

**Sub-Theme 2:** Innovative approaches to external QA in tertiary education: not a single approach towards excellence

**Audio-visual requirements:** equipment for a Power Point presentation

## **INTEGRATING INNOVATION AND DIVERSITY INTO EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES: THE RUSSIAN EXPERIENCE**

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### **Abstract**

This paper considers the innovation potential of external quality assurance processes within the specific national context of Russia. Using the case of the National Center of Public Accreditation, the authors offer their reflections on the way diversity and ongoing development of higher education may influence the performance of quality assurance agencies: the use of innovative approaches, integration of new elements into agencies' methodologies, implementation of projects not typical of their 'traditional' activities. The authors discuss their agency's initiatives – in particular, international cooperation in subject-specific quality assurance, internet-based student learning outcome assessments, projects aimed at the recognition of excellence in higher education - to argue that quality assurance agencies must take into account institutional and programme diversity to be truly responsive to the needs of the highly diversified sector and contribute to its further enhancement.

Russia is a country with a highly diverse higher education (HE) sector, which currently includes over 1,114 higher education institutions (HEIs), of which more than 650 are public, and about 2,200 are branches of HEIs. The total number of HE students is about seven million. There are three major kinds of HEIs in Russia: institutes, academies, and universities; two more categories were recently introduced, namely federal (nine) and research universities (twenty-nine). Each of the institutions has its specific district mission and strategies.

In the context of Russia's deepening involvement in European and global integration processes, among stakeholders at all levels there is growing awareness of the influence made by diversity on HE delivery, as well of the need to take this diversity into account in external quality assurance (QA) procedures. This is one of the reasons why the last ten years have seen an evolution in the attitude of Russian HEIs, employers, students, policymakers towards what is called in Russia 'public' accreditation in contrast to 'state accreditation', both being currently provided at the national level.

State accreditation is an institutional procedure mandatory for all Russian HEIs. It is conducted by state authorities to determine the degree of HEIs' performance compliance with national legislation requirements, including the State educational standards. Now that state accreditation has gradually turned into a major tool of state regulation in HE and a mass procedure (99% of Russian HEIs hold state accreditation status) with a unified standardized approach, we observe increasing public interest in alternative external quality assurance procedures – public accreditation, provided by organizations established by non-governmental or professional associations. There are currently four public accreditation agencies that conduct actual quality assurance activities nationally.

Public accreditation is voluntary for HEIs; unlike state accreditation, public accreditation implies active students, employers and international peers' involvement in external QA procedures, thus encompassing a higher level of expectations of public organizations and employers towards HE provision. Public accreditation agencies use individualized approach to study programmes while implementing external QA procedures; quality standards and criteria developed and used by public accreditation agencies are largely based on standards widely recognized at the European and global level (ESG-ENQA, ABET standards) and may exceed the

minimum threshold State education standards. This contributes to the reputation of accredited programmes and their attractiveness for prospective students, as well as to their relevance to employers.

Being non-governmental organizations, public accreditation agencies are more independent and flexible in their activities. Russian HEIs are highly interested in undergoing joint accreditation procedures resulting, in case of successful accreditation decision, in obtaining accreditation from a Russian public accreditation agency and an international one. Only public, not state, accreditation agencies can act as co-providers of joint accreditation in Russia, which requires them to be flexible and innovative in their approaches. Below is the experience of one of the Russian public accreditation agencies - the National Center of Public Accreditation (NCPA).

NCPA is an autonomous non-profit organization with the mission to establish and promote quality culture in higher education through evaluation and accreditation of study programmes in accordance with the legislation of the Russian Federation and the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG-ENQA).

In 2011, in cooperation with the European Association of Conservatoires (AEC) NCPA conducted joint accreditation procedures regarding three study programmes, delivered by the two music higher education institutions. Preparing and implementing those procedures required a special, innovative for Russian QA practices, approach owing to the peculiarities of professional music education, to the specificity of the European approach to quality assessment and to the Russian national context. For example, an integrated set of standards and criteria was developed by NCPA and approved by AEC to be used for these particular procedures. The Review Panel nomination process was revised: three members were nominated by AEC, and three by NCPA. Such a combination of national and international peer-reviewers was highly appreciated by the institutions: feedback from European experts on ways to adapt their educational process was helpful to improve the preparation of young musicians for international careers. At the same time, HEIs were reassured by the presence of Russian experts, aware of the national context-specific challenges. All those innovative aspects were introduced into NCPA work in order to assure adequateness and maximum benefits for the study programmes under review. The reviewed academies identified the most beneficial aspect the accent put on assistance to the institutions and on quality enhancement: the combination of their own perception of the achieved level of implementation of the programmes and the external perspectives of the Panel members, especially professional musicians and music educators from European countries, gave a powerful impetus for on-going enhancement of their musical and educational activities.

For over four years now NCPA in cooperation with its partner organisations has been carrying out the project initiative aimed at identification and recognition of study programmes focusing on the needs of academically talented youth - 'Open International Internet-Olympiad for higher education students', international online student academic competition in different subject fields. More than 84,000 students from over 19 countries have participated in the project by Autumn 2013.

Another example of NCPA activities in identification and recognition of excellence in higher education is NCPA project launched in 2010 - 'Best Study Programs of Russia', the main goal of which is to identify HE programmes distinguished by the exemplary level of professional education quality on the basis of expert assessments provided by public and professional communities. It is search for best practices through expert evaluation on the basis of a number of a set of predetermined indicators and selection criteria. One of the project outcomes is publication (in Russian and in English) of the reference-book 'The Best Study Programs of Russia' which is of interest in Russia and abroad.

Collective diversity among higher education institutions of Russia is one of the great strengths and challenges of Russian higher education system. Accordingly, certain innovative mechanisms and tools should be developed and introduced in external QA systems to ensure that diverse providers of higher education have adequate opportunities for quality education delivery and for demonstration this quality to the society. External quality assurance agencies may largely contribute to it through innovative approaches, which may not be typical of the 'traditional scope' of EQA activities, but responsive to the needs of diversified HE sector.