

REVISED ESG – ADDITIONAL IMPETUS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN B&H

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ABSTRACT

The first version of the Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area was adopted in 2005 in Bergen at the Conference of European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education. Significant advancements in the field of quality assurance in higher education were made in Bosnia and Herzegovina during its ten-year application. Framework Law on Higher Education in B&H was adopted, the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance in B&H was established, national regulations aligned with ESG were adopted too, and the process of institutional accreditation for the most of higher education institutions in B&H completed. Revised version of these standards was adopted at the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015.

The aim of this paper is to assess the influence of the revised version of ESG on the activities of all stakeholders in internal and external quality assurance in B&H.

Keywords: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance, higher education, accreditation.

1. INTRODUCTION

Higher education (HE) in Bosnia and Herzegovina (B&H) is part of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) since 2003 when B&H signed the Bologna Declaration. The changes caused by the Bologna principles were implemented and one of them was stronger establishment of quality assurance (QA) system in higher education institutions (HEIs) and at national level.

Framework Law on Higher Education (Framework Law) that was adopted in 2007 established the Agency for Higher Education and Quality Assurance in BiH (HEA) and defined its roles and responsibilities, namely in the area of quality assurance in BiH.

2. WHAT HAVE WE DONE BEFORE YEREVAN?

The Agency established the accreditation system in BiH, formed the pool of experts and managed institutional accreditation activities, defining accreditation criteria first for institutional and then for study program accreditation in line with the ESG. Table 1 represents the compliance between the ESG (group 1) and Criteria for Accreditation of HEIs in B&H. These were used for institutional accreditation for 27 HEIs in B&H processed by April 15, 2017. [1]

Table 1. Compliance between ESG group I (2005) and Criteria for Accreditation of HEIs in B&H

ESG group I (2005)		Criteria for accreditation of HEIs in B&H ("Official Gazette of B&H", No.: 75/10 & 44/13)	
1	Policy and procedures for quality assurance	1	Development and strategy of HEI
		2	Management, internal QA and quality culture
2	Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programs and awards	3	Procedures for quality assurance of study programs
3	Student assessment	4	Student assessment procedures
4	Quality assurance of teaching staff	5	Human resources
5	Learning resources and student support	6	Quality of physical resources
6	Information systems	7	Information systems
7	Public information	8	Public information
–	–	9	International relations ¹

Every accredited HEI has developed a system of internal quality assurance in line with these criteria, while expert committees evaluated their fulfillment in the process of external quality assurance. Aiming to establish a functional internal quality assurance system, these criteria established a need for HEIs to adopt their internal regulations, referring to the first group of ESG. In order to verify the fulfillment of these criteria in the external quality assurance process, the expert committees should take into account, not only the sole existence of these internal regulations, but the results of their practical application too. In that sense, the Agency provided support to the experts by organizing numerous practical trainings in order to coherently and consistently evaluate the fulfillment of the criteria [2].

Revised version of ESG, adopted in 2015 in Yerevan, at the EHEA Ministerial Conference emphasized that quality assurance needs to take into account: the needs and expectations of students, employers, all other stakeholders and society, as well as their need for good quality [3].

Through the realization of IPA Twinning project “Strengthening Institutional Capacity for Quality Assurance in HE in BiH” in the period between 2013 and 2015, the Agency has done certain preparatory activities in legislative and operative fields of actions in order to align quality assurance system in B&H with the demands of the revised version of ESG. Figure 1 demonstrates the anticipated influence of the revised ESG on quality assurance system in B&H [4].

¹ Note: HEA deliberately developed this criterion in order to increase internationalization of B&H HE, in line with its vision.

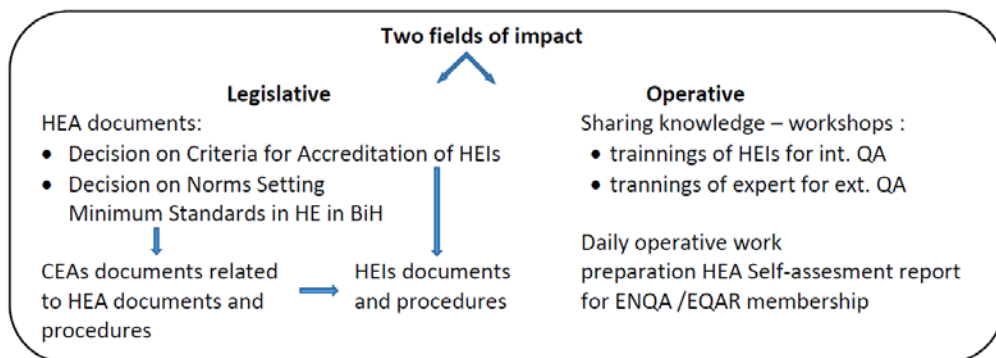


Figure 1. Anticipated influence of the revised ESG 2015 on QA² in B&H

3. WHAT HAVE WE DONE AFTER YEREVAN?

Even before the Ministerial conference in Yerevan, all stakeholders were aware of new proposals and frameworks. After the change has become official, stakeholders were able to initiate and perform changes in their regulations and practices. It was up to national institutions to decide on pace of adaptation to revised ESG. Since the legal framework in B&H is generic, the changes are to be visible at the level of national agency and HEIs the most.

3.1. Instance of Agency for Higher Education and Quality Assurance in BiH

As a leader in the process of quality assurance in B&H, the Agency in legislative and operative field so far has done the following:

Legislative

- In order to align the existing criteria for accreditation of HEIs in B&H with revised ESG, the Agency, within the IPA Twinning project, in partnership with international experts and stakeholders, has prepared the revised version of the existing criteria for accreditation. (New Criteria for Accreditation of HEIs published in Official Gazette of B&H No. 96/16)
- New Criteria for accreditation of study programs are also aligned with revised ESG and were adopted by the Agency's Steering Board in February 2017 and are in process of publishing in Official Gazette of B&H.
- New Decision on norms setting the minimum standards in HE in B&H has been prepared too.
- Thematic analysis of accreditation process 2014-2016 has been done and recommendations are forwarded to competent HE authorities for official adoption, in order to enhance the existing documents and achieve further compliance with the revised ESG.

Operative

- HEA promoted revised ESG in BiH through many activities. In June 2015 the Agency held three workshops for HEIs management, QA structures and competent HE authorities, in Sarajevo, Tuzla and Bihac, titled The influence of revised ESG on QA in B&H [5].
- Self-assessment report of HEA was prepared and finished according to revised ESG and sent to ENQA Secretariat in February 2017. (Available at HEA web page)

² QA= Quality Assurance

- The Agency has realized trainings for experts on its expert list and educated them about and for new Criteria. These trainings were held on March 21, in Banja Luka and on March 23, in Sarajevo.

3.2. Instances of the University of Bihać and the University of Zenica

University of Bihać is a representative example for the activities initiated by revised ESG aiming to improve quality at this HEI. One of the activities initiated by more pronounced request to implement student-centered approach to both learning and teaching is change of study programs, so the main focus is on the delivery of study programs, while at the same time clearly defining learning outcomes of the entire program and every single course. Moreover, educational goals are precisely defined, teaching methods in use, necessary resources and equipment, as well as quality staff for successful implementation of these programs. The entire system is further enhanced by incorporating Qualification Framework in B&H demands and professional requirements.

Another significant improvement at the University of Bihać is related to internationalization of HE, with increase in numbers of student mobilities both to and from the University. Introduction of digital technologies, namely distance learning system through the appropriate and professional platform, is yet another example of positive customization of HE.

Since learning and teaching are profoundly emphasized in these revised ESG, University of Bihać adjusted its policies and approaches to educational process and students in general. The obvious example of the influence of these demands and resulting shift is evident in the proposal of the Law on student standard which assumes that Student Union Body would receive 1% of the total University of Bihać budget, each year. University management is supportive of such practice and actively creates the ambient where students could focus on their education and learning. Students are also regular part of the governing bodies and are being included in research and project activities at various levels. The rate of student participation in scientific and professional conferences is increased, as well as published papers resulting from more efficient cooperation between students and teachers.

Even though the demands related to research and project activities are not so prone or deliberate in revised ESG, these are somehow perceived to be important in some of the standards and guidelines, and are understood to have been addressed by HEIs. These are standards dealing with staff promotion and study program reviews. University of Bihać initiated improvements in this area too by tackling the issue of recognized publications, relevant for staff appointments. The appropriate system of QA and enhancements was established in this segment. Another aspect was the development of self-evaluation system for managerial structures, ranging from the Board of trustees, through Senate, Scientific and teaching councils and individual managers. The aim of these improvements of QA system is the establishment of system of accountability and improvements.

Furthermore, cyclic nature of internal evaluations has been improved since the current internal evaluation at the University of Bihać is done in line with revised ESG and new Criteria. It posed a new challenge, but the approach used by the Agency and workshops organized enabled smooth transition to this new set of demands. Self-evaluation methodology remained the same but the criteria are slightly different and will require new tools and practices for systematic monitoring in some areas.

As it was mentioned earlier, Agency's formal meetings and presentations significantly directed development and advancement of QA system at the University of Bihać. The essential principles of revised ESG are applied and these assume taking the full responsibility for quality by HEIs. University of Bihać applied that notion firmly in its activities and processes, by adapting its regulations and enhancing its quality culture. These resulted in detailed annual plans for Quality Assurance Board and Centre for Quality Assurance at

institutional level, and Teams for Quality Assurance at faculty level. The position of students and other relevant stakeholders is also enhanced through better representation in University structures, especially in QA structures. Yet another positive example is inclusion of students as volunteers in Centre for Quality Assurance. Majority of these examples were also understood in the previous ESG, but they are more clearly emphasized in revised ESG and consequently HEIs' adjustments and implementation became, as represented in this section, more concrete and steered towards the common goal.

Pretty similar set of activities targeting quality enhancements initiated by revised ESG have been performed at the University of Zenica too. Many of them are part of the already established university authorities and practices originated from the implemented Bologna principles. The core activities related to quality assurance at the University of Zenica after the institutional accreditation in September 2014 are based around the measures identified in Improvement Action Plan. The Plan was created as the result of the recommendations provided by the experts' panel that performed external evaluation in the process of institutional accreditation of the University of Zenica. Annual report on the level of implementation of measures in this action plan is analyzed by the University Senate and its content is the essential part of the internal evaluation of the University, performed annually. Preparation of the report, as well as the internal evaluation for every year is done by the Quality Board of the University of Zenica. As a part of their regular sessions and activities related to quality improvements, the Quality Board has informed all the University bodies and employees about the contents and demands stipulated in revised ESG. It has been done in written, through regular communication, and also through specially crafted workshops. An additional impetus to these activities was provided via the active participation of the University of Zenica in IPA Twinning project "Strengthening institutional capacities for quality assurance" (BA11-IB-OT-02) that provided translation of revised ESG, rather soon after they were officially adopted. According to the above mentioned, all University bodies, offices and individuals involved in realization of scientific, educational, research, administrative or managerial processes at UNZE, must perform their activities in line with the revised ESG. Quality Board performs summative evaluation and analysis of the completed activities and institutional compliance with revised ESG through the contents of the internal evaluation report. Therefore, the entire contents for 2016 will comply with the criteria envisaged by the revised ESG, i.e. its first part defining Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance. Such a contents of the Institutional self-evaluation report for 2016, together with the integral Report on implementation of Action plan after the accreditation, represents the basis for institutional reaccreditation that the university of Zenica will apply for in March 2017.

4. CONCLUSION

Several comparative analyses between ESG 2005 and ESG 2015 available on-line (ENQA, ASIIN, and other QA agencies) indicate in details the changes made by revised ESG. An apparent change is increase in number of group I standards, from seven to ten. This in itself is a clear indicator that the change of focus in QA moved towards the internal system that is the responsibility of higher education institution itself. Nevertheless, even in group I standards, there is a responsibility of national QA agency. This responsibility primarily comes from the fact that national agency defines national criteria, in line with ESG, and these criteria condition HEIs' internal QA systems. There is no doubt that, according to Framework Law, HEA is the only agency responsible for defining accreditation criteria. Since the Agency has issued new accreditation criteria, in line with revised ESG, there are no obstacles for HEIs, as illustrated through the examples of the University of Bihać and the University of Zenica, to adapt their internal QA systems to revised ESG.

Agency's Regulation on norms that define minimal standards, that passed public discussion phase and is to be adopted by HEA's Management Board and published in Official Gazette, is related to group II ESG. After that, competent educational authorities will have to adjust their regulation in line with this Regulation on norms. With that step, external QA in B&H will comply with revised ESG and enable external evaluations of HEIs and study programs according to revised ESG. However, there will still be different dynamics in implementation by the competent educational authorities in some parts of B&H. These could be attributed to objective obstacles like lack of staff or experience, but also to politically motivated changes. When it comes to the third group of ESG that deals with QA agencies, it becomes obvious that HEA's steps towards full membership in ENQA represent a major breakthrough for HE in B&H. The final and most relevant activity in this process is already scheduled visit by ENQA expert panel, due in May. The Agency, together with its stakeholders, is readily awaiting this visit, aware that this event will determine the future prospects of quality assurance in higher education in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

5. REFERENCES

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