

2. Problem Statement

Quality assurance in education was an approach implemented in the Romanian educational system as a result of the pan - European events in the field of education, held around 2000. This endeavour was initiated in the European space, also as a result of the findings of a significant gap in this area with other educational systems in the world that have been striving to implement this approach since the 1990s. *Quality Assurance* of education is, in our opinion, a reaction of the educational environment to the technological advance of society, ever faster and deeper. At the same time, initiatives have been set up at the level of the community space to establish reference books to help European education systems to implement this approach more easily. However, with regard to quality assurance, as part of quality management, already used and practiced for many decades in business environments, the educational environment preferred to use only this concept *quality assurance* of education, creating the impression that the other components of quality management are subsumed to this approach. With the inherent effects! The quality assurance approach is already being used and implemented in European educational systems with different outcomes.

2.1. Terms, concepts, definitions

Although we currently have access to a vast literature on Quality Management, however, we can see that literature dedicated to *quality management in education* is relatively poor. There is still a quote of Sallis (1992), although at that time it was written with considerable reservations and reticence about a

fundamental "dilemma": "*What is education? Product or service? Or pupils/ students are the "product of education"!*" According to the definitions in the literature, Quality Management has four essential components (in the following sequence):

a) *Quality planning* - involving the setting of quality objectives and policies. This part reflects the ability of an organization to establish / plan its quality objectives and policies. By default, the resources and processes that will be involved in achieving these goals must be established. Quality planning is in correlation with three fundamental factors: *what customers want; requirements / specifications of products / services (standards)*; the ability of the organization to achieve the first two factors;

b) *Quality control* - involving the satisfaction of quality requirements. *Quality Control* represents all the organization's actions in the management of in-house processes in order to achieve the three factors mentioned above;

c) *Quality assurance* - involving confidence in meeting the quality requirements. In reality, *Quality Assurance* is the organization's ability to provide stakeholders with confidence that *the three factors mentioned above can be achieved*;

d) *Improving quality* - Improving the capacity to meet the quality requirements. *Quality Improvement* represents all the actions undertaken by the organization in order to improve the organization's ability to meet the quality requirements;

Of course, these components cannot be separated because an essential aspect of quality management is that of a systemic approach that is valid for all four components, in the form of an integrated approach.

An "aspect" of the separation of the four sides is seen in the case of the implementation of quality management in educational processes. As a rule, "Quality Management in Education" (and "Quality of Education Management") is associated in the current expression only with "quality assurance in education" (and, respectively, the concept of "quality assurance of education"). This approach is especially found in European education systems and, most importantly, in community documents that regulate this issue. It is interesting and almost inexplicable why the "initiators" of the approach preferred the "extraction" of the quality assurance (for the education segment) from the established concept, the quality management!

It would be useful, in our view, to investigate the causes for which the Community Courts (the periodic conferences of the Ministers of Education in the Member States) accepted the ENQA (2018) proposal for exclusive use of the concept of "quality assurance", although the quality management specialists know too well that this can't exist without the other three components mentioned above.

In Romania, the action was "institutionalized" by a normative act that led to the establishment of almost unique regulation in the Romanian society. Thus, besides the construction sector, the education sector became, after 2005, the second sector with a regulated approach from the perspective of quality. For obvious reasons arising from the need to use these terms correctly, we will continue to outline some of the concepts that we find in the glossary of terms of the most „shaky” quality management agency: the American Society for Quality (ASQ) and the Standard ISO 9000: 2015, dedicated to the concepts and terms used in this important field (ASQ - American Society for Quality, 2018).

Table 01. Definitions formulated in the literature and in the Romanian normative act

Terms defined in specialized literature or specialized / recognized institutions in the field of quality	Terms defined in Romanian legislation
<p>ASQ - American Society for Quality:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality Management (QM): "Implementing a quality management system (in an organization - NA) for managing a process, in order to achieve maximum customer satisfaction at the lowest total cost for organization, while improving the process. " 2. Quality assurance: All planned and systematic activities implemented in the quality system to give confidence that a product or service will meet the quality requirements; 3. Quality control: the techniques and operational activities used to meet the quality requirements 	<p>GEO no. 75/2005:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality Management - There is no definition of this concept in the normative act! 2. Quality assurance: It is achieved through a set of actions for the development of the institutional capacity of elaboration, planning and implementation of study programs, which form the trust of the beneficiaries that the education provider meets the quality standards. Quality assurance expresses the capacity of a provider organization to provide education programs in line with the announced standards. It is thus promoted to lead to the continuous improvement of the quality of education. 3. Quality control of education: "in preschool, primary, gymnasium, vocational, lyceum and post-secondary education institutions involves activities and techniques of an operational nature, systematically applied by a designated inspection authority to verify compliance with predetermined standards"
<p>ISO 9000: 2015:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Quality management - coordinated activities to guide and control an organization (3.3.3) in terms of quality (3.6.2) (Note ISO 9001: 2015: In general, quality guidance and control include the establishment of quality policy (3.2.4) and quality objectives (3.2.5), quality planning (3.2.9), quality control (3.2.10), quality assurance 3.2.11) and improvement of quality (3.2.12)); 2. (3.3.6) Quality assurance - part of quality management (3.3.4), focused on providing confidence that the quality requirements (3.6.5) will be met; 3. (3.3.7) Quality control - part of quality management (3.3.4), focused on meeting the quality requirements (3.6.5) 	

A simple analysis of the definitions presented leads us to the conclusions of at least "interesting".

A. Quality assurance. While the ISO 9000 terminology standard "focuses" on the definition of this concept on the organization's ability to provide confidence (to customers) that "quality requirements are accomplish, the Romanian normative act translates this definition into "quality standards" - thus, an external reference organization! (AN: The standard quality concept is inappropriate / redundant and does not express what the designer has intended - it is actually a minimal standard that should be accomplished for the approval / accreditation of a school / university!) Which leads to the conclusion that

the school organization should establish its quality policies / requirements only on the basis of the standard requirements and less / at all than the expectations of the customers!

Let's suppose that a school is accredited. It results that it will give confidence to stakeholders that the school meets the quality requirements formulated / established by that standard, that is, to say the minimum quality level! Accreditation of all schools in the system will give confidence to society in the fact that the system works to the quality requirements formulated by the accreditation standard, *achieving what we call quality assurance in education but at the minimum level of quality! The quality assurance process in education*, in the current, specifically Romanian approach, *obliges schools to maintain their quality requirements at the level of the accreditation standard* without encouraging them in any way to orient these requirements primarily towards client or / and at the level of *the optimal level standard*, for example, or to a recognized performance standard (ISO 9001) or a model of excellence (EFQM model) EFQM, 2018). The normative act specifies what is meant by "internal assurance of the quality of education": establishment of a quality assessment and quality commission in each educational entity. The key role of this committee is to monitor (in compliance with the normative act) the application of quality assessment and quality assurance procedures and activities in the organization, reporting on their achievement and formulating improvements to the quality of education. In fact, the activities of this commission are very different from what the normative act has set out. The normative act does not explicitly mention what means the external assurance of the quality of education.

B. Quality control. The ISO 9000 standard tells us that this process is "part of quality management focused on meeting quality requirements". Quality control can be defined as the set of corrective actions aimed at eliminating the causes of nonconformities.

Therefore, *quality assurance* will include customer-oriented (external) actions, trusting that what the organization has said about quality has achieved, while *quality control* will include actions (internal) centered on meeting quality requirements. From this perspective, quality assurance can be defined as the set of preventive actions (in the new version of the standard (ISO 9001: 2015) this process is in the form of risk management. Consequently, quality assurance should be: *generating the confidence that what has been said is done plus a high-risk management!*

It is noted that in the definitions formulated by the normative act, the client's requirements are missing from the "equation".

The problem of this concept in the education system is a major one because it is very difficult for the teaching staff to be convinced or understand that in reality pupils and students are not their products and that they are their clients. It was very difficult to accept the concept of the beneficiary, however, the advance is still insufficient, in our opinion, because a correct approach is the client approach!

3. Research Questions

In the 12 years of "quality assurance in education / education" many schools (many thousands of schools!) have been evaluated and the costs of these evaluations represent considerable sums. According to GD no. 712/2009, the tariff of: 1) authorization is in the amount of 2 basic salaries corresponding to the salary scale, gross amount, for the position of professor S, didactic degree I and seniority over 40 years in state pre-university education; 2) accreditation is in the amount of 3 basic salaries corresponding to the

salary scale, gross amount, for the position of teacher S, didactic degree I and a seniority over 40 years in state pre-university education; 3) The periodical evaluation is in the amount of 1.5 basic salaries corresponding to the salary scale, gross amount, for the position of teacher S, didactic degree I and seniority over 40 years in state pre-university education. There is no explanation as to why this computational "algorithm" was chosen from our point of view without any link to the evaluation process of the schools. The ARACIP (RAQAPE) public data show that over 7000 evaluations were made over the 2007-2017 period. Let's make the following calculation: Let's assume that the 7000 evaluations were for authorization only and the authorization it's about 1100 euro (according to the data published by ARACIP at <http://oldsite.edu.ro/index.php/articles/c775/>). It follows that for the 7000 authorizations we spent: $7000 \times 1100 = 7,700,000$ euro! A considerable amount! Obviously, smaller than the real one! (ARACIP – RAQAPE, n.d.).

And yet, after many thousands of schools evaluated, reports, findings, etc., there are no initiatives from the "educational system" to carry out practical studies on, firstly, *the costs of what "non-quality" means!*

Here are some possible questions in this regard, which can be the basis of some important research on the evolution of the educational system under the influence of this approach: *How many schools did not meet the "quality" standards? What steps should be taken to address nonconformities with these standards? Standards were really what they needed? Was their construction smart enough to push the system to a relevant level of quality? What were the costs of remedial processes? Has the non-conformities been effectively and effectively remedied? How many schools were closed as a result of failing to meet quality standards? What were the costs of closing schools? Quality standards (minimum and optimum level) are referential or objective for schools in the system?*

4. Purpose of the Study

The main objective of this analysis is to alert the consumption of considerable resources (material, human, etc.) used to implement the quality assurance in education / of education without the expected positive effects! At the same time, another important objective is the formulation of proposals to improve this approach so that quality assurance can actually become a driver of the evolution of the Romanian educational system.

4.1. Quality assurance in education - realities, perspectives

The positive effects of this approach would have to be found, first of all, in an effective improvement in *quality in education* - improving the quality at the educational system level by:

- Effective and effective functioning of the schools in the system or, at least, most of them, respectively, of a crucial critical mass for the educational system;
- Improving the educational services offered by schools in the system, with straight effects in improving the results obtained by students at the completion of the study cycles;
- Effective improvement of results obtained at system level, internationally established testing in the field (PISA, TIMSS, PIRLS, 2018) between two successive editions.

The results obtained in the last three PISA editions confirm the conclusion of mediocre results, although a significant percentage of the evaluated schools obtained the "ARACIP - RAQAPE quality certificate. The functioning of schools in the system has not improved since the introduction of quality assurance in education / education. *Differences between urban and rural schools (on operation, endowment, staffing and results) have increased considerably.* Bureaucracy of redundant papers and reports - a straight effect of the quality assurance approach in education, in the current approach - has increased exponentially, overlapping with other effects generated by an excessive culture of inspection. We refer to the existence of at least 4 control-inspection factors exerted on today's school: general school inspection, CNDIPT (2018) inspection for vocational schools and technological high schools, evaluation / monitoring by ARACIP - RAQAPE, evaluation / control / inspection carried out by other institutions in the higher schools (county council, prefecture, ministry etc. Have elapsed 12 years since the approval of the basic normative act for this approach and 11 years since the effective implementation of the approach to the functioning of the education system. *A brief conclusion shows that the quality assurance of education in the pre-university education system did not succeed!* After more than 11 years of implementation, the quality in education / of education quality assurance process should have achieved its essential purpose of generating confidence amongst all stakeholders that most schools in the system are operating at pre-established standards for their institutional assessment (ARACIP – RAQAPE, n.d.).

This desideratum has not been achieved and the key objective of quality assurance is becoming more and more difficult to achieve, becoming a "far removed bridge"! It is a reality that, if it wasn't accepted, the negative effects would probably exponentially multiply! What are the causes of this failure?

5. Research Methods

Considering the aforementioned aspects, regarding, first of all, the inappropriate use of specific quality management concepts, other than in business environments, we approached in our paper elements of qualitative research, duplicated by comparative analysis.

5.1. Results of comparative analyzes, and qualitative research applied to the quality assurance of education in Romania (secondary education)

The qualitative research elements and comparative analyzes have led us to identify the causes of the failure to achieve the main objective of the *quality assurance in education / of education* approach in the Romanian educational system:

- The definitions formulated by the basic legislation in the field were, in our view, the main cause of the failure, because, as we have seen from a "mirror" comparison of these definitions, the definitions formulated in normative acts are different and / or defective;

- Institutional Evaluation Standards are constructed in terms of "at least" - becoming, in reality, mandatory rules for schools. "At least" is a minimum level, which will force schools in the system to formulate their development goals, correlated with the requirements of the mandatory standard - a minimum level of quality!

- Specific legislation in this field speaks of quality assurance in education / of education without making a distinction between the two syntagma (generating obvious confusion)! For example, in the official

"statements" of the agency responsible for quality assurance, it is clear: "... we cannot talk about quality assurance only at school level, because only there can be the confidence of the participants in the educational process that the results obtained will have value for them." (ARACIP - *Conceptual and Methodological Milestones on the National Management and Quality Assurance System*, page 3). Therefore, according to these official statements, we cannot talk about quality assurance at the educational system level! (ARACIP – RAQAPE, n.d.).

- The center of gravity of these "standards" is significantly shifted to the organization and functioning of the school (infrastructure, spaces, procedures, etc.), with a disproportionate burden on the organization and functioning of the school, to the detriment of educational effectiveness and school management;

- Institutional assessment standards in the current form are genuinely bureaucratic by: the very large number of redundant and irrelevant requirements for the educational process, its superposition with other school referential, the faulty external evaluation as it does not respect any of the generally applicable principles of the external evaluation (second part - assessment by the clients of the organization or third part- evaluation carried out by an independent organization), given that the agency is subordinated to the Ministry of Education and the evaluators are persons active in the system. We mean that valuers are, for the most part, active in the system. During the evaluation process, these experts interrupt their activity at the school where they work and go to the schools they evaluate. In quality management, the general principle in the external audit activity is that of "third part" assessment, to carry out a relevant and objective audit.

6. Findings

Although the Romanian educational system was among the first educational systems in the European space that implemented the quality assurance in education and among the only ones that have fully implemented this approach at the level of the secondary education it is noted that the quality assurance in education with all the positive elements mentioned, it was not a successful move, its essential objective being more and more distant. On the basis of the elements we have identified, we have put forward several proposals for improvements so that the quality assurance of secondary education is actually an achievable approach with positive results.

6.1. Quality assurance in the educational system - proposals to improve the approach

A *first improvement* could be achieved by eliminating confusion about the "quality assurance" process introduced by the normative act (GEO nr. 75/2005), because in many situations it is being discussed about "quality assurance in education" and „quality assurance of education" (Dragulănescu, China, Militaru, & Colceag, 2014) as if the two syntagma had the same meaning. We believe this is a major confusion with multiple negative effects (China, 2015). From our point of view, "*quality assurance in education*" encompasses interrelated processes relating to "providing confidence that most / at least a critical mass of educational entities in the system will meet quality requirements."

"*Quality assurance of education*" is a process (described above) triggered by the school organization by which it provides confidence that the quality requirements (as declared by it) will

accomplish! A major difference between the two concepts, because in the first case the responsibility for quality assurance lies with *the management of the system*, while in the second case the responsibility lies with *the management of the school organization*.

A *second improvement* should be at the level of the concepts used in the basic regulatory act [18], since the biggest confusion is generated by the misuse of these concepts.

A *third improvement*, we believe, can be achieved by rethinking some benchmarks (standards) so as **to highlight** three essential pillars:

- **Management of school organizations;**
- **Quality of teachers;**
- **Outputs from educational processes (educational cycles) reflected in terms of results and, in particular, pupils' skills.**

Horizontally, the standards should be compatible with other school referential so that the reconciliation process leads to a single referential - drastically reducing the existing bureaucratic pressure on the school organization. For example, through a flexible and efficient construction, three standards existing at this time in the educational system can be merged into the same reference: *The specific standards of the internal management control system, the General School Inspection Regulation and the quality management standards used by CNDIPT* in the evaluation of schools in the vocational and technical education system. The resulting reference could be used differentially for each level of education and type of activity carried out by an educational entity: *external evaluation, internal evaluation, control, monitoring, etc* (CNDIPT. 2018).

The fourth improvement could be achieved through the use of *third-part* external evaluation which requires external evaluations by **an independent and objective agency** in order to eliminate the risk of subjectivism existing in the current approach.

The fifth improvement may be in the "area" of using **experts** (really prepared) in the evaluation process, without confusion with what we usually call *inspectors*.

Clearly, there are many more improvements that can be formulated. We've succeeded in penciling a few, which means the problem remains open. Any of the five improvements mentioned above can consistently reconfigure the quality of education approach and can greatly contribute to reducing bureaucracy in the system.

7. Conclusion

The approach of *quality assurance in education/of education* is an important aspect of the evolution of the educational environment in the context of the multiple challenges of the current, increasingly technological and sophisticated society. A successful approach (we mean the quality assurance process in education) in this part of the world could prepare the educational environment for transitions to address other challenges that are already being implemented elsewhere in the world. We refer, for example, to a considerable advance of some educational systems on another important approach: *education about standardization*. By contrast, maintaining the current approach shows that quality assurance in education is in fact "a bridge too far". Hard to reach and conquer but not impossible! Another important negative effect of maintaining the current status is that of creating a (sub) culture of quality in the educational system,

whose harmful effects multiply exponentially from day to day. Urgent measures to resolve the move are necessary and more vital, otherwise, as we have mentioned, its negative effects multiply exponentially every day.

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