

ENQA Workshop
Accreditation Models in Higher Education: Experiences and Perspectives

Introduction

The paper is a summary of two presentations, the first given at the session on the “Scope of accreditation”, the second in “Working methods”. Both dealt with the Hungarian experience in quality assurance in higher education. In addition, the first presentation briefly looked also into the practice of accreditation in Central and Eastern Europe, which is described in conclusion.

The Hungarian Accreditation Committee

The Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) was set up by the Higher Education act in 1993, mandating accreditation of all higher education institutions and all their programmes every eight years. The first cycle (at the time of 89 institutions) took place between 1995 and 2001. The HAC’s concept of institutional accreditation was based on the premise that the output of higher education institutions was the diploma or degree, and the content behind the degree was the study programme, therefore it must be the object of evaluation. The institution was seen as the environment contributing to the quality of study programmes. The institutional level, in contrast, was not of equal significance because in the social-historical context in which Hungary found itself after regime change in the early 1990s, there was little experience in institutional management, and institutional leaders were selected based on academic merit. Linked to that, legally declared institutional autonomy was in fact limited, with numerous aspects of higher education legislated and severe financial restrictions imposed both by legislation and the amount of money available and allocated to higher education. Thirdly, there was no internal quality assurance in place at the time.

The accreditation decision by HAC pertained, therefore, to a whole institution, all its faculties, and all its study programmes. Roughly one third of the programmes were given “conditional” accreditation, with defined conditions to be met by a set date, reviewed in a monitoring procedure. Some small, new colleges were also given short-term, conditional accreditation and no institution was closed. There was small number of new institutions requesting preliminary accreditation that had to resubmit their application before being granted their request.

In the upcoming cycle of institutional accreditation, beginning in autumn 2004, greater emphasis will be given to the institutional level. Internal quality assurance is in place at all higher education institutions, who send their annual reports, reviewing changes in their institution and programmes as well as quality concerns, to the HAC. The reports will constitute the building blocks for accreditation. A selection of programmes will be reviewed in depth. Whereas in the first cycle, only the accreditation decision and a brief explanation for it, but covering the institutional level as well as the programmes, was published, accreditation reports will now be published in full. The HAC has already launched a pilot procedure in which it evaluates a specific discipline across the board, whereby the same visiting team reviews the study programmes in the given discipline at all institutions in the country within a

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limited time-frame. The pilot phase, still running at the time of this writing in early 2004, covers the disciplines of psychology and history, and no decision has yet been taken concerning the feasibility of the approach in the future.

The HAC has 30 full members, who are delegated by higher education institutions (the Hungarian Rector's Conference, the Conference of College Directors, and the Conference of Art University Rectors); by research institutes (of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences); and by professional organisations (chambers, unions). There is also one non-voting student member, as called for by the higher education act of 1993. In addition, several non-voting members are invited on a permanent basis to fill in for major disciplines not covered by the delegated members. This is necessary, since the HAC works in a multiple-level decision-making structure both in institutional accreditation and separate programme accreditation procedures. The latter involves the preliminary accreditation of new programmes on the national level (initiated by institutions but issued as national qualification requirements in the form of government decrees); the preliminary accreditation of new programmes launched by institutions (based on the national qualification requirement for the given study programme); and the preliminary accreditation of doctoral schools. Moreover, as noted, programme accreditation is also part of institutional, that is *ex post*, accreditation every eight years.

The internal procedure for conducting institutional accreditation (which involves visits by a peer review team sent to each faculty and based on the institution's self-evaluation report) is as follows. The members of the HAC plenum head standing expert commissions for main disciplines or discipline groups. As expert commission chairs they recommend the leaders of the review teams. The review team leaders in turn recommend the members of the team, which may include non-academics. The team is approved by the institution to be visited, and approved by the HAC plenum. In the following cycle of institutional accreditation, students will participate in visiting teams. Another difference between the first and second cycles is that in the former the accreditation decision was made on a grading scale of Excellent, Strong, Adequate, and Not Adequate (with excellent being measured against the international standard), which will be discontinued in the new cycle, leaving only a yes/no decision. In both cycles there was and continues to be Conditional Accreditation (technically a yes decision), either if there were not yet any graduates in the evaluated programme or if weaknesses called for a monitoring evaluation, whereby set conditions must be met by a given deadline. The visiting team produces an evaluation report that is discussed by an *ad hoc* commission, made up of HAC members representing the disciplines evaluated, with a final accreditation report passed as a resolution by the HAC plenum. Prior to the final vote, the institution is given the report for comments. The final report is published.

The selection of evaluators for programme accreditation, which involves evaluation based on a written application, proceeds as follows. The chair of the relevant expert commission for the given discipline (usually a plenum member) recommends two external evaluators, usually but not always academics. A third evaluator may be called upon if the evaluation is not unambiguous. The HAC has a pool of over 500 peers. The expert commission discusses the evaluations and prepares its recommendation for the plenum, which passes the final decision on granting preliminary accreditation to a new programme in the form of a resolution.

With both institutional and programme accreditation, a HAC decision is an "opinion" given to the minister of education, who issues the final decision on accreditation. By law, the minister must publish his or her reasons for passing a decision that is contrary to the HAC's opinion. Institutions have the right to appeal the HAC's decisions based on legal grounds. The frames

of reference for the HAC's decisions are the higher education act; the government decree on the HAC that details the delegation of HAC members and the tasks; the HAC's By-Laws, which include procedures of operation and tasks of the committees; the HAC's Accreditation Requirements; the HAC's Strategic Plan; and its Code of Ethics.

All higher education institutions which applied for accreditation have been accredited (about half for the full eight-year term), and about 70% of the programmes were accredited for the eight-year term, while less than 1% were closed. Almost all private higher education institutions applying for accreditation were accredited, though some had to re-submit their application. There are now 11 private HEIs in Hungary.

Accreditation in Central and Eastern Europe

Quality assurance in higher education in CEE countries began with the main aim to protect stakeholders by insuring the quality of higher education in the respective countries. It took the form of accreditation in almost all CEE countries from the start and is now being conducted in all countries. The reasons for this choice have been discussed in detail in the literature, but mainly had to do with the fact that higher education policy-makers, in conjunction with established academics, saw a form of control necessary at the time of regime change, whereby institutions were granted a certain degree of autonomy in exchange for allowing external control of the quality of the education they produced. In the given social-historical context the accreditation structure may have appeared as rigid and, indeed, the practice varies in the different countries. Other reasons for introducing accreditation in CEE countries was to protect stakeholders; to define quality standards and levels; to assure comparability of study programme content and level with those in Western Europe; and in some countries, most notably Romania and Bulgaria, to control the quality of education at proliferating private institutions. A survey showed that all quality assurance agencies professed an orientation toward helping higher education institutions to improve the quality of their education.

All CEE countries have national quality assurance agencies, although Poland until recently had only commissions set up with the voluntary co-operation of higher education institutions of various profiles. In recent years, as the new social structures are taking root, a development toward a more flexible implementation of quality assurance and a relaxation in the legislation can be witnessed. Higher education laws are being revised or new ones passed in several countries.

The Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education was formally established on October 19, 2002 in Vienna as a non-governmental and non-profit organisation. The CEE Network has 18 members from 16 countries. The contribution of CEE agencies to the dialogue on quality assurance in Europe is to define educational and quality assurance strategies in each country; to co-operate among each other to define the needs and expectations for higher education and quality assurance; to channel their opinions to other European players in quality assurance; to participate in European projects in a pro-active way and to initiate own projects in order to arrive and mutually acceptable and comparable standards and methodologies in quality assurance.