QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

The topic of quality assurance has always been of exceptional importance to the private sector. However, today it is very important in education and in other areas of the public sector, also. Because the private sector was the first in quality assurance, organizations and institutions in the public sector can learn from the experience of the private sector. Quality assurance has become an increasingly important topic at both local and international levels. The concept of quality assurance is not new; however, the terminology and methodologies that are now used to define, develop and implement quality assurance are relatively new, mainly due to the impact of changes in quality assurance in higher education. It has become an expected norm at European universities, an unquestionable basic concept and the most frequently set political objective of the Bologna process which directly affects and changes the balance of power within the university.

The aim of this paper is to determine the methods used by three countries (Croatia, Slovenia, and Hungary) to ensure quality in higher education and give suggestions for improvement of education service quality.

Keywords: *quality assurance, higher education, Croatia, Slovenia, Hungary*

JEL Classification: L1, P36, I2

1. INTRODUCTION

The implementation of quality assurance in the area of higher education has been made complicated by the important socio-economic role which education has in the development of local, national and global society, with the same basic goals of defining and acknowledging quality. Starting from the moment when accomplishing clear and transparent quality assurance systems and accreditation became one of the goals of the Bologna process, integration and implementation of the quality assurance system became essential in most of the European countries.

The development of quality assurance systems is an important lever for achieving the strategic objective of improved educational quality and efficiency, consequently, the quality of education is increasingly being evaluated across Europe. The focus of this evaluation may be the education system as a whole, or it may be individual schools or teachers. Moreover, European countries have adopted varied and contrasting policies related to school accountability based on student performance (Eurydice;2012,11).

2. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In the last ten years, various concepts have been used to describe the process of quality assurance control in higher education (Lučin;2007,8): quality control, quality guarantee, quality management, quality assurance, quality culture. The current goal is to develop quality culture which indicates the change of attitudes and behaviour of all individuals included in the work of high education institutions. Dolček-Alduk et al. (2008,39) consider that although quality assurance was introduced before the Bologna process, nevertheless the Bologna process assures better quality and its widening and implementation in the daily university routine. "Quality assurance is a comprehensive term which generally includes all the policies, processes, activities and mechanisms by which quality assurance of higher education is acknowledged, sustained and developed" (Glanville;2006). As it is considered in the European Higher Education Area and wider, quality assurance system is based on the autonomy of each higher education institution and its corporative responsibility for the quality of education which provides to its students. In simpler terms, it is an ongoing process which assures the fulfilment of the agreed standards.

Bogue and Saunders (1992,20) observe quality assurance in higher education as a process which is primarily based on coordinating the mission and achieving the goal within a framework of publicly accepted responsibility and integrity. Such a definition makes certain assumptions: firstly, it assumes that the institution should define the mission, secondly, that the goals of the institution are explicit and achievable, and thirdly, that there are public and accepted standards which are advocated by the institutions. Still, Roberts (2001,426) concludes that quality assurance does not include solely the efforts of the institution (internal quality assurance). It also includes external evaluations (external quality assurance). Additionally, quality assurance is a condition which leads to achieving transparency. Institutional transparency insures *academic* quality (lectures, *curriculum*, etc.), *structural* quality (buildings, computers, premises, etc.), subject facility. It will also ensure an independent and objective insight into their quality (Ivošević et al.;2006,12). By implementing the quality assurance system the government keeps the supervision over the university's autonomy, for understandable reasons. Universities get their autonomy when the government fulfils its obligation to sustain educational and scientific research programmes. Therefore, autonomy is not solely the right of the universities, but also the obligation towards the government, labour market, professional associations, students and their parents (Mencer;2005,239).

2.1. QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) is an umbrella organisation which represents quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) member states. It represents its members at the European level and internationally, especially in political decision making processes and in co-operations with stakeholder organisations. ENQA promotes European co-operation in the field of quality assurance in higher education and disseminates information and expertise among its members and towards stakeholders in order to develop and share good practice and to foster the European dimension of quality assurance[1]. The Association aims to maintain and enhance the quality of European higher edu-

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[1] European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, http://www.enqa.eu/

cation at a high level, and to act as a major driving force for the development of quality assurance across all the Bologna signatory countries.

Every quality assurance system reflects the national system of higher education, and also the local frame in which higher education institutions function. Therefore, European higher education standards have been established and they must be applied in all the Bologna signatory countries. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) have been produced by ENQA, in co-operation and consultation with its member agencies and the E4 Group (ENQA, EUA[2], EURASHE[3] and ESU[4])[5]. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area support, among others, the following principles (Glanville;2006):

1. the interest of the students as well as the labour market in quality higher education,

2. the importance of autonomy of higher education institutions which bare the greatest responsibility for quality assurance.

3. the need for external quality assurance must be fit for its purpose, that is, the achievement of higher education objectives

4. the quality of the academic programmes needs to develop and improve in favour of the students and other beneficiaries of higher education,

5. there need to be efficient and effective organisational structures within which those academic programmes can be provided,

6. transparency and the use of external expertise in quality assurance processes are of great importance,

7. it is necessary to encourage quality culture within higher education institutions, etc.

The establishment of criteria for quality evaluation and assurance in higher education demands comprehension of different concepts of quality. Quality assurance system in higher education institutions is the main point of the Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Namely, European coun-

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[2] European University Association

[3] European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

[4] European Students' Union

[5] European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/home/esg/

tries have established their own agencies for quality assurance and have developed their own national solutions for quality evaluation. Beckford (2002) has emphasized that, without compliance with the quality control system, no institution can be aware of its work and performance. Mizikaci (2006,50) states that the evaluation programme should be considered as an approach to a system and that an appropriate model should be integrated into quality planning. Further improvement of quality in higher education and the efficiency of evaluation is a priority of the overall educational policy demanded by the EU.

There are several examples associated to quality assurance and its formal implementation into British higher education which started in the mid 1960's. External quality assurance, as a "world phenomenon", started in the 1980's and 1990's (Woodhouse;2004). In 1985, Harvey (2005,264) recommended the universities and the overall British system to work with clear goals, develop performance indicators and offer real value for money. The same year, certain public sector institutions were recommended by Lindop (1985,x) to take full responsibility for their own quality assurance standards and also work on their image. Stanley and Patrick (1998) have made their own comparison of the British and the American higher education. In Great Britain, the emphasis is mostly put on variety of systems connected to quality assurance: revision quality, teaching quality, research quality and quality assurance based standards. In the USA, the focus is on regional accreditations, specialized accreditations, system efficiency indicators, student evaluation outcome and *alumni*.

2.2. PROBLEMS IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Not all countries apply all the elements of quality assurance. There are five key elements which all quality assurance systems should have, and they are all implemented in the Berlin declaration (internal evaluation, external assessment, student involvement, result publication and international participation). Most European higher education institutions coincide in all the criteria. Of the five above mentioned elements, two lacking the most are student involvement and publication of evaluation reports from the higher education institutions. Result publication is a key element for the exposure and transparency of quality assurance system. In some countries higher education institutions publish their evaluation reports, while in other countries the universities are still not open to public.

Transparency and the publication of evaluation reports are not unique problems in some countries. Depending on the country, additional problems may occur. For example, standards in Poland are more concentrated on the administrative part of higher education institutions and not on actual student benefits. The National Agency mostly verifies the work of academic and non-academic staff, and does not include the relation and the ways of learning and teaching. And although it is emphasised that students are the best source of information connected to quality of educational service, there are no student representatives in The National Agency. Therefore, if the higher education institutions aim to get objective results, they should ask the students. Transparency and studies comparability at different universities and at different academic centres is also a problem. A significant number of small, private higher education institutions started to offer a lower quality of educational services. Unfortunately, they are unjustly compared to good institutions that provide educational services (ESIB;2005,9-20).

3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN CROATIA, SLOVENIA AND HUNGARY

Given that all three countries (Croatia, Hungary and Slovenia) are EU members, the educational system has many obstacles to overcome: achieving better quality, adaptability, increase mobility and the ability to respond to the needs and changes on Croatian and European level. Besides that, it is very important for the educational system to equalize the quality of the overall educational system and make it attainable for everyone. This challenge is especially emphasized in the case of Croatia as a new EU member.

Higher education and science in Croatia are closely connected. It should be pointed out that the responsibility for higher education quality and science is primarily in the hands of higher education institutions and scientific institutions. National Council for Higher Education, National Council for Science and Agency for Science and Higher Education bear the responsibility for the processes of external quality assurance and science. According to the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (2009,čl.18), quality assurance and advancement system includes external and internal system. External system of assurance is based on national, European and international standards and as proscribed by the Act, The Agency for Science and Higher

education participates in it. Every institution in the system of science and higher education regulates its own internal system and a part of a unique quality assurance and advancement system at universities. According to Bjeliš (2007,42), Croatian higher education institutions will become even more exposed to international criteria and procedures which will require a higher level of acceptance and compliance. Therefore, it would be important to continue to participate in different academic procedures of quality assurance. It is a good preparation for a full entry in the international evaluation and accreditation system which is based on an active and professional partnership of those who evaluate and are evaluated.

Quality assurance policy in higher education in Croatia is based on the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education, as well as on the regulations of individual higher education institutions, and rules and recommendations of Ministry of Science, Education and Sports, National Council for higher education, higher education institutions and universities themselves (Ivković;2009,21). By signing the Bologna declaration, Croatia has taken over the commitment to carry out the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. One of the problems in Croatia is that higher education institutions firmly hold on to set acts and are not trying to change them, not realizing that they are the ones that need to establish and participate in the establishment of certain decisions concerning act changes. Besides establishing a university board in charge of quality control, it is also necessary to establish boards in individual branches of universities which would help develop institutional mechanisms relevant for quality promotion. This step is in its initial phase.

In the 1980's the quality of the educational system in Hungary, in comparison to other countries, was ranged in the middle. Yet, universal reorganisation of all sectors is being done under a motto "Quality, Approach, Efficiency" which makes a coherent group of priorities. Therefore, all operations must be in concordance with all three goals (Ministry of Education and Culture;2008,34). The priority project named *General quality development in public education* within the Social Renewal Operational Programme has two main goals (Eurydice;2008/09,37):

1. Ensuring the accountability of public education services and supporting central and local education administration.

2. Supporting the improvement of educational institutions based on national assessments and examination results and the information from local and

national quality evaluation projects, with special emphasis on providing reliable information to school operators (maintainers).

Quality development plan covers goals directed at programme development, research, student evaluation, personal and infrastructural relations and conditions, student service, as well as internal and external communications. Quality assurance apart from evaluation and accreditation includes internal quality assessment system of the higher education institutions. The comparison of the Hungarian quality assurance system to the ESG (the quality assurance requirements of the EHEA), the external evaluation on the operation of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee has been carried out. The Hungarian higher education institutions have defined their quality assurance system in their rules of organization and operation since 2001 (Eurydice;2008/09,186). There are no general standards of evaluation set in Hungary. This is the reason why internal evaluations of certain institutions are not able to take their place in the unique government system. Internal evaluation is generally connected to regular duty fulfilment of the institutions. It got its full meaning in the mid-1990's when the institutions started to evaluate their own activity so that they could achieve better profiles and programmes. Methodology and activities connected to internal evaluation have been framed and updated in 2006 in the Act on Public Education. The importance of equalizing management systems has been especially emphasised. The evaluation should be conducted at least every two years. An action plan is prepared based on the internal evaluation of the institution, and with the goal of equalizing the aims and the work of the institution (Eurydice;2008/09,338). Hungary is a good example on how internal evaluation of quality assurance can be done badly, since the only form of internal evaluation is student evaluation of the academic staff. The results are shown solely on paper and are rarely published or taken into consideration when improving the quality. There are no other forms of evaluation (ESIB;2005,9-19). Besides internal evaluation, external evaluation is also very important and it is being conducted at least every four years.

In recent years, partial evaluations of the Slovenian higher education system have been conducted each year in the form of a report on the implementation of the Bologna process. They are conducted by the Ministry for Higher Education in consultation with universities, student organisations and other stakeholders in regards to the evaluation of relevant specific aspects of the system.

(Eurydice;2008/09a,202). Several universities have participated in international quality assurance projects (*Tempus*, PHARE, EUA).

Quality assurance in higher education institutions is regulated by the Higher Education Act. Individual forms and standards of quality assurance are specified by regulations passed by bodies responsible for quality at the national level. Internal quality assurance in higher education institutions is regulated by statutes and other governance documents of universities and independent institutions. In higher education institutions (universities and their members, faculties), independent higher education institutions quality assurance is the responsibility of their executive officer (vice-chancellor, dean, director), whereas for the conduct of individual tasks special committees for quality and expert or administrative staff are in charge. In all bodies students are also represented. A very much needed special agency for quality assurance has still not been founded (Eurydice;2008/09a,197).

In recent years, a few external evaluations were carried out on the initiative of higher education institutions themselves; they were conducted by intra-university or international organisations. Since 2006, external evaluations of higher education institutions have been conducted by the relevant government body. Individual higher education institutions, for example, faculties and colleges can volunteer for evaluation or can be recommended by the university of which they are members. External evaluation has been conducted by the Senate for Evaluation at the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia. It evaluates if the institution fulfils all the standards for an accreditation (Eurydice;2008/09,200,201). External quality assurance includes accreditations and external evaluations of the higher education institutions and study programmes. According to the amendments to the Act on Higher Education (October, 2009), recently formed government agencies for quality in higher education will take over accreditation procedures and occasional external quality controls (Eurydice;2009/10:11).

4. CONCLUSION

Croatia, Slovenia and Hungary strive for quality improvement in higher education. Programme quality is the first and the most important item on all levels of educational system. Higher education institutions have mainly developed quality improvement programmes. At least once a year an internal eval-

uation is conducted, and on average every three years an external evaluation which effects accreditation renewal. Universities have established councils for quality assurance, while some stakeholders have not, and this would definitely help institutional mechanisms function better in quality promotion. Due to this problem, Hungary has poor internal evaluation caused by badly set evaluation standards. This is so although the importance of adjusting the quality control assurance is emphasised in the Act on Public Education. The only existing form of internal evaluation is evaluation of the academic staff by the students. The results are rarely taken into consideration in order to improve the educational service quality.

Main demands for quality in educational service have been determined by fierce competition and market changes. Quality assurance is not a concept which can be qualified as good or bad. Every institution sets an individual quality assurance system based on its internal structure and the use of the standards and concepts. However, the emphasis should be put on establishing and assuring the standards, as well as evaluating them. Standards help enrich the quality system and are the key point of improvement and better market positioning of higher education institutions. Continuous quality assurance, firstly internal (institutional level), and then external quality assurance, is of great importance. Guidelines and standards for quality assurance are relevant only on paper, which is a great mistake, and defined problems are rarely solved so the situation in the educational system remains the same.

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