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CRITERIA FOR ASSESSING THE QUALITY AND ACCESSIBILITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION: A CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

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Abstract. The article analyzes the concept and criteria for assessing the quality and accessibility of education. The author notes that specific criteria that can be investigated empirically or on the basis of statistical data are key indicators of the effectiveness of educational systems. The author considers the main scientific approaches to determining the quality and accessibility of education. This article establishes that the quality of education is a multidimensional concept that encompasses not only academic indicators, but also social and economic aspects. The author analyzes the concept of accessibility of education. The study identifies the relationship between the quality and accessibility of education and analyzes the existing debatable approaches to the possibility of combining them. The novelty of the article lies in the author's own approach to the formulation of the concepts of «quality of education» and «accessibility of education» and the identification of their criteria. The research methodology is based on comparative analysis, logical and legal method and systematic approach. The results of the study allow to form a comprehensive view of modern methods of evaluating educational services and their practical application.

Key words: quality of education, accessibility of education, higher education institutions, criteria of quality of education, criteria of accessibility of education, higher education.

Introduction. Higher education plays a major role for every country. It forms a layer of specialists necessary to ensure the development and competitiveness of the state (Alokhina, 2014: 124). A high level of education ensures a skilled workforce that meets the challenges of the modern labor market. The quality of education and the high level of training of students have a positive impact on the future income of citizens (Lopushnyak & Rybchanska, 2018: 49). In addition, education has a significant impact on social mobility. This approach provides equal opportunities for self-realization for applicants from different social groups. Therefore, since education is one of the main factors of social development, it is important to ensure its quality and accessibility for all segments of the population. It is not enough just to provide educational services. It is necessary to ensure that they meet the modern requirements of the economy and society.

At the same time, there is a problem of unequal access to education due to regional, economic, and social factors. For example, in some countries, the quality of education can vary significantly due to different circumstances. This creates educational inequality, which in the long run can lead to a growing socioeconomic gap between larger groups of the population.

Thus, the need to provide quality and affordable education is not debatable. At the same time, there is a need for a clear understanding of the terminology «quality of education» and «accessibility of education». Defining these concepts is, in fact, impossible without a clear understanding of the criteria that each of them includes. There are no universal methods of evaluation, as education systems differ in their structure and social context. In order not to be speculative, it is necessary to clearly examine what elements influence the definition of «quality» or «accessible» education.

The purpose of the research. The purpose of the article is to identify the criteria of quality and accessibility of education and to justify the author's choice. In addition, the purpose of the article is to formulate the concepts of «quality of education» and «accessibility of education».

Materials and methods of research. The study of criteria for assessing the quality and accessibility of education was carried out on the basis of an analysis of scientific literature, regulatory documents and official reports of international organizations. The main sources of information were scientific publications that highlight modern conceptual approaches to assessing the concepts under study. The author also analyzed international and national regulatory documents that establish the relevant criteria and standards.

The research methodology is based on the use of several approaches that allow for a comprehensive analysis of the issue under study. One of the key methods was comparative analysis, which was used to compare different concepts for assessing the quality and accessibility of education used in the international and national educational space. This made it possible to determine the main approaches to understanding these categories.

To study regulatory approaches to determining the quality and accessibility of education, the logical-legal method was used. The author applied it when developing legislation within the scope of the study. The method of expert assessments was also used, which consisted in the analysis of scientific works that highlight the problem of assessing the quality of education. This method allowed us to identify the main criteria that are most often used in modern research.

An important element of the study was a systemic approach, which provided a comprehensive consideration of the relationship between the quality and accessibility of education. Since these categories do not exist in isolation from each other, it was important to assess how changes in one indicator can affect the other. The systemic approach allowed us to consider the education system as a holistic mechanism in which quality and accessibility are formed under the influence of various internal and external factors. Based on the combination of these methods, the author identified his own definitions of the studied concepts and criteria for their analysis.

Thus, the use of a comprehensive methodological approach made it possible to analyze the concepts of quality and accessibility of education in more depth and to identify key criteria.

Results of the research. Assessing the quality and accessibility of education is a rather complex and difficult task. We want to conduct a detailed study, so we propose to consider the issues of quality of education separately and accessibility separately. Although these issues are interrelated, they belong to different categories and may include different criteria. Therefore, we will start by analyzing the concept of «quality of education». However, before proceeding to the analysis, we emphasize that in this paper we are studying only the quality of higher education, because the relevant category at different levels of education (preschool, primary, basic secondary, etc.) may differ significantly due to differences in the subjects to whom it applies. In this study, we use the concept of «quality of education» (along with the concept of «accessibility of education») exclusively in the context of higher education.

There are a number of approaches to defining this term in the scientific literature. A group of American researchers Schindler L., Puls-Elvidge S., Welzant H., Crawford L. identify four broad concepts of higher education quality, namely, quality as purposeful, transformational, exceptional and responsible. In addition, they identify a set of quality indicators specific to each of the concepts (Schindler, 2015: 8). Their approach also confirms our position that it is necessary to study specific criteria on the basis of which the quality of higher education can be stated.

In the national scientific community, there are also different scientific approaches to the definition of the studied concept. According to the Ukrainian researcher Klimova H., the quality of education is a multidimensional phenomenon that can be defined as a set of educational resources together with the process of educational activity and its results (Klimova, 2016: 40). At the same time, we have to mention the definition of Batechko N., who emphasizes that the quality of education is «a complex system that combines the organizational structure, methods, processes and resources necessary for the functioning of the education system in order to meet the requirements and social norms, state educational standards» (Batechko, 2017: 14). According to the definition of national researchers

Zelnytskyi A., Zabolotnyi O., the quality of education is an integral indicator of the sum of the products of the degree of formation of each of the defined competencies and its corresponding weighting factor (Zelnytskyi, & Zabolotnyi, 2020: 158). Thus, the above definitions show that researchers consider the quality of education through its multidimensionality. They emphasize its complex nature, which includes procedural and resource components.

Overall, we note that the quality of education is not a statistical characteristic. Of course, the list of analyzed sources is not exhaustive. We have selected the definitions that, in our opinion, had the greatest scientific value within the framework of our research. The «quality of higher education» is complex in nature and is formed under the influence of many factors. This once again confirms the importance of a comprehensive approach to evaluating educational processes and the need to apply different criteria when analyzing the quality of education. Without pretending to be universal, based on the analyzed sources, we propose to define the «working» concept of «quality of education» for this research. Thus, the quality of education is a multidimensional and dynamic characteristic of the educational process that reflects compliance with criteria and standards, as well as the needs of subjects and society. It involves the efficient use of resources and continuous improvement under the influence of modern challenges.

After defining the concept of «quality of education», we will move on to identifying and analyzing its criteria. There is no single list of criteria that can serve as a guideline for determining whether education in a country is of high quality. Therefore, we consider it appropriate to consider the scientific approaches proposed by other researchers and, based on them and our own analysis, to identify the criteria that serve as indicators of the quality of higher education. Let's start with domestic scientific views. It is worth paying attention to the work of Babyn I, who notes that at the initial stage of implementation of integration initiatives within the Bologna Process in European countries, three main models of education quality assessment dominated:

English, which is based on the internal self-assessment of quality within the higher education institution itself;

French, which provides for external evaluation of a higher education institution in terms of its responsibility to society;

American, which combines elements of both the English and French models (Babyn, 2011).

The approach presented by Babin I. has some analytical value. However, we believe that it does not fully meet our research priorities. The models of education quality assessment that he identifies do reflect the main approaches used in Europe and the United States. However, they mostly describe general methods of quality assessment rather than specific criteria for measuring its level. For example, the English model undoubtedly plays an important role in maintaining academic standards. However, this approach may be insufficiently objective and does not take into account external indicators, which we will discuss later in the paper. In turn, the French model is more in line with the criteria of openness and transparency. However, its effectiveness depends on the methodology of applying such assessments. Finally, the American model, in our opinion, is the most balanced, but it does not provide a clear understanding of which indicators are crucial in measuring the quality of education.

Hence, Babin's classification can be taken as a basis for understanding approaches to assessing the quality of education. Ukrainian researcher Kulchytska A. notes that the criteria for assessing the quality of educational services are the factors that directly affect the quality of the educational process and the conditions for the provision of educational services (Kulchytska, 2014: 139). Of course, such criteria have a certain impact, but in our opinion, they are too narrow. We believe that they do not take into account important aspects that reflect the impact of education on the future life of students and the social value of the educational institution. Another Ukrainian researcher, Debych M. identifies the internationalization of higher education institutions as the main criterion (Debych, 2019: 101). Internationalization is certainly an important indicator for the reputation and global competitiveness

of a university, but it does not reflect the full picture of the quality of education. This criterion certainly deserves attention, but it cannot be the only one and should be complemented by other approaches. In our opinion, the internationalization of a higher education institution is indeed an important factor in its competitiveness at the global level. It facilitates the exchange of experience and the expansion of academic opportunities for students and teachers. However, we believe that «internationalization» as an independent criterion is not entirely feasible for empirical research. Therefore, in order to elaborate on it and to allow for further in-depth study, we have identified our own criterion – the number of international academic partnerships of the higher education institution. We believe that this criterion is fully consistent with the concept of «internationalization», but is more adapted to finding accurate statistical data.

A similar opinion is noted in the work of the Ukrainian researcher Medvedovska D. The author notes that it is advisable to apply a three-level approach to assessing the quality of higher education, which combines three components: reputational, effective and general (Medvedovska, 2016: 51). Let us focus on the reputational factor in more detail. As with the previous criterion, it requires clarity for further analysis. The researcher herself distinguishes «reputation in society» within this criterion, which, among other things, is expressed through the «rating of the higher education institution». We agree with this position of the author and detail this criterion as the position of the higher education institution in international rankings.

Thus, based on this, we can distinguish two criteria of education quality: the number of international academic partnerships and the position of the higher education institution in international rankings of higher education institutions.

In addition, we would like to clarify the classification of Medvedovska D., which, although quite broad, is of scientific interest. We have reviewed and detailed above one of the criteria she derived «reputational» one. However, in addition to this, the author also identified two other elements. Thus, as an effective component, we use the criterion of «graduate employment rate». If a higher education institution provides high performance indicators, this indicates high-quality training that allows graduates to find jobs in their field. We also detail the other criterion, but we believe that it is more related to accessibility of education rather than quality, as will be discussed later in the article. We find a similar position in the work of the Ukrainian scholar Skydan M., who, among other things, distinguishes «employment opportunities and graduate success» (Skydan, 2024). The success criterion, in our opinion, is not very suitable, as it cannot be determined on the basis of empirical research. But if we specify «employment opportunities» as specific statistics on the level of employment of graduates, this criterion correlates with the one we have proposed and can be used to determine the level of quality of education.

In general, Skydan M. identifies other criteria, in particular: learning outcomes; curriculum development; effectiveness of the assessment system; resources; qualifications of teachers; student support services; technological integration; inclusiveness and diversity; feedback processes; global competence (Skydan, 2024). For our side, we would like to note that we do not agree with all of the author's criteria, as we believe that most of them are subjective and cannot be analyzed based on statistical data. Moreover, some of them, such as inclusiveness and diversity, generally characterize accessibility rather than quality. However, there is still something interesting, namely the author's views on the need for properly qualified teachers and student support systems. Although this criterion cannot be applied by us, we have identified our own criterion based on it as the ratio of the number of teachers to the number of students. We focused on it because it is a statistically measurable indicator. It demonstrates the real ability of the higher education institution to ensure the intensity of contact between the teacher and the student. Thus, taking into account Skydan's vision of the proper qualification of teachers and the student support system, we have defined this criterion as more specific, quantifiable, and one that really affects the quality of the educational process.

It is worth paying attention to the views of foreign researchers. A group of researchers from the Czech Republic, Vykydal D., Folta M., Nenadál J., identify the following criteria for ensuring the quality of a higher education institution: regular internal and external evaluation, the creation of a quality assurance system based on a clear mission, strategies, resources and procedures, as well as transparency and accountability of evaluation results. The importance of financial, human, and information resources to support quality education is also emphasized (Vykydal et al, 2020: 2). We partially agree with the proposed criteria, as they emphasize the importance of consistency and transparency in ensuring the quality of education. In particular, regular assessment, mission, strategies and resources are indeed fundamental elements that can influence the position of universities in international rankings. However, these criteria do not take into account the effectiveness of educational services, for example, the level of employment of graduates, which is a key indicator of the effectiveness of a higher education institution. In addition, the emphasis on the internal quality management system does not always correlate with the actual achievements of students and the impact of the institution on the labor market, which limits the practicality of this approach to assessing the quality of education.

Thus, for future analyses of the quality of education, we distinguish the following indicators: the university's position in international rankings; graduate employment rate; the ratio of the number of teachers to the number of students; and the number of international academic partnerships.

Turning to the definition of «accessibility of education», we note that there are the same problems here as in the study of «quality of education». Some researchers even equate these two criteria. For example, Alokina H. defines accessibility of education as an external criterion of education quality (Alokina, 2014: 126). American researcher Weeden E. considers accessibility of education through the prism of inclusiveness, noting that accessibility is the absence of barriers to education for students with disabilities (Weeden, 2023). A similar definition of accessibility can be found in other papers (Al-Hmouz, 2014: 26; Dolmage, 2017; Alsalem & Doush, 2018: 542). They all equate accessibility with inclusiveness. We also partially agree with this position. However, we believe that in addition to inclusiveness, accessibility manifests itself in other aspects, so it would be incorrect to consider it exclusively through this prism.

There is also an opinion among foreign scholars that accessibility to higher education can be manifested through access to the digital environment and the Internet (Greco, 2019: 18; Campoverde-Molina et al., 2023; 134), the so-called «Web accessibility» (Hermosa-Ramírez & Arias-Badia, 2024). However, we also believe that narrowing accessibility solely to digital indicators leaves out many important factors. For a comprehensive analysis, it is advisable to take into account other elements, namely, to define access through a set of conditions for obtaining education. For example, in the final report of the European Commission «Study on Access to Education and Training», access is defined as «participation» in any field of knowledge. Participation implies the possibility for a person to try himself or herself in a certain field of education (Study on Access to Education and Training, 2005).

It is worth noting that in 2004 the Constitutional Court of Ukraine interpreted access to education as a constitutional guarantee of the right to education on the principles of equality as defined by Article 24 of the 1996 Constitution of Ukraine. (Sprava N 1-4/2004, 2004). We believe that equality should be one of the characteristic elements of determining the accessibility of higher education. We find a similar position in the Ukrainian researchers Hrekul-Kovalyk T. and O. Donchenko, who define the accessibility of higher education as a set of real conditions for ensuring equal opportunities for individuals to obtain higher education, regardless of their economic status (Hrekul-Kovalyk & Donchenko, 2022: 14). In general, we think this definition is quite close. The emphasis on non-discrimination is in line with one of the basic principles of accessibility. At the same time, we believe that other possible obstacles, such as physiological capabilities or infrastructural barriers, could be elaborated upon. Summarizing the above, we propose our own definition for the purposes of this paper: accessibility of higher education is a set of conditions under which every potential

applicant, regardless of the factors that impede it, has real opportunities to enter a higher education institution, successfully study and complete an educational program. It covers geographical, economic, informational and infrastructural accessibility, and also includes ensuring the right to equal access without discrimination and creating the necessary conditions for the full involvement of all categories of applicants.

Analyzing the issue of access to higher education, it is worth pointing out that in a society based on democratic principles, the opportunity to realize the right to higher education should be equal. The absence of this means the consolidation of inequality (Hrekul-Kovalyk & Donchenko, 2022: 13). In other words, access to higher education is an integral element of a democratic state governed by the rule of law. Therefore, the study of accessibility of higher education goes far beyond pedagogical sciences and affects the functioning of the state and the protection of human rights.

Moving on to the criteria, let us focus on the opinion of the Ukrainian researcher Lukina T., who defines accessibility of education as the presence of a sufficient and extensive network of educational (training) institutions where different categories of the population can receive education in accordance with their educational needs, abilities, etc. (Lukina, 2013: 116). We partially agree with the author's position. The existence of a disorganized network of higher education institutions does contribute to the geographical accessibility of education. In addition, this indicator is subject to minimal subjectivity, as clear data can be found. A similar view is also noted in the research of the EU research team Sá S., Florax R., and Rietveld P. They emphasize that one of the criteria for accessibility of education is geographical accessibility (Sá et al, 2004). Therefore, we would like to highlight the criterion of the number of higher education institutions in the country as one of the basic ones for further research on accessibility of education.

The English researcher Ziderman, A. identifies four main criteria for accessibility of education: widening access (increasing the number of applicants), deepening access (ensuring a significant share of students with special needs or ethnic minorities), retention and successful completion of studies and maintaining the level of freshman enrollment (Ziderman, 2013). The criteria formulated by the author provide a holistic view of the multidimensionality of accessibility. They cover both quantitative and qualitative indicators. At the same time, given the complexity of the accessibility problem, these criteria alone are not enough to fully address the issue. Nevertheless, they give us the opportunity to talk about the inclusiveness of education as one of the criteria for its accessibility. We would also like to return to the criterion of «inclusiveness and diversity» mentioned earlier by Skydan M. (Skydan, 2024). We believe that it is useful and can be studied practically, but it relates more to the accessibility of education than to the quality, where the author actually singled it out. However, to allow for a comprehensive analysis, it should be detailed. Therefore, in order to more clearly formulate the criterion, we propose «integration of students with special educational needs». It is fully consistent with the concept of inclusiveness, but it can be analyzed in quantitative and qualitative aspects. In addition, this criterion implies not only the existence of a barrier-free environment but also the formation of a tolerant attitude and mutual respect.

In addition, Ziderman A mentions the involvement of ethnic minorities as one of the factors of accessibility. However, we would like to expand this criterion a bit and define it as «the number of foreign student». Such an indicator allows us to analyze statistical data and is important in the context of accessibility, as it indicates the openness of the education system to external applicants. The analysis of this criterion can demonstrate the ability of a higher education institution to create favorable conditions for attracting applicants from different cultural backgrounds. Thus, expanding the focus from «national minorities» to «foreign students» not only enriches the analysis with multiple and qualitative indicators, but also allows us to take into account the processes of globalization and the prospects for further development of the educational space.

A group of researchers from Romania identifies their own criteria for access to education: financial, geographical, educational, organizational, cultural/social/physical (Prodan et al, 2015: 538). In general, most of them are similar to those we have already identified and specified earlier. We have already noted the position of Medvedovska D., who singled out the «general» indicator among the indicators of education quality. We have applied our own approach to this, namely, we have singled out the criterion «number of people with higher education». This indicator effectively indicates the level of access to education. If the share of the population with higher education is high, this may indicate a number of positive factors. Firstly, the democratic nature of the education system, which allows the general population to enter higher education institutions. Secondly, a favorable financial and economic situation in which university or institute education is affordable for students with good results. Thirdly, a developed network of educational infrastructure that provides appropriate conditions for training specialists in various fields. Fourthly, the social significance of education itself, which is expressed in state and public support for the idea of mandatory or desirable higher education.

In addition, the criterion of «number of people with higher education» allows us to better understand the impact of public education policy: if this indicator is growing over time, it means that a country or region can increase the involvement of young people (and possibly the adult population) in the higher education system. This approach also allows for comparisons across regions to identify any differences in access to quality educational programs. Thus, the «number of people with higher education» is a number added to other criteria that does not sufficiently demonstrate how large, open and attractive the higher education system is to the population as a whole.

Thus, based on our research, we have identified the following criteria for access to higher education: the number of people with higher education; the share of foreign students; the number of higher education institutions in the country; and the integration of students with special educational needs.

Therefore, the quality and accessibility of education are two key characteristics of the education system. They are closely interrelated, but not always in harmonious balance. In a general sense, accessibility of education means the ability of the general population to receive quality educational services regardless of any factors. The quality of education, in turn, determines how effectively the education system meets the needs of society, the economy and science. To achieve a balance between the quality and accessibility of education, it is necessary to apply comprehensive approaches in all areas of higher education institutions, including financial, logistical, personnel, etc. This will ensure accessibility of education and maintain high standards of the educational process.

Conclusion. The issue of quality and accessibility of higher education is relevant for all higher education institutions at all times. However, terminological confusion and fragmentation of research lead to different visions of these factors. The study showed that the scientific community also has different approaches to defining the quality and accessibility of education. Moreover, the criteria for their definition are not detailed and often subjective. They cannot be properly analyzed because of the difficulty in finding empirical data. Therefore, we have defined the quality of education as a multidimensional and dynamic characteristic of the educational process that reflects compliance with criteria and standards, as well as the needs of individuals and society. To ensure the objectivity of the statement about the level of quality of higher education, we have identified the following criteria: the university's position in international rankings; the level of employment of graduates; the ratio of the number of teachers to the number of students; the number of international academic partnerships. Each of them can be studied on the basis of empirical analysis and statistical data analysis, which minimizes subjectivity in drawing conclusions.

In turn, accessibility of higher education is a set of conditions under which each potential applicant, regardless of the factors that impede it, has real opportunities to enter a higher education institution, successfully study and complete an educational program. This concept covers geographical, economic, informational, and infrastructural accessibility, and also includes ensuring the right to

equal access without discrimination and creating the necessary conditions for the full involvement of all categories of applicants. Among the criteria for accessibility of higher education, we have identified the following: the number of people with higher education; the share of foreign students; the number of higher education institutions in the country; and the integration of students with special educational needs.

Ensuring a balance between the quality and accessibility of education requires a comprehensive approach to all aspects of higher education institutions. Only with systematic improvement of these components can access to education be expanded and high standards of the educational process be maintained.

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