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How does Quality Assurance Make a Difference?

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Impact of new standards on quality improvement of study programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina

Abstract:

The idea for the study of these issues arose as a result of the current state of higher education in BiH, which has not yet begun the process of accreditation of higher education institutions and study programs. The existence of 43 higher education institutions and about 1,400 study programs at private and public universities in BiH requires efforts in their comparison, taking into account that there are no formal criteria for comparing their quality.

This paper presents the development of criteria for accreditation of academic programs that will allow comparisons, training of BiH academic community regarding the implementation of accreditation of academic programs and implemented a pilot accreditation of 32 study programs in eight public universities in accordance with the developed criteria. In parallel with these limitations, advantages and disadvantages identified by this procedure are presented.

Key words: Accreditation, Study program, Criteria for accreditation of study programs, Indicator, Self evaluation report

Text of paper:

Introduction

Since 2003 Quality Assurance (QA) is one of the main priorities in European higher education since it will guarantee mutual trust and will provide frames and conditions for recognition of qualifications and credits abroad. Comparison of different study programmes is a prerequisite for a good academic international cooperation and increase of the university exchange potential as the crucial points of the Bologna Process implementation [1].

Since 2005 when the process of establishing of the QA system in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BH) started, taking into account the full dedication of the management of BH universities to develop the system as such, the universities had invested huge efforts in order to improve QA in every segment of their higher education institutions.

After several projects aiming to establish and improve the QA system in BH, and in accordance with the needs and priorities as the new objectives for establishing precondition for BH university accreditation and developing system of QA in the frame of the European standards and the recommendation resulted by the Tempus project "European Union (EU) standards for accreditation of study programmes on BH



Universities" [2]. After developing institutional QA capacities of the universities, establishing of operational national Agency for Higher Education Development and QA in BH (HEA) and Agency for accreditation of higher education institutions in Republika Srpska (HEARS), originally the idea is to join forces and bring all necessary capacities in order to develop a common system and praxes for developing and accreditation of study programmes in BH.

Clear procedures for the assessment and the accreditation of study programmes and professional development in QA procedures of the university quality staff, providing expertise for internal and external assessment requires issuing of common guidelines for assessment of study programmes at BH universities.

This paper describes the development of criteria for accreditation of academic programs, taking into account the current state of higher education in BH, academic training (improving skills and competencies) regarding the accreditation of academic programs, implementation of a pilot accreditation program in the 4 study of each public university in BH (total of 32 study programs) in accordance with the proposed criteria for accreditation of academic programs and their impact on improving the quality of the performance of academic programs and the accreditation of academic programs in BH.

Metodology of work

Methodology of work is based on:

- 1) development of criteria for accreditation of academic programs in BH,
- 2) training of BH academics in connection with accreditation of study programs (introduction to the criteria and their development, work in small groups, practical exercises on existing examples of European accreditation programs),
- 3) performance of 32 pilot study program accreditation with 8 public universities in BH (four SP with each university), and
- 4) impact on improving the quality of the performance of academic programs and the accreditation of academic programs in BH.

Results

Development of criteria for accreditation of study programs

Taking into account the lack of criteria for accreditation of academic programs in Bosnia and Herzegovina, the first step was their proposal, development and acceptance by the relevant institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina (Agency for Higher Education Development and Quality Assurance BH). Preliminary analysis of the existing criteria for the accreditation of academic programs that are used in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was done, and according to the current situation in higher education in BH and existing documents 7 criteria for accreditation of study programs are proposed under which 24 indicators are defined.

The proposed criteria are as follows [3]:

Criterion 1: Educational Objectives
Indicator 1.1: Level and Orientation
Indicator 1.2: Domain Specific Demands
Criterion 2: Curriculum
Indicator 2.1: Correspondence Between Objectives and the Content of the Program
Indicator 2.2: Demands Professional and Academic Alignment
Indicator 2.3: Coherence Program
Indicator 2.4: Workload
Indicator 2.5: Coherence of the Organization of the Learning Process and Contents



Indicator 2.6: Final paper
Criterion 3: Staff
Indicator 3.1: Quality of Staff
Indicator 3.2: Demands Professional / Academic Alignment
Indicator 3.3: Quantity of Staff
Criterion 4: Students
Indicator 4.1: Assessment and Testing
Indicator 4.2: Practical Training
Indicator 4.3: Conditions of Admission
Indicator 4.4: Student Involvement in the Improvement of Teaching / Learning process
Indicator 4.5: Measures for Promoting Mobility, Including Mutual Recognition Credits
Indicator 4.6: Coaching of Students
Indicator 4.7: Information, Consultation and Complaint System
Criterion 5: Means and Facilities
Indicator 5.1: Material Aspects
Criterion 6: Internal Quality Control
Indicator 6.1: Evaluation Results
Indicator 6.2: Measures for Improvement
Indicator 6.3: Involving Co-workers, Students, Alumni and the Professional Field
Criterion 7: Results Achieved
Indicator 7.1: Realized Level
Indicator 7.2: Educational Output

It is worth noting that the drafting of criteria for accreditation of academic programs was done by the experts from Belgium, Spain, Germany, Portugal, Romania, experts from eight public universities in BH, Ministry of Education at the level of Entities and cantons and the Agency for the Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance BH (HEA).

Training of the academic community in BiH

HEA announced applications for registration on the list of experts (external experts, teachers, businessmen, students) who will participate in the process of accreditation of universities and academic programs. Successful completion of this procedure made the final list of experts, after which their training was performed.

Approximately over 1000 representatives of the teaching staff and 40 students are trained. Training is conducted at public universities in BiH especially for all groups, including training for secretaries of the future Commission for accreditation, and training of experts from BH, coordinator for quality assurance and students in Belgium, Portugal and Romania.

All groups were working in small groups on the analysis of already carried out procedures of accreditation of study programs in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), as well as the application of the proposed criteria for the accreditation of academic programs BH, after which satisfactory improvement of knowledge and competence of experts who will be members of the Commission for the implementation of a pilot accreditation of study program in BiH was achieved.

Pilot accreditation of 32 study programs in BiH

Prior to implementation of the pilot accreditation Commission for pilot accreditation of study programs were formed. They were comprised of external experts (in some cases



there were two external experts) who had been chairman of the Commission, BH experts, students and the Secretary of the Commission. Experts from the list could not be members of the Commission on Accreditation of those universities with which they are contracted by the study or attend them (students).

After the teams did their study program self-evaluation reports in two language versions, they were obliged to send them to the Secretaries of the Committees which organized the further procedure of accreditation.

The Commissioners were required, after sending self-evaluation reports to be read, to fill out their Individual preparation of the 7 criteria and 24 indicators. Thereafter, the Secretary synthesized the individual preparations by members of the Commission in a group report, which they later transferred to the analysis and personal preparation for the meeting of the Commission the day before the visit to study program.

Secretaries, in accordance with the form of the Agenda, are offered, in coordination with the program of study, to create the list, which they were obliged to adhere to all participants in the pilot accreditation.

Visits to study programs lasted for two days, in which interviews were conducted with all groups of the study program (management, teaching and administrative staff, students, graduate students, representatives of the labor market) and finally oral report was created and presented to them in order to present a SWOT analysis on all the criteria.

Immediately after the visit to the study program, Secretary of the Commission, together with the other members, were required to create Assessment report which will be sent to the study program as a final document of the pilot accreditation of study program and the scores for each criterion (satisfactory / unsatisfactory) and indicator (excellent, good, satisfactory, unsatisfactory).

Impact on improving the quality of the performance of study program

Taking into account that the process of accreditation of study programs at the higher educations in BH has not started yet, this was the first activity of this kind. What is important is that the procedure is aimed to educate all future actors in accreditation processes, with emphasis on the development of criteria for accreditation of study programs that do not currently exist in the BH and the implementation of the accreditation process in selected degree programs.

After the procedure of accreditation of study programs it was evident that all study programs that were part of this process got feedback from experts in the EHEA, BH experts and students in the form of oral statements and Assessment Report. This feedback will assist the study programs to correct their deficiencies and to improve the quality of their educational program to more easily accept the actual process of accreditation of study programs in the future.

All study programs undergoing this process have to correct the irregularities detected by the evaluating Commission in order to pass a formal accreditation process that will follow. In accordance with this, each institution or program should create an action plan with clear actions, timelines and responsibilities related to it. In those study programs in which this procedure (pilot accreditation) is carried out, activities to eliminate irregularities are going. Given that in BiH awareness of accreditation and the survival of higher education institutions increased enough, this issue has become strategic, and in accordance with these monitoring and control for the performance of activities after the pilot of the procedure of accreditation is recognized by the management of each university. Pilot accreditation does not include the control and supervision over the activities conducted after the accreditation, but it is a process that each individual institution has to take on its responsibility in order to satisfy formal accreditation.

Given that in this entire process HEA BiH and HEA RS were actively involved, their influence is reflected in recommending what programs of study that meet the proposed minimum criteria for accreditation of academic programs should do in the direction of



eliminating the perceived weaknesses, so that the indirect supervision and control these agencies will perform in the future and implement a formal accreditation process in BiH.

Making difference

The fact is that the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is quite alarming in terms of the existence of an extremely large number of study programs (around 1400) and higher education institutions - legal entities (43), which is not consistent with the number of people in Bosnia and Herzegovina (4 million) and under-affiliated labor market with the sector of higher education. What BiH higher education needs to do is to compare the academic programs on the basis of the criteria for accreditation of academic programs (which do not officially exist), so the best curriculum creates the image of a high-quality graduates needed the labor market, both in BiH and in Europe and beyond because it is currently impossible to assess the quality of the 1400 academic programs without formal parameters.

Pilot accreditation described in this paper pointed out, in the first place, the public universities, and degree programs included in this process, and developed a set of criteria for accreditation of academic programs that have made a huge step forward in comparison of the study programs involved in this process and imposed a new form of quality assessment in higher education for all study programs which in BiH did not exist systematically.

The advantage for study programs involved in this process is that these programs (when adopting the proposed criteria for accrediting programs) will apply for accreditation (with eliminated weaknesses identified during the pilot accreditation), while the main disadvantage is that many courses could not have been included in the pilot accreditation process that would truly help improve their quality.

Conclusion

During the pilot project, the criteria for accreditation have been successfully tested and generally, with small corrections, proposed to adoption of the Agency for Educational Development and Quality Assurance BH. Adoption of these standards as mandatory is expected in autumn of this year. They are completely in accordance with Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [4] and Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education in BH [5]. The main significance of this project, in addition to the development of criteria for quality assurance of study programs, is the training and preparation to teams responsible for the preparation of self- evaluation reports, as well as teams for external review of programs. Generally, the main disadvantages of analyzing internal and external reports on the study programs at public universities are that the BH equipment, lack of good educators, poor conditions for research and imprecise definition of students' competences. System of students testing in most cases was incompatible with the objectives of courses and programs themselves.

On the other hand, a great step forward was made in a positive way in the field of modernization of the curriculum, collaboration among the universities, cooperation regarding the application of the various projects and developing a quality assurance system.



Adoption and use of these standards will be one of the major breakthroughs in improving the quality of academic programs in BH.

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Questions for discussion:

1. Are the criteria for accreditation of academic programs sufficient parameter for comparing on the state level?
2. How does the pilot study program accreditation affect the functioning of faculties and universities as a whole?
3. What are the differences between the accreditations of higher education institutions and study programs in the Bosnia and Herzegovina?
4. Advantages and disadvantages of the procedure the pilot accreditations of study programs.
5. What are the future plans concerning accreditation of study programs?
6. Generally, how much remarks and suggestions were accepted by management teams of involved study programs?
7. How much management teams are ready to change situation in high education area based on external reports'?