

The quality of the assessment process administered in the context of assessments, exams and national competitions in the discipline of music education and specialized music education (vocal art, instrumental music)

Ancuța Simona SANDU¹

Abstract: *The quality of the evaluation process administered in the context of evaluations, exams and national competitions is a desiderate that can be achieved by systematically monitoring the compliance with the norms, principles, assumed values and by developing optimized evaluation practices for each of the components of the process. In order to develop the professional skills of teachers in the role of teacher-evaluators, we must take into account the normative and legislative guidelines, the deontological elements of evaluation, principles and evaluative practices in national exams and competitions. In this specific context, the main components targeted in monitoring the quality assurance of the evaluation process are the identification of ways, strategies, techniques, procedures to reduce the subjectivity of the human factor in evaluation and scoring with the aim of increasing the quality of the evaluation decision, for the benefit of the candidates.*

Keywords: *legislation; evaluator teacher; items; evaluation; objectivity; scales;*

Introduction

On September 17, 2020, the Ministry of Education and Research launched the call for the establishment of the Corps of Assessors for National Exams and Contests (CANEC) intended for teachers who wish to be part of the Corps of Assessors for National Exams and Contests (CANEC). I responded to this call and after the candidate selection process held between November and December 2022, I was selected to be part of a group of teachers, organized by exam/competition disciplines, who meet the criteria established at the national level and will evaluate, in a unitary and efficient manner, the works of students/teachers within the national exams (national assessment for 8th grade graduates, baccalaureate, full-time professional degree in education and the national competition for teaching positions – the tenure exam). Once selected the teachers become members of the CANEC after completing and graduating the training program, accredited by the Ministry of Education and Research and provided by the CANEC, in partnership with the teachers' training centers.

The community of teachers as assessors for national evaluations, exams and competitions is constituted by identifying, valuing, developing and practicing the principles, strategies, techniques, and procedures that contribute and define the quality assurance of the assessment process in this specific context. This increases the efficiency of the assessment process within

¹ Faculty of Letters of the University from Craiova, sandu_ancuta@yahoo.com.

national exams/competitions for students, teachers and teaching career candidates, increases the quality of the assessment process and reduces corruption.

The quality of the assessment process in the context of evaluations, exams and national competitions is a goal that can be met by monitoring systematically how the evaluation norms, principles, and values are applied and by developing optimized assessment practices for each of the components of the process. In order to develop the professional skills of teachers as assessors, we must take into account the normative and legislative references, the deontological elements of evaluation, and the principles and assessment practices in national exams and competitions.

Without violating the code of ethical conduct in evaluation from the perspective of the values, principles and reflective practices used in the specific activities of the assessment process, I will focus on the components employed in monitoring the quality of the assessment process by identifying ways, strategies, techniques, and procedures meant to diminish the subjectivity of the human factor in evaluation and marking and hence increase the quality of the evaluative decision, to the benefit of the candidates.

1. Normative and legislative references

The assessment process carried out by the teachers-assessors in the national evaluations, exams and contests has as its starting point a thorough understanding of the defining elements specified in the methodologies applied at the system/national level.

For the field of music education and specialized music education (vocal art, instrumental music) the assessment process employed for DEF – the full-time professional degree in education organized according to OME 5434/2020 for the approval of the Methodology-framework for organizing and conducting the national exam for full-time professional degree in education and TIT – The national competition for teaching positions – the tenure exam for the occupation of positions/jobs declared vacant/reserved in pre-university education, approved OME no. 6218/2022, the methodology regarding the mobility of pre-university teachers in the 2023-2024 school year.

When briefly observing the provisions of the DEF and TIT methodology, we notice that there are organizational differences in the evaluation process between obtaining the full-time professional degree in education (DEF) and the tenure exam (TIT).

As to the commissions from the assessment centers within the national exam for full-time professional degree in education – DEF according to art. 34 (6) lit. e) there are 2 assessors for a maximum of 100 written papers. Evaluating members are qualified teachers with the teaching degree I and/or a doctoral degree, with competence in assessing national exams. For the tenure exam – TIT, according to art. 68 (2) letter b) there are members – two tenured teachers with teaching degree I, with specialization in the job profile/responsible of methodical commissions with specialization in the job profile/school inspectors with specialization in the job profile/methodologists of the school inspectorate with specialization in the job profile, for each discipline for which candidates have registered, for a maximum of 40 candidates.

Each written paper is assessed independently, in separate rooms, by two teachers, the assessors who evaluate separately, with marks from 10 to 1, including the ex officio point(s), according to the evaluation and marking scale, without writing anything on the paper.

To have a valid assessment, the difference between the marks awarded by each assessor shall not exceed 1 point.

If the difference between the marks awarded by the two assessors exceeds 1 point, the written paper will be evaluated by a third assessor for the full-time professional degree in education – DEF according to art. 35(5) the final mark awarded to the paper is the average of the marks awarded by all three assessors, for the tenure exam – TIT, according to art. 70(4). The grade awarded by the third assessor is final.

If in case of the assessment of the paper for the full-time professional degree in education – DEF, where there are 2 assessors for a maximum of 100 written papers, the grade apparently gets a balance between all three assessors, because the assessors' work is quite large, in case of assessing the papers for the tenure exam, where there are 2 assessors for a maximum of 40 candidates, there might be consequences due to art. 70 (4) in terms of the assessors' objectivity.

This assessment method may lead to errors because there is no balance in awarding the grade: there is only one assessor in this case and his judgment cannot be regulated by the existence of another point of view on the paper. Thus, it may be underrated/ overrated, major errors in the assessment process, which lead to objections on the candidates' part.

There might be differences in the grades awarded because of a marking scale that is not sufficiently well written and because of the fact that some items that are not correctly and coherently stated.

Another consequence could be that the paper is not appreciated in its strong points, thus risking aiming to find mistakes at any cost where the marking scale may provide other grading options as well.

In case of objection to the grade received, the reassessment of the paper is carried out by other teachers than those who initially assessed it. If the difference – plus or minus – between the grade awarded by the committee that reassessed the paper and the grade awarded by the committee that first assessed the paper is smaller than 1.5 points or equal to 1.5 points, the final grade is the one awarded by the committee that reassessed the paper. If the difference between the final grade awarded by the committee that first assessed the paper and the final grade awarded by the committee that reassessed the paper is greater than 1.5 points, a difference that can be either plus or minus, the paper is assessed once again by two other teachers, other than those who initially assessed/ reassessed the paper, as the legal provisions state.

The methodological aspects that create the regulatory context for the assessment activity are carried out by teachers and represent the foundation of the process. This process, in which a multitude of actors, factors and elements of influence are engaged, is governed by norms, values and principles that guides and adds value to each assessment cycle.

2. Aspects on assessment deontology

The assessment process seen as a whole, specific to the context of assessments, exams and national competitions, engages a multitude of educational actors who operate with different sets of norms, values and actions in the different moments and instances of this process. Thus, the assessor embraces values, principles and rules of conduct of the Code of Ethics² for pre-

² The code of ethics for pre-university education based of art. 10 and art. 16 of the Order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sports no. 5550/2011 regarding the approval of the Regulation on the organization and functioning of the National

university education, according to art. 4., which also gives substance to the evaluative approach as an integral part of the educational process.

A framework list of the constitutive and actionable elements of a possible code of deontological conduct in evaluation is proposed in the perspective of the values, principles and reflexive practices activated by the assessor in the specific activities of the assessment process, the transposition in terms of assumed norms involves a complex picture from which at least the following principles³ can be listed: integrity, honesty, correctness, confidentiality, transparency, protection of the assessor's identity, the right of appeal.

Over the years, the management, at the national level of assessments, exams and national competitions has highlighted and confirmed several sets of ethical values intrinsic to the assessment process, as follows⁴: ethical values in the administration and logistics of the assessment process, in the management of documents involved in it, in the relations with the managers with different roles in this process, in the internal communication between the assessors, in the selection of the assessors, and in the prevention and resolution of conflicts of interest.

The status/ role of the assessor is exercised in a climate that must be governed by norms, values, actions assumed and internalized so as to demonstrate the quality of the evaluative act. The existence of a code of ethical conduct in assessment may or may not be shaped as a code of ethics. The literature on the assessment process suggests a diversity of options, but systematic, transparent and documented action in the spirit of assumed deontology remains fundamental.

3. Assessment principles and practices

As part of the training program meant to establish the Corps of Assessors for National Exams and Contests (CANEC), through its structure, each candidate had to practice assessing several written papers from evaluations, exams and national competitions, by studying the typology of the items, the specificity of their design in terms of the creation of the marking scheme corresponding to each type of item and the creation of an evaluation form in excel for each of them.

The assessment process of the written papers, carried out by the assessor in national assessments, exams and competitions, focuses on two main components: the items and the corresponding marking schemes, respectively, the tests and the corresponding assessment and marking scales.

The item can be administrated individually or in close correlation with other items of the same type or of different types, in a docimological test, which is accompanied by the assessment and marking scales, which provides a certain score for the right answer of each item.

To create correct items one requires scientific correctness, compliance with the norms of the literary language, compliance with the rules of spelling and punctuation and the suitability of the vocabulary to the cognitive peculiarities of the candidates. Also, the item must contain the

necessary and sufficient information for its right answer without any additional information, irrelevant for the targeted competences to be assessed.

Objectivity in assessment and marking is the extent to which multiple independent assessors understand the assessment and marking scale in the same way.

When writing a docimological test, the complementarity of the types of items and the gradual approach to their difficulty must be taken into account.

The objective and semi-objective items are relatively easy to administrate, they allow the assessment of higher taxonomic level skills than those that involve the recognition and review of knowledge, but it can be really difficult to formulate these items if the aim is to assess high-level skills, so they are not recommended for the assessment of higher cognitive skills – problem solving, analysis, synthesis, formulating arguments, formulating possible solutions and expressing opinions, skills required for the two exams: the full-time professional degree in education – DEF and the tenure exam – TIT.

The semi-objective item, the structured question type, consisting of an input text and sub-questions, makes the transition from objective items to subjective once. Their making requires a lot of time, and the writing of the assessment and marking scale is laborious, but in this way some essay-type items can be changed into a series of objective and semi-objective items, which increases the objectivity of the assessment.

As their name suggests, the subjective items, completely opposite to the objective ones, can indicate the existence of a relatively high degree of subjectivism in the assessment and marking of the answers, but if the item is clearly formulated, the subjectivity of the assessors can be avoided, even if the way to solve this type of items differ from one candidate to another. Understanding the assessment and marking scale and assessing these items in accordance with those stipulated in the scale decreases subjectivity.

Moreover, from the perspective of the one who creates the topics, writing these items is time-consuming. He must be careful that the requirements of the item are consistent with the skills assessed, skills that require complex learning results, the wording of the item must be clear, according to the level of development/ understanding of the candidates to whom it is addressed. In this case, the development of the marking scheme becomes difficult and requires attention, in order to minimize the effects of the assessor's subjectivity. In case of higher cognitive processes, marking is done by breaking down the marks on each cognitive field tested (for example, comparing two aspects includes identifying the features/ aspects of each of the two elements compared).

If the candidate's answer will also be assessed in terms of language and organization (spelling, punctuation, space limit, agreed structure, form of presentation, etc.), all these aspects must be explicitly included in the given framework, therefore, they must be found in the assessment and marking scale.

Creating the assessment and marking scale is a complex endeavor that involves making the correspondence between the skills, the content units and the assessment criteria.

The marking scale is determined by the peculiarities of the discipline, the targeted competences, contents and typology of the items included in the test. Ensuring the fidelity of a test paper requires the development of an assessment and marking scale with a high degree of objectivity and applicability, aimed at minimizing the grading differences between the assessors. Its completion is a laborious and difficult stage because of the complexity of the assessment objectives and the variety of tests and assessment items.

The assessment and marking scale is created by establishing the score for each item, and in the case of subjective items, which imply a high level of originality when writing the answer, even for the parts of each item.

As part of the Corps of Assessors for National Exams and Contests (CANEC) training program, I have assessed written papers from evaluations, exams and national competitions and I have filled in, for each of them, an assessment form to pinpoint the correct application of the provisions of the assessment and marking scale, the decrease in the number of errors in assessment, the relevant arguments for the grade awarded by applying the provisions of the assessment and marking scale and the creation of a synthetic assessment report on the grade awarded to each of the works corrected by applying the provisions of the assessment and marking scale.

I have found the following possible sources of errors when the assessment and marking scale is used:

- sometimes one of the assessors may award the points, while the other may not award the points provided by the assessment and marking scale. Equally subjective is the situation when points are awarded for analytical and argumentation skills. Although there are some specific aspects that the assessor should follow (logical succession of ideas and their support through arguments presented in a persuasive way; critical thinking), there is still a possibility for the assessor to award or not the points provided in the scale, depending on his/her objectivity.

- awarding the highest score for the incomplete identification of some component parts, on the principle: "He/she wrote almost everything, he/she forgot to mention only one element, but he/she wrote all the others correctly, and I can't subtract so much." In this case, the assessor does not take into account the fact that the exam has a selection function and that there must be a clear tie between the candidates.

- differences may arise between two assessors in case of items that require a presentation, if an assessor considers the presentation correct and complete, and the other not.

- the assessor does not comply with the provisions of the assessment and marking scale, namely: no intermediate points are awarded, other than those explicitly specified in the scale and awards 3 points or 1 point for a partially correct or incomplete answer, even if the scale specifies that 2 points are awarded in this situation.

- although the item is a structured essay type, in which the expected answer is guided by clues and clear requirements, the assessor may not take into account the given structure of the essay, awarding points for other scientific and specialized information that is not listed. Also, the assessor must pay attention if the candidate uses the specialized language correctly, an aspect that proves both the ability to synthesize and the scientific rigor;

- the assessor may make a holistic (global) grading, instead of an analytical one, as provided for in the assessment and marking scale;

- overestimating a nice layout and overlooking content slips;

- correcting a poor paper after an excellent one can lead to undervaluation.

- writing only the correct answer, without the complete solution;

- partial solutions, the assessor does not assess correctly the share of right answers;

- correct solutions by other methods, different from the method presented in the scale;

- lack of intermediate scores can be a cause for differentiation;

- an error may occur when applying the scale if the assessor awards the total score for a particular item even if the candidate does not follow the instruction to write all the stages necessary to solve it, but writes directly the number of symphonies, for example.

- There is also the possibility that a correctly mentioned characteristic is not graded because of the assessors' lack of scientific/ specialized training.

As to designing assessments, exams and national competitions in the Romanian pre-university space, the docimological practice of the last two decades indicates a constant effort to establish a balance between "objective" and "subjective" in the assessment process.

The objective-subjective balance in the assessment process contextualized in national assessments, exams and competitions must be subject to the control and quality assurance mechanisms applied to any process involving the human factor, including possible elements of subjectivity in the assessment/ measurement/ evaluation/ decision, or even elements of subjectivism.

In the national exam, defined as "assessment with high social stake" for all those involved (candidates, assessors, human resources responsible for the logistics/ administration/ management of the assessment process), it becomes essential to know, control and reduce the effects and actions that can influence the objectivity of the assessment and the quality of all the assessment decisions.

The specialized literature notes and documents through studies and empirical research the existence of several errors in assessment (with effects, implicitly, in grading) and it is necessary to know them so as to be able to control, diminish, and counteract them.

To identify these errors one has to acknowledge the following characteristics: they can be identified in practice and when the assessment tools (the test and the corresponding marking scale) are controlled from the perspective of limiting subjective factors; the assessment criteria are clearly and transparently established and the assessment procedures are complied with.

In practice, the observation of disruptive effects due to the subjectivity shown by the assessors means that they vary in terms of their assessment judgments. The variability of their assessment judgments means that one and the same performance (or answer of the candidate) is appreciated differently by two assessors or by an assessor in different situations or moments.

The differences between assessors are not random, but are the effects of several situations that have to be identified. Consequently, once understood, measures can be taken to prevent or reduce/ adapt their effect. Hence, the real problem is to highlight the circumstances that generate the variability of assessments as well as the promotion of procedures meant to reduce this variability.

The assessor's personality traits have a direct impact both on the assessment process and on its results: his/ her state of calmness, emotional balance, nervousness, irritability, the good or bored mood, the caring or distant attitude towards the candidates, the contemptuous attitude, being strict/ lenient, constant, consistent/ fluctuating, capricious, etc.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the practice emphasizes both influencing factors and effects with an impact on the objectivity and, sometimes, on the correctness of the assessment, affected by a series of circumstances that may cause significant, revealed, sometimes quantifiable variations, either in the case of the same assessor in different moments or in the case of different assessors.

Not only the assessment theory but also its practice center on highlighting a series of techniques and actions that can reduce the negative effects and strengthen the unitary character of assessment. Some of these are already applied today, while others are currently applied in international comparative studies to which Romania is also a part, and others can be adapted to the Romanian context. The list of these techniques and actions remains open:

- ensuring that all the test papers stay anonymous throughout the assessment process (a provision currently in use in case of evaluations, exams and national competitions in Romanian pre-university education);
- ensuring the "external" character of the assessment in case of written papers;
- developing an assessment and marking scale with sufficiently clearly detailed scoring and grading criteria;
- the uniform adoption of partial grades in the case of semi-objective and subjective items, by combining quantitative and qualitative criteria;
- the adoption of a simple mechanism of action in case, between the results of the evaluation of two assessors there are higher differences than those specified in the methodology (the assessment of the third assessor);
- multiple assessment (currently, in the case of the procedure applied for in the appeals);
- random distribution of papers for assessment in ad hoc made packages.

The completion of the assessment process must be supported by arguments and statistically substantiated "evidence". The smooth functioning of all the components that lead to the quality of the assessment process in the context of evaluations, exams and national competitions converge towards the achievement of the fundamental goal: the assessment decision in case of each candidate should be the one appropriate to the level, characteristics, and individual performances shown in the evaluation / examination situation / competition.

5. References

● Books

- Potolea, Dan; Neacșu, Ioan; Manolescu, Marin. 2011. *The methodology of evaluating the school achievements of students [Metodologia evaluării realizărilor școlare ale elevilor]*. București: Editura ERC Press.

Electronic sources

● Internet articles based on a printed source

- *The code of ethics for pre-university education elaborated on the basis of art. 10 and art. 16 of the Order of the Minister of Education, Research, Youth and Sports no. 5550/2011 regarding the approval of the Regulation on the organization and operation of the National Ethics Council in pre-university education [Codul de etică pentru învățământul preuniversitar elaborat în baza art. 10 și art. 16 din Ordinul ministrului educației, cercetării, tineretului și sportului nr. 5550/2011 privind aprobarea Regulamentului de organizare și funcționare a Consiliului național de etică din învățământul preuniversitar]*. Retrieved April 28, 2023, from: https://www.edu.ro/sites/default/files/proiect%20cod%20etica%2019_12_2016.pdf.