

MECHANISMS AND CONTRIBUTION OF ACCREDITATION FOR INCREASING THE QUALITY OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION IN BULGARIA

prof. Josif I. Iliev, DSc
Deputy Chairman of
the National Accreditation Agency of the Republic of Bulgaria
Sofia
Bulgaria

ABSTRACT

The experience of the Bulgaria for accomplishment of the accreditation and the post-accreditation control of High Schools is look at the report. The accent of the report is put on the mechanisms and the criteria, which establish the condition of the quality of the education of academic staff, the progress and the problematic fields in insurance and development of the quality of high education.

Keywords: quality, high education, Bulgaria, accreditation process

1. SUMMARY

Increasing the quality of the higher education in Bulgaria is among the strategic priorities of the country especially in the context of its membership since 01.01.2007 in the European Union. The main subjects to this uneasy process are the universities themselves (1); the Bulgarian Ministry of Education and Science (2) and the Bulgarian National Assessment and Accreditation Agency (3) as, undoubtedly, close interaction and partnership is needed between them.

The Bulgarian National Assessment and Accreditation Agency already has over 10 years of history and is created in accordance to the Higher Education Law as an independent institution of the Bulgarian Council of Ministers.

In 2004 a series of reforms in the higher education were implemented in the country, including strengthening the role and contribution of the Agency in ensuring and developing the educational and research services and products.

The statutory and substatutory regulations define four types of activities of the Bulgarian National Assessment and Accreditation Agency:

1. Institutional accreditation of the universities
2. Programme accreditation of the universities
3. Assessment (and approval or not) of projects for opening new universities and sections of existing universities.

Bulgarian higher education today includes 41 universities and specialised institutions of higher education, (of which 7 private), 10 independent colleges (of which 9 private), as well as a big number of colleges within the structures of the universities. The expansion of the educational network after the liberalization of the political and social system went, to some extend, in inconsistent circumstances. In the characteristics of the Bulgarian higher education

we find some analogy with most of the countries of Eastern Europe – big number of universities compared to the size of the country; very small sizes of many of them - 17 have under 1000 and 34 – under 5000 students; definite decrease of the requirements and in pouring of the secondary school standards.

Clearly realising the need of regulation of the processes in the area of higher education, the country set to the Agency as a specialised government body a number of new tasks:

- to improve the criteria, procedures and organization of conducting the accreditation of the universities in accordance with the European standards of higher education quality;
- to increase the requirements towards the projects for opening new universities and sections of existing universities;
- to start the new for the Bulgarian higher education activity of post-accreditation control;
- to expand and enrich the cooperation of the Agency with the Bulgarian universities and the Ministry of Education and Science as well as with the European Association for Quality Assurance for Higher Education (ENQA).

The Bulgarian Accreditation Agency works with relatively small permanent personnel. A leading role in it have eminent university professors who form the Accreditation Counsel (11 people) and nine constant committees on areas of higher education (about 60 people). At the same time, in the accreditation procedures participate expert groups chosen by approved and trained expert staff of 600 lecturers with academic rank (professors and readers) forms universities along the country and from the Bulgarian Academy of Science. Definite efforts and initial results are being made in attracting prominent foreign experts in the accreditation process.

2. SUMMARY OF THE ACCREDITATION AND ASSESSMENT ACTIVITIES OF THE NATIONAL ASSESSMENT AND ACCREDITATION AGENCY DURING 2006

In 2006 were completed 35 institutional accreditations which are grounds for a number of conclusions:

- **Stage of implementation of the national system for ensuring the quality in accordance with the European standards and directions for quality ensuring.**

A prevailing part of the universities in Bulgaria have implemented procedures for ensuring quality, which are enforced by interior regulations, by specially created structures and by allocation of functions and duties on developing and maintaining the internal quality systems. All universities have mechanisms for approval, periodic inspection and monitoring of the proposed curriculums and programs, a central role in which play the attention to the structure and contents of the lectures, the resources, students' feedback and periodic review of the curriculums. Some of the universities have created specific units and rules for providing quality of the distance education for which to big extend they are helped by the government standards (requirements) for distance education, published in 2004.

Isolated are the cases in which the periodic reviews of the curriculums include representatives of other institutions. There is a lack of system mechanisms for mandatory accounting of the opinion of employers when renewing the syllabus, although 50% of the universities over the past two years have built career centers for meeting students with employers that are expected to start giving results. Although there is significant progress in achieving better transparency in the students assessment criteria in the area of humanities and social sciences this process falls behind the other branches of knowledge. Written form of examination is prevailing but the procedures of administrative verification and control of the correctness in assessing are not always explicit and made public. In some universities are missing mechanisms for consideration of student complaints and reassessment.

All universities use competitive principle in appointing lecturers for all academic positions. Along with this, there is a system for periodical attestation of the lecturers, implemented everywhere. In some of the universities is being renewed the interrupted in the beginning of the 90's tradition for compulsory including of the newly appointed academic staff in programs for pedagogic development aiming to improve the pedagogic skills and competences.

Restructuring of the information systems of the universities is in action but the implementation of databases for realization of the graduates and for the effectiveness of the lecturers is very slow because of lack of financial resources.

- **Synergy between teaching and science research – an important factor for quality higher education**

One of the principal ideas, developed in the Bergen communique is Humboldt's idea for equality and mutual relationship between teaching and research as a main engine of the quality of higher education. In its work on assessment, accreditation and postaccreditation control the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency emphasizes on its importance as a factor for higher or lower accreditation mark.

- **Increase of the attractiveness of higher education**

Among the elements which build the attractiveness of higher education are the academic such (harmonization in the European higher education; enhancement of the role of the student as a partner in the governance of the university and in the efforts for improving the quality of higher education...), professional (career centre, which should establish connections with the business during the study and for realization after graduation...), logistic (transport connections, sports equipment ...), etc. Accreditation ascertains definite development in this direction in some of the Bulgarian universities.

- **Students' participation**

Students are full-rights participants in the efforts for improving the quality of higher education – a goal set at the Berlin (2003) and confirmed at the Bergen (2005) ministers gatherings. Most of the European countries, including Bulgaria, have achieved certain progress and good results. Different approaches are used for inclusion of the students at all stages of the assessment processes – at preparing the self-assessment report of the university, at visits of the expert group of the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency, as a participant in the expert group and as a member of the Accreditation Counsel, making the decisions.

In Bulgaria students take part in preparing the self-assessment report (in some universities) and communicate with the members of the expert group (in all universities).

The National Assessment and Accreditation Agency has developed a model, giving encouraging results, according to which students participate in the expert groups but not as their full-right members. The nominated according to a special procedure student presents an independent report with which the expert group gets acquainted with before it declares its position. This approach accounts the circumstance that the student is competent in some fields like education (like content of the curriculums, quality of teaching, etc.), service (administrative service, condition of the libraries and information centres), social and culture environment and so on.

Students' participation in assessing the higher education is useful for achieving the correct assessment of the university but also for development of the personal qualities and experience of the participating students like teamwork, evaluating, reporting and other skills. The Bulgarian legislation does not provide for students' participation in making the final decision of the Accreditation Counsel of the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency.

3. BUILDING AND ACTIVITIES OF THE SPHERE OF POST-ACCREDITATION MONITORING AND CONTROL

The short period after the changes in the Higher Education Law characterizes with a certain progress in the field of the new for the system of higher education in the country processes and activities of post-accreditation monitoring and control. It should be specially emphasized that they are new not only to us but also to the countries of the European Union.

The progress in the field of post-accreditation monitoring and control can be summarized as follows:

1. Institutionalization of the activities of post-accreditation monitoring and control in the Agency – Constant Committee (still incomplete) and a junior expert of post-accreditation monitoring and control are chosen and working, process of recruitment of post-accreditation monitoring and control experts has started.

2. Regulation of the post-accreditation monitoring and control activities is elaborated, including criteria for post-accreditation monitoring and control of applying the internal system for assessment and maintaining of the quality of education and of the academic staff in universities; procedures for post-accreditation monitoring and control differentiated depending on the received accreditation assessment and directed towards implementation of the recommendations of the universities accreditation.

3. Developed and approved by the Constant Committee multitude of methodical instructions, forms and documents connected with the forthcoming processes of post-accreditation monitoring and control of the universities. Our basic understanding regarding the post-accreditation monitoring and control is that it should be most of all a supporting instrument (mechanism) of the Agency for the universities. The post-accreditation monitoring and control will undoubtedly find existing weaknesses or outlined negative tendencies in the quality of education but its main purpose is to give directions and reference points to the universities in their pursuit of higher quality of education.

The approach in the basis of the post-accreditation monitoring and control which is planned in the regulations is the following:

1. Simultaneous purpose of the post-accreditation monitoring and control towards implementation of the recommendations given by the Accreditation Counsel at assessment and accreditation of the university and applying the internal system for assessment and maintaining the quality of education and of the academic staff.

2. Strong connection between the received accreditation assessment and the frequency (accordingly the range) of the post-accreditation monitoring and control of universities.

This approach originates from the philosophy and intention of the Law of Higher Education, namely – post-accreditation monitoring and control to “work” in support of the increasing quality of education. It can be defined as equitable to universities – those of them, received high accreditation assessments, “meet” comparatively rarely the representatives of the post-accreditation monitoring and control and vice versa – the ones that received low accreditation assessments or rejection are subject to stricter and regular control. At the same time the results of the conducted post-accreditation control carry information about desired and necessary improvements in the universities and also information regarding next accreditation of the universities. The visions and approaches in understanding and developing the new processes of post-accreditation monitoring and control, presented by us at international forums receive positive appraisal and are met with interest.

It has to be emphasized that we are to give real proves of the effects of the post-accreditation monitoring and control processes. We reckon that a main criterion for the success of the post-accreditation monitoring and control activities should be the increasing quality of education in universities, providing of lasting positive trends in the three areas of activity of the universities

as a precondition for higher competitiveness. In the context of what was said, it is especially important to be provided relationship and interaction between the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency (respectively the body of post-accreditation monitoring and control) and the universities, typical for the successfully cooperating parties pointing their efforts towards achieving a common goal – increasing quality of the educational services and extending competitiveness of the Bulgarian higher education.

The already accomplished control allowed the Constant Committee to understand and enrich a number of methodical and practical problems, such as:

- conformity of the undertaken by the universities actions with the recommendations of the accreditation;
- proves and ground of the results of the measures for implementing the recommendations of the accreditation;
- main points of support in evaluation of the effects and benefits of the functioning of internal systems for maintaining quality in the universities;
- structure and scope of universities reports to the Constant Committee regarding post-accreditation monitoring and control, etc.

The specifics, including “know-how”, of many university internal quality systems are a reason for deriving “good practices” in this area. The connection between recommendations at institutional accreditation of universities, measures and actions for their implementation and their impact over the quality of education is better and better understood.

Independently of the short functioning period of the internal quality systems in the universities, as a whole there are grounds for a conclusion that the management of the universities approach responsibly and not formally to this especially important side of activity and that there is present tendency for progress regarding reaching and perception of the mechanisms and rules for quality form the level of departments and subjects, to particular lecturers and students.

It can be generally pointed that 2006 put a good start of the post-accreditation monitoring and control. Gradually the approaches, mechanisms and contents of the post-accreditation monitoring and control are reaching the universities in the country and are being adopted as a mutual activity with the National Assessment and Accreditation Agency, based on partnership and assisting the establishment of positive trends in the functioning of the universities, the further development of quality and increase of their competitive advantages.

