

STUDY PROGRAMS ACCREDITATION – FITNESS FOR PURPOSE

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ABSTRACT

The fitness for purpose of accreditation of study programs is one of the most important issues in quality assurance in higher education. Therefore, it is very important that the accreditation of study programs, and the evaluation of quality in higher education in general, is not a bureaucratic procedure but that it truly contributes to a qualitative step forward in the field of higher education. One of the ways in which the fitness for purpose of the procedure of accreditation of study programs is enabled is the development of different models of accreditation of study programs and their adaptation to different higher education institutions. The model of review of study program offers institutions the expert opinion of a peer-reviewer from the narrow field of expertise. On the other hand, the cluster accreditation model is suitable for large institutions that have numerous study programs in various scientific fields. Quality assurance agencies are obliged to support institutions in developing a culture of quality and improving the quality of the study program within the accreditation process.

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in higher education, including the accreditation of study programs, has been one of the primary demands of society for almost three decades, but for most European countries, accreditation in higher education is a relatively new process. However, along with the establishment and development of quality assurance systems in higher education, questions are raised about the fitness for purpose of accreditation, whether it truly contributes to the development of higher education institutions, and indirectly better education of students for the modern labor market or accreditation is another bureaucratic procedure which effects are primarily in the sphere of additional administration. Ten years ago, more than 4,500 study programs were accredited in Germany by a number of accreditation agencies, and at the same time the academic community is beginning to intensively question the effects of accreditation and its contribution to the competitiveness of study programs.¹

" The contributions show that the accreditation of study programs not only has external effects, but also leads to reflection within the universities. In the ideal case, the external effect results in a higher attractiveness of a study program, whereas internally an effective and permanently anchored quality management is promoted - primarily for teaching, but also indirectly for scientific research " (Winter R., Sinz E., Dyllick T., Kurbel K., Schmidt H. and Eymann T, 2009).

At the same time they want to emphasize that accreditation is connected to relatively high expenses so that compulsory accreditation without an active quality management does not appear useful.

¹ <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007/s12599-009-0064-1.pdf>

Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina, in relation to most European countries, entered the process of accreditation of study programs late, and the first programs were accredited in 2019 at the University of Banja Luka, the University of East Sarajevo and the University of Zenica. Taking into account the rich experience in the accreditation of study programs in European countries, it should be borne in mind that each accreditation must offer additional value to the institution and/or study program. What does that basically mean? This means that each accreditation cycle must result in a qualitative step forward for the intent study program in a way that provides inputs that will help the institution to improve, develop and thus make that study program more competitive.

Any accreditation procedure that does not meet this primary condition can be characterized as bureaucratization.

2. ACCREDITATION OF STUDY PROGRAMS IN REPUBLIC OF SRPSKA

In July 2020, the Law on Quality Assurance in Higher Education of the Republika Srpska ("Official Gazette of the Republika Srpska", 67/20)² came into force, which is one of the first laws that specifically regulates this area in the region. Of all the countries in the region, such a law exists only in Croatia³, while this area in other countries is regulated under the law on higher education.

When it comes to quality assurance of study programs, this Law prescribes mandatory accreditation. "A higher education institution registered in the Register is obliged to accredit all study programs of the first and second cycle of studies for which it has a work permit," it is stated in Article 16 of the Law.

The same article states that the object of accreditation are higher education institutions and study programs, including the procedures of managing a higher education institution, the processes by which study programs are implemented, the internal quality assurance system in the higher education institution, resources and potentials as well as organizational capacity for change.

Since accreditation is carried out in accordance with the standards for accreditation of higher education institutions and study programs, which are harmonized with European and international standards, and criteria for accreditation of higher education institutions and study programs in BiH, it is certain that the quality of standards is in correlation with fitness for purpose and quality of accreditation procedures.

In the previous accreditation procedures, the criteria for accreditation of higher education institutions and study programs adopted at the level of BiH⁴ have been applied directly, but it has been noticed that these criteria are too generic, set broadly and in principle, it is practically a translation of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area (ESG)⁵.

In that way, the accreditation procedure is too much reduced to the skill and personal impression of the experts engaged in the panels of experts. It can be concluded that one of the most important activities for improving the quality of accreditation of study programs is the development of accreditation standards that set measurable quality indicators, and thus the matter of personal assessment and "artistic impression" of experts is reduced to a much more acceptable measure and therefore should make accreditation results much more comparable.

In addition, with the development of standards for accreditation of study programs, it is necessary to develop different models of accreditation of study programs allowing flexibility in choosing a model that will be tailored to the needs of a particular higher education institution

² https://www.avors.org/images/propsi/zakon_o_obezbjedenju_kvaliteta_u_visokom_obrazovanju.pdf

³ https://narodne-novine.nn.hr/clanci/sluzbeni/2009_04_45_1031.html

⁴ http://hea.gov.ba/Dokumenti/dokumenti_agencije/?id=7765

⁵ <https://www.enqa.eu/esg-standards-and-guidelines-for-quality-assurance-in-the-european-higher-education-area/>

and its study programs.

At the level of the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance in BiH, a Decision on Amendments to the Decision on Norms for Determining Minimum Standards in Higher Education in BiH⁶ was adopted, which envisages the possibility of applying different models of accreditation of study programs.

Namely, the mentioned Decision states in the chapter entitled Method and areas of external quality assurance verification: "External quality assurance of study programs is carried out through various quality assurance mechanisms, such as review, cluster or individual accreditation of study programs. Accreditation of study programs is carried out as part of institutional accreditation and / or individually between two accreditation cycles. The structure of the model of external quality assurance of study programs should include: - Report on the study program prepared by the higher education institution, - Expert report on the study program (one or more reviews or other types of reports of experts from the scientific field to which the study program belongs), - External evaluation study program, which may be an integral part of the visit of the Commission of Experts for a higher education institution or several study programs - published reports on the external evaluation of the study program which may be part of the external evaluation report of the higher education institution published by the competent education authorities - follow-up activities according to the recommendations of the Commission of Experts in the external evaluation report. "

This creates preconditions for the competent educational authorities to develop each of the three mentioned models of accreditation of study programs, adjusted to the needs of the specific system of higher education, which the Agency for Higher Education of the Republic of Srpska did. Thus, the Rulebook on Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programs⁷ envisages the possibility of applying all three mentioned models of accreditation of study programs, specifically accreditation of study programs is carried out using different quality assurance mechanisms and models of accreditation of study programs: reviews, cluster accreditation and individual accreditation.

It is also envisaged that the accreditation of study programs may be conducted as part of the accreditation of the institution and / or as a separate procedure.

When it comes to reviews, it is a procedure that is carried out as part of the accreditation of a higher education institution. Accreditation of the study program according to the review model is carried out by a commission of experts for higher education institutions and reviewers from academic staff and students.

Study program review is an analysis of the structure of the study program, assessment of purpose and goals, and especially the compliance of the curriculum with the competencies of graduates and the competencies of teaching staff required for quality study program, basically expert opinion on compliance with standards and approval of the study program and student-centered learning, teaching, and evaluation. The Director of the Agency, at the proposal of the Accreditation Coordinator, appoints three reviewers to review the study program, two of whom are academic staff and one student reviewer. Reviewers are selected from the scientific / educational field and / or the scientific / educational field to which the study program belongs and their task is to independently and objectively analyze the documentation of the higher education institution and give an expert opinion on the study program, with recommendations for improvement. The role of the student is somewhat different, so the task of the student reviewer is, based on the documentation of the higher education institution, to bring an objective and well-founded opinion about the study program from the point of view of the requirements

⁶ http://hea.gov.ba/Dokumenti/dokumenti_agencije/?id=8304

⁷ https://www.avors.org/images/propisi/pravilnik_o_akreditaciji_visokolskih_ustanova_i_studijskih_programa.pdf

of the standards relating to students. The report on the review of the study program with recommendations for elimination of deficiencies is sent to the higher education institution and it is obliged to determine improvement programs for all recommendations, ie programs for elimination of deviations from standards, and evaluate their effectiveness in the self-evaluation process.

If the review of the study program indicates significant deviations from the Standard, the higher education institution may withdraw the study program from the further external evaluation procedure, and apply for re-accreditation after eliminating the identified deficiencies and fulfilling the recommendations given in the study program review reports. The application for accreditation of such study program may not be submitted less than one year from the date of receipt of the previous review report.

Accreditation of study programs according to the cluster accreditation model can be carried out within the accreditation of the institution or as a separate procedure. Study programs are grouped into clusters in accordance with the regulations of the competent ministry, which regulate the classification of scientific fields and areas and narrower scientific fields.

Accreditation of study programs according to the cluster or individual accreditation model is carried out according to the same methodology as the accreditation of the institution, in accordance with the Annual Plan of external evaluation of study programs adopted by the Agency taking into account the needs of higher education institutions and available funds in the Agency budget. The law stipulates that the procedures of external evaluation of public higher education institutions are financed from the Agency's budget.

When determining the first procedures for accreditation of study programs, the Agency initially choose model of review of study programs due to various limitations in the planned accreditation of study programs.

"Although the external evaluation methodology applied so far is generally accepted, in the process of external evaluation of study programs in Republic of Srpska it was not possible to conduct an external evaluation that includes a visit of a commission of experts to each study program, for several reasons. The first reason is related to experts in the external evaluation process, because in BiH, unlike other European countries, there are strictly established lists of experts (closed type) that are used to form commissions in external evaluation procedures ", (Tepic, Vojvodic, Radakovic, 2018, pp. 209-210).

At that time, the Agency pointed out the problem of the lack of experts from certain scientific fields and areas, as well as the unequal position of public higher education institutions in relation to private ones due to the high cost of individual processes.

Five years later, the problem of lack of experts is still relevant and it is overcome in various ways, by accessing cluster accreditation for scientific fields in which there are enough experts on the List of domestic and international experts⁸ and through model of review that enables the engagement of reviewers coming from the narrow field of expertise appointed from the List of Reviewers⁹. We see that the obstacle in terms of inequality of public higher education institutions in relation to private ones due to the high cost of individual processes has been overcome by financing processes at public institutions from the Agency's budget, which is made possible by new legislation.

Accreditation of study programs according to the model of individual accreditation is carried out as a special procedure under the same conditions as the accreditation of a higher education institution.

In order to conduct the procedure of accreditation of study programs in an efficient, rational, purposeful and transparent manner, when choosing the model of accreditation of study

⁸ http://hea.gov.ba/kvalitet/lista_eksperata/Archive.aspx?template_id=52&pageIndex=1 and <https://www.avors.org/index.php/sr/lis-s-rucnj>

⁹ <https://www.avors.org/index.php/sr/lis-r-c-nz-n>

programs, it should be taken into account:

- ... the number of registered study programs,
- ... the number of scientific fields / areas to which study programs belong and
- ... the availability of experts from the narrow scientific field at the corresponding lists.

3. ADVANTAGES OF DIFFERENT MODELS OF ACCREDITATION OF STUDY PROGRAMS

The most important advantage of review of study programs, as a model of accreditation, is the possibility of hiring experts from the narrow scientific field or area to which the study program that is the subject of review belongs, as well as a student reviewer studying in a study program of very similar profile. The expert opinion of the reviewer, as a kind of expertise, is an important part of the input documentation for the commission of experts that will visit the higher education institution, and be convinced of the evidence of fulfilment of conditions for accreditation of all study programs. Based on the feedback from the 55 study programs that were the subject of reviews as of May 2021, it was noticed that the representatives of the study programs emphasize the importance of hiring experts from the narrower scientific field, because they recognize that the recommendations given for improvement are very specific. Those recommendations referred to the very core of the structure of the study program, as well as the curriculum. The review is therefore a favourable form of accreditation of study programs in the field for which there are currently no experts available on the List of Experts from which commissions are appointed, primarily study programs in the field of natural sciences, humanities, and especially in the field of arts.

On the other hand, cluster accreditation is a favourable model of accreditation for large higher education institutions that have numerous study programs in all scientific fields and area, and therefore must inevitably organize accreditation of study programs between two cycles of higher education institution accreditation. Given the availability of experts, these are primarily study programs in the field of technical and biomedical sciences, and partly the social sciences. Individual accreditation of a study program is a model for which small institutions that have only one study program for accreditation can opt, and it is also suitable for joint study programs conducted by two or more institutions, as well as for study programs created as a result of international projects in higher education.

4. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In systems limited not only by the lack of financial resources to support the accreditation of study programs, but also by the lack of human resources for quality implementation of accreditation, it is important to allow flexibility of approach in order to achieve the fitness for purpose of the procedure.

In that way, every study program is enabled to achieve maximum benefits and additional value through the process of external evaluation, which will result in further development of the study program and indirectly better competencies of graduates, which is a necessary prerequisite for competitiveness in the modern labour market.

In order to improve the quality of accreditation of study programs, it is necessary to work on providing preconditions for supporting a flexible approach to accreditation of study programs. This primarily refers to the development of accreditation criteria with measurable quality indicators in order to obtain the most objective results of external evaluation, as well as the continuous updating of the List of Experts to ensure the availability of accreditation experts from as many scientific fields.

We have seen how the Agency's approach has changed over the last ten years, relying primarily on evaluation of the views of key stakeholders (higher education institutions and the entire academic community, students and labour field) and insisting on their active involvement in

developing Agency procedures and acts.

Stakeholder participation and regular evaluation of the level of satisfaction of key stakeholders by the quality of service provided, is one of the postulates of continuous quality improvement in all areas, and are mandatory for all agencies dealing with quality assurance in higher education. In this way, they listen to the needs of the higher education system and society as a whole and show the capacity for change that is required not only from higher education institutions but also from agencies that evaluate their work.

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