

Managing diversity and moving towards quality assurance in Slovenian higher education

Diversity in European higher education area is a product of different languages, cultures, and institution types. Common European market demands the comparability of various systems, and transparent quality assurance system is one of the guarantees for required confidence. Ministers of education undertook to attain the promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to develop comparable criteria and methodologies. Slovenia is in the process of building its quality assurance system in higher education: forming of an independent Agency for Evaluation of higher education, formulating the needed acts that should allow the system to work. We were involved in the process of writing the criteria for evaluation, defining the transition period and the tasks to be done: to test the criteria, the external evaluation trials, to evaluate the quality of higher education institutions and programmes. All these without suffocate the diversity, which is the salt and pepper of creativity and innovation.

Keywords

Diversity, Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Evaluation, Higher Education,

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1 Diversity in European higher education

Managing diversity is an important issue in European higher education today, due to various institutional types, different systems of quality assurance and to the present efforts to form a transparent and comparable European system of higher education. As stated by European Ministers of Education in Bologna declaration, agreed objectives would be as follows (Bologna declaration 1999, 3-4): easily readable and comparable degrees; adoption of a unitary system based on two main cycles – undergraduate and graduate; establishment of a system of credits (to promote student mobility); promotion of mobility of students and academic staff; promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance (to develop comparable criteria and methodologies); promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education (curricular development, cooperation, mobility schemes etc). However, it does not seek standardisation or 'europeisation' of European higher education because the principles of autonomy and diversity are highly respected.

Europe is one of the regions in the world that is able to offer such a diverse wealth of countries, cultures and educational systems within such easy geographical reach. The intensity of cross-border flows of students within this space is already a unique phenomenon. As of 2005, the

Bologna Accord will be implemented within most of 40 signatory countries. The mobility of professors and students will be further facilitated. A common European framework has to be defined, but inside within each country can maintain its own identity and offer its own distinctive learning experience (Gauthier and Shenton 2005, 3).

European University Association – (EUA) stresses within their framework the importance of the need to recognise and accept the diversity of national quality assurance procedures. At the Graz convention, EUA exposed also the following goals: achieving compatibility in European higher education while managing diversity; promoting innovative, creative and dynamic institutions in a context characterized by diversity of missions, levels and context (Graz declaration 2003, 3).

Diversity of higher education in Europe can be recognized in different cultures and languages that are spoken in European countries, different national higher education systems, types of institutions and curricula. There is also diversity of: histories of quality assurance in Europe; purposes for quality assurance; quality assurance models; methods; qualifications; outcomes; learners and learning; individual, academic and labour market needs; wording etc. But in order to be capable to form a homogeneous European market in the near future, all this precious diversities should be organised to produce positive outcomes. Diversity is absolutely necessary. It is only positive that there are several ways of creating education programmes and a number of different ways of teaching and learning. Conformity is a risk when using national systems for quality assurance. That is why diversity and autonomy must be recognized as a positive academic value.

Placing the international quality review in the existing network of national higher education and quality assurance leaders supports this diversity. It honours national differences. It requires that considerations of quality are addressed carefully, calling for analysis of those dimensions of quality that are more culturally dependent and those that are less culturally dependent in any society. National system for quality assurance in higher education has to incorporate several elements, in order to harmonize with EU higher education system: forming of independent agency; internal evaluations on the level of institutions or programmes; external evaluations from experts' commissions; involvement of students in internal and external evaluations; publishing the results of evaluations; and international cooperation and networking of Agency.

Europe's diversity forms the very basis of its cultural and economic identity. Diversity also offers a key to providing new models for services. It is through harnessing the potential for innovation and creativity inherent in Europe's rich and varied store of traditions and capabilities, and through embracing diversity in specifying goals, mechanisms and outcomes, that the success of Europe's outputs at market can be determined. Diversity thus represents a critical element in the creation of an environment where businesses, consumers and public services can together develop Europe's competitive capability in a global market (European Organization for Quality 2000, 17).

Nóvoa and de Jong-Lambert (2002, 10) critically discuss the idea of European educational space and argue that 'education has been one of the most contested arenas in Europe, not only due to its symbolic value in national imaginaries but also because of public resistance to a common policy'. They further analyse the wording of European higher education documents (Nóvoa and de Jong-Lambert 2002, 15-16): "To identify means to agree on shared objectives and guidelines for educational policies, and to spread refers to the diffusion and transfer of most successful practices from one country to another. To measure is to establish precise benchmarks and to evaluate the performance of each educational system, and to compare means to organise a way of assessing the progress made by each country. It is pointless to restate the overt intention that all of these

convergence policies be adopted to agreed instruments, voluntary participation, partnership and decentralised approaches. The goal of these processes is described as 'to help Member States to develop their own policies progressively, in accordance with the objectives defined at the European level.'" They discuss indicators for measuring progress as an intention to organise a league table for nations, and not as it is claimed to learn from one another, not to single out the good pupils from the bad and they argue that it is difficult to imagine how a national state could stand outside of this playing field (Nóvoa and de Jong-Lambert (2002, 16).

2 Higher education area in Slovenia

In the last ten years, the Slovene education system has experienced thorough and all-encompassing modernisation. The Higher Education Act, adopted in 1993, aimed at achieving the following objectives: establishment of a modern higher education system comparable to other European systems, with the focus on co-ordinated development; promotion of quality education; renewal of undergraduate and postgraduate studies; establishment of a systematic link between research and teaching; co-operation between higher educational institutions, industry and local communities etc. The new legislation enabled the establishment of private higher education and independent (free-standing) higher education institutions besides state universities. It introduced binary system by abolishing study programs of the former two-year colleges and establishing new three-year professional higher education programmes in addition to the four- to six-year university ones. A possibility was given to start doctoral studies immediately after graduation (provided that certain conditions were met) without first obtaining master degree.

Principles of diversity, quality and openness of higher education were all included in the legislative solutions while goals of the Bologna Declaration became all especially relevant in the process of accelerated internationalisation of higher education in Slovenia. The Higher Education Amendments Act (1999) puts the citizens of the EU on equal footing with the citizens of the Republic of Slovenia as far as enrolment in higher education institutions and payment of the tuition fees is concerned. Both stipulations will enter into force upon the accession of the Republic of Slovenia to the European Union (University of Ljubljana 2001, 2).

Higher education in Slovenia is regulated by the Act Amending the Higher Education Act (OJ RS 100/04-UPB2). Higher education institutions in Slovenia include universities, faculties, academies of arts and professional higher education institutions. Vocational colleges were introduced by the Vocational and Professional Education Act (OJ RS, No. 12/96). There are 102,723 students studying at the undergraduate level in the 2004/05 academic year. This number covers students enrolled in vocational colleges, universities, freestanding higher education institutions and candidates for graduation who have the student status.

According to the provisional data (as of October 15, 2004), there are 89,272 students enrolled at higher undergraduate studies (including candidates for graduation) in the academic year 2004/05, which is 200% more than in eighties, nineties. For a country with not even 2 million populations is this remarkable data. 13,451 students are enrolled at post-secondary vocational studies, which is 21,2% more than a year before. 72% of higher education students are full-time students, while only 31% of those enrolled at vocational colleges study full time (Statistical office of the Republic of Slovenia 2004, 1).

3 Quality assurance system in Slovenia

The Higher Education Act, adopted in 1993 main concern in the field of quality was: systemic care for the quality of teaching, formation of commissions for quality with the purpose to perform self-evaluations on faculties and universities and the result was only internal collection of opinions, without the final report about quality. The Higher Education Quality Assessment Commission (HEQAC) was established in 1996 on the basis of the Higher Education Act to elaborate the report on the basis of self-evaluations on single universities. After the Higher Education Amendments Act (1999) government formally demands the quality monitoring as conditions for financing the higher education institution.

The quality assurance system in Slovenia has to be developed yet and is right now in the phase of construction. We had to take in account UNESCO, European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and European university association (EUA) standards or procedures with some adaptations as it balanced the notion of general standards with the particular history and circumstances in Slovenia. It follows the description and analysis of just what adaptations were made.

In higher education, there are two main concepts of quality, accreditation and evaluation that have become widely spread and well rooted in this last decade. Accreditation usually refers to the achieved status awarded to an institution or programme by an authorised body. Accreditation can acquire different aspects: it can be a process applied to applicant organisations; or the label that institutions or programmes may acquire as a result of the accreditation procedures; and third, underpinning the first two, accreditation is an 'abstract notion of a formal authorising power' (Haakstadt 2001, 77).

We can observe different approaches in acceding the accreditation in Europe: accreditation can be perceived differently; it can be a complete system or an addition to an existing evaluation system; embraces the entire higher education system or in some cases only new courses; sometimes is built around the institution, and sometimes around the programme. Establishing national systems of accreditation tends to produce divergence, in conflict with the Bologna Declaration for greater harmonisation and synergy (Scheele 2003, 19).

Accreditation usually denotes the procedure of assessing 'an already operating' institution by using pre-set minimum standards. It could be compared with the 'quality control' concept, i.e. inspection of schools at the pre-university level. It is an important feature of quality management in the USA, Europe and has recently been adopted in Slovenia. Here, however, and also elsewhere in Central and Eastern Europe, the procedure of accreditation is connected with establishing new higher education institutions or new study programmes. For example, in Slovenia, the National Council for Higher Education 'assesses' the newly established, not yet operational, institution simply on the basis of a detailed written document (a type of report called an 'elaborate'), and grants this institution the 'permanent right' to award diplomas in accordance with the adopted study program.

In Denmark a centre responsible to guarantee quality assessment of higher education carried out the evaluation of teaching programmes. This process concluded with an evaluation report, which contained the relevant recommendations in the area evaluated. These evaluations are periodical. In France, the "Comité National d'Evaluation", which is an independent administrative body, is in charge of evaluating the teaching and research aspects of higher education institutions, but it does not have the authority to evaluate personnel or to authorise curricula. The institutions are not supposed to prepare reports prior to a visit. The committee analyses the data gathered by a small

team who visits the institution, obtaining the information and preparing the public report. In Netherlands, all of the higher education institutions should be responsible for assuring the quality of their education programmes as well as its internal assessment. The quality assessments carried out in six years cycles and combines self and external evaluation. In Spain there is a similar situation. Each university is supposed to be responsible for the quality of their educational programmes and their internal evaluation. So to say, each university determines its concept of quality in relation to its goals (Pérez Esparrells et al. 2003, 3).

Today's system of monitoring and assessing the quality of Slovene higher education process is not comparable with Europeans. Higher education quality main foundations are: self-evaluation, external evaluation, accreditation and improvements of the findings. On one side we have governmental body for the accreditation of study programmes, on other side university body of Slovene universities for quality assessment.

According to international experience the higher education is an important condition for the competitiveness of Slovenia and its inclusion into European higher education area. Quality assurance of higher education institutions, their pedagogical, research and other activities, represent the priority of strategic documents, such as National program of higher education in Republic of Slovenia. Most of European countries have established quality assurance system that is coordinated from national agency or suitable body on the state level. In Slovenia we already began to establish our quality assurance system, for the moment as regular self-evaluation activity inside the higher education institutions and formal commissions. See also Dolinsek et al. 2004, 2-4.

Council of Republic of Slovenia for Higher Education gives the expert opinion about the quality of programmes and delivers the accreditation of programmes and the institution, before the establishment of higher education institution and every seven years renews the accreditation by official duty and does not monitor and assesses the quality of higher education process.

Slovenia has to create an autonomous national agency for the quality assessment in higher education. Agency will have the role of independent and neutral harmonizer of different interest groups from the higher education field. The roles of Agency are as follows: it runs external evaluations, nominates commissions for evaluations of programmes and higher education institutions, collects and analyses self-evaluation reports, publishes reports of external evaluations, and others.

Until the formation of Agency, the Quality Assessment Commission of Slovenia has to carry out 4-5 experimental external evaluations in 2005, as pilot project, to restore conditions for redefinition of criteria and for the functioning of National council for evaluations in higher education, which has also to be established. Its duties will be to determine criteria for monitoring, assessment and assurance the quality of the higher education institutions, study programmes, science and research, and artistic and professional work; to give opinion and prepares the report about external evaluations of higher education institutions, their programmes and their work. Deadline to form these two bodies is December 2005.

Central activity in higher education quality assurance is the process of quality improvement of higher education institutions; based on the self-evaluation, first step in evaluation process. Once the self-evaluation has been conducted, it follows the analysis of condition and search for weak areas. With regard to weaknesses, goals are determined, realizing them will eliminate the identified gaps. That's why every institution has to plan a corrective measures system. Improvement is an internal process, which has to be implemented on universities and higher education institutions. Basic intention is to increase satisfaction of all stakeholders in higher

education. Process of self-evaluation and improvement is actually a never-ending process that has to be present in every life cycle of higher education institution. So we assure that (together with external evaluations) the institution fulfils the required norms for the accreditation.

Next step is external evaluation, which includes a visit of external evaluation commission that has to write also a report with recommendations. It derives from the self-evaluation of higher education institution. Tasks of the Commission will be: overview of the contents of self-evaluation report, visit of higher education institution, which is the object of external evaluation and forming of evaluation report with recommendations. The possibility of dialogue between the evaluators and the evaluated institution has to be present. Competent and balanced members of external evaluation commission will be demanded. Because of the restricted Slovenian higher education area, foreign experts will have to take part in the evaluation commissions. In the work of commission the participation of student population representatives will be obligatory. External evaluation report will be public.

For the assurance of credibility of national agency, it will have to be involved in wider, international environment. European dimension of quality assurance is evolving in the direction of mutual acknowledgement of agencies for quality assurance in higher education, mutual recognition of accreditations, study programmes and diplomas. These are the reasons for the importance of membership in the ENQA, for the future agency. Even on the European level, school ministers address ENQA, to develop a set of standards, proceedings and directions for quality assurance, to investigate paths for implementation of adequate fellow survey system for agencies or institutions, responsible for quality assurance and/or accreditation. All this in collaboration with EUA, EURASHE - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education and ESIB - The National Unions of Students in Europe.

4 Criteria for quality evaluation of Slovenian higher education institutions and programmes

We would hardly say that the quality concept means something new for Slovene higher education institutions and that the universities did not engage themselves on quality matter in the past. But critical assessment of proper work was always part of activities inside the universities. Public always trusted in the efficiency of their self-control, because of the superiority of these institutions. In last years we began to access to this question sistematically. The three elements of the proposed European Quality Vision are: harnessing diversity, building on success and winning together. Faculty of Management Koper management approached very sistematically to form the institution's mission, vision, strategic goals, leading principles, all in order to increase the quality of our work and to succeed in the global education environment. In the field of graduate management education alone, more than 12,000 master programmes will compete for students. In this environment institutions will have to assess their strenghts and decide which markets they want to enter and position themselves carefully. Institutions must define, design and position their portfolio of programmes so they can meet the needs of the new Bologna marketplace. They must also integrate quality assurance measures from the outset (Judge et al. 2005, 12).

Our Faculty, which employs at the moment over 100 teaching staff, is implementing the self-evaluation as quality control for several years now. The reports include a series of quantitative and qualitative data, regarding the quality assessment: regular questionnaires of students' assessment (candidates informing, inscription policy, mechanisms of selection, average duration

of study, fluctuation, mentoring, monitoring and help for students' problems, mobility of students, employment of graduates), employees surveys (employment, advancing, mobility of professors, bibliographical publications), study schemes and programmes, research and scientific work, work on international, national and internal projects, programmes description and goals, methods for lecturing, teaching and knowledge testing, international cooperation, cooperation with industry and public services etc.

At the Faculty we already established a Centre for quality and evaluation, which purpose is the establishment of quality management system on Faculty of Management Koper. The most important tasks: analyses of different quality management systems and their comparison, to suggest a suitable quality management system for Faculty, prepare elements for Faculty quality management handbook, monitor work at the research area (define elements, measurement modes and ways of reporting) and on education area (reports of efficiency of study, analyses of satisfaction surveys). Our representatives contribute in the work of: university commission for quality assessment, the Quality Assessment Commission of Slovenia (hereinafter the Commission, Council for higher education and other institutions, which concern is quality assessment. And most important for any organization that is struggling for quality improvement we have strong commitment of our management; they are also closely involved in implementation of quality management system and express the determination to move toward quality assurance.

In autumn of 2004, members of our Centre for Quality and Evaluation wrote first 'Criteria for monitoring, assessment and assurance of quality in the higher education institutions, study programmes, science and research, and in artistic and professional work' (hereinafter the Criteria), that were accepted in October 2004, from the Quality Assessment Commission of Slovenia (hereinafter The Commission). The Commission uses this document for: planning the national higher education policy; attentive functioning of monitoring, assessment and assurance of quality in higher education institutions; leading the external evaluation processes and preparation of the expert material for them; preparation of the quality experts selection; nominating the commission for external evaluation of higher education institutions, study programmes, science and research, and in artistic and professional work; cooperation with the higher education institutions and encouragement of the self-evaluation processes; cooperation with international institutions or boards for external evaluation of higher education from abroad; organising the training for external evaluation commissions and self-evaluation teams of higher education institutions; collecting and analysing the self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions; forming opinions, for preparation and publishing of external evaluation reports; forwarding the self-evaluation results and the external evaluation reports to the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia, to the Council of Experts for Technical and Vocational Education and to the ministry responsible for the higher education. We included the guidelines for quality assurance from UNESCO, ENQA, EUA criteria and standards, and the best practice from our own self-evaluations practice.

The Criteria evaluate three areas: higher education institutions, study courses and research, artistic and professional work. By external evaluation of a higher education institution the following areas are assessed: the strategy, organisation and management of the institution, arrangement of evidences and the concern for quality; the educational - study activities; the science, research, artistic and professional activities; the higher education teachers and co-workers, scientific workers and co-workers; the administrative and expert-technical workers; the students in higher education institution; the rooms, equipment for educational, scientific and

research work, libraries; the funding of educational – study activities, science and research, artistic and professional activities; the cooperation with the social environment on the regional, state and international levels. By external evaluation of the study programmes the following areas are assessed by each individual study programme: the performing of the study programme and the learning goals; the internal organisation and measures for quality assurance; the subject's directory, teaching and learning methods; the students in the study programme; the conditions for study programme performance. By external evaluation of the scientific and research, artistic and professional work the following is assessed: the scientific, research and artistic activities; the professional activities; the conditions for implementing the scientific and research, artistic and professional work.

Until the forming of independent Agency, has the Commission for quality in higher education the task to perform three experimental evaluations of different higher education institutions. In the evaluation commission there are five members, one from abroad (according to the regulations he/she must be from the area of the higher education), and one from the economic or non-economic area, two from the area of higher education and one student representative. The experts must demonstrate the adequate qualification in the area of quality. Evaluating commission prepares a visit to the institution after consulting the institution's self-evaluation report. In two month after their inspection, they have to write a report to the Commission, which informs the competent Ministry. The commission for external evaluation presents the evaluation report including the comments to the Commission. The Commission informs the responsible ministry for higher education, the Council for Higher Education of the Republic of Slovenia and the higher education institution about the findings.

The documentation that has to be presented at the evaluators visit, according to the Criteria is: the annual action plan of the higher education institution; the annual report of the higher education institution; the self-evaluation report of the higher education institution, from which it must be clear that the activities in the area of quality assurance and assessment, the correction of deficiencies; the student questionnaire from the last three academic years before the year of the external evaluation started; the regulations about the assessment, determination and assurance of the quality in the higher education institution; the mission and vision of the higher education institution; the strategic plan of the higher education institution; if the quality assessment of the higher education institution is performed in the institution that is a member of an university than the strategic plan, the mission and the vision of the university is also considered; the evidence kept by the higher education institution on the basis of the Higher Education Constitution and other acts; other documentation that according to the higher education institution should be used for the realisation of the external evaluation.

At the Ministerial meeting in Bergen in May 2005, common 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' should be accepted. These standards and guidelines were prepared from ENQA in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB. The main results and recommendations of this report are: there will be European standards for internal and external quality assurance; European quality assurance agencies will be expected to submit themselves to a cyclical review within five years; there will be an emphasis on subsidiarity, with reviews being undertaken where possible. With recommendations implemented, there will be improved the consistency of quality assurance across European higher education area; there will be some common reference points for quality assurance; the credibility of the work of quality assurance agencies will be enhanced.

5 Conclusion

The Bologna process aims to harmonise forty different European higher education systems by creating a single system of degrees within an agreed framework and with a consistent credit and grading system, to form a competitive knowledge market. The main objective is to create a more competitive Europe by establishing a higher education system compatible with global standards. Bologna will therefore create choice for over 2.4 million Bachelor graduates each year. Students as purchasers of higher education are likely to demand greater quality of service and be willing to travel to obtain this goal. Quality is important in a crowded marketplace to prevent substandard diplomas. Quality assurance and accreditation bodies have to be created to monitor institutions that they comply with national standards and curricula and they have to be transparent on the European level.

Evaluation and accreditation is mostly carried out on a national basis. It is expected that these local processes will become more comparable through the use of agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines and the involvement of foreign experts. Only in a limited number of cases there is a scope for transnational evaluation and accreditation. For instance in the fields of study like business and engineering. Integrated study programmes, like joint masters, require collaboration of the respective quality assurance agencies (European Commission 2003, 4).

It is not the intention to unify the European higher education market; diversity shall remain and positively enrich the common market of tomorrow. That's why the diversity should be respected and nursed. Of course, the self-evaluations, certification and accreditation only, are not enough to improve the quality of higher education institutions. It is only the beginning of a process that has to evolve in the international participation, cooperation and networking.

And finally, European Ministers warn about the necessity to develop a set of standards, procedures and orientations for quality assurance and suitable system of peer review for agencies or bodies, competent for quality assurance and/or accreditation. They also stress that the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework (Berlin communiqué 2003, 3).

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