

**DIMENSIONS OF QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION  
SOME INSIGHTS INTO QUALITY-BASED PERFORMANCE  
MEASUREMENT<sup>1</sup>**

**Ioana Maria Diana ȘANDRU**

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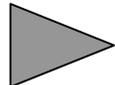
***Abstract***

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*The present paper aims to analyze the meaning of five quality dimensions in the field of higher education and establish to what extent quality related higher education can lead to performance. Based on the five quality dimensions, the paper seeks to offer some insights into quality based performance measurement.*

**Keywords:** quality, higher education, performance



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***Introduction***

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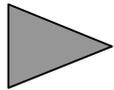
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How can one define quality in the educational setting? Is it about the features of the input that quality is associated with? Is it about keeping rules and reaching standards? Is it about fulfilling stakeholders' needs and expectations? Is it about the higher education institution assuming accountability and creating opportunities for people to become self-empowered through knowledge?

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<sup>1</sup> This article is based on Ioana Maria Diana Șandru's MA dissertation *Dimensions of Quality in Higher Education. Some Insights into Quality-Based Performance Measurement* presented within the framework of the Interdisciplinary Master Programme "English Language Education and Research Communication for Business and Economics", ASE Bucharest, 2008, having Prof. Dr. Laura Mureșan and Associate Prof. Dr. Mirela Bardi as academic supervisors.

Nowadays, a trend in linking quality to performance, for example, can be noticed; but is quality really one of the key factors that leads to performance, competitiveness, and afterwards to excellence? How can we know that? What is *evidence* showing that quality generates performance and that performance can not be reached without applying quality concepts, principles, models, and eventually systems?




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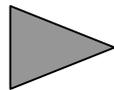
### *Quality dimensions in higher education*

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How is quality defined within higher education? Given the complexity of the concept there is no single definition to comprehensively describe its meaning; that is the reason why quality is discussed on the basis of dimensions. According to the literature in the field (Harvey and Knight, 1996 in Becket and Brookes, 2006:127), within the higher education field these dimensions which are “different but related” (idem) would refer to:

- „(1) *quality as exceptional (e.g. high standards);*
- (2) quality as consistency (e.g. zero defects);*
- (3) quality as fitness for purpose (fitting customer specifications);*
- (4) quality as value for money, (as efficiency and effectiveness); and*
- (5) quality as transformative (an ongoing process that includes empowerment and enhancement of customer satisfaction).”*




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### *Quality as exceptional*

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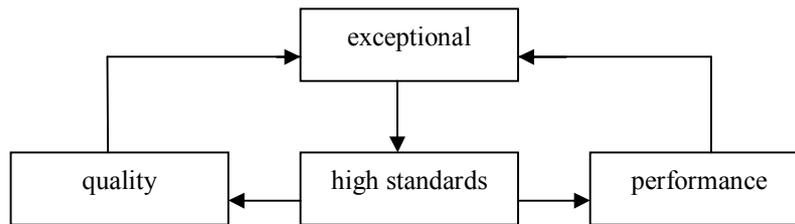
The first dimension defines quality as something “exceptional”. According to the online Oxford English Dictionary<sup>2</sup> „exceptional” means „out of the ordinary course, unusual, special”, „(...) something which stands apart from the perceived norm”.<sup>3</sup>

Under these circumstances it is quite natural to ask the following question: how is performance defined? According to the online Oxford English Dictionary, performance refers to the “1.b. *The quality of execution of such an action, operation, or process; the competence or effectiveness of a person or thing in performing an action; spec. the capabilities, productivity, or success of a machine, product, or person when measured against a standard.*”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>2</sup> accessed through the virtual library of the British Council Romania

<sup>3</sup> The same meaning of „1. (...) unusual, extraordinary” is granted by Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1996: 496) and further on extended to „2. unusually excellent, superior” (idem).

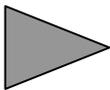
<sup>4</sup> Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1996:1070) defines performance as: “5. an action or proceeding of an unusual or spectacular kind”. Taking these definitions into account it could be concluded that within this context quality and performance become synonyms.



**Figure 1 Quality as exceptional**

Further issues that need to be tackled when discussing this dimension refer to:

- the level where the standards are defined, namely within a quality management system that applies to the whole higher education organization and/ or within each process of the organization. That higher education institutions formulate standards, i.e. high standards is already a fact; still to what extent are these standards extended and adapted to the particularities and requirements of the teaching-learning process within higher education institutions active in the field of economics and business?
- the match and compatibility of these high standards applicable to higher education with those according to which stakeholders and society, eventually, are being governed;
- the necessity and relevance of applying benchmarking.




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### *Quality as consistency*

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The second dimension refers to quality as “consistency”. There can be differentiated among certain levels, as shown in some of the dictionary definitions:

- coherence that makes things stand together, that unites parts by conferring meaning to the whole;<sup>5</sup>  
Teaching and learning (pieces of knowledge) in a logical manner, using the most appropriate examples and case studies, make knowledge consistent. In this context, what does qualitative teaching-learning actually refer to? One possible answer could refer to creating and developing **skills** by blending them with knowledge that is **substantial**, not superficial.
- Compatibility;<sup>6</sup>

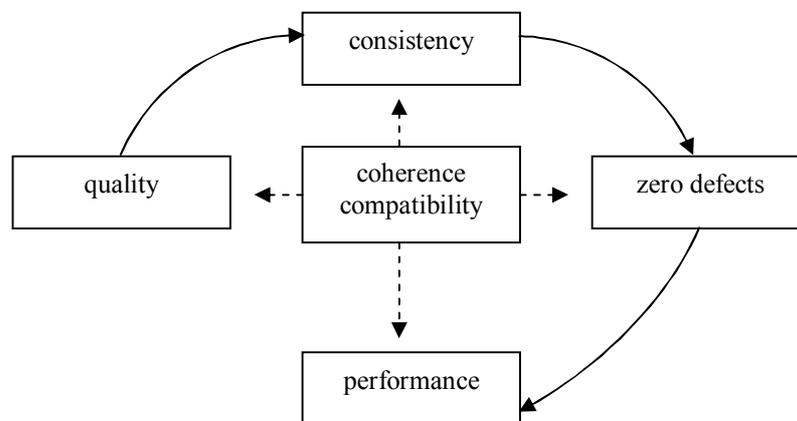
<sup>5</sup> “2.b. *fig.* Firm condition so as to hang well together; solidity; substance; 3.b. *fig.* Condition, degree, quality” (from the online Oxford English Dictionary) and “1. the condition of cohering or holding together and retaining form (...); 2. Degree of density” (Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1996: 313)

<sup>6</sup> “4. (...) agreement, harmony, compatibility (*with* something, *of* things, or *of* one thing *with* another)” (from the online Oxford English Dictionary) and “3. (...) adherence to the same principles (...); 4. agreement, harmony, or

On the one hand, the quality of the teaching-learning process is consistent in the sense that pieces of knowledge from other fields are integrated and put together. On the other hand, the quality of the teaching-learning process is consistent in the sense that the higher education institution's standards are reached and stakeholders' needs and expectations are met, society's standards being compatible with the ones set by the academic institution.

By this second meaning, the first dimension is linked with the second.

A possible way to understand the second dimension is suggested by the authors: "zero defects" (Becket and Brookes, 2006:127), no further comment being made. If we consider this meaning, then the products obtained are flawless: on the one hand, students turn into skilled and competent graduates that consequently fit and are also adaptable to the labour market demands, and on the other hand, standards formulated both by the higher education institution and society are met.

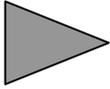


**Figure 2 Quality as consistency**

In order to achieve these goals, a great emphasis is placed on the way things are done (**how?**). If we refer, for instance, to the teaching-learning process then it is the **means** (method/ instrument) that stay under focus. "Zero defects" implies a 100% compliance with standards and norms. It can be concluded that by achieving no defects, performance is reached.

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compatibility; agreement among themselves of the parts of a complex thing (...)" (Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1996: 313)

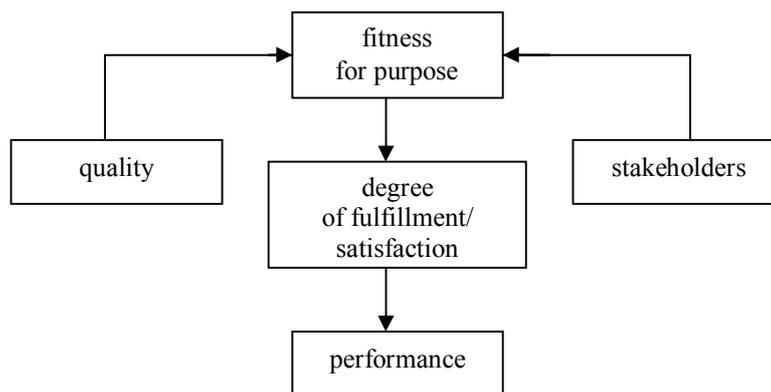


### ***Quality as fitness for purpose***

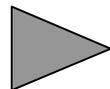
The third dimension relates quality to something that fits a purpose. The main question that has to be addressed is whose purposes are to be fulfilled; thus, the goals and expectations of both internal and external stakeholders: teachers, students, administrative staff, graduates, employers, parents, etc. need to be met. To what extent stakeholders are satisfied depends on the degree quality is understood and applied by all those who are engaged in activities and processes carried out within a higher education institution and/ or the “outside world”. Performance is reached when quality fits all (or as many) purposes (as possible) established.

By interpreting quality as fitness for purpose, the role higher education plays within society is highlighted. Serving a purpose implies the idea of usefulness, utility and also, capability to achieve goals. What is the aim of higher education? Are its aims compatible with those of its internal and external stakeholders?

One of the main issues that has to be addressed within this context is whether stakeholders’ purposes are explicit, respectively implicit and to what extent implicit purposes should also be decoded and achieved (by the higher education institution).



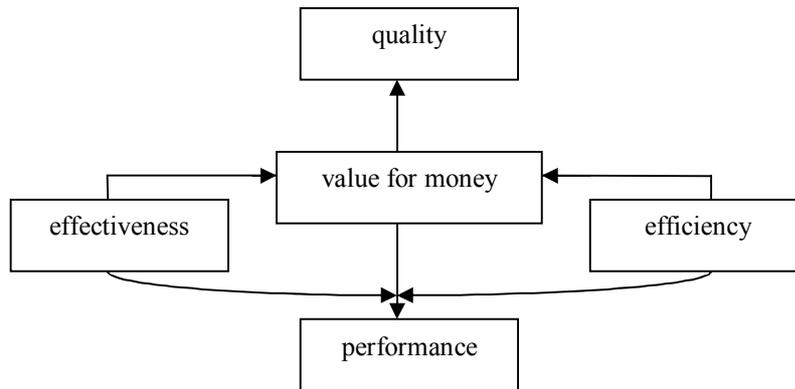
**Figure 3 Quality as fitness for purpose**



### ***Quality as value for money***

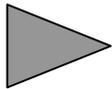
The fourth dimension describes quality as “value for money”, namely as “*quality in terms of return on investment*”. *If the same outcome can be achieved at a lower cost, or a better outcome can be achieved at the same cost, then the ‘customer’ has a*

quality product or service.” (Analytic quality glossary). In other words it is about efficiency and effectiveness.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 4 Quality as value for money**

If we take a look at the way Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (1996:1070) defines performance, namely as: “7. the manner in which or the *efficiency* with which something reacts or *fulfills its intended purposes*”, then, it can be concluded that quality as value for money becomes synonym with performance.




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### *Quality as transformative*

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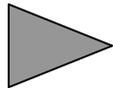
The fifth and last dimension according to this set, defines quality as something transformative. Quality is thus something active, capable of change. It can evolve and turn into something better, and consequently something that can be improved. Quality is not static, on the contrary, it is something dynamic and adaptable to new demands and requirements. It can be perceived as a set of processes that change continuously in response to inputs, that can be managed (controlled, measured), and whose feedback is evaluated in terms of improved outcomes.

According to Harvey and Knight „quality as transformative can incorporate the other dimensions to some extent, and the first four dimensions are not necessarily

<sup>7</sup> Effective refers to something “6.c. that is attended with result or has an effect” (from the online Oxford English Dictionary) or that is „1. adequate to accomplish a purpose; producing the intended or expected result” (Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1996:455). So, effectiveness is linked to reaching goals. Efficient means “1. performing or functioning in the best possible and least wasteful manner; (...) competent, capable (...); 2. satisfactory and economical of use” (Webster’s Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, 1996:455), so efficient is linked to preserving resources. Reaching the set goals with a minimum use of resources (human, financial, material), namely acting effectively and efficiently at the same time means reaching performance.

end products themselves.” (Becket and Brookes, 2006:128). Another aspect to be highlighted is that stakeholders perceive these dimensions in different manners, and thus, judge their relevance according to their criteria.

*“For example, quality as exceptional can be measured by both internal and external stakeholders through degree classifications awarded. However, quality as value for money is likely to be judged differently even by various internal stakeholders. Students may judge value for money according to tuition fees paid versus contact time, whereas a department manager is likely to be more concerned with effective use of resources in relation to student numbers.”* (Becket and Brookes, 2006:128).



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### ***Measuring performance***

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Nowadays, any higher education institution that aims at acting like a competitive actor on the market is expected and supposed to apply quality concepts and systems; what makes the difference is the capability to reach performance.

A much debated topic is the way quality based outcomes are quantified and the way the effects generated by the relationship quality-performance are measured.

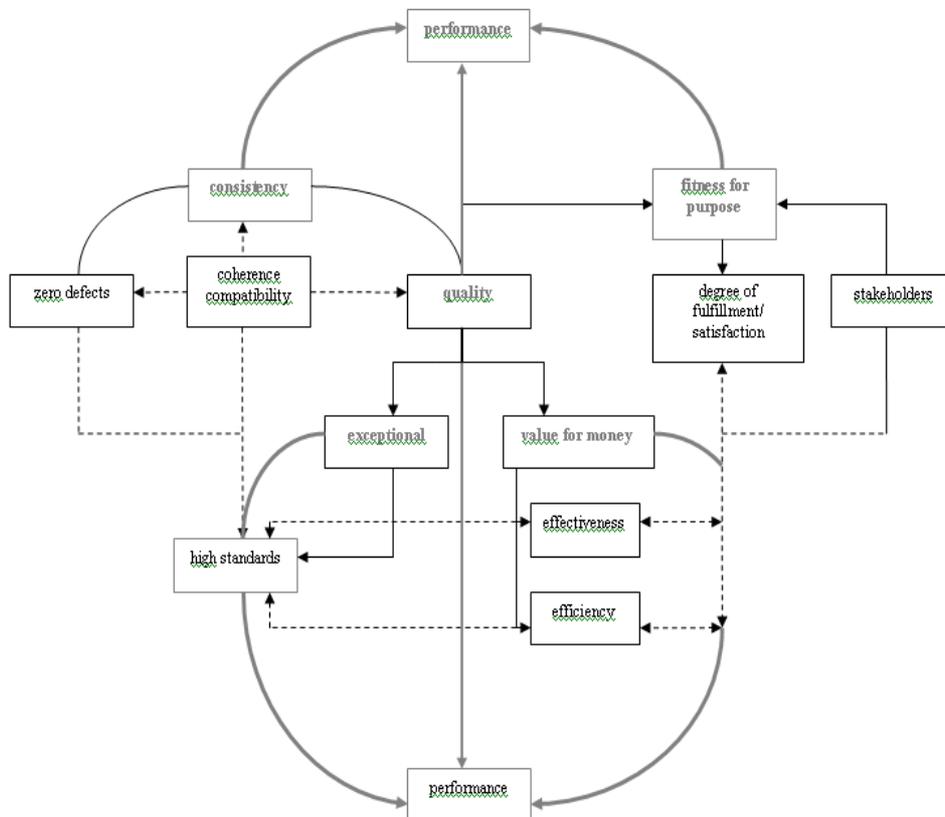
Criteria to measure performance have been applied in the business field. Hudson et al. (2001:1102) propose the following six concepts as “critical characteristics of performance measures”: quality, time, flexibility, finance, customer satisfaction and human resources. Let us see how these criteria would apply to the educational processes based on quality dimensions, especially the teaching-learning process. Consequently, the performance measurement will be discussed on the basis of all five dimensions, and since quality is embedded in all of them, it becomes an omnipresent factor.

Performance based on *quality as excellence* can be first of all measured on the existence of high standards derived from a set of reference standards that any higher education institution should apply. Excellence is achieved if the outcomes obtained exceed the values within a certain reference interval by the superior limit of the interval.

On the other hand, excellence is not a state of facts; it implies change. From this point of view this dimension is related to quality as transformative, since, most times, only a continuous and systematic chain of improvements leads to achieving excellence. Benchmarks can be, in this case, a useful means to measure performance.

Performance based on *quality as consistency* can be measured according to the skills and competences gained by students, if, for instance, the teaching-learning process is referred to. To what extent are students ready, prepared to face the challenges of a reality based situation/ experience – what are their attitudes, reactions? What is their capability of acting in an innovative way? What kind of arguments is their reasoning based on? At the same time, performance should be measured not only on the basis of what students/ graduates are able to perform, but also on the basis of the methods and models employed to teach students.

Flexibility is another criterion that can contribute to measuring performance based on quality as consistency: are students flexible, for instance? Are students capable to operate with concepts and adapt theoretical models to practical situations? Or are teachers (eventually, the educational system) capable to stimulate students' creativity by creating the opportunities for them to come with new, viable solutions?



**Figure 5 Integrative approach of quality dimensions**

Performance based on quality as fitness for purpose can be measured by the degree of stakeholders' satisfaction. Graduates' satisfaction, for example, depends on their capacity to integrate in and compete on the labour market, and in the business field by acting as entrepreneurs.

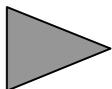
When referring to the measurement of performance based on quality as fitness for purpose, a crucial role is played by the quality of human resources. Teachers' involvement and productivity (as researchers, also) are important aspects that better help quantify performance.

On the quality of human resources, in particular, and on resources, in general, relies quality as value for money, performance being measured according to the "efficiency" variable. Costs and financial funds are also issues related to the educational processes; these also relate to this dimension.

Time is a resource, as well, and within the teaching-learning process this may refer to students' capability to work under pressure or teachers' capability of best training students' skills in a given period of time. This criterion should also focus on productivity (time needed for the completion of research work) or learning efficiency (time needed by students to digest and properly acquire knowledge) and resource utilization. The second variable used to measure performance is effectiveness: to what extent the set goals have been achieved.

A challenging endeavour is the attempt to measure performance by identifying those aspects that integrate the quality dimensions. For theoretical purposes and ease in establishing quality based performance measures, the five dimensions have been briefly presented above; but, as already stated, it is challenging to decode the mechanism that makes these dimensions interact and stick together:

- high standards versus efficiency and effectiveness;
- high standards versus zero defects;
- zero defects versus efficiency and effectiveness;
- zero defects versus stakeholders' satisfaction;
- efficiency and effectiveness versus stakeholders' satisfaction;
- high standards versus stakeholders' satisfaction.
- quality as transformative concept (that according to the approach presented in this paper, see fig. 5, has the role of bringing together the other four dimensions);
- quality as transformative – improvement versus customer satisfaction.



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### *Conclusions*

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Though quality concepts have been transferred from the business environment to the educational field, they still need to be explained and analyzed according to the specificity of educational processes. The article aims to briefly demonstrate that

between “quality” and “performance” there is a strong link, as well as to present some approaches to quality-based performance measurement.

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***The author***

**Ioana Maria Diana Şandru** is a Teaching Assistant at The Bucharest Academy of Economic Studies. She teaches Quality Management within the UNESCO Chair of the Faculty for Business Administration (in Foreign Languages). Her professional interests include measuring performance and applying quality based concepts and methods in higher education.