

MACEDONIAN VERSUS EU STANDARDS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Macedonian national standards for quality assurance of higher education are mainly based on the standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, adopted by the EU ministers responsible for higher education, in 2005. The mentioned document was prepared by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in cooperation with the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA). Consequently, the Macedonian standards comply with EU standards, as North Macedonia has been a candidate for future membership in the European Union since 2005. However, these should not, under any circumstances, be fully prescribed and implemented, due to the national characteristics, specific higher education system, historical background, and different future perspective. The paper focuses on the analysis of the Macedonian standards for quality assurance of higher education, and their comparison to corresponding EU standards vis-à-vis their level of compliance or difference. The scientific method, the analysis, is based on a comparative analysis. The main goal of the research is to identify and point out those already adopted national standards that are not applicable, the ones that the practice proved to be correct, the ones that should be revised and the ones that should be adjusted. As such, the paper aims to contribute towards the promotion of common standards and prototypes for Balkan countries through exchanging experience and knowledge by benefiting from the EU standards, as the best way to improve their cooperation and harmonization in the area of higher education, both on a local and international level.

Keywords - Higher education, quality assurance, standards, EU, North Macedonia

1 INTRODUCTION

With the act of signing the Bologna Declaration in 2003, the national authorities of the Republic of North Macedonia committed themselves to a successful implementation of the Bologna principles and objectives. Since then, higher education quality standards in the country have been discussed. In fact, these standards were officially formalized at the beginning of the 21st century and were in line with the pioneer actions in this direction in the EU, when the first guidelines for evaluation and evaluation procedure, at the level of faculties/higher education institutions/research institutions, were issued back in 2002. These Guidelines were formally adopted by the Interuniversity Conference of the Republic in Macedonia and they were the gateway for the future development of the quality standards and their implementation. So, in 2003, the first external evaluation of the public universities (two at that time), was realized. The evaluation was two-levelled, the first one was realized by Macedonian experts, nominated by the National Board, whilst the second one was realized by EU experts, nominated by the European University Association (EUA).

Although the first steps were promising, after universities' evaluations and published guidelines, nothing was done in terms of following the progress and improving the higher education quality standards until 2009. In the meantime, higher education quality standards in EU (EUA) were developed and officialized in a document entitled "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area", adopted by the EU Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005. Also, the EU universities, from that point, were subject to continuous external evaluations based on the cited document, which meant that not only the quality standards were prescribed, but they were constantly implemented, discussed and improved.

The previous Macedonian Law on Higher Education (LHE), adopted in 2008 (Official Gazettes, 2008-2015), merged the Accreditation and Evaluation Boards into a single legal entity and the first bylaws regarding the higher education quality standards, issued by this Board, were delivered in 2009 (Rulebook on Organization, Functioning and Decision Making (Official Gazette No. 121/2009, 2009); Accreditation and Evaluation Methodology; and Accreditation and Evaluation Standards and Other Issues Related to the Higher Education Accreditation and Evaluation Board). These bylaws prescriptions were in line with the EU (EUA) Standards and Guidelines, but the main flaw was their complete takeover, without considering the national higher education conditions. It should be pointed out that one of the main areas covered by this particular Law on Higher of Education (now obsolete) was the quality assurance, through addressing the following aspects:

- Strengthening the role of the Higher Education Accreditation Board and the Agency for Evaluation of Higher Education into one national body for quality assurance in higher education;
- Introduction of student participation as well as the participation of employers' representatives in decision-making bodies of the universities and the quality assurance process (from both the private and the public sector);
- Introduction of international cooperation in the quality assurance process (peer reviewers, other quality assurance agencies and/or relevant associations);
- Membership of the national bodies for quality assurance in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA);
- The need for the national quality assurance system to comply with the standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education.

At this point, there is a new law on higher education in place, which was adopted in 2018, where some of the standards of higher education are taken over fully as they were prescribed previously (the ones that proved to be correct), but mainly brand-new regulations are presented (Official Gazette No. 82/2018, 2018).

The paper is organized as follows. In the next section, a brief comparison of Macedonian and EU standards for quality assurance of higher education is made. Recommendations are given in Section 3. Section 4 concludes.

2 COMPARING MACEDONIAN AND EU STANDARDS FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The Quality Assurance System (QAS) in higher education in the Republic of North Macedonia is based on the Law of Higher Education and the requirements of the Bologna Declaration. It includes the following issues (EACEA, 2010, p. 5):

- Approval, verification, and recognition of the higher education institution, within the framework defined with the LHE, accomplished through the accreditation process;
- Quality assessment in the following areas:
 - Performance of the activities;
 - Management;
 - Financing.
- An evaluation system for academic and other related activities;

- Other activities and mechanisms that develop and maintain the quality of higher education as determined by the Law and the regulations of the bodies (agencies) that carry out the quality assessment of higher education.

The evaluation (Quality Assessment) of the higher education institutions (HEIs) is being implemented through:

- External evaluation (external quality assessment);
- Self-evaluation (internal quality assessment);
- System of evaluation of the quality of the academic staff.

The external evaluation and the overall assessment of the academic staff at the universities and the other types of higher education institutions in the Republic of North Macedonia are carried out by the Agency for Evaluation of Higher Education (Evaluation Agency, i.e. Quality Assurance Agency).

Speaking of the standards of higher education that proved to be correct and that are transferred in the new Law on Higher Education (Official Gazette No. 82/2018, 2018), are the ones that prescribed self-evaluation process for the universities to be realized over the period of three years. This regulation not only allows the universities to self-evaluate their success in past performance and the level of their development, but the Self-evaluation Report (as a final document of this process), proved to be the most useful tools for the managerial team of the universities for determining the future growth and development and foreseeing the next actions in the strategic documents.

On the other hand, the major difference between the old and the new Law on Higher Education is the prescription for dividing (again) the Board for Accreditation and Evaluation into two single bodies, one for accreditation of the higher education institutions and study programs and one for their evaluation. The reason for this is based on the fact that the Board for Accreditation and Evaluation was active (and not in full capacity) only in the part of accreditation of the study programs, while the part of the evaluation of the institutions and the study programs was done only within the higher education institutions, by themselves without any involvement of the board. Those actions of self-evaluation were legal requirements, but the external evaluation, although regulated with the law and specifically with the Board's Rulebook on the Criteria for Quality Assurance and Assessment of the Higher Education Institutions and Academic Staff in the Republic of Macedonia (Official Gazette No. 67/2013, 2013), was never conducted in the discussed period of time. The external evaluation of the higher education institutions was planned to be executed by an expert team of five members, at least one of which would be an international expert and four domestic experts. This idea never saw the light, so it cannot be considered a solid base for concluding if it would have been successful or not.

Such lack of actions by the responsible national body towards the external evaluation caused a lack of continuity in the process of external evaluation of the public universities, which had to make decisions on whether to follow the EU recommendations. Higher education institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), on a cyclical basis, by organizing external evaluations every five years, which was difficult to realized considering the limited funds.

Luckily, to fill this gap in the final period, an overall project for the national education system funded by the World Bank allowed the public universities to be a subject of the external evaluation process by the EUA expert teams. So, at the moment, public universities have been evaluated and some of them have closed the whole cycle with both initial and follow-up evaluation processes, whilst some of them are expected to close the cycle with a positive follow-up evaluation process in a year or two.

The incentives for following the EU standards in quality assurance of higher education can be witnessed by the Rulebook on the Criteria for Quality Assurance and Assessment of the Higher Education Institutions and Academic Staff in the Republic of Macedonia, issued by the Board of Accreditation and Evaluation in 2013 (Official Gazette No. 67/2013, 2013). It stated that the external evaluation is realized in accordance with the standards recommended in the guidelines of the European Association for Higher Education Evaluation (ENQA) and they consist of four major fields:

1. Organization, management, and performance
2. Teaching and learning
3. Research, development and/or creative activities
4. Service to Society

Speaking of the fulfilment of the stated criteria for the external evaluation (EUA Institutional Evaluation Program, 2016), and based on the experience of the University “St. Kliment Ohridski” – Bitola while doing a self-evaluation relied on the exact criteria as for the external evaluation (EUA Institutional Evaluation Program, 2017; St. Kliment Ohridski University – Bitola, 2017), it can be concluded that two of the criteria are difficult to achieve. It is about the criteria 3.4.1. The higher education institution has financial resources for realization and upgrading the scientific-research/art function and 3.5.4. The higher education institution engages renowned foreign experts in realizing its third cycle as well as in the supervision of the Ph.D. thesis. The higher education institution plans financial support from its own funds for engaging these renowned international experts.

When it comes to the fulfilment of the ESG standards, (opportunities for and promotion of the professional development of teaching staff, scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research and innovations in teaching methods and using new technologies), again the lack of financial resources results in not being able to reach these standards in full.

The reasons for difficulties in fulfilment of these criteria are basically due to the financial problems our universities are constantly faced with, because of the unfavorable budget funds distribution. This notion is also stressed in the “North Macedonia Public Finance Review: Sowing the Seeds of a Sustainable Future” issued by the World Bank in 2018. Namely, their data shows that North Macedonia has steadily reduced its spending on education, which is currently lower than the EU and peer countries’ averages. “Between 2011 and 2016, public spending on education as a share of GDP slipped down from 4.62% to 3.77% (–0.85 percentage points), and as a share of total government spending from 13.30% to 11.60%. North Macedonia also spends less on tertiary education than peer countries. Its public and private spending on tertiary education was 1.32% of GDP in 2011, below the OECD average. Estimates based on data provided by the Ministry of Education and Science (MOES) put public investment in tertiary education at 0.40% of GDP in 2015 - significantly lower than the OECD average of 1.10%, and the 1.30% invested by Slovenia or even the 0.70% invested by Croatia. As a result, public universities lack the infrastructure and resources they need (buildings, laboratories, qualified personnel) to improve their quality.”

One of the basic criteria, that is discussed during the evaluation processes, is the drop-out rate of students, which is noticeably high at Macedonian universities. On the other hand, this high drop-out rate increases the teacher-student ratio and helps toward the EU standard. As for the ESG standard regarding the recognition of qualifications in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, it should be noted that the Macedonian Higher Education System is based on national recognition procedures. The higher education institutions are not entitled to recognition of foreign qualifications. Though, the national recognition procedures refer to the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its recommendations.

3 RECOMMENDATIONS

The external quality assurance on a cyclical basis is a *conditio sine qua non* for each higher education institution that aims to be recognized and valued on the EU higher education institution map. Namely, in North Macedonia, both external and internal QA systems for higher education are not yet fully developed. Therefore, the Macedonian higher education institutions should not allow discontinuity of such an important cycle. Additionally, these cycles should reinforce quality assurance mechanisms to promote university transparency and competitiveness. This stands for the Balkan and every other university.

The share of GDP in our country that goes towards education must be increased because, as noted in the World Bank Report, it is on the lowest level compared to regional peers. By increasing funds, the higher education institutions could possibly reach not the highest, but certainly, the average level of the requested criteria for improvement of the study process, learning outcomes, professional development of teaching staff, study programs delivery, teaching performances and research.

The increased funds should be allocated on the basis of a per-student formula that is more transparent and more equitable, bearing in mind some priorities when setting up transparent criteria.

As the World Bank Report recommends, “Effective reform options might be to explore the feasibility of education institutions optimization, revisit how they are funded by introducing per-student formulas in higher education. Options to enhance the quality of education might be to introduce a learning assessment system and improve recruitment and teaching conditions for teachers” (World Bank, 2018).

The negative characteristics of high drop-out rates and long average times to complete the higher education could be overcome by considering different approaches that suit various student groups when designing study programs to help to enhance their soft skills.

4 CONCLUSIONS

The Macedonian higher education system is highly centralized, which means that the functioning of public universities mainly depends on government decisions. That is to say, over a decade there is no consistent vision for higher education on a national level.

As it was stated in the World Bank Report, "since 2006, education spending and efficiency have deteriorated until they are now near the bottom among international peers" (World Bank, 2018). Therefore, as long as there is no adequate system for financing higher education, the universities' independence is questionable. At this point, funding is not linked to university's performance, which explains the poor higher education institutions' accountability, their few mechanisms for quality assurance and unsuitable learning results. The vague methodology for financing public higher education combines the state budget share and funds from other sources, where the state budget share depends on the number of study programs, number of full-time students enrolled for the first time under the state quota in each academic year, as well as the number and structure of employees, although depending on the available state funds. The financial problems also reflect on the infrastructure investment that falls short of the need that influences quality performance.

The general conclusion is that significant capacity of building and financial resources are needed to establish a culture of quality in higher education institutions in the country. This is the only way the European quality standards in higher education will be reached and, if not fully but partially fulfilled under Macedonian terms and conditions.

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