

Evaluation Capacity Building as a Means to Improving Policy Making and Public Service in Higher Education

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1 The Need for Evaluation Capacity Building

In order to strengthen the processes of organizational learning and to improve the policy making and implementation process in various public sector areas, organizations have been searching for means of putting evaluation into practice at the organizational level and offering their staff and management opportunities to learn about evaluation and to include evaluative thinking and acting in their day-to-day routine. In this respect, evaluation capacity building has become a very prolific topic of discussion and writing in the evaluation field since the year 2000 (Compton et al. 2001; Preskill and Boyle 2008). In the higher education system, among other fields like public health or social policy, evaluation capacity building has to deal with various stakeholders' interests and values and try to find a way of integrating evaluation as part of the system and not as an intrusive, external activity that has to be done in order to comply to external or internal pressures.

Throughout this analysis, the higher education system is seen as consisting of at least two types of organizations: those who provide educational services (such as universities), and those which possess attributions in the decision making process, policy planning and implementation, regulation, control or mere executive functions (such as the Ministry of National Education, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS), the National Authority for Qualifica-

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tions, the Executive Agency for Higher Education, Research, Development and Innovation Funding (UEFISCDI)). The following evaluation capacity building framework is addressed to the second type of organizations, in order to discuss a set of elements which can facilitate their organizational learning and improve their policy making functions. This choice was made because of the important part that the second type of organizations plays in the decision-making process.

There is a growing need in the Romanian higher education system for identifying mechanisms for improving public policies in the field of higher education and, implicitly, of other services which are complementary to the educational process, such as the impact of scholarships on improving the access to higher education and the quality of the educational process; the implementation of systems for acknowledging and validating qualifications and the related consequent competences; improving and increasing access to counselling and professional orientation services, among others. Evaluation is becoming more and more visible and used as one mean to improve policies, programs and/or organizations. Evaluation can be used not only as a step in the public policy making process, but also as an individual process for collecting, analyzing and interpreting the necessary facts for grounding, improving, legitimating, correcting and adapting policies, or even for developing capacities at the organizational level in general, and especially at the level of expert teams within organization. In spite of the fact that evaluation has been promoted in the Romanian public sector as part of the public policy cycle, in practice using evaluation at this state is relatively infrequent as there is no strategy in developing evaluation expert or funding the evaluation step of the policy making process and thus, evaluation rarely stays at the bottom of a new public policy.

The practice of evaluation started to develop in Romania only after the second half of the 1990s, and one of the factors which led to the institutionalization of this practice was the conditionality and expectations linked to different financing opportunities from external sources (Perianu 2008; Cerkez 2009a, b). During this period, the best examples of this are represented by the financing which was offered by international financial institutions and external donors. Even though the use of joint evaluation was encouraged as a mean for contributing to the development of an evaluation culture in partner countries, Romania as a recipient country and partner in the evaluation process was not able to create its own evaluation capacity, partly due to the fact that the evaluations were centred on the needs of the external donors, following their planning and programming cycle and not that of the partner country—and this was a common issue among those experimenting the joint evaluations (Dabelstein 2003). The educational field was one of the first beneficiaries of these development instruments which were accessed by Romania. For example, on the 31st of May 1996 the Romanian Government and the EU signed the Financial Memorandum for implementing the Phare Programme RO9601 Universitas 2000, which consisted in undertaking activities for evaluating components of the system in order to accomplish structural changes in Romanian higher education system. Thus, in association with the Reform of Higher Education and Research Project (Loan 4096-RO), financed by the World Bank and implemented by the Romanian Government, a series of exercises were conducted during the

1997–2001 period for evaluating procedures, methodologies and organizations within the national higher education and research system in order to improve the public policy making processes in this sector. On the other hand, a vast exercise in the field of evaluation took place between 2000 and 2001 as part of the Education Reform Project RO 3742 which was financed by the Romanian Government and the World Bank, its objective being to evaluate the implementation of the curricular reform for compulsory schools in the 1990–2000 decade (Vlasceanu et al. 2002).

After this period, once Romania's participation in European programs in the field of education and higher education began to increase, it became understood and clear that financing would critically depend on the evaluation of programs and projects which were implemented. What is more, with the advance of the reform in the central and local administrative sectors, the need for evaluation intensified both in terms of evaluating projects, programs and policy, but also in terms of evaluating organizations in order to increase their performance. For example, in the case of higher education system, quality assurance was established as a compulsory process (Law 87/2006). It wanted to lead to the implementation of a national system for quality assurance and was based on periodical internal and external evaluations. This entails the continuous evaluation of the educational process as a whole, as well as the organizational performance of higher education institutions which are subject to periodical evaluations. As a consequence, based on the experience which was accumulated during a policy cycle of quality assurance in higher education it became possible to apply a national exercise for collecting data and information for evaluating universities and study programs in order to classify universities and rank study programs. On the one hand, this exercise offered an overview of Romanian higher education institutions, as well as a series of data for grounding a new cycle of policies regarding higher education financing, quality assurance, developing research programs etc. On the other hand, this exercise demonstrated a level of institutional maturity of the actors within the system, as far as the use of evaluation as an useful instrument is regarded. In this case, universities as actors which are part of the system, used quality assurance as a guide in order to increase their performance, adaptability and friendliness, as well as a means for public accountability.

Evaluation capacity building as a means for improving organizational performance and public policies and programs is an aspect which has not been studied extensively in Romania. Also, its practical use for organizational learning is reduced. On the one hand, this subject is approached by few authors in Romanian specialized literature in spite of the fact that at the international level the interest for developing the evaluation capacity as an element of organizational change, and also the causes, motivation, influences, results or its use has a long tradition. On the other hand, universities' superficial approaches to evaluations prove that neither evaluation, nor organizational learning are understood and perceived as instruments capable of generating knowledge and reducing time for solution-finding. Though they could lead to organizational development towards finding more efficient, flexible and lasting solutions, university tend to neglect them. They mime achieving the standards, replicate the behaviour of older organizations or accomplish only the

minimum of what is demanded through standards and indicators in order to obtain formal recognition or financing, proving once again the lack of prospective thinking.

Organizational learning thus occurs in an unstructured manner, with significant losses regarding the accumulated experience and with weak emphasis on vision. Practices such as reforms which dismantle everything that was being built through the previous reform, without thinking strategically and selecting elements which can be used or further developed are another indicator of the lack of continuity in the thinking of policies and of the insufficient use of organizational learning. For example, between 2009 and 2011, through the Quality and Leadership for The Romanian Higher Education Project, UEFISCDI performed an exercise of systemic foresight for the development of higher education policy makers' prevision and leadership capacities. This approach was based on learning by examples and participation in the elaboration of strategic documents like Green Paper and White Paper (Andreescu et al. 2012). Although the exercise involved a large participation, the universities and policy makers did not implement the institutional recommendations designed within the White Paper.

Evaluation can also be used for adapting policies and organizations, thus contributing to saving time and increasing the probability of identifying an adequate alternative. Thus, during the time when a policy, a program or an organization develops, on-going or intermediary evaluations can point out eventual problematic aspects, difficulties, reticence, unfavourable conditions, unintended effects (positive or negative), alternative ways for handling problems, as well as opportunities occurred on the way that could be valued in order to increase the impact of the development process. This would allow reflection and finding, in due time, solutions for improving implementation and for getting closer to the intended results or effects. An anticipative adaptation approach offers the possibility of diminishing uncertainty periods and risks, informing debate and decision taking thus ensuring the continuity of the programs' implementation or of the organizations' activity. Understanding as early as possible which aspects can be improved also increases flexibility, allowing measures to be taken before an activity has advanced too far for changes to be made. Furthermore, costs are reduced because activities are stopped from unfolding towards possible deficient outcomes and allow for fixing inefficiencies as they appear, and for redirecting resources to aspects which deserve more or are in need of additional support.

2 Developing a Logical Framework for Evaluation Capacity Building in the Romanian Higher Education System

In spite of the fact that the technical assistance programs from the EU pre-accession period enabled the development of initiatives aimed towards generating a culture of evaluation. These initiatives which were expected to gradually lead to the full scale use of evaluation practices in order to improve the public policy making process, and a solid culture of evaluation have not been fully successful at the system level,

including in the higher education system. In spite of this fact, in recent years some ex-ante and intermediary implementation evaluations have been conducted regarding the operational programs for implementing structural and cohesion funds, some of which targeted components of the higher education system. However, these evaluations were rather meant to point out the needs within the system which could be addressed through the use of structural and cohesion funds, without directly targeting the improvement of the policy making process in the field of higher education through evaluation exercises.

The focus on the internalization of quality assurance, which was sustained by ARACIS, has led for some organizations to the perspective that the methodology and instruments used by ARACIS is the only possible approach. This could be seen as an aspect of coercive isomorphism (Păunescu et al. 2012), without learning through evaluation what it would mean to diversify and particularize evaluation approaches, models, methods and instruments. However, the methodological framework which is being used by ARACIS does not oblige universities to conduct deeper evaluations for understanding the way in which their established objectives are accomplished, estimating the social impact which the evaluated programs have, comparing the evaluated programs with each other (Cerkez 2010). The use of specific methods of evaluation capacity building would have been facilitating the enhancement of the institutional responsibility for quality.

Even though regulatory and executive higher education agencies sustained such a process of diversifying evaluation approaches, models and methods in order to increase the quality of services which are offered by actors within the system, they have not had the logistical capacity or the expertise necessary to sustain this process. Consequently, because of the lack of an organizational culture of evaluation the regulatory and executive higher education agencies within the system adopt a refractory behaviour when comprehensive system evaluations are being conducted, whether we are talking about quantitative or qualitative methods. For example, in the April–August 2011 period, when the first exercise for conducting the primary evaluation of universities and the evaluation of study programs in order to accomplish the classification of universities and the ranking of study programs, evaluators noticed the hostility with which the personnel and the management staff reacted to such a normal process of collecting the necessary evidences for this exercise of evaluating the systems' status. Such behaviour can be explained by the fact that until that moment there was no institutionalization or routine for collecting, processing and using evidence from the systemic level in order to evaluate the respective organizations within the system in order to improve the services they offer, and such a necessity was not perceived and treated as a priority either at the institutional level, or at national level. What is more, because of the lack of exercises such as this, public policies in the field of higher education have frequently been based only on the use of statistical data which was supplied by the National Statistics Institute which are rather scatter and frequently irrelevant, rather than on systematically collected, processed and interpreted evidence which would allow the evaluation of the actual state of different aspects of the system. For example it did not make it possible to assess the efficiency and impact of the policy for raising

access and maintaining within the system of Roma ethnics or the degree of active participation of students who are over 34 years old. This lack of evidence-based policies has led to policies and programs that do not respond directly to the needs, capacities and availability of the main actors, but rather to momentary political desires. The National Student Enrolment Registry, which was designed as an electronic database for registering all the students in Romania in state and private universities which are either accredited or authorized to operate, has proven to be a difficult instrument to implement. There are several difficulties in ensuring that all the functions with which it was designed are working properly, even though it should be already in place as the National Education Law (Art. 201) stipulates that this instrument has to be totally functional within maximum 2 years after the law was passed, which was in February 2013. The implementation of a program or policy should be seen as an open system, which is sensitive to a certain degree to interferences (Chen 2005). At the same time, the dynamics of transforming an initial state into a desired state through the implementation of a program or policy is dependent of the dynamics of the organizational internal and external pressures among other factors. Evaluations regarding the organizational development of the actors within the higher education system, including those for quality assurance which are specific to the suppliers of higher education programs, can be seen as a practice for improving both the actual services that they are offering, as well as the policies which they are implementing. From these evaluation exercises, organizations in the higher education system can learn from each other how to better accomplish the mission which they have undertaken and how better to accomplish their strategies, improve their practices etc. Learning through evaluation entails the fact that the evaluation process does not end when the final results are identified. Instead it includes prospective thinking of the next period of programming and implementation with the use of the knowledge and experience which have been gained, and, ultimately, restarting the evaluation cycle. This is a circular process, as it can be seen in Fig. 1, being made up of 4 steps, each step offering explanations for the situations which are identified in the subsequent steps

2.1 Stage 1: Shaping Evaluation Priorities and Creating Institutionalised Evaluation Structures

Evaluation knowledge and practice become better understood and increasingly used in organizations which resort to the implementation of intentional ECB strategies (Bourgeois and Cousins 2013). Shaping evaluation priorities at the organizational level implies developing processes like: (a) identifying important topics for dealing with organization's mission and objectives; (b) analysing the topics and revealing the logical connections between them; and (3) arrange them by previously established criteria and select priorities. Even if the Evaluation Capacity Building strategies rely on the creation of specific internal structures (such as evaluation

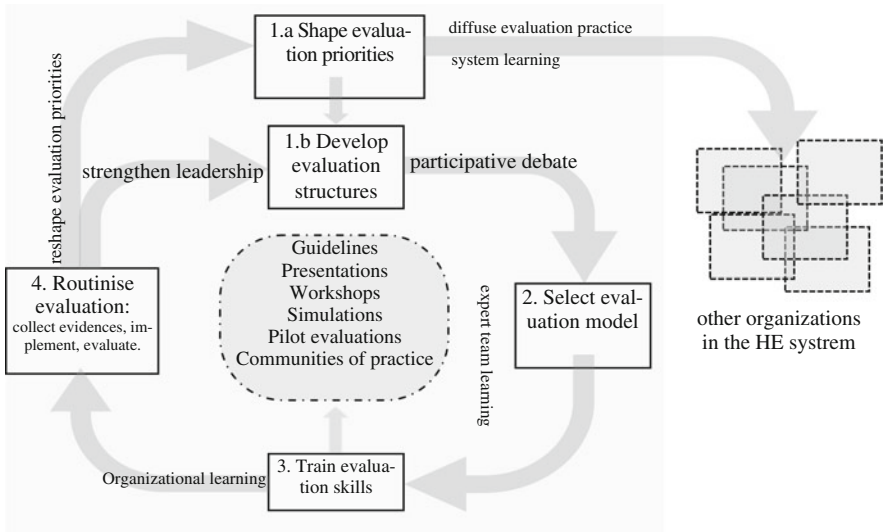


Fig. 1 Evaluation capacity building framework (authors)

departments or units) within the organization, they can have a broader impact and be more effective in the process of getting staff member used to addressing evaluation needs and using specific toolkits as a day-to-day routine. From the ECB perspective these structures have the role of ensuring the continuous evaluation and monitoring component, including the component for evaluating the projects which have been implemented by the respective organizations, by planning and conducting periodical evaluations regarding the adequacy of institutional arrangements (institutional blockages, necessary time etc.), efficiency and effectiveness, relevance, usefulness, the performance of implementing policies, programs, strategies and/or supplying services, administrative capacity etc. For example, within the Ministry of National Education this function is exerted by the Public Policy Unit, and within UEFISCDI evaluation is treated as an on-going process for the programs and system strategic projects which are implemented. In the case of UEFISCDI, this approach has been institutionalized, strengthened and perpetuated through the implementation of the Phare Universitas 2000 Program between 1996 and 2002, as well as the Higher Education and Research Reformation Program RO-4096, programs which can be consider as the basis for learning through evaluation at a systemic level. Apart from the functions which were presented earlier, these structures which have a role in evaluation could also serve as communication channels with beneficiaries and interested actors by generating a framework for participatory debate, thus implicating them in the evaluation process, as well as increasing the evaluations' degree of responsiveness to the needs of the community which it serves (Bărbulescu et al. 2012). Thus, this could lead to increased organizational learning, which can be understood as “the vehicle for utilizing past experiences, adapting to environmental changes and enabling future options”

(Berends et al. 2003). The learning process can use different means, such as dialogue, reflection, asking questions, identifying and clarifying values, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge (Preskill and Torres 1999), but in order for participants to become involved, they need to have the proper motivation to learn about evaluation and use it. In addition to motivation, participants need the organization to offer them “leadership, support, resources, and the necessary learning climate” (Taylor-Ritzler et al. 2013) so that the impact of ECB becomes visible.

At the level of organizations within the higher education system ECB can be undertaken both through internal means, as well as through external means. For example, in order to gain the status of European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) member, a process which represents one of the main factors which has led to strengthening the position of ARACIS within the configuration of the national institutional environment, ARACIS needed to develop its own organizational evaluation capacity. The process of becoming an ENQA member was long and was carried out through both categories (internal and external) of ECB specific means, which needed examining the extent to which the standards the ENQA required for candidates had been achieved. From the internal perspective of the consolidation of ECB within ARACIS, the agency established a set of internal procedures and instruments through which it carried out an auto-evaluation exercise which represented the base for all the subsequent activities for applying to become an ENQA member. From the external perspective of the ECB consolidation within ARACIS, between the years 2007 and 2008, the European Universities Association (EUA) led the process of evaluating ARACIS, recommending at the end of the process the inclusion of ARACIS in the European Registry for Quality Assurance, which was a significant step in gaining the status of ENQA membership, which occurred in 2009. ARACIS was considered to meet the ENQA criteria in terms of its activities, its official statute, independence and other aspects, while it did not fully meet the following criteria: the processes for external quality assurance, resources, the declaration of principles, the criteria and processes for external quality assurance used by members and the responsibility procedures (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education 2009, pp. 46–47). Regarding the latter, ENQA recommended ARACIS to continue its’ efforts in these directions in order to achieve full conformity as fast as possible. Taking into consideration this example, it can be concluded that the process of shaping evaluation priorities and improving or adapting institutionalized evaluation structures is continuous and plays a role in the process of institutional strengthening.

2.2 Stage 2: Using a Participative Approach for Deciding the Appropriate Evaluation Model

Developing the evaluation capacity at the level of public systems implies the need of thinking from an evaluative point of view and improves the organizational and system learning processes through a participative approach. Introducing evaluative

activities in the usual practice of organizations requires the adoption of evaluation models, able to transpose this practice into a set of systematic activities, with a clear methodology and a useful purpose. Thus, the development of the evaluation capacity ensures “the design and implementation of teaching and learning strategies to help individuals, groups, and organizations, learn about what constitutes effective, useful, and professional evaluation practice”, the final purpose being to create a “sustainable evaluation practice—where members continuously ask questions that matter, collect, analyze, and interpret data, and use evaluation findings for decision-making and action” (Preskill and Boyle 2008). To this end, in order to support organizations, the analysis of several evaluation models and approaches from the specialized literature can be useful in order to select elements which will be included in the organizations’ own model. What is more, there are in hand different checklists which have been designed especially for facilitating the process of evaluative practices to be more vastly used, such as “A Checklist for Building Organizational Evaluation Capacity” (Volkov and King 2007) and “Institutionalizing Evaluation Checklist” (Stufflebeam 2002).

A criticism that can be addressed concerning the way in which the practice of evaluation has been introduced in the education field is that the choice of evaluation approaches, models and methods often ignores the opinions of those who are part of the organization where this process is taking place. For example faculty members, in the case of university, or experts, in the case of agencies which have responsibilities in the educational policy making process are often excluded from the decisional process regarding the undertaking of an evaluation. This can result in a certain degree of rejection from these groups as a consequence of the insufficient relevance of the chosen approaches in relation to their role in the educational process (Nevo 2006). Continuing this line of thinking, the activities which are specific to evaluation can seem foreign or external to the agencies’ field of activity if the experts within it are not consulted while choosing them and if they have nothing to say regarding the way in which evaluation activities will be integrated within their usual, day-to-day routine. For these reasons, but also for choosing an evaluation model which is as adapted as close as possible to the organizations’ particularities and to the needs of individuals and teams which form it, it is fundamental that the choice of an evaluation model be based on a wide and informed debate at the organizations’ level. This allows for the integration of the different needs of individuals, but also for them to become more easily accustomed to the new routine. In the case of the higher education system, however, routines can also become an impediment in the way of improving organizational performance and adapting to a dynamic environment. For example, in the case of universities, the Quality Barometers, which were conducted by ARACIS in order to present a subjective status analysis, show the fact that the internal evaluation of quality is a ritualistic and conformist routine, mostly decoupled from the managements processes within the university. This leads to the miming of standards, the dysfunctional transposition of norms into practices, the weak professionalization of internal evaluation commissions and the focus on entry values rather than on effectively increasing quality (Vlăsceanu et al. 2011; Păunescu et al. 2011). On the other hand,

routines can generate a framework for comparing the evolution of different policies and programs which leads some agencies within the system to establish their own evaluation model and customize specific instruments according to the characteristics of the implemented programs. For example, in the case of the National Agency for Community Programs for Education and Professional Development (ANPC-DEFP is the acronym in the Romanian language), program and projects evaluations highly depend on the approach, methods and practices which are used by the European Commission, DG Education and Culture, which are transposed to the agency's level by expert evaluators which it has selected.

Still, what are the fundamental elements which are the base of constructing or adapting an evaluation model? Which are the most frequent evaluation questions which agencies in the field of higher education should be taking into consideration including in their own model, in order to develop their own evaluation capacity and be able to answer to the evaluation needs and priorities? Different meta-approaches to evaluation tend to assign an increased importance to different functions of the evaluative process, for both formative or summative evaluation (Scriven 1967), responsive evaluation (Stake 1975), illuminative evaluation (Parlett and Hamilton 1977), utilization focused evaluation (Patton 1986), systematic evaluation (Rossi and Freeman 1985), constructivist evaluation (Guba and Lincoln 1989), goal-free evaluation (Scriven 1991), empowerment evaluation (Fetterman 1994), realist evaluation (Pawson and Tilley 1997) developmental evaluation, etc. All these approaches propose various selections of concepts, instruments, elements of design and roles and instances of the evaluator in order to achieve the emphasized function. But how can regulatory and executive higher education agencies distinguish and choose between all of these, in order to use an adequate evaluation model, which takes into account the system's constraints and conditions such as: quality assurance standards, various needs and values of the various stakeholders, scarce resources, institutional and organizational context? Given the sectors' dynamics and the multidirectional influences to which it is subjected (external conditions, the coherence with national and international strategic and reform lines, changes which are diffused from other sectors etc.), it is difficult for a single evaluation model to offer all and the most appropriate answers when evaluating an educational program, the effects of a reform package, organizational accountability or responsiveness etc. Thus, for each situation agencies can choose from a large number of combinations of different elements, dimensions and values which are useful for the evaluator, different methodological approaches, quantitative (surveys, large-scale analysis) and/or qualitative (in-depth interviews, public consultation, focus-groups). Though in some cases there will be an obvious predisposition towards choosing a certain method or a certain type of methods, the process of choosing or establishing the most adequate evaluation model might seem very confusing and stressful and could attract contradictory discussions, as well as resistance to change in the case of some organizations. However, this debate at the level of each agency about the ways in which they develop their evaluation capacity and they choose an evaluation model that they will integrate in the agencies' current activities, can also be very productive. Ultimately, it can build the strategy that the agency is going to follow in a

practical manner and create the basis of the decision of the evaluation model which will be chosen, having both an informative role, as well as a formative role for the experts which take part in the debate. The choices that are going to be made or which may be favoured by those who participate in the debate lead to the manifestation of a certain degree of subjectivity which is connected to various factors such as:

- values and preferences for certain approaches of methods;
- competences, skills, education;
- the way in which they interact and the intra and inter-organizational levels;
- the emitting of judgments regarding the quality of a policy or program;
- other elements which model their decision and that will guide them subsequently in the practice of evaluation activities.

This process is also connected with the way in which they or the activity of the organization which they are part of or of other organizations within the system with which they interact could be improved. All these elements help them understand why a certain decision has been made, why a certain alternative was implemented, why a certain action generated a specific effect, why an organization took a certain course of changing or adapting, why the response behaviour of an organization to a certain situation followed one pattern and not another. Eventually it could enable them to identify generalizable effectiveness models and the sense of an intervention. As a concluding remark, regulatory and executive higher education agencies have to ensure an open and participative environment for the most adequate evaluation approaches, methods and instruments to be chosen. Also, the choices made should be representative for the various stakeholders' needs and values.

2.3 Stage 3: Training Evaluation Skills

How can evaluation skills develop in bureaucratic routine-embedded systems? The need for training that agencies have to address consists in making managers and staff aware of the importance of using evaluations and also in giving them the practical tools for doing it. Training and capacity building is essential but putting the training process into practice is itself a challenge if there is a desire to introduce a new "routine" in the normal schedule of experts within an organization. This is why it is important that attending the training not be considered a boring and imposed activity. A major part is played by the two steps which were previously described, which offer on the one hand the an institutionalized function of the agency, which will become part of every staff members' current activity, and on the other hand the familiarization with elements which are specific to the practice of evaluation and consulting and integrating their own needs, values and opinions within the new activity. The various means through which evaluation skills can be formed at the level of organizations, both for staff and management, include:

Elaboration of agencies' own evaluation guidelines: offering written, explanatory and exemplifying materials which support training activities and which guide evaluation activities by taking into consideration the particularities of the activities which the organization carries out within the higher education system. In the context of deepening European integration, the instruments which are elaborated/ adapted by organizations at the system level should lead to the adaptation to the multiannual financial programming principles, taking decisions according to Romania's needs, generating coherence with the EU's priorities, ensuring consultation in order to rank national priorities, initiatives for adapting and aligning the legislative support and instruments, strengthening the relevance of programming, stimulating risk awareness, initiatives that ensure the coherence of the institutional and normative system.

Brief presentations of concepts, guidelines and standards: theorists and practitioners can share their expertise with the organization members by presenting different approaches, concepts, models and methods which are specific to evaluation, adapting these to the organizations' evaluation priorities and to the changes that are taking place within the higher education system.

Interactive courses: discussion about the expectations regarding the results and the use of evaluation processes.

Workshops: interactive sessions during which participants are offered an extended participatory framework for dialogue and learning by carrying out team activities regarding the way in which evaluation instruments relate to the educational policies, programs or reforms implementation and their day-to-day activities.

Evaluation simulations: undertaking, in an organized environment, all the steps which need to be taken during each step of an evaluation cycle (contracting, preparation, evaluation design, implementation of the evaluation and reporting of the results) related to an educational program, policy or organization within the higher education system.

Pilot evaluation implementing and reporting: carrying out a pilot evaluation in a more narrow geographical or thematic area within the higher education system and discussing about it with decision makers in those areas. In the case of the higher education system in Romania in the 2006–2013 period most emphasis was placed on organizational evaluations from the perspective of the quality assurance dimension and these entailed conducting several national pilot evaluative exercises. As a consequence of these exercises in the year 2011 a comprehensive national exercise was conducted for establishing the hierarchy of study programs and for classifying higher education institutions. Furthermore, as a consequence of these evaluations at the system level, in the period 2012–2013, the European University Association is conducting a longitudinal institutional evaluation of 42 universities using its own methodology, which has been adapted and particularized to the specific characteristic of the higher education system in Romania. Of course, this latest national evaluation exercise could not have been successfully (efficiently and efficaciously) implemented if pilot and common exercises/learning activities had not been undertaken before the year 2011 regarding quality assurance. An interesting aspect is that after the exercise of ranking study programs, alternative

methodologies have been developed in order to create a comparative framework for the official hierarchy (Viïu et al. 2012), thus diversifying the perspectives which are taken into account when such evaluation exercises are conducted.

Consultations regarding improving the agencies' own evaluation guidelines: regular initiatives to improve the channels for public consultation regarding the design of evaluations which should be undertaken both for organizational evaluation, as well as for the evaluation of the programs which have been implemented. For example, both UEFISCDI, as well as ANDCDEFP periodically carry out activities for increasing the awareness of the beneficiary and interested public regarding the achievement of specific objectives and the contribution towards achieving policies' objectives. They disseminate information regarding the economic and social impact and the coherence with the directions which are stated in strategic documents. They also organize public debate on results from the perspective of the contribution to the accomplishment of priorities.

Collaboration with universities for professional Master programs: developing specialized study programs and curriculum for evaluating policies, programs and organizations and adapting them to the students' profile. At present no public or private higher education institution offers a Master's program dedicated to higher education management which studies organizational evaluation in the higher education system. This component is instead treated as a subject in related programs such as: management and governance, educational management, the evaluation of public policies and programs, public policies, European integration etc. Furthermore, this subject is discussed in continuous professional training activities, which have taken place in the last few years as part of projects which were financed by the Human Resources Development Operational Sectorial Program 2007–2013. It is expected that in the next years universities which offer master's programs that are connected to the field of organizational evaluation will extend this framework of mutual cooperation and learning towards the specialized professional environment (professional associations, consortiums and companies which offer services for evaluation public policies and programs).

Apart from becoming familiar with specific elements from literature and the practice of evaluation, the training of experts within the agency should include the strengthening of their competencies in the use of social research models for evaluation activities. Thus, depending of the approaches that will be chosen and the selection of quantitative and/or qualitative methods, they can practice in workshops, simulations or pilot evaluations quantitative research activities such as social inquiries, surveys, etc. or qualitative research activities such as undertaking observations regarding the ways in which individuals work within the target organization, conducting in depth interview with decision makers which are responsible for the management and implementation of programs, document analysis, content analysis, root cause analysis etc. In the case of pilot evaluations, experts will have the possibility to approach evaluation results in an integrated manner and to validate them by soliciting feedback from the other organizations with which they will interact during the evaluation process. As a concluding remark, for the training process to be efficient and relevant to the training needs,

regulatory and executive higher education agencies could also take into consideration being open to involve the expertise of independent evaluators or training staff from another agencies within the system.

2.4 Stage 4: Routinising Evaluation and Continuously Reshaping Priorities

The routinization and redefining of the priorities in ECB entails the formation of a critical mass of individuals who will support the use and dissemination of evaluation practices, the reconceptualization of problems and of the solutions which are proposed, the analysis of the implementation's fluidity, the consistence, relevance and plausibility of changes, the persistence of problems in programming and implementation—aspects which have to be maintained/aspects which need to be modified, the utilization of experience and lessons which have been learned for new policies and programs in higher education. What is more, these steps should provide answers to the following question: what happens with the evaluation skills when the training, simulations and the pilot evaluations end? If the involvement of management and staff is reduced to short term engagements during training activities and they are not offered continuity through their involvement in on-going evaluation activities, it is very likely that the impact of evaluation capacity building strategies will be minimal, and that the new competencies which have been formed will not be used in the normal routines of the agencies. This is why the organization needs to offer its management and staff opportunities to practice evaluation by “developing tools, processes, and understandings about how new knowledge and skills are transferred to the everyday work of program staff and leaders” (Preskill 2013). Monitoring the degree of routinization of organizational evaluation can be achieved by using a matrix like the one which is presented in the table below. The matrix is structured on four levels of intensity, understanding, use and learning transfer (Table 1).

The essence of the ECB approach is that in the case of organizations which have already internalized a culture of evaluation, transforming evaluation into a routine and continuously reshaping priorities involves considering the readiness of participants, their motivations and expectations, organizational conditions, opportunities they may or may not have to use their new evaluation knowledge and skills, and the extent to which leaders encourage, coach, support, and resource their evaluation activities (Preskill and Boyle 2008). Thus, their staffs adopt a proactive behaviour when undertaking activities with an evaluative character. What is more, through the experience that they accumulate, managers and staff contribute to the dissemination of experience to other actors within the system, both through institutional transfer mechanisms, as well as through opportunities for becoming independent evaluators, as in the case of the Phare Universitas 2000 Program, as well as the Higher Education and Research Reform Program RO-4096. As a

Table 1 Levels of evaluation routinisation in organizations (authors)

Level	Understanding, use and learning transfer
High routinisation	There is a functional evaluation unit within the organization, which systematically and actively carries out evaluation activities and whose members are open to continuous professional development opportunities related to their work
	Staff and management members have a comprehensive understanding about evaluation concepts, models, methods, uses and functions, they have access to internal learning resources and share common knowledge and skills with those within the organizations and with experts from other organizations in the system
	Skills among management and staff are periodically assessed and continuously updated
	The contact of organization members with activities related to evaluation is frequent, being an integrated part of their work
	Evaluation activities are generally well conducted and implemented, and the difficulties which appear along the way are handled efficiently
	The evaluation findings are used for improving current activities of the organization, such as the implementation of policies or programs
	There is a stable evaluation budget at the organizational level, which is clearly delimited in the budgetary allocation, which is conceived based on evaluation priorities and is adequate for responding to the costs which are implied by evaluation activities
Intermediate routinisation	There is a functional evaluation unit within the organization, which periodically undertakes evaluation activities
	Staff and management members have a general understanding about evaluation concepts, models, methods, uses and functions
	The contact of organization members with activities related to evaluation is periodical, in order to respond to the major evaluation priorities
	Evaluation activities are implemented without any major problems, and the difficulties which appear along the way are generally well handled
	Evaluation findings are partially used for improving current activities of the organization
	The budget allocation for evaluation activities is included in the budgetary allocation for a wider range of activities within the organization
In progress routinisation	At a formal level an evaluation unit has been created within the organization and visible efforts are being made for it to become functional and active
	Staff and management members have a minimal understanding about evaluation concepts, models, methods, uses and functions
	The contact of organization members with activities related to evaluation is occasional, depending on the projects that will be implemented and which include an evaluation component
	The implementation of evaluation activities is faced with some problems which are more difficult to handle
	The evaluation findings are minimally used for improving current activities of the organization

(continued)

Table 1 (continued)

Level	Understanding, use and learning transfer
	The budget allocation for evaluation activities is occasional, depending on the budgets of projects that will be implemented and which include an evaluation component
Low routinisation	There is no structure specialized in evaluation within the organization
	Staff and management members have a poor understanding about evaluation concepts, models, methods, uses and functions
	The contact of organization members with activities related to evaluation is short and sporadic
	The implementation of evaluation activities is fractured, and major problems appear along the way
	The evaluation findings are not used for improving current activities of the organization
	There is no budget allocation for evaluation activities

conclusion for this stage, the process of transforming evaluation into a routine involves different levels of awareness and practices related to most relevant topics that managers and staff have to deal with for continuously improve their activity.

3 Conclusions

There is a growing need in the Romanian higher education system for identifying mechanisms for improving public policies and agencies' attributions in the decision making process, policy planning and implementation, regulation, control or mere executive functions. Introducing evaluative activities into the usual practice of organizations requires landmarks such as evaluation models, which are able to transpose this practice into a set of systematic activities, with a clear methodology and a useful purpose. We thus propose a logical framework for evaluation capacity building based on a cyclical model of shaping evaluation priorities and developing evaluation structures, selecting evaluation models, training evaluation skills, transforming evaluation into a routine, and reshaping evaluation priorities. The framework relies on the way in which evaluation practice can become a routine at the micro level (within the organization) through expert team learning and organizational learning processes and diffuses at macro level (within the system) through system learning and interactions at the system level. In spite of the fact that in the case of organizations within the higher education system in Romania, the ECB is not institutionalized yet as a current practice for improving the way in which programs are implemented, assumed objectives are reached, and the way in which services are offered, while presenting the steps of the logical framework, several relevant examples were offered which prove the fact that in certain regulatory and executive higher education agencies the practices which are specific to ECB are routinized and

are even gradually diffused towards other agencies and consultative organisms within the system, offering at the same time a context for mutual learning. Learning through evaluation means that the evaluation process does not end when the final results are identified, implying instead, a prospective thinking of the next period of programming and implementation making use of the knowledge and experience which have been gained, and, ultimately, restarting the evaluation cycle.

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