Ethics in Academia: The Impact of Ethics on the Quality of Higher Education Services
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Abstract: *The paper examines one of the categories of problems facing the academic world – violations of ethical facts. We have thus discussed a few elements that together lead to better academic activities, and thus to a higher degree of quality in universities: The professional relationship between students and teachers, the resolution of harassment cases, or the avoidance of favoritism. I have therefore looked at the consequences of deviations from ethical principles in universities, and so I have come to the conclusion that such cases lead to the creation of a hostile academic environment where students cannot perform, they cannot express themselves freely and thus affect the overall quality of academic services.*
Keywords: *massification, ethics, quality of education, harassment, favoritism.*

I. Introduction

The University is a complex organization in the environment that is a very large number of institutional actors, which differ in terms of race, gender, abilities, incapacity, religion or political beliefs. There are inevitably different relationships between all these people, be they of power or status. However, it is important that these members of the Academic Community can enjoy respect and recognition from others. They should both enjoy the exercise of certain rights and care for the well-being of the other members of the university. Thus, universities, with double posts (as a service institution and the professional community), can generate various problems, some of which are ethical in nature. If neglected, several aspects risk being affected, such as: student satisfaction with the quality of studies, graduate satisfaction with their academic course, management efficiency or overall quality of academic services. Therefore, one of the main solutions proposed to solve such problems is the existence of university codes of ethics, which are intended to explicitly formulate ideals, principles, values and moral norms that members of the Academic Community agree to adhere to and follow.[1]

When we talk about higher education, several elements come to mind. Whether we mean students, performance, research, quality, innovation, all these components together create a system of information, values and principles that are distributed and shared with an increasing number of students and beyond. I am referring here to the

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process of massification of higher education, which involves providing academic services to the widest population, making a comparison between the current society in Romania and the one before the 1989 revolution.[2]

The reason why I am raising the process of massification is that, in view of the shift from an elitist to a mass system, this has made the teacher-student relationship change and somewhat affected. As there are now increasingly rare cases where a teacher is entrusted with a limited number of students to work with, fewer and fewer students are now known to university staff and, at the same time, fewer and fewer students know their teachers. This alienation toward teachers means that their impact on students is as small and "diluted" as possible, in the sense that the same information reaches as many students as possible, but in the least possible quality.[3]

That said, the reason for this work is, of all the components listed initially, that of the quality of higher education from an ethical point of view. In other words, in this paper I will try to discuss the ethical component of higher education and, more specifically, to answer the question: "Can we talk about a correlation between the occurrence of ethical issues in universities and a decline in the quality of the academic process?" I have chosen to speak specifically about this because I believe that when we talk about quality in higher education, intuitively we are looking at several elements: performance, satisfaction, friendly environment, teacher-student relationship, etc. All of this contributes to the student's overall condition and, more specifically, to the way it relates to the academic environment of which he or she is a member. Given that there have been, and still are, ethical issues in universities (favoritism, verbal/sexual harassment, inadequate teacher behavior), I believe that all of these can have a negative impact in terms of student performance and hence, it is an impediment to increasing the quality of higher education. Next, I will discuss the importance of a professional relationship between teachers and students, and I will clarify what I mean when I mention ethical issues in universities.

II. The teacher-student relationship and ethical problems encountered

Firstly, given the ability of universities to issue diplomas, this places teachers in a dual position: That of teacher and that of reviewer of the performance of their students. The responsibilities of this dual role are sometimes difficult and uncomfortable. While teachers are motivated by the desire to contribute to the advancement of both students personally and academically, they also need to behave as a judge of their own success as a teacher. It is thus an internal tension between the desire to encourage and motivate students to learn and the responsibility to be the judge of their performance. Thus, the credibility of teachers among students may depend on their ability to manage situations involving justice and fairness as much as their actual teaching quality.[4]

Also, another ethical aspect that I consider relevant to my work is the way in which the teacher addresses the situation where students are not prepared and fail to provide satisfactory answers. A form comment "you could think before you open your mouth", for example, can make student participation, or even others, significantly decrease, as for the student when they decide to answer in the class, this represents a personal risk to a group of colleagues. For students, speaking in class is a psychological security situation (is it worth the risk?). Having an verbal contribution that is either incorrect or poorly received by the teacher can expose the student to embarrassment or even humiliation in the classroom.[5]

Thus, according to the study conducted by Mihai Paunescu and Simona Ciotlăuş[6], students consider "the good teacher" to be punctual, during the course hours he is visibly interested in understanding, but also shows that he respects his students. Also, this kind of teacher, in the students' view, must do more than the students could do, that is, not relate to reading from some PowerPoints or simply to their superficial examination. The "good teacher" must be more involved, encourage debate and take everyone's opinion into account, so that students feel they are actually taking part in these classes. Therefore, in the light of student responses, I believe that all these elements are a first step in terms of the ethical approach in universities, relevant for the good conduct of academic work.

"There are courses where they simply read from those slides, and it seemed to me a half hour in which you learned nothing, do some robot work and get me more. And then I didn't go to those courses, there was no presence, and then I really didn't motivate myself to go" (A., International relations and European studies, first year, West University, Timișoara)[7] such a statement, drawn from the interview given to a first-year student, it shows how the attitude the teacher has in his class counts a lot when it comes to the way students report at the time. We bear in mind, however, that such behavior (teacher's delay in classes, superficial teaching of matter) is not seen by students as some of the worst ethical deviations that occur in universities, but that is what I will talk about a little later in the paper. In the meantime, however, I would like to add one more answer given by another student in connection with the teacher-student relationship, namely:

"I have a pretty good relationship with a few teachers there, with whom I talk about these matters and they admit that … they constantly form researchers and, yes, it's not okay… you can't get so many researchers out in the context of a mass education. We don't need so much more, we only need people who are oriented toward practical things, and this is not often the case" (V., European relations, Faculty of History and philosophy, year III, "Babeș-Bolyai" University, Cluj-Napoca).[8] The reason I also added this paragraph is that this student mentions precisely the massification that I spoke about earlier when he talks about "mass education". I understand from this that both students and teachers are aware that in today's society, there is the possibility that some universities may gradually become "diploma factories"[9] and thus an oversaturation of the graduate market, in areas where labor supply is not appropriate. A problem arises here, therefore, as regards the level of quality in higher education, when either a part of the students is not interested in the classes they attend, or the teacher pays more attention only to some students and thus neglects others, and as a result, an imbalance is created, as the equity factor is affected.[10]

III. Ethics in Romanian universities

As I said previously in the paper, I am going to discuss the main ethical problems encountered in Romanian universities, considering the prospects of both students and teachers or auxiliary staff. As ethical issues can arise at any level in a university, I think it is necessary to take as many views and points of view as possible into account in order to give us a clearer picture as possible of immoral and deontological facts in universities. Thus, the question we need to answer is no longer "how many students do we have?", but rather "what are the skills and programs that we can offer to students to create utility and competition for their professional integration?".[11]

As regards the results of research in short, I think it is interesting to note that regardless of the category of respondents (students, teachers, managers or administrative staff), the most serious ethical problem has been reported as that of favoritism, whatever kind of favoritism we are discussing. The problem is closely related to sexual harassment, in line with the hierarchy, followed by the erotic relations between students and teachers, as well as by clique relationships in the academic and administrative bodies. I also mention here: politicization of university education, use of offensive language by teachers and failure to inform students in advance.[12]

As different categories of respondents, there are some differences in their perception of the ethical seriousness of some of the problems raised in universities. Thus, comparing the hierarchy of the importance of these problems from the perspective of management and teachers, it can be noted that both categories mention favoritism as the most serious ethical problem of higher education. Also, both administrative staff and doctoral candidates agree on this matter. However, at the university management level, the are not signaled such problems as: clique relations, equal opportunities, or bribes offered to teachers. On the other hand, it is also significant that problems such as non-compliance with intellectual property do not arise in the top of the most serious ethical issues raised by teachers. Looking at the hierarchies proposed by each category of institutional actors, the main ethical issues come to light, namely favoritism and sexual harassment in a hierarchy, as these two are at the top of each category that participated in the research.[13] For this reason, I will continue to stop at one of the two irregularities, namely sexual harassment in universities.

Firstly, through sexual harassment I understand the proposal for unwanted sexual advances, requests for sexual favors or other such conduct, whether physical or verbal, of a sexual nature, which occurs in situations where the victim and the aggressor have power relationships. These power relationships thus place the injured person in a delicate, vulnerable position, whether we are talking about public space, the workplace or the school environment.[14] It is also a form of discrimination and violence prohibited by law, and, according to the European Commission, it represents "*any conduct aimed at creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive space*".[15]

However, as far as university is concerned, the issue of sexual harassment remains, according to the FILIA Center, an issue which is insufficiently explored in both the media and academia. Thus, in an exploratory study carried out by FILIA in 2015 to highlight the occurrence of sexual harassment in universities, 668 people (551 women) responded and the results show: 1 out of 2 respondents consider that there is sexual harassment in universities and the main solution that half of the participants have offered is the introduction of sanctions proportional to sexual harassment in university codes of ethics.[16]

In view of the significant number of people mentioned in the previous paragraph who have experienced cases of sexual harassment or observed their existence in universities, I note, however, that not many such cases have come before ethics committees, for administrative decisions. I am referring here to the data that, over the decade 2005-2015, only three cases of sexual harassment have taken an institutional course in the 55 Romanian public universities.[17] It is therefore clear that many such cases are either solved without media coverage or remain unknown for too long, during which time the victims of such actions suffer from both the personal and academic point of view. With Carol Jordan et.Al's study on the correlation between sexual harassment and academic performance of students[18], more than 40% of women who arrive at university experienced sexual harassment in the early years Moreover, women who have been victims of such

abuse tend to get lower grades in their first years of faculty, and they also tend to have overall lower academic results than women who have not experienced such occurrences.

I consider such data relevant when we discuss the negative impact that this ethical problem of sexual harassment has on the quality of the academic environment, especially for students who are in the first year or even the first half of their faculties. For them, such a trauma means that their academic performance is very low, which can only contribute to a general decrease in the morale and health of the victim, leading to a gradual decline in quality overall, the quality of the academic environment.[19]

Although, as I said in the introduction of the peper, a viable solution to prevent such behavior that runs counter to ethics would be the existence of codes of ethics in universities, it may be useful to take a look at the assessment students are making (if and how often they do) about their teachers. I say this because, as we have seen in the articles discussed earlier, the problem is often that ethical irregularities (harassment, favoritism, bribery, etc.) do not end up on the surface, being either hidden or discovered far too late. For this reason, I believe that there should be a little more emphasis on these assessments, in which students can express themselves freely and anonymously in terms of both the behavior and performance of their teachers. Even though, according to Maarten Goos and Anna Salomons (2016)[20], the most common method of measuring quality in higher education is the assessments made by students themselves, I believe that this is not the only benefit of these assessments. Through these, such cases/incidents that violate ethical principles can be shared and thus it would be easier for students to make themselves heard when they encounter such problems. However, according to the two authors mentioned above, these assessments suffer from very low response rates, especially if they are made online. This is not at all desirable, given that the evaluation of teachers is among the few or even the only way to provide students with feedback on the quality of their teachers' teaching/behavior.

Turning now to the codes of ethics, I would like to discuss a specific example, a case study that was carried out on the "Faculty of Economics and Business Administration" (FEAA) at the University of "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" in Iasi (UAIC), where certain ethical irregularities were reported. According to Iulian Warter, *'ethical behavior is based on transparency and fairness of the information of the interested parties'.*[21] From this point of view, the FEAA and the management of the univesity do not provide some data and the data that are published are partially erroneous. Thus, the external evaluator Prof. Dr. Windried Muller mentions in the report 'the Internal quality assessment report 2013/14 (IQAR)' that there is a lack of clarity as to the number of teaching positions and the number of students, given that the data provided by the university are partially contradictory. Also, some study programs appear to exist only on paper. Moreover, the same evaluator noted that the university did not prepare a self-assessment for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), but only the IQAR report, which is not too self-critical and does not contain a SWOT analysis, and the data provided in that report are not always consistent.[22]

As far as the Ethics Committee and the Code of University Ethics are concerned, things are not better here either. The above-mentioned evaluator points out that it is not at all right for an ethics commission to be composed entirely of members of the same institution and thus not able to handle sensitive cases. Another interesting thing is that the rules contained in the statute of the Ethics Committee are being violated by the very university leadership, as is apparent from that report. Thus, an attack on the person not based on evidence of the alleged actions

was accepted by the Ethics Commission and the accused was put in a position to justify and prosecute, facing false accusations and claims from the plaintifer. This case was found to be in contradiction with Article 11 of the Ethics Commission Regulation.[23]

However, one of the most serious problems is probably the fact that the ethics Commission is judging by a code of university ethics that does not respect legal grounds, as the Ministry of Education claimed. Thus, according to the annual reports by the Ethics Committee, this has already been happening for several years[24]

Continuing in the same way, the records of certain disciplines are made superficial and sometimes not respected by teachers. The ARACIS evaluator thus mentions that there are teachers at the university who do not respect their discipline sheet and the screening method they proposed to students at the beginning of the course.[25] These aspects are also known by the university, as the 2018 Rector's report on the status of the UAIC in Iași mentions: "*As a negative aspect, we admit the incomplete posting of the necessary information for students on course support, discipline sheets, evaluation criteria, etc. and also the insufficient monitoring of the way in which the specialized practice is carried out within the faculties.*[26]

Moreover, the lack of transparency is also noted by the fact that the student's assessments are not made public, despite the legal obligation for students to be posted on the university website. The evaluators also noted a lack of transparency in the income and expenditure of the university.[27] Another aspect pointed out by the evaluator was that teachers who are paid by the hour did not display their CVs or the relationship with their scientific work on the site. Moreover, the teachers have not posted the above-mentioned documents on the website either.[28]

Quality culture is not developed at this university, according to Prof. Dr. Winfried Muller, who notes a suggestive case by an associated FEAA professor who teaches quality Management and is also head of the UAIC quality Management Department. He does not have his own course support for his classes, and thus he teaches after a book published more than 10 years ago, based on decades-old Romanian publications[29]

Another ethical problem that Iulian Warter observed in his research was that, in a contest for a teaching post he attended, the Commission President and some of its members are co-authors of the work of the candidate, which was published shortly before the contest. In this way, both the candidate and the members of the commission have ensured that they successfully meet the minimum standards imposed on their positions.[30]

That there are carelessly built record books, lack of course support, unnecessary or poorly addressed disciplines, recurring disciplines, delayed and incomplete posting of student material, These are examples of practices leading to a decrease in the quality of the academic process in any faculty, not just the FEAA. In addition to these practices, it is also worth mentioning: the employment of close relatives in the same department, the too large number of students who can be admitted (where the number of university staff is not sufficient), but also the expression of the FEAA Dean such as "*discipline holder can do whatever he wishes*"[31], these are other deeply non-ethical issues that can have serious implications in terms of quality.

Having said that, I believe that there is a close connection between ethics and quality when we talk about higher education. Quality comes from good moral attitudes, from culture as a result of education and from the use of the information acquired to successfully practice in the fields concerned. Thus, quality often refers to patterns that we build as "good" or "bad", and they guide our actions, which links us to ethics by reference to philosophical rhetoric, i.e. concepts such as "good", "bad", "fair", "wrong", "ethical" or "non-ethical".

In conclusion, what I have tried in this work was to highlight a few aspects, some even taken from real events, in terms of the importance of ethics in the academic world, especially the Romanian one. As I said in my introduction, through ethics I referred to those desirable moral behavior, which make the academic world welcoming, performant and in which each institutional actor can develop both personally and in an academic way. In order for these values to be respected, as we have seen, it is necessary to adopt codes of university ethics. In practice, they contain clear regulations as to what is and what is not ethical in such an environment, with the mention that the codes of ethics are properly applied. We have therefore discussed the link between ethics and the concept of quality in higher education and, in my view, we cannot talk about quality in a university without considering compliance with desirable moral standards. Whether we are talking about favoritism, sexual harassment, or inappropriate behavior during classes (either students or teachers), all these elements are impediments to creating a pleasant environment in which everyone can express themselves freely and develop as a person, and as a future researcher.

Notes

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[5] Ibid, pp. 56-57

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[7] Ibid., p. 63

[8] Ibid., p. 64

[9] Socaciu, Emanuel et al., *"Academic Ethics and integrity",* University of Bucharest Publishing House, 2018, p. 46

[10] Macfarlane, Bruce, *"Teaching with Integrity. The ethics of higher education practice"*, RoutledgeFalmer, New York, 2004, p. 64

[11] Miroiu, Mihaela, Cutaș, Daniela; Bulai, Ana; Andreescu, Liviu and Ion, Daniela*, "Ethics in universities. How it is and should be: Research and Code"*, 2005, p. 9

[12] Ibid, pp. 4-8

[13] Ibid. pp. 6-9

[14] Association for freedom and Gender Equality (OPT), *"sexual harassment in universities",* 2014, p. 1, available online at: http://aleg-romania.eu/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/Doc.-de-pozitie-5_Hartuirea-sexuala-in-universitati.pdf , accessed at 12.01.2021 a.m. 18:15

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[18] Jordan, Carol E., Combs Jessica L. şi Smith, Gregory T., *"An Exploration of Sexual Victimization and Academic Perforance Among College Women"*, Trauma, Violence & Abuse (SagePub), vol. 15, 2014, p. 191

[19] Ibid., p. 196

[20] Goos, Maarten şi Salomons, Anna, *"Measuring teaching quality in higher education: assessing selection bias in course evaluations"*, Springer, 2016, pp. 342-343

[21] Warter, Iulian, *"The Nexus Between Ethics and Quality in Higher Education. Case Study"*, Journal of Intercultural Management and Ethics, nr. 2, 2019, p. 123

[22] Ibid.

[23] Ibid., p. 125

[24] UAIC, *"2017 Ethics Commission report"*, available online at: Raportul-Comisiei-de-Etica-pentru-anul-2017.pdf (uaic.ro), accessed on 14.01.2021 at 15:10

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[27] Ibid., p. 6-7

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[29] Ibid., p. 128

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