"Guidelines on External Evaluation of Quality in Higher Education"
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The wide-ranging social and economic developments that have occurred both in the country and in particular at the Higher Education environment, the integration policies doggedly pursued by our country towards the ultimate goal of making the European Union integration a reality, the inclusion of our Higher Education into the Common European Higher Education Area, the persistent desire of these institutions to gain more in the way of autonomy have reinforced and brought to a top-notch level the responsibilities of the universities and other institutions with vested interests in higher education.

The official commitment of Albanian political system to formally acknowledge and practically execute documents linked up to Bologna Process, the signing of such documents on our part at the Berlin Conference way back in September 2003, among other things, highlights the need for establishing and promoting the Culture of Quality and other related characteristics which are to be put in the mainstream for all our higher education institutions.

In quite a recent meeting of Ministers of Education held in Bergen in May 2005, Quality Assurance at the Higher Education System is to be reformulated and promoted as one of the main pillars in the context of the Bologna Process. This can be realized through the National Institutions of Quality Assurance in close cooperation with the Institutions of Higher Education and the relevant European structures and beyond.

Quality at Higher Education is a multi-faceted concept. It is concerned with all the functions and activities that are conducted at the Institutions of Higher Education: with teaching and learning process, with scientific research, with students’ admissions, the hiring and qualification of teaching staff, with education facilities and equipments, with services rendered on the benefit of third parties, and with the managerial team. The evaluation of all these dimensions is necessary for the perspective of people both within and outside the system. The latter could be the ones with experience in the field of evaluation. Hence the combination of the internal evaluation with the external one in the Higher Education Institution is vital to the increase of Quality.

Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation are the twinning components of Quality Assurance. The Evaluation of Quality is made possible through the Internal Evaluation (self-evaluation) and External Evaluation. While evaluation is the process of determining the quality level of HEI, of curricula and certain academic programs, the accreditation is a process of decision-making in connection to the evaluation conducted.

The process of internal evaluation is an important indicator of autonomy of HEIs. In the meantime, it constitutes to be an aid to the leading and executive teams of the unit of higher education in terms of boosting awareness of the extent of such an important issue as Quality. It also helps perpetuate a two-way mutual faith climate among the academic staff, the helping and
managerial staff and students and the wider public, who figure largely in this process.

On the other hand, it’s pretty clear that under the conditions when much more autonomy and a higher level of responsibility is sought out for the HEIs, the evaluation with external experts becomes necessary in order to prove the validity and objectivity of the internal evaluation; in a way it is the external evaluation which ultimately proves the quality of any institution, of a university curricula or diploma for that matter.

The ultimate aim is for society to receive in a real, clear, and transparent manner and for the intent of any likely use in the future the accurate information on the status and condition of Higher Education institution. The people who are intensely keen on finding out the real status behind and institution include: the society, parents, students, employers, and political system. Hence the provision of information on the status on one hand, gives them the chance to make the right and desired choices in the Higher Education Market, and on the other hand it is a real proof that the Higher Education Institution accepts the responsibility that it has adopted or is about to assume, it enhances the level of confidence among the social partners and the end users as well.

Quality Assurance on the outside serves to keep afloat the National Standards of Quality at Higher Education, for accrediting the program and/or institutions of Higher Education, for protecting the users of this service, for providing independent information with quantitative and qualitative data on programs or institutions towards the long-term objective in ensuring and increasing quality in this sector of public education.

In this context, the Agency of Accreditation of Higher Education (AAAL) has attached special importance to the development of Evaluation Guidelines as well as of Manuals according to Contemporary Standards of Quality and transparent procedures in the evaluation of these institutions in a clear and reliable manner at all levels of university organization and in all its wide range of activities. The development of such guidelines is the best response to the permanent responsibilities they have in ensuring Quality Assurance at Higher Education as part of the Accreditation System. The ever growing demands on higher education, not only in the field of education, but also in the scientific research area, make such an obligation both fundamental and essential.

On this account alone, AAHE is proposing “The Guideline of External Quality of Higher Education”. This material follows the first edition of the “Guideline of Internal Evaluation of Quality” at Higher Education. The main aim of this manual is to help the External Evaluation Team to conduct a complete evaluation and accreditation process; to help the HEIs to work closely with the External Evaluation Team and to benefit from its experience, to help the HEIs to build up the procedures and practices in evaluating quality in order to make such a process inseparable from the work of the institution itself. The ongoing reform of education is based on its own internal needs, but even the integrating processes as such ask for the establishment of a Culture of Quality, in the sense that it will enable the planning objectives, the exchange of information, the qualifications of teachers and students, the realization of joint projects with similar institutions in the EU countries and beyond.
Thus in the final analysis, the External Evaluation helps in an indirect way the establishment of the Internal Systems of Quality Assurance of HEIs, which leads to the creation of Culture of Quality, which is in the short and long run the goal of the External Institutions of Quality Assurance (AAHE, Accreditation Council and MOES).

This guideline is compiled for the first time ever in the history of our education. In its compilation process wide and extensive use has been made of all European documents in support to the Bologna Process, the experience of the counterpart agencies, standards of Quality Assurance in Higher Education which were approved in Bergen in May 2005. This manual owes a lot to the experience of AAHE which was enriched over the years and best utilized to adapt this manual to the current conditions of our HEIs. Admittedly, such a document on Quality Assurance and many others to follow are not to stay as permanent fixtures, they are likely to gain more in new elements. They are likely to fit in with the further reforms of HE in the context of implementing the Bologna Document with success.

Authors

CONTENTS:

INTRODUCTION ............................................................ 3

I. EVALUATION PROCESS .............................................. 9

II. EXTERNAL EVALUATION ............................................ 14
   II.1. Stages and the timeframe .................................... 14
   II.2. The External Evaluation Team ............................... 17
   II.3. Working plan of the External Evaluation Team .......... 21
   II.4. The External Evaluation Report                      27
         II.4.1. Description ......................................... 30
         II.4.2. Analysis ............................................ 30
         II.4.3. Synthesis ........................................... 34
         II.4.4. Conclusions ........................................ 39
         II.4.5. Recommendations ................................... 39

III. THE RELATIONSHIP OF EXTERNAL EVALUATION GROUP WITH HEIs, INTERNAL EVALUATION GROUP AND AAHE ........................................ 41

IV. FINAL EVALUATION REPORT ..................................... 43

V. ACCREDITATION ..................................................... 45
I. EVALUATION PROCESS

Evaluation of Quality at Higher Education falls under the responsibility of Accreditation Agency of Higher Education (AAHE). It could very well take its own analysis into the diplomas issued by any Higher Education Institution (HEI). The subject of its analysis might just as well extend to university subjects, study courses of all institutions, or the internal quality system of HEI. As such, it could assume a rich choice of forms and meanings. All types of evaluation administered are to be guided, as a rule of thumb, by the principle of combining the courses with a perspective of the times ahead fixed in your mind. As such, the evaluation of Quality offers to the HEI the objective evaluation instrument of what has been achieved as well as the perspective on relevant changes to be made in order to give Quality Assurance a chance to gain ground.

The evaluation of Quality has to be characterized first of all by high-profile professionalism, objectivity, impartiality, complete transparency and the inclusion of all actors in all of the evaluation stages.

The main objectives of the evaluation processes are as follows:

- To get to reveal/denote facts about the status and condition of the institution, programs and curricula at Higher Education, in real time and in the national and international context;
- To promote the administration of evaluation in an objective fashion and voluntary basis, in order to paint a clear and amazingly transparent snapshot of the institution, on the basis of which the institution should build development plans in line with its mission statement;
- To make public any information in order that for all partners and the public at large ( student body, parents, academic and helping staff, other social partners, economic or social ones) to be better informed of the quality of HEI, programs, curricula, diplomas and other services that are being offered;
- To provide a wide range of data, a rich set of recommendations and other professional considerations which are going to serve as starting points for the further accreditation process;
- To deepen the understanding of the need to do evaluations of Quality at Higher Education Institutions and to better serve to cultivate the culture of quality at HEIs, which is to be reflected upon the form and shape of structures, practices and other internal procedures of Evaluation of Quality. These structures no doubt do combine the experience gained in the course of the internal and external evaluation;
To ultimately serve to cultivate the Culture of Quality at Higher Education Institutions, which will be targeted as the long-term objective of this process.

Evaluation of Quality goes through two stages: **Internal Evaluation** (Self-evaluation) and **External Evaluation**.

**Internal evaluation** (self-evaluation) is the evaluation that the unit (institution) conducts of its own will in its attempts to be accredited or in the circumstances when inclusion in the accreditation process is requested of such an institution. Such an evaluation is done under the full responsibility of the institution when it takes the initiative for such an evaluation, or when inclusion in the process is required in the accreditation process, in compliance with the accreditation plans. The results of such an evaluation are to be recorded in the **Self-Evaluation Report**. The self-evaluation report is an integral part of the full package titled the **Self-Evaluation Folder**. The self-evaluation folder contains all of the materials on which are based all of the activities of the institution to be accredited. The materials contained within this folder could be made available to the External Evaluation Team. During the preparation of the folder special care is taken in order for it to depict in true colors the entire development of the institution, to display all the previous evaluations conducted within the institution, to bring out all the elements of achievements and the weakness of the institution as well as the perspective into which the institution is heading to. The most analytical and entire prospect of such a development is to be found within the self-evaluation report. The preparation of such a report is done on the basis of the recommendations issued in the Guideline of Internal Evaluation of Quality.

**External Evaluation** is administered by External Evaluation Group, which is set up, guided along and follows closely the criteria defined by the AAHE and the Accreditation Council, which are faithfully described in this guideline. It is run and monitored by AAHE; during this stage the evaluation and analysis of the unit and/or programme, curriculum is done by experts in various fields who display no conflict of interest or any hidden agenda with the unit under evaluation. The compilation of the External Evaluation is sought out and supported by the AAHE. Its own content is under the responsibility of EET and in this sense such an evaluation should be independent, while the report itself is under the possession of the AAHE. As a result, the members are not allowed to produce the data, to make any statements or to publish any parts of the report without the consent first of the AAHE. The period over which the evaluation stretches out is divided into two stages: the fact-gathering or fact-finding period and the analysis stage. The two stages are crowned with the compilation of the evaluation report for all its components already set out in the guidelines that follow.
At the end of the two reports (IER and EER), AAHE drafts up the Final Report of Evaluation relying on three main sources:

- The Self-evaluation folder including the Self-evaluation Report;
- The External Evaluation Report, and
- Notes and discussions run by AAHE during the Self-evaluation and External evaluation process.

With the conclusion of the External Evaluation, the Final Evaluation Report is submitted to the Council of Accreditation in order for it to issue its recommendations or to make its respective decisions. On the basis of this decision that AC makes for each evaluation, the Evaluation Report along with the evaluation outcomes is made public.

Further details on the complete procedure of evaluation and accreditation of Higher Education could be found in the publication titled "Procedures for Evaluating Quality at Higher Educations", approved by the Accreditation Council in June 2004.

II. EXTERNAL EVALUATION

The Evaluation of Quality and Accreditation are sought out by the Institutions of Higher Education and the Ministry of Education and Science. In the cases when evaluation is sought out by HEI, it starts out only when approved by the Council of Accreditation and is administered according to the timelines already laid out by the AAHE and approved by the AC. A complete evaluation process for the intent of accreditation lasts two months in two years’ time and the timeframe is determined by the size of the institution to be accredited. It is also determined by the fact if the evaluation is at the program or institutional level, or a combination of both. Within this period of time, the External Evaluation stage takes up half of the time given to evaluation as a whole. In every concrete case, the deadline and the timeframe of the evaluation are to be determined by the AAHE and later on are to be approved by the AC.

II.1. Stages and the timeframe

External Evaluation consists of several stages:

a) Determining the timeframe of the External Evaluation
b) Informing the institution under evaluation about the timeframe of the external evaluation to take place
c) Establishing the External Evaluation Team
d) Informing the institution about the composition of the External Evaluation Team;

e) Contracting the members of the External Evaluation Team;

f) Training the External Evaluation Team from the AAHE staff

g) Helping the EET get to know the Self-Evaluation folder and the ensuing discussion

h) Compiling the working plan

i) Preparing the EET for the visits down to the HEIs;

j) Meeting of the EET with the head of the institution under evaluation and the Self-Evaluation Team

k) Visits to the destination (unit) of the EET;

l) Compilation of the preliminary External Evaluation Report by the team;

m) Discussion of the preliminary report with reps of the institution under evaluation;

n) Compilation of the External Evaluation Report and submission of the report to AAHE.

As well as the above criteria, the member of the External Evaluation Teams is expected to stick to several criteria of an ethical nature which in their entirety enable the product of their labor to be useful to society, to be in line with the common interests of development of Higher Education and to respect the participants in it.

Experts are not allowed to hide the data, to tinker with them or to even change them. They are also not allowed to discard the sensitivity of the participants, the plagiarism, and giving up the truth for various narrow interests. In relation to the above it is all too natural for a member of the External Evaluation Team to inform the participants on the nature of the study to be conducted, to do the preliminary evaluation of the acceptability of its own actions, to determine the extent of the harm done to the others, to make public the obligations and responsibilities to the subjects and the persons doing the study, to honor the freedom of participants in order to halt cooperation with them, to protect the participants in the study up to the moment when a decision is being made against them etc. The respect of such criteria makes a come-true reality of the appearance of an objective evaluation report, which is useful and acceptable to all.

During the whole process, the AAHE takes good care of honoring the determined criteria, in order for the procedure in question to be followed through in a proper fashion as well as the statements contained within the guidelines. It supports the EET for the needs that might arise in the course of its own work and it gets informed on the way how the work goes. In cases of failure to respect them, the AAHE discusses, determines or issues recommendations for the EET.