

QUALITY SYSTEM FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF UNIVERSITIES OF BIH

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ABSTRACT

This paper gives overview of quality assurance systems at BiH universities obtained during the external evaluation process. The members of Committee were foreign and domestic experts.

Key words: Quality assurance, BA universities, External evaluation

1. INTRODUCTION

The Bologna process is one of the most important factors, influencing shaping of higher education area in Europe in coming decades. There are identified numerous of mechanisms helping higher education to contribute to improvement of economic effects in environment. One of the aims of these changes is to increase mobility and workforce, in other words graduated students [1-3]. In order to achieve this, the system of higher education higher education institutions must be changed and adapted to new situation. Increased mobility impacts on increase of university's quality and it further reflects on possibilities for employment of graduated students [1, 4].

Due to the globalization of world economy, the working environment and labour market for graduated students are changed. The universities must compete for students. The requests standing in front of young experts are increased. Conducted studies [3, 5] showing that beside social and political factors, movements on labour market have significant influence. Survival of universities today depends on their capacity to accept these changes, how to improve their practice and how they can increase their competitiveness. As with other organizations, universities improve their work in different ways, as well as their competitiveness. Among methods used for increase of competitiveness, the universities are using quality management method [6, 7].

In last two decades serious changes in universities' funding systems and higher education in general are observed in B&H. The private capital has become more present in funding of newly-established private universities, as well as in requests for increase of scholarships in one part of public sector higher education. The marketing concept is idea that is more and more accepted in no-marketing contexts, such as relationship between university and its students. The students are seen as clients for acquiring of knowledge at many universities, and universities are considered as suppliers of these knowledge to the clients [2,8]. Many universities are going even step further and their students are observed as co-workers in quest for knowledge. In order to empower their chance in marketing, universities often are using quality management systems as very strong weapon.

All of these were reasons that responsible people at universities in Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina decide to implement independent evaluations through audit that will be performed by foreign experts, professors from respectable universities from Europe.

Graduated students after employment are facing with significant challenges at their working place and environment. This is one of many reasons to evaluate level of qualification of students from BiH universities to meet their obligations in companies that employ them, or to determine level of knowledge quality taken from the universities.

2. THE BACKGROUND

The beginning of activities on quality assurance at universities in Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina originate from 2003/2004 when the preparations for first external evaluation appear. The assistance during reports' preparation was provided by the experts from European Universities' Association (EUA). Several models of quality assurance at EU member states universities and in EU candidate countries at that time and which had the similar university development path (Bulgaria, Romania, Poland etc) were presented. During this process participants acquired significant experience later used for preparation of self-evaluation reports [9]. In all strategic documents related to development of Republic of Srpska and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and especially for education, one of most important aims to achieve referred to quality assurance in higher education.

The changes of relevant regulation and the legal framework in Republic of Srpska and in Bosnia and Herzegovina enabled introduction of quality assurance system at universities and newly-established Agency for development of higher education and quality assurance (2008) and Agency for accreditation of higher education institutions in Republic of Srpska (2010) were in charge for its evaluation. In the meantime, these agencies defined standards, criterion and procedures for implementation of evaluation (internal and external) and accreditation of higher education institutions (HEIs) [9]. The evaluation of quality system at HEIs in Republic of Srpska in this moment is clearly divided into: **licensing**, as the initial stage of accreditation and assessment of the requirements for the start of HEIs and **accreditation**, as evaluation of quality level of HEIs, above the minimum working conditions.

3. MATERIAL AND METHODS

External evaluation of all public universities in B&H was conducted in period between February and May 2012. The process of evaluation was done by the committee composed of experienced foreign and domestic experts and representatives of students, which were chosen from a list of experts from the Agency for Accreditation of Bosnia and Herzegovina. The Commission based its work on the standards and criteria previously adopted, and included seven criteria which comprises of 23 indicators. Criteria were developed in the framework of the Tempus project [10].

After analyzing the documents that are developed within the quality assurance system by the universities, formed Commissions visited universities and representatives of certain academic programs, which were the subject of evaluation and on-site verified the functioning of quality systems. After that, the Commissions gave their written statements.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Organization of visit to university and on-site evaluation

In accordance with created reports, the team members who participated in the evaluation of the BiH universities, were well informed about Self-evaluation reports and had good cooperation with partners throughout the overall visit. Students were actively involved in discussions.

2. General aspects as results of on-site visits

The Commissions for external evaluation have noted that many elements related to the study programs are too standardized, a number of legal provisions or regulations restricts activities within the study groups (faculties, universities). Restrictions relating to problems that should be designated to the responsible person within the study groups (faculties, universities). For example, some faculties need to obtain permission from the Ministry of Education, when they want to do some small changes in the curriculum. The timeframe until they receive a response usually can take months, sometimes even up to a whole year. In some cases, the ministry decides on the theme and content of research projects, which should be the responsibility of faculties and universities. Therefore, Commission recommended that there should be greater autonomy of faculties and universities in the area of administration, education, and especially the management of funding. This will certainly impact on the following:

- increase the motivation of all involved persons in institutions of higher education,
- prevent inefficiency of faculties / universities using the excuse that their government does not provide the possibility for change, and
- possibility that the government makes decisions and performs verification of education and research development based on autonomous decisions.

Still there is the mentality of those responsible at the HEIs that the teaching is main (only) activity at faculties and universities. This kind of mentality shows a general lack of research activities at higher education institutions. Excellent teaching is based on excellent research and vice versa, and if one of them is missing or defective, others will not function. In the next few years, supporting research and development at HEIs in B&H should be the main direction of development. The Commissions for external evaluation were found number of faculty where the content of Self-evaluation reports is written in the form of the plan and that lacks evidence that the activities are carried out, resulting in recommendations that this work must continue. More frequent preparation of Self-evaluation reports will certainly accelerate and enhance this job.

5. SPECIAL ASPECT OF ON-SITE VISITS' RESULT

5.1. Educational goals – Curriculum

In accordance with the implementation of the Bologna reforms all attended HEIs changed their curriculums and incorporate ECTS in them. In addition, they've made a detailed program for implementation of various study programmes, each subject was assigned a certain number of ECTS adhering to the principle that the maximum number of ECTS credits per one semester is 30, or for the entire academic year - 60 ECTS. In certain cases, counting the number of ECTS was done on the "free way". It can be argued that the consequence of this is lack of real changes in curriculum content (something like "old wine in new barrels"). Shortening the number of teaching hours must be followed by reduction of the content of study programs, which in some cases remained the same as before the reform. Commission in specific cases, provide recommendations to re-analyze the curricula in order to reach the required competence. It is necessary to improve methods of teaching and evaluating students, and to establish a special commission at the level of each study program that will have power to make decisions related to control of the teaching process.

5.2. The staff

The teachers are mostly concerned with teaching, while research activities into a number of faculties or study groups visited depend on individual interests. The motivation for the research work is significantly reduced after reaching a certain academic level. In addition to general changes in the relationship of teachers to researchers, HEIs must change the attitude towards the organization of research, which would be more centralized and to strengthen inter-disciplinarity of research. In addition to establishing a central committee which will monitor the implementation of research, the Commission proposes to establish the overall structure of the research and to provide sufficient time for research activities.

5.3. The students

The students as young upcoming generation that needs to take important positions in society, at the same time are very important part of the HEIs. Their involvement in all decisions relating to education is essential, because it helps the work of the university administration. In addition, recognition of students as partners affects the avoidance of unnecessary confrontations, on one hand, and strengthening the motivation and support as measures for fruitful cooperation and the desire of students to be engaged in the implementation of its activities, on the other side.

Procedures for enrollment of students in higher education institutions should be improved, as has been observed that the withdrawal rate of students studying in the first two years of study in several studies is very high (70%). Certainly there are some reasons for it (insufficient information on study programs, different levels of education in various secondary schools, social problems, etc).

5.4. The equipment and infrastructure

Although significant efforts are made to provide funding for students and staff at HEI, we still observed a lack of IT and laboratory equipment. In the opinion of the Commission, the reason for this may be a lack of money and problems related to autonomy in the process of financing faculties / universities. Intensive research and greater international cooperation will enable more money in the fund and will provide enough money to purchase needed equipment.

5.5. Internal quality

For most of study programs there are activities for strengthening the internal quality assurance and they applied instruments (questionnaires) to collect data and information. Evaluation Commissions consider the job well done, but so far in all cases the analysis of the data is not well done and adequate measures arising from the implementation of previous activities have not been taken. Certainly the management of study groups should define the rules and measures to be taken as a result of an internal quality assurance.

5.6. Achieved results and educational outputs

Bosnia is on track to improve its higher education. Many new development activities have started and should be implemented in the next few years. Activities for accreditation on the basis of a pilot project ESABIH, which is supported by the HEA, should help to accelerate this process.

6. CONCLUSIONS

1. At all public universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina there are systems for quality assurance
2. During 2012 external evaluations of selected study programs by a mixed commission (foreign and local experts) was conducted at these universities
3. Commission noted that at all universities there are established bodies for quality assurance, there are regulations that enable quality assurance, that in the bodies carrying out a system for ensuring the quality includes teaching, non-teaching staff, students and representatives of the environment and that they are all completely open to talk about all issues and aspects of quality and are ready for improvement.

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