

Risks Assessments for the Quality Assurance Process in HEIs

Petrișor Laurențiu ȚUCĂ*

*Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management,
National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest,*

**Corresponding author, tucapetrisor@gmail.com*

Dana Corina DESELNICU

*Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management,
National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest,
Academy of Romanian Scientists*

Petronela Cristina SIMION

*Faculty of Entrepreneurship, Business Engineering and Management,
National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest,*

Abstract. *The article examines the risks associated with the quality assurance process in higher education, focusing on various aspects that can affect the effectiveness, integrity and evolution of this process. Through the detailed analysis of the listed risks, from chaotic changes in legislation to the lack of specialized human resources and the decrease in the quality of external evaluation reports, the article explores how these aspects can influence the quality of university education and the strategic decisions of higher education institutions. Methods by which universities can manage and minimize these risks are also presented, emphasizing the need to implement proactive risk management strategies and strengthen institutional capacity to respond to the changing challenges of the educational environment. The article highlights the importance of addressing risks and opportunities in the quality assurance process, with a particular focus on the digitization of quality assurance processes as an opportunity for continuous improvement. In addition, it identifies ten risks relevant to the quality assurance process in a university, classifying them according to their consequences and evaluating them by the risk index method, for better evaluation using the risk matrix. The article emphasizes the fact that, by systematically approaching risks and opportunities and promoting the exchange of good practices between universities, it is possible to contribute to strengthening the quality of university education throughout the country, effectively responding to the ever-changing requirements of education and contributing to the development of society.*

Keywords: quality assurance, higher education, risks management, digitalization, external assessment

Introduction

In recent years, the landscape of higher education has undergone significant transformations globally, driven by advancements in technology, pedagogical approaches, and the increasing demands for transparency. Therefore, quality assurance (QA) has emerged as an important concern for higher education institutions (HEIs). Ensuring the quality of educational programs not only fosters student success but also enhances institutional reputation and societal trust. However, the attainment of quality in higher education is impacted by various risks that can compromise the effectiveness of QA processes. Understanding and effectively addressing these risks are essential for maintaining and enhancing the quality and relevance of higher education.

This article aims to conduct a risk management analysis of the QA processes within a Romanian HEI. By examining the diverse array of risks confronting the QA initiatives, ranging from academic evaluation concerns to operational vulnerabilities, this study seeks to propose strategies for mitigating these risks effectively and to offer practical recommendations and actionable insights for policymakers, institutional leaders, and practitioners involved in higher education quality assurance

Risk definition and characterization

Defining the notion of risk is difficult, given the diversity of risk-related perceptions and the broad typology of risk in the business and academic world. According to ISO Standard 31000, risk can be defined as the effect of uncertainty on objectives; the effect may be positive, negative, or a deviation from the expected (ISO, 2009). The Institute of Risk Management defines risk as the combination of the probability of an event and its consequence. Consequences can range from positive to negative (IRM, 2023).

The risk is the possibility of an event occurring that could damage the company's business or the company's inability to adapt, in time and at the lowest cost, to changes in the economic and social conditions in which it operates (Dumitrescu & Deselnicu, 2018). In practice, organizations face a variety of risks, both internal and external. Risk is an inherent part of doing business at all levels and involves a complex of factors (Popa, 2009). Due to the potentially significant impact of these risks on the results of enterprises and the impossibility of their full control, risk analysis and management are important dimensions of the strategic management of enterprises (Deselnicu, 2014). The risk management process usually involves the following steps: risk identification, risk analysis and assessment, determination of priority interventions to mitigate risks, and risk management.

From the above definitions, we conclude that risk is an inherent phenomenon, but with a wide range of probabilities of occurrence, which can result in both losses and hazards, that can be remedied with difficulty or with a certain degree of effort (Burduş & Popa, 2016). The range of risk manifestation is wide, encompassing both the human and the social, technological and political risks, to name a few. As a consequence, conscious or unconscious actions taken on the elements of a system can lead to the emergence of direct, conflicting effects corresponding to the objectives pursued, as well as to the emergence of direct or indirect, undesirable, accidental effects which the specialist literature defines as risks (Kaplan & Mikes, 2012).

Quality assurance in the international context

When the Bologna Process was launched in 1999, the details of a quality assurance system in higher education did not exist, which initially left an open space in terms of concrete ways to assess and improve the quality of education.

The main objective of the Bologna Process was to create a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), designed to be competitive and attractive on the global stage. As the process progressed, the ministers responsible for higher education recognized the imperative need for a coherent and systematic quality assurance framework to support and facilitate the development of the strategic initiatives of the Bologna Process. This awareness has led to the formulation and adoption of specific standards and guidelines to guide higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in their efforts to ensure and continuously improve the quality of education.

Thus, in 2005, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were adopted. A new form of them was adopted in 2015 and has become an essential tool in establishing common criteria and methodologies for evaluating and improving education quality. The adoption of ESG marked a turning point in the evolution of the Bologna Process, underscoring the essential importance of quality assurance as a foundation for achieving its goals of integrating and modernizing European higher education (ESG, 2015).

Today, international cooperation in quality assurance is one of the most remarkable successes of the Bologna Process, highlighting how ESG has been widely adopted and recognized as a valuable and indispensable framework. This universal recognition of ESG contributes to standardizing quality assurance practices and facilitating academic mobility, strengthening mutual trust between higher education institutions in different EHEA Member States.

The implementation of the ESG and the renewed commitment of ministers in 2020 underlines a continued evolution towards excellence in education, ensuring that universities in the European Higher Education Area remain at the forefront of innovation and educational quality (EHEA, 2020). This not only supports the individual aspirations of students, researchers and teachers but also improves cross-border cohesion and collaboration in education, research and mobility. Thus, quality assurance at the European level is affirmed as an essential pillar of educational integration and academic excellence within the Bologna Process.

Quality assurance in the Romanian context

Following the fall of the authoritarian regime in Romania, a significant change occurred in the structure of the educational paradigm of the education system. Between 1991 and 1992, the first private higher education entities were established. Immediately after, the year 1993 witnessed the adoption of Law no. 88/1993, which was the basis for the establishment of the National Academic Evaluation and Accreditation Council (CNEAA). This organization, subject to parliamentary supervision, was structured in evaluation commissions dedicated to different fields of study or specializations and consisted of members proposed by the Ministry of Education and approved by the Romanian Parliament, reflecting a low institutional autonomy.

With the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), Romania implemented an educational quality assurance and assessment framework, aligned with European criteria, through the Government Emergency Ordinance (GEO) no. 75/2005. This normative act emphasized the need to create a favorable framework for the development of a culture of quality in education and the protection of the beneficiaries of this system. The implementation of GEO no. 75/2005 led to the establishment of the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), an independent entity that took over the responsibilities, resources, and obligations of CNEAA, marking a significant evolution in the accreditation and quality assurance processes.

In the Romanian contemporary landscape of higher education, Law 199/2023 is the essential legislative pillar within the quality assurance mechanisms of higher education. It defines the mission of quality assurance activities, which is to contribute to strengthening the positive perception of society towards the local higher education system, highlighting its belonging to the European educational space. By promoting the mutual recognition of studies and qualifications obtained by students, as well as by supporting the academic mobility of students and graduates both nationally and internationally, the law underlines a clear commitment to effective integration in the global educational context. The definition of the quality of education, as provided in this law,

is a set of characteristics specific to each study program and the offering institution, which must meet both the established quality standards and the diverse expectations of the education beneficiaries.

Risk analysis for the quality assurance process in a Higher Education Institution (HEI)

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The risk analysis can be done on different risk units, such as the risk analysis of a company, of a department, of an activity, or of a process that underlies the institution's functioning. For the purpose of this paper, the risk analysis will be performed on the quality assurance process of one of the largest universities in Romania, namely the National University of Science and Technology POLITEHNICA Bucharest (Politehnica Bucharest).

Identifying risk related to quality assurance in a higher education institution (HEI)

The risk analysis begins with identifying the possible risks and drafting a risk list. The identification of risks can be done by using various methods. For this paper, the authors mainly used quality assurance managers' experience, the institution's history, and brainstorming. The quality assurance Director of the HEI organized a brainstorming session with 5 quality assurance experts and education institution employees to determine the most important risks that the HEI is facing in this process. The brainstorming lasted for 90 minutes and concluded with an agreed risk list, presented as follows:

Table 1. Identification of risks affecting the HEI quality assurance process

Risk no.	Risk
R1	Neglecting to conduct on-time external evaluation missions on time for bachelor's programs, master's domains, doctoral studies, or at an institutional level
R2	Changes in the legislation applicable to higher education and the quality assurance of higher education
R3	Lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the HEI technical-administrative structures of quality assurance
R4	Inadequate and subjective external review committee
R5	Non-fulfilment of quality assurance standards and indicators
R6	Digitalization of the quality assurance process
R7	Lack of human resources with knowledge and expertise in the field of quality assurance of higher education
R8	Standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies
R9	Low quality of external evaluation reports resulting from external assessment
R10	Neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations

Source: Authors' own contribution.

These ten risks were considered to be the most relevant for the quality assurance process in Politehnica Bucharest. They are presented in no particular order, as they emerged from the brainstorming session conducted for this purpose.

Description of identified risks

For a clearer understanding, the identified risks are depicted below:

R1: Neglecting to conduct on-time external evaluation missions on time for bachelor's programs, master's domains, doctoral studies, or at an institutional level. Universities may neglect external evaluations due to a lack of resources (human or financial) and even due to insufficient awareness of the non-evaluation of university study programs, and this can have serious consequences. In accordance with art. 30 of Law no. 199/2023 if a university organizes the admission process for programs not evaluated externally, the Ministry of Education starts the liquidation process of the university in question.

R2: Changes in the legislation applicable to higher education and the quality assurance of higher education. Frequent changes in legislation can profoundly affect the way universities manage the quality assurance of education. A slow adaptation to these legislative changes can lead to non-compliance, affecting the accreditation, reputation of the institutions and even their operation. It should be noted that in Romania Law no. 1/2011 (the last law that governed the higher education system at the national level) was amended more than 114 times until the adoption of the new Higher Education Law no. 199/2023, and this in turn was modified in the first week of the academic year 2023-2024.

R3: Lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the HEI technical-administrative structures of quality assurance. Ignoring recommendations from internal and external evaluations, a phenomenon sometimes encountered in universities, can be influenced by a lack of understanding of their importance. This attitude can lead to the stagnation of the quality of education in universities. However, the institutions that have effectively adopted the quality assurance system have developed additional structures, in addition to the Quality Assurance and Assessment Commission (CEAC) and technical-administrative entities, to support this process. These structures strive to communicate constantly with program managers, although the latter are not always receptive.

R4: Inadequate and subjective external review committee. Inadequate selection of external review committee members, chosen by an agency from the European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education (EQAR) from its own database, can compromise the effectiveness of this process. Universities request external evaluation missions from these agencies, but there is a risk that the committee members will become subjective in evaluating the files of the host universities. This can lead to assessments that do not adequately reflect the quality of education provided.

R5: Non-fulfilment of quality assurance standards and indicators. Lack of compliance with national and international standards in higher education quality assurance can be caused by insufficient resources or lack of expertise. This non-conformity not only affects the quality of the education provided, but can also lead to a decrease in the international recognition of the university. It is essential that higher education institutions continuously align their practices and processes with these standards.

R6: Digitalization of the quality assurance process. The digitalization of the quality assurance process represents a significant opportunity for universities and agencies. A balanced and well-thought-out implementation can lead to considerable improvements in the assessment and quality assurance process, increasing efficiency and accuracy. On the other hand, a rushed

implementation without proper planning can lead to data security issues and difficulties in data integration and interoperability.

R7: Lack of human resources with knowledge and expertise in the field of quality assurance of higher education. The lack of qualified staff in the field of quality assurance in universities can lead to an overload of existing human resources. This situation can negatively affect the efficiency and accuracy of internal educational quality assessment and assurance processes. It is essential that higher education institutions recognize the importance of investing in specialist human resources to sustain high-quality standards and avoid the risks associated with staff shortages.

R8: Standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodology. Lack of uniformity in reporting methodologies can create inconsistency and confusion, negatively impacting the ability to perform effective benchmarking. By synchronizing and standardizing data reporting methods in the context of continuous digitalization, universities can exploit the opportunity to collect and analyze data quickly and efficiently. This enables more informed decisions to be made, based on accurate and accessible real-time data, thus optimizing the decision-making process within higher education institutions.

R9: Low quality of external evaluation reports resulting from external assessment. Poor quality external assessment reports not only provide an inaccurate representation of the quality of education, but also influence the decisions of stakeholders such as students, teachers, investors and partners. Furthermore, the lack of concrete recommendations in these reports deprives universities of the opportunity to include them in future strategies. Thus, the quality and accuracy of the reports are crucial for a clear picture of the university's activity and to support the development and effective strategic planning within them.

R10: Neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations. Ignoring the recommendations of external evaluations can lead to the stagnation of progress in improving the quality of education. In addition, it deprives universities of a valuable external view essential for continued development and innovation. This is a crucial aspect, as an external perspective can provide new directions and solutions adapted to the current demands and needs of the academic community.

Classification of risks

The identified risks were then classified, for better understanding and analysis. The main criterion for classifying risks is based on their consequences (Hopkin, 2010). Risks that generate clear negative consequences fall into the category of hazard risks. They are easily quantifiable and they are also called operational risks because they prevent the normal conduct of the institution's operations.

Another category of risk is speculative or opportunity risk, which, can have positive effects, which, however, are not guaranteed. Opportunity risks are usually investments that the company makes and are considered to be under the control of the enterprise, as managers are the ones who decide to take them. The company risks human, financial, time, technological, and other resources in order to make a profit. This is the most important type of risk for the advancement of the organization.

The literature also mentions a third type of risk: uncertainty (control) risks. These risks have uncertain consequences. For them, the effect of the risky events is not known from the beginning. The effect can be better than the expected objective, but it may just as well deviate from the objectives, generating additional costs, increased material or human resource requirements, longer project completion times, difficulties in achieving the intended results, and so on.

Therefore, based on their consequences, the identified risks can be classified as follows (Table 2):

Table 2. Risks classification

Risk no.	Risk	Hazard risk	Control risk	Opportunity risk
R1	Neglecting to conduct on-time external evaluation missions on time for bachelor's programs, master's domains, doctoral studies, or at an institutional level		X	
R2	Changes in the legislation applicable to higher education and the quality assurance of higher education	X		
R3	Lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the HEI technical-administrative structures of quality assurance		X	
R4	Inadequate and subjective external review committee	X		
R5	Non-fulfilment of quality assurance standards and indicators	X		
R6	Digitalization of the quality assurance process			X
R7	Lack of human resources with knowledge and expertise in the field of quality assurance of higher education	X		
R8	Standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies		X	
R9	Low quality of external evaluation reports resulting from external assessment	X		
R10	Neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations		X	

Source: Authors' own contribution.

As depicted in Table 2, a diverse range of risks has been identified, encompassing risks related to human resources, technology, legislation, investment, administration, and communication.

Assessment of risks

Risk assessment is an essential process in risk analysis, as it allows the very diverse risks that have been identified in the previous steps to be evaluated quantitatively for easier decision-making regarding the mitigating actions that need to be taken by management.

For the evaluation of the identified risks, the risk index method was chosen (McNeil *et al.*, 2015). The risk index provides a clear illustration of the severity of any risk based on its probability of materialization, and on its impact in case the risk materializes. The risk index is calculated as:

$$R_i = P \times I \quad (1)$$

where: R_i = Risk index

P = Probability that the risk materializes

I = Impact (consequence) if the risk materializes

with P, I taking integer values between $[1 \dots 10]$.

In order to conduct this evaluation, five quality assurance managers and experts from Politehnica University were asked to assess the probability and impact of the previously identified risks. The results of their evaluation are presented in Table 3:

Table 3. Assessment of the identified risks

Risk. no	Risk	Probability (P)	Impact (I)	Risk index (Ri)
R1	Neglect to conduct external evaluation missions on time for bachelor's programs, master's domains, doctoral studies, or at an institutional level	3	9	27
R2	Changing the legislation on higher education and the quality assurance of higher education	8	8	64
R3	The lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the technical-administrative structures with attributions in the field of quality assurance at the university level	4	5	20
R4	Inadequate and subjective external review committee	5	5	25
R5	Non-fulfilment of quality assurance standards and indicators	3	7	21
R6	Digitalization of quality assurance process	7	9	63
R7	Lack of human resources with knowledge in the field of quality assurance of higher education	5	6	30
R8	Standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies	7	7	49
R9	Low quality of external evaluation reports resulting from external assessment	5	6	30
R10	Neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations	5	5	25

Source: Authors' own contribution.

It can be observed that R2, R6, and R8 are by far the most critical ones. They have been evaluated as having the highest impact and probability of occurrence, posing a real threat to the quality assurance process in higher education institutions. Changing the legislation on higher education and the quality assurance of higher education, the digitalization of the quality assurance

process and the standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies prove to be the most important and impacting threats that can affect the quality assurance process in higher education.

The least critical risks are R3, R5 and R10. The lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the technical-administrative structures with attributions in the field of quality assurance at the university level, and controversially, the non-fulfillment of quality assurance standards and indicators and neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations, are not as threatening, since they can be either resolved relatively easy or the university has the following 4-years period to solve them.

For an easier observation of all the risks that the higher education institution faces in the area of quality assurance, the assessed risks can be represented graphically using the risk matrix (Figure 1):

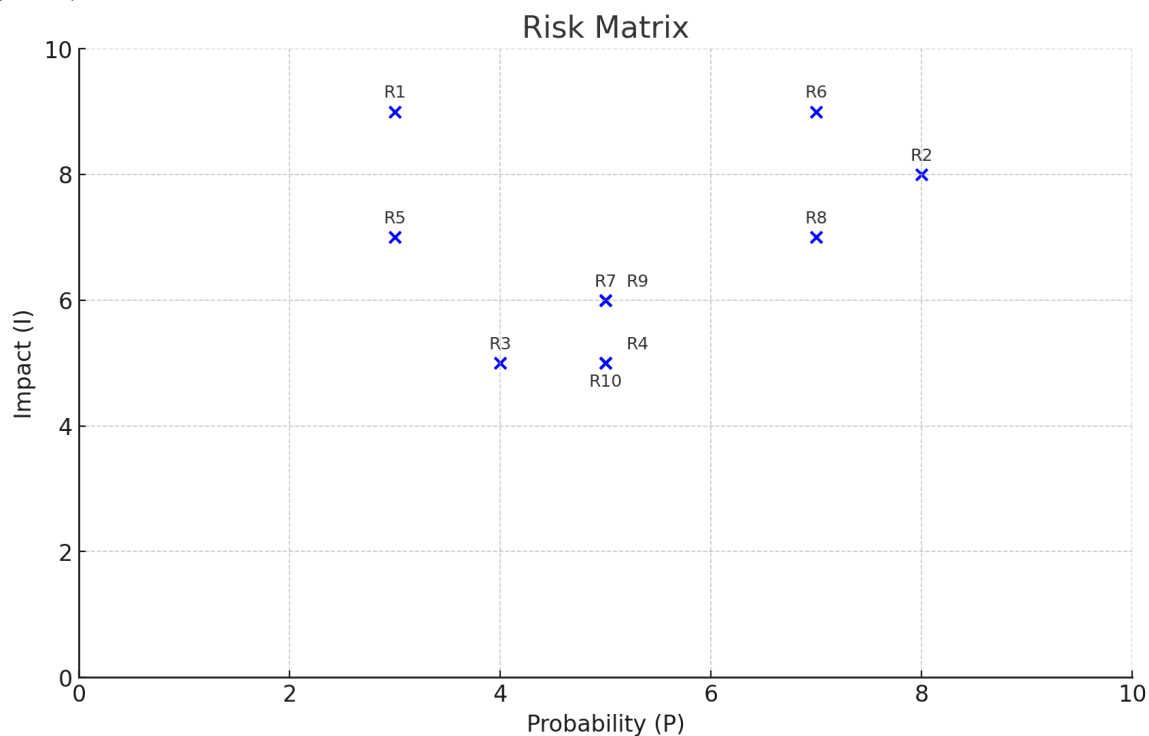


Figure 1. Risk matrix

Source: Authors' own contribution.

The risk matrix is a particularly important tool for risk analysis since it allows the visualization of all the risks affecting the institution in one single instance, and it emphasizes the critical risks and the ones that can be tolerated. It can be observed that most of the risks that were identified for the quality assurance process in the higher education unit under study are high-impact risks, even if some of them have a low probability of occurrence.

Risk management and mitigation

In the case of identified and assessed risks, based on the graphical representation of these risks using the Risk matrix, it is possible to recommend generic strategies for mitigating them. According

to the literature (Hopkin, 2010), risk management strategies are described as "the 4Ts, because they include the treat, tolerate, terminate, and transfer strategies.

In close connection with their position on the risk matrix (Figure 1), the four generic risk strategies are placed as follows: the transfer of risks to a third party (quadrant I), the termination of risks (quadrant II), the treatment of risks (quadrant IV) and the toleration of risks (quadrant IV). For the 10 risks affecting the quality assurance process of Politehnica Bucharest the generic risk management strategies are presented in Table 4:

Table 4. Generic strategies for risk management

Risk no.	Risk	Risk strategy
R1	Neglecting to conduct on-time external evaluation missions on time for bachelor's programs, master's domains, doctoral studies, or at an institutional level	Transfer
R2	Changes in the legislation applicable to higher education and the quality assurance of higher education	Terminate
R3	Lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the HEI technical-administrative structures of quality assurance	Tolerate
R4	Inadequate and subjective external review committee	Tolerate
R5	Non-fulfilment of quality assurance standards and indicators	Transfer
R6	Digitalization of the quality assurance process	Terminate
R7	Lack of human resources with knowledge and expertise in the field of quality assurance of higher education	Transfer
R8	Standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies	Terminate
R9	Low quality of external evaluation reports resulting from external assessment	Transfer
R10	Neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations	Tolerate

Source: Authors' own contribution

As resulted from Table 4, three of the risks that affect the quality assurance process in higher education institutions can be transferred to other stakeholders (R1, R5 and R9). This is specific to this process, in which a lot of different parties are involved. Another three of the identified risk can be tolerated, having low probability and low impact (R3, R4 and R10), with only two of the risks needing to be terminated, because they are critical to the quality assurance process.

However, in order to further detail the mitigation measures that can be applied to the identified risks, the authors advanced several particular solutions to these risks, detailed below:

R1 - Neglecting to conduct on-time external evaluation missions on time for bachelor's programs, master's domains, doctoral studies, or at an institutional level: The implementation of clear assessment preparation processes in universities is vital for ensuring the quality of education. This includes not only establishing clear and efficient procedures but also allocating the necessary resources such as time, funding and expertise. It is also crucial to develop an institutional culture

where teaching and support staff and students are aware of the importance of assessments and actively participate in the quality assurance process. This involves training and informing them about the standards and objectives of the assessment and how their input can positively influence the results. Therefore, adequate training and involvement of all stakeholders is essential to achieve high-quality standards in education.

R2 - Changes in the legislation applicable to higher education and the quality assurance of higher education: Active monitoring of legislative changes and rapid adaptation are essential aspects for higher education institutions. Constant attention is required to legislative changes that may affect the educational field, and rapid adaptation to these changes is vital to maintaining compliance and the efficient operation of universities. At the same time, ongoing staff training on the new regulations is crucial to ensure they are properly understood and to implement compliant practices. This continuous training contributes to strengthening staff skills and promoting an institutional culture oriented towards change and adaptability to legislative developments.

It is also imperative that the national representation structures of students, teachers and rectors support predictability in higher education and strongly oppose toxic legislative changes. The active involvement of these structures in legislative processes contributes to protecting academic interests and maintaining a stable and fair environment in higher education.

R3 - Lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the HEI technical-administrative structures of quality assurance: It is important to emphasize that the lack of training of external evaluators can affect the quality of recommendations in external evaluation reports. Quality assurance agencies should pay attention to investing in the initial and ongoing training of assessors they delegate to external assessment visits. This not only improves the quality of the evaluation process, but also strengthens the integrity and validity of the recommendations made, thus contributing to the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education.

R4 - Inadequate and subjective external review committee: Ensuring a rigorous and transparent selection of external review committee members is of crucial importance in the process of quality assurance in higher education. Key selection criteria should include not only technical skills, but also diversity and relevant experience in the field.

It is also essential that universities report to the external review agency if they experience difficulties in communicating and collaborating with the delegated external experts. This transparency in the reporting of experiences can facilitate more effective collaboration in the future and allows the agency to better know the profile of the people it delegates to ensure an appropriate match with the specific needs of the evaluated universities.

R5 - Non-fulfilment of quality assurance standards and indicators: Investments in the continuous training of staff and the appropriate allocation of resources are imperative aspects to ensure the quality of higher education. Extensive collaboration with other institutions, promoting the exchange of best practices, brings significant benefits in the continuous improvement process.

In addition, an effective strategy could involve the use of alternative assessments that do not adversely affect the functioning of the university. For example, universities could consider the IEP (Institutional Evaluation Program) assessments offered by the European University Association (EUA). These evaluations can provide an objective external perspective without imposing significant pressure on current activities, thereby contributing to quality improvement without disrupting the normal functioning of the institution.

R6 - Digitalization of the quality assurance process: Digitalization of quality assurance processes represents the opportunity that universities can exploit to achieve significant improvements in the process of assessment and quality assurance. Balanced and well-thought-out implementation of digitalization can increase the efficiency and accuracy of assessment processes. A strategic approach can facilitate access to relevant information, optimize workflows and strengthen data integrity. Thus, investment in digitalization can provide significant benefits, contributing to the efficiency of the quality assurance process in higher education.

R7 - Lack of human resources with knowledge and expertise in the field of quality assurance of higher education: Significant investments in continuing education and the recruitment of quality assurance talent are essential to the evolution and prosperity of a university. By ensuring a well-trained and specialized staff, the institution becomes able to respond to the complex demands of its environment, to innovate and adapt to changes in an effective and sustainable way. Thus, these investments not only contribute to the individual development of employees, but also to strengthening the organizational capacity in achieving its strategic objectives.

R8 - Standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies: The university can create its own performance indicators, which exceed the minimum level provided in national legislation. This initiative gives the university the opportunity to set its own standards and pursue academic excellence, thus helping to strengthen its prestige in the field of higher education. It is important to note that the university can create and participate in best practice exchanges with other partner institutions from various consortia, having the opportunity to learn and contribute to continuous improvement

R9 - Low quality of external evaluation reports resulting from external assessment: Ensuring a rigorous process of vetting and providing feedback for reports, alongside significant investment in the ongoing training of assessors. To strengthen this process, agencies can implement a mechanism to assess universities' satisfaction with the reports provided by evaluators. It is also crucial to allocate resources to ongoing investment in the training of assessors, ensuring that they are up to date with the latest practices and standards, which contributes to the continuous improvement of the assessment process.

R10 - Neglect to follow-up on the recommendations received following internal and external evaluations: The implementation of an effective system for monitoring and evaluating progress following recommendations is essential to ensure continuous improvement within higher education institutions. Universities should adopt and implement such a system, which allows for impact assessment and provides relevant data for evaluating the success of the implementation of the formulated recommendations. This monitoring and evaluation process not only reinforces the integrity of the quality assurance process, but also provides useful information for the continuous adjustment and optimization of institutional strategies.

The authors trust that if the proposed mitigation solutions are implemented, the probability and impact of the risks affecting the quality assurance in Politehnica Bucharest will decrease, and this process will be more efficient and performant.

Conclusions

Addressing the risks and opportunities in the quality assurance process in higher education is a crucial aspect for all Romanian universities. The article highlighted the various risks, such as the misunderstanding of the importance of external evaluations at all levels, the slow adaptation of

universities to the chaotic changes in legislation, the lack of specialized human resources or the low quality of external evaluation reports, which can affect the quality of university education and the strategic decisions of institutions of Higher Education. At the same time, the importance of the opportunities offered by the digitization of quality assurance processes, which can contribute to the continuous improvement of this vital process, was also emphasized.

Ten relevant risks that can impact the quality assurance process in Politehnica Bucharest were identified, then classified according to their consequences. They were further assessed using the Risk index method and were plotted for a better evaluation using the Risk matrix.

It can be observed that most of the risks that were identified for the quality assurance process in the higher education unit under study are high-impact risks, even if some of them have a low probability of occurrence.

Following the analysis the most critical risks, which have the highest impact and probability of occurrence, posing a real threat to the quality assurance process in higher education institutions, are: changing the legislation on higher education and the quality assurance of higher education, the digitalization of the quality assurance process and the standardization and synchronization of calendars and data reporting methodologies prove to be the most impact important and impacting threats that can affect the quality assurance process in higher education. The least critical risks are the lack of responsiveness of coordinators from faculties and departments to the recommendations received from the technical-administrative structures with attributions in the field of quality assurance at the university level.

The authors advanced generic mitigation strategies and also specific solutions, which, if implemented, can reduce the probability and the impact of the identified risks.

It is important to note that all these identified aspects can be applied not only to Politehnica Bucharest but to all universities in Romania. Regardless of size, location, or specialization, every academic institution faces challenges and opportunities in ensuring the quality of higher education.

Thus, the systematic approach to risks and opportunities, the implementation of proactive strategies for their management and the promotion of the exchange of best practices between universities can contribute to strengthening the quality of university education throughout the country. By investing in continuous staff training, creating effective systems for monitoring and evaluating progress, Romanian universities can strengthen the quality of education, effectively responding to the ever-changing demands of the educational environment and contributing to the sustainable development of society.

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