



Budimir, Verica¹

THE ROLE OF THE INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN THE PROCESS OF RE-ACCREDITATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS IN CROATIA

Abstract:

The paper aims to clarify the process of re-accreditation in Croatia and the standards for quality evaluation and to show the internal structure of the quality assurance system based on the example of a higher education institution that successfully passed this procedure during 2019. The importance of the work is evident in the enrichment of European scientific literature by presenting the re-accreditation process in Croatian higher education.

Keywords:

Quality; higher education institutions; ESG standards; re-accreditation; internal quality assurance system

Author's data:

¹ Verica, Budimir, dr. sc., Veleučilište u Požegi, Požega, vbudimir@vup.hr

Introduction

Legislation of the Republic of Croatia prescribes the obligation of re-accreditation of higher education institutions (HEI). Re-accreditation is the process by which the Agency for Science and Higher Education in Croatia, every five years, verify the quality of the HEI and its compliance with the standards prescribed for quality evaluation in the re-accreditation process, which are in line with the ESG standards. Croatian HEIs are currently undergoing a new cycle of re-accreditation, which is being carried out according to new standards for quality evaluation. A well-established internal quality assurance system (QAS) is vital in order to prepare an HEI for this process successfully. The paper aims to clarify the re-accreditation process in Croatia and the standards for quality evaluation. The goal is to show the internal structure of the QAS based on the example of an HEI that successfully passed this procedure during 2019. The literature review presents the importance of the re-accreditation process for quality assurance (QA) in higher education in general, with an emphasis on the European Higher Education System. The importance of the work is evident in the enrichment of European scientific literature by presenting the re-accreditation process in Croatian higher education. In addition to scientists, work is also essential for practitioners in higher education, primarily managers and quality managers, through the example of the successful organization of an internal QAS. The limitation of the paper is visible in the presentation of the internal QAS of only one HEI. The paper

provides a basis for further research of internal QASs, based on the examples of other HEIs in the Croatian and European Higher Education System, and the link between the development of the internal QAS and success in re-accreditation.

Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

Many European countries, including Croatia, see their future in a knowledge-based economy. The focus previously placed on secondary education that was sufficient for the labour market needs is shifting to higher education. According to Jarvis [1] placing knowledge in service of humankind lie at the very heart of the idea of the university. With the increasing importance of higher education, public interest and concern for its quality are growing.

QA in higher education can have many different meanings. According to Westerheijden [2], QA can mean restricting the freedom of HEI to offer programs as a result of the government's efforts to increase the responsiveness of HEI to community demands. The need for QA in higher education first emerged in the US. Limited governmental control over the higher education leads to ease the establishment of new study programs and colleges (especially private ones) [3]. QA was seen as a way to prevent students from being exploited.

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), QA becomes essential with the implementation of the Bologna Declaration and by the publication of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area 2005 (revised

2014) [4]. QA is expected at institutional, national and European level. Institutional level implies the autonomy of every HEI in terms of ensuring the quality of education provided to its beneficiaries. The national level implies the creation of an adequate legal framework that enables the design and implementation of a QAS in higher education. For QA of higher education, it is crucial to develop an internal QAS (institutional level) and its external evaluation procedures (national level).

ESG standards in the area of internal QA form the basis for improving the quality of HEIs' services under their institutional autonomy. Also, they provide users - students with the highest quality access to services in the EHEA. The document contains ten standards for internal QA: 1.1. Policy for quality assurance; 1.2. Design and approval of programs; 1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; 1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification; 1.5. Teaching staff; 1.6. Learning resources and student support; 1.7. Information management; 1.8. Public information; 1.9. Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of the programmes; 1.10. Cyclical external QA.

In the area of external QA in higher education, ESG standards provide the basis for the work of external QA agencies and enable a high level of accessibility and understandability of the results of external QA. One of the external quality evaluation procedures observed in this paper is (re)-accreditation. (Re)-accreditation is a process of external evaluation of organization's quality and formal approval of HEI or programme to meet predetermined and agreed on standards in which an accreditation

recommendation with assessment and recommendations for improvement is issued, in order to confirm eligibility for continuing activities of HEIs or scientific organizations [5].

European higher education at the beginning of the 21st century underwent intensive reforms triggered by national development on the one hand and the need to ensure the quality of higher education and evolve comparable programs on other [6]. These reforms triggered by the Bologna Process lead toward a coherent, compatible and competitive EHEA. At the heart of the Bologna Process and the reforms that result from it is the evaluation, improvement and certification of the quality of higher education [7]. One of the most popular methods of external QA in the world is accreditation [8]. While in the 1990s, less than half of European countries conducted an external (supra-institutional) evaluation of HEIs, by 2003, all countries (except Greece) had introduced some form of supra-institutional evaluation [6].

Quality Assurance in Croatian Higher Education

The intensive work on QA in higher education in Croatia began with the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 2001. Croatia then committed itself to promote European cooperation in QA to develop comparable criteria and methodologies. The QAS of HEIs in Croatia is organized following ESG Standards. The external quality evaluation is conducted as an external audit, re-accreditation, initial accreditation and thematic evaluation [9].

The paper explains the re-accreditation process that is mandatory for all HEIs in Croatia.

Re-accreditation of higher education institutions in Croatia

The re-accreditation of HEIs in Croatia is carried out by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) by the Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education Act [9], the Regulation on the Content of the Permit, and the Conditions for Issuing a Permit for Higher Education, Study Programs and Re-accreditation of Higher Education Institutions [10], the Regulation on the conditions for issuing the Permit for Scientific activity, the conditions for the Re-accreditation of Scientific Organizations and the Content of the Permit [11], following ESG standards. All public and private HEIs are subject to the re-accreditation process, which takes place in five-year cycles. The first cycle began in the 2010/11 academic year, and currently, we have the second cycle. Re-accreditation is carried out according to the annual plan adopted by the Accreditation Council of the ASHE. The methodology of carrying out the re-accreditation, the deadlines, the relevant authorities, the required documentation and the outcomes of the procedure are defined in the document Re-accreditation process of HEI [12]. The process begins with an annual re-accreditation plan issued by the Accreditation Council of the ASHE, followed by the nomination of expert committees. The committee consists of five members (two of whom are foreign) and includes teachers, practitioners and students. The evaluated HEI is obliged to prepare the Self-

Analysis in Croatian and English following the Standards for Quality Assessment and submit it to the ASHE within the stipulated time. Also, they are obliged to update information on teachers, students and study programs in the MOZVAG (information system for support of valuation procedures), based on which an analytical inclosure is made, which is an integral part of the Self-analysis. After the Agency's training, the expert committee visits the valued HEI. During the visit, interviews with all stakeholders (administration, teachers, external associates, alumni, students) are organized, after which the committee compiles a report on the results of the re-accreditation. The committee's report contains an analysis of the situation, recommendations for improvement and ratings at the level of each standard and theme. The report is submitted to the HEI for a statement. After the statement, the report is submitted to the Accreditation Council, which delivers an independent opinion. Based on the opinion, the ASHE makes an accreditation recommendation to the Minister on:

- issuing a certificate of eligibility for pursuing higher education and/or scientific activity;
- denying a permit for pursuing higher education and/or scientific activity;
- issuing a letter of expectation with a deadline for deficiency elimination of up to three years.

When a letter of expectation is issued, the HEI is obliged to draw up an action plan for eliminating the deficiency by the recommendations of the committee, followed by a follow-up phase within the stipulated time. In the case of issuing a certificate, the HEI has to draw up a five-year action

plan to improve quality by the recommendations of the committee and report about realization to the ASHE every two years. All final reports of the committee, statements and accreditation recommendations are publicly available on the Agency's website.

After the conclusion of the five-year re-accreditation cycle, the ASHE analyzes the procedures performed to summarize system-wide results but also to define system development policy and mechanisms for its implementation. The first re-accreditation cycle lasted from 2010 to 2015. The outcomes of the evaluation are visible through the accreditation recommendations, whereby for the 139 evaluated institutions of higher education, 67 certificates, 85 letters of expectation and 15 denials of permits were issued before the follow-up phase (differences in the total number arise because a HEI may receive a certificate of higher education activity but a letter of expectation or denial of a permit for scientific activity and other combinations) [13].

The second cycle of re-accreditation began in 2017, according to an improved model. The emphasis of the first cycle were quantitative indicators and fulfilling the minimum academic requirements. The goal was to recognize the strengths and weaknesses of HEI, in order to encourage the improvement of the quality of HEI, based on the recommendations of the committee [14]. The new model provides an opportunity to verify the compliance of the HEI's operations with key and generally accepted standards, and to assess the quality of all activities and the overall institution. An important role in quality assessment has the

implementation of activities based on the recommendations from the previous re-accreditation cycle.

Standards for evaluating the quality of higher education institutions

The quality assessment of HEIs in Croatia in the re-accreditation process is measured by the level of compliance with the set standards. The first cycle of re-accreditation was based on the Quality Assessment Criteria [15], which included seven standards: (I) HEI management and QA, (II) study programs, (III) students, (IV) teachers, (V) scientific and professional activity, (VI) mobility and international cooperation and (VII) resources (space, equipment, financing). The quality level achieved was evaluated by five levels: not implemented, initially implemented, partially implemented, mostly implemented or fully implemented.

In the second cycle, Quality Assessment Standards for Higher Education Re-accreditation are applied [13]. These standards are substantially in line with ESG standards. The standards are grouped into five themes: (I) internal QA and the social role of HEI, (II) study programs, (III) teaching process and student support, (IV) teaching and institutional capacities, (V) scientific/professional/artistic activity. The standards clearly define the quality level of a part of HEI's activities which should be compared with the actual achievement. In doing so, it has been determined that there are key standards that are discriminatory, and their failure to comply is estimated to impair the quality of the entire HEI. Furthermore, for each standard,

elements have been defined that are taken into account when assessing the compliance of HEI's activities with the standard and the evidence used to conclude the level of compliance with the standard. The attained quality level of each standard and topic is evaluated through four grades: unacceptable level, minimum level, satisfactory level or high-quality level. In doing so, the outcome of the re-accreditation is directly related to the assessed level of quality of the themes. Namely, if any theme is rated as unsatisfactory with the quality level, the outcome of the procedure may be the issuance of a letter of expectation or denial of the permit, while if any topic is rated with the minimum quality level, the outcome of the procedure may be the issuance of a letter of expectation. If all topics are rated satisfactory or high-quality levels, the outcome of the procedure is the issuance of a certificate. However, in this case, it is also possible to issue a letter of expectation if one or more key standards have been assessed with a minimum or unacceptable level of quality.

Theme I. Internal QA and social role of HEI is substantially harmonized with ESG standards 1.1., 1.7. and 1.8. This topic assesses the level at which the institution has established a functional internal QAS (key standard), whether it applies recommendations for improvement from previously conducted internal and external evaluation procedures, how the institution supports academic integrity and freedoms, the level of information availability, the social role of HEI and lifelong learning programs.

Theme II. The study programs comply with ESG standards 1.2. and 1.9. This topic covers the assessment of the compliance of the general objectives of the program with the strategy and needs of the labour market, the alignment of learning outcomes with the level and profile of qualification being acquired (key standard), the achievement of anticipated learning outcomes, the revision and proposal of new study programs, the compliance of ECTS credits with student workload and student practice.

Theme III. The teaching process and student support are aligned with ESG 1.3, 1.4. and 1.6. The topic assesses the clarity of enrolment requirements (key standard), collecting and analyzing student progress and graduation data, student-centred teaching, student support, especially for those from underrepresented and vulnerable groups, support for student mobility, objectivity and consistency of student evaluation and assessment procedures achievements, the issuance of an adequate diploma and diploma supplement, and care for student employability.

Theme IV. Teaching and institutional capacity are aligned with ESG 1.5. and 1.6. It covers the assessment of teaching capacities (key standard), the objectivity and transparency of recruitment and promotion processes, support for teachers in professional development, the integration of infrastructure with learning outcomes (key standard), library equipment and rational management of financial resources.

Theme V. Professional/scientific/artistic work is not directly related to ESG standards. It follows the commitment of teachers to the achievement of

high quality professional and scientific work (a key standard), the social relevance of research and knowledge transfer, recognition in regional, national and international frameworks and the link between professional/scientific work and the teaching process.

Internal quality assurance system in the institution of higher education

The development of an internal QAS plays an important role in the process of re-accreditation of the HEI. A well-structured internal system enables monitoring of the activities in all fields of management of the HEI, thus simplifying writing and creation of better self-analysis.

Organization and operation of the internal quality assurance system

A well-organized internal QAS is based on relevant documentation and bodies involved in its organization and implementation of activities. Observed HEI has adopted the basic acts regulating the functioning of the internal QAS, such as Quality policy, Quality strategy, Manual for quality assurance, Rulebook on the organization and operation of the QAS, Rulebook on the procedure of periodic internal audit of the QAS. Over time, as the system has evolved, in addition to the revision of the basic acts, numerous other documents have been adopted to ensure and improve the quality of the institution, among which are: strategic documents, the annual activity plans and reports, rules and decisions supporting the system (e.g.

rulebook on the improvement of study programs, the rulebook on surveys, etc.), internal reports, key performance indicators, numerous surveys.

In full awareness of the importance of information on quality and effectiveness of activities, HEI performs, which are especially stressed by the ESG standard 1.7. Information Management, Internal reports have been drawn up. The document prescribes collection of 45 reports in a year related to student profile, progression through study, performance and dropout, student satisfaction, availability of learning resources, etc. In response to the document, in order to determine the institution's development trends and facilitate comparisons with other similar institutions in the area and inform the public about results of performance monitoring Key performance indicators have been adopted. The data from internal reports and indicator are important to the HEI for monitoring of the implementation of strategic goals as well as to determine advantages and shortcomings in its operation. Over time, in order to better define improvement activities, target indicator values have been defined. Collected information the HEI uses in planning processes and for ongoing improvements of the QAS.

Management and for this purpose defined persons and bodies (committees) take care of the system. However, for an integral system, it is important to involve all internal (employees and students) and external (businessmen, local community, Alumni) stakeholders and to allow them to make opinions and suggestions for improving the system. In the HEI under study, students are thus involved with

the external stakeholders in the work of numerous committees and the preparation of strategic documents.

In order to carry out activities transparently and continuously and to improve the QAS of the HEI, it is important to draw up annual activity plans (based on strategic documents and other needs), monitor and evaluate their implementation. For that purpose, the HEI prepares annual reports containing an analysis of the performance of the activity, an assessment of its effectiveness and any proposals for better achievement of the objectives. Assessment of the effectiveness of the established QAS at the HEI and its impact on the development of a culture of quality in respect of improvement of the system based on recommendations for improvement is evaluated in the internal audit of the system. Based on the results of monitoring and evaluation, changes are initiated in the system, and it is continuously improved.

The annual plans of activities and measures for ensuring and improving the quality of the observed HEI are in line with ESG standards. As the Quality Assessment Standards for Higher Education Re-accreditation rely on ESG standards, this way of planning and monitoring the realization of the set institutional goals contributes to the achievement of a satisfactory level of quality in all aspects of the HEI performance. The demonstrability of all activities plays an important role and the basis for making quality self-analysis, as well as for the whole process of re-accreditation. The described HEI has set up a portal to support the QAS. The portal allows recording of all activities set out in the plan

of activities, assignment of tasks to responsible persons, the definition of implementation time limits and monitoring of implementation as well as storage of related documentation. The portal contains all QAS documents developed and adopted in a specific year since 2016. Thus the portal also represents a repository of QAS documents. Use of the portal enables the continuous and systematic flow of information and increases the transparency of the whole system.

Self-analysis and results of re-accreditation of the higher education institution

The observed HEI included all stakeholders (employees, students, alumni, business people) in the process of self-analysis. Information and documents from various bases were used in the preparation of the self-analysis: the quality portal, the HEI's archive, web sites, CROSBİ (Croatian Scientific Bibliography), ISVU (Higher Education Information System), MOZVAG, etc. As previously stated, the HEI continuously plans activities on an annual basis following strategic documents and ESG standards, monitors and documents their implementation. All plans, reports and the quality portal on which all evidence is archived, were an important basis for self-analysis and facilitated its implementation.

The expert committee in the re-accreditation process, based on self-analysis, stakeholder interviews and evidence analysis, assessed that the HEI in theme I. Internal QA and the social role of the institution has at a high-quality level. Other themes were rated with satisfactory quality levels. In its report, the committee provides an analysis of

the situation, recommendations for improvement and an assessment for each standard and theme. The analysis of the situation relies heavily on the self-analysis of the HEI, and the results are outlined below.

In the theme I, the committee quotes that the establishment of a functional internal QA system is an example of good practice and the effective implementation of recommendations from previous evaluations. They recommend to the HEI to maintain this level of quality. The overall rating of the topic is a high level of quality, with four standards rated high and one with a satisfactory level of quality. Some examples of good practice presented through self-analysis are the existence of key documents (policies, strategies, rulebooks); action plans; reports on the implementation of action plans; internal reports; surveys; internal audit; implementation of the quality improvement recommendation from previous evaluations; continuous analysis of improvements in the QAS and plans for further development through various activities; information on teaching, professional and research activities and the social role of the HEI, which are publicly available in Croatian and English on the official website; the social role of the HEI achieved through various projects with the community and volunteer work.

In theme II. Study Programs committee states that the HEI carries out study programs that meet the needs of the local and regional labour market. General objectives of the program are well integrated into the strategic goals of the HEI and the needs of the labour market. The projected learning outcomes of the study programs are in

line with the level and profile of the qualifications obtained, but there is space for improvement in part of the study programs. Examples of good practice at the HEI are well-established procedures and methods for revision of study programs; the work of the study program review committees to which all stakeholders are involved; continuous revision of study programs based on the results of internal reports, surveys of former and current students, employers; proposition of new study programs following ESG standards 1.2. and 1.9.; revision and distribution of ECTS credits under student surveys and teacher recommendations; student practise that takes place in the teaching base of the HEI and external entities (enterprises, local community) and is an integral part of study programs; monitoring student and mentor satisfaction with the implementation of professional practice. In addition to the recommendations for modernization of some study programs, the committee rated for three standards the high level, and the satisfactory level for three standards (one of which is key) and the overall grade of the theme is a satisfactory level of quality.

Theme III. Teaching process and student support were evaluated with a satisfactory level of quality, with five standards rated as satisfactory (one key) and five with a high level of quality. Examples of good practice at the institution are: clearly defined and publicly available admission and continuation criteria; collecting passing data and in accordance with the results application of appropriate measures, such as individual counseling and mentoring, to help students take the exams more

easily and continue their studies; rewarding the best students; high level of international mobility of teachers and students; institutional support and individual access to students, especially students with disabilities; objective and consistent evaluation of student achievement; application of different teaching methods (student-centred teaching); students' surveys about teacher and program satisfaction; conducting self-evaluation and collaborative evaluation; adapting the teaching process to vulnerable and underrepresented groups; use of e-learning; detailed course plans that link activities to teaching methods, learning outcomes and student achievement evaluation methods; collaboration with Alumni. The recommendation to the HEI is to increase promotional activities.

In theme IV. Teaching and institutional capacities examples of good practice are the high qualifications of teaching staff; objective and transparent recruitment and promotion procedures based on strategic goals; continuous improvement of teaching and other competencies; rewarding the best teachers; teaching facilities that are appropriate for the completion of study programs and the achievement of expected learning outcomes in terms of professional work; rational and transparent management of financial resources (linking financial to strategic planning). In addition to the recommendations for improving the library and laboratory space, four standards are rated high (one key), two satisfactory (one key) and one minimum quality level, and the overall topic rating is a satisfactory quality level.

In theme V. Scientific and/or professional work, the committee states that the HEI is dedicated to the development of professional, scientific and research activities and is assessed with a satisfactory level of quality. Two standards are at a high level, one (key) at a satisfactory level and one at a minimum quality level. A good practice is evident in: the systematic and continuous (financial) support of the HEI for the scientific and professional development of teachers; continuous publishing of scientific and professional papers; systematic recording and monitoring of published works; scientific conference; implementation of professional, scientific and EU projects in cooperation with the local community and the labour market; active participation of employees in the work of professional associations, etc. The HEI is recommended to raise the level and quality of scientific research and the international visibility of research.

Conclusion

External evaluation of the quality of the HEI through the re-accreditation process is carried out throughout the EHEA, including Croatia. Standards for quality evaluation in the re-accreditation process in Croatia are based on ESG Standards. Every HEI is responsible for quality assurance of its programs. Therefore, in order to succeed in the re-accreditation process, it is important to well organize internal QAS and harmonize it with ESG standards. A well-established internal quality system that enables continuous implementation, monitoring and evaluation of all activities that

ensure and improve the quality of the institution contributes to the quality of HEI and higher education as a whole.

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