



**Council of Europe Higher Education Forum**  
*Legitimacy of Quality Assurance in Higher  
Education: The Role of Public Authorities and  
Institutions*

**The Reform in Quality Assurance  
Framework in Bulgaria**  
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# Accreditation as a tool for quality assurance

In 1997 accreditation was implemented in Bulgaria as a means of external peer review for accountability and quality improvement of all types of higher education institutions and programmes

# Accreditation decisions as:

- accounts of compliance to the legal requirements (1999- 2004)
- recognition based on evaluation of the quality of provision (after 2005)

# Legal provisions for the new quality assurance setting (I)

- **Institutional accreditation legal definition :**

An outcome of the evaluation of how effective and efficient is the higher education institution in maintaining, monitoring and improving the quality of education in the fields of education on offer (Higher Education Act, Article 77)

# Legal provisions for the new quality assurance setting (II)

- **Programme accreditation legal definition :**

An outcome of evaluation, based on examination of the quality of student learning in all types and forms of study and in particular qualification levels.

# Paradigm change:

- the focus of institutional accreditation shifted from conformity with the law to internal quality assurance and quality enhancement arrangements set by the institution.
- In programme accreditation, the evaluation of student learning experience is in focus, rather than compliance with the uniform state requirements, designed in a prescriptive form of national curricula.

# The present quality method

- institutional and programme accreditation are both based on analyses of the quality of education, research and the management of the institution [NEAA Guidelines to accreditation, 2005, p. 91]

# Roles and responsibilities under the new legal setting:

- **Higher education institutions** – to assure the quality of provision and research through a formal quality management system that has to be included into the Statute of the higher education institution and there must be a place in it for a regular feedback from students
- **accreditation agency** – to provide the Government and the wider public with independently produced conclusions and recommendations as an outcome of its accreditation processes and procedures



# *National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency*

- Professionalized accrediting body (full time AC members and SC Chairpersons) (**new!**)
- Enlarged Rectors' Conference quota in the AC (**new!**)
- decentralization of decision-making powers for programme and institutional accreditation (**new!**)
- Institutionalized accreditation follow up (**new!**)
- Prolonged accreditation cycle (from 5 to 6 years)

# Accreditation consequences for HEIs :

- to run educational courses and programmes and open new ones;
- to award nationally recognised degrees and qualifications;
- to receive annual student quota with guaranteed state subsidy for it;
- To be allowed for an enrolment of extra students charged with full tuition fees;
- To get public funding for its operations

# Quality assurance related powers of other bodies

- ***National Assembly***
- ***Council of Ministers***
- ***Minister of Education and  
Science***

# *National Assembly :*

- establishment, transformation and closing down of higher education institutions;
- opening and closing down of faculties in the field of regulated professions (**new!**)

## ***Council of Ministers :***

establishment and closing down of  
faculties, institutes, branch campuses  
and colleges inside the state  
universities

# *Minister of Education and Science:*

- **initiating programme accreditation off the Schedule (new!)**
- **initiating re-accreditation in the cases of legal infringement (new!)**

# Main features of the QA framework:

- Multiple coordination at the state level
- Total level of scope
- Accreditation method for QA
- Information about accreditation results is channeled to the Government and the institution, rather than to users of education services;
- Predominantly control oriented system

# Main outcomes (HEIs' level):

- Majority of institutions (70%) accredited or re-accredited under the new scheme
- Implementation of QA processes and procedures on a systematic basis
- Internal review and update of programmes on a massive scale
- Improved student achievements rates
- Improved research productivity of staff



# Main outcomes (Agency level):

- Student participation in institutional evaluation
- Ensuring the voice of employers and graduates (model programme for site visits)
- Approved protocols for participation of international peers

# Issues for consideration:

- Disintegrated institutions with poor internal communication face difficulties in preparing for accreditation;
- Reputable courses and programmes tend to delay with implementation of credit system
- Business-university relationships are only emerging to a great disappointment of students
- Doctoral studies need serious reforms

# Lessons learned:

- Responsibility for quality lies within HEIs, not Accreditation Agency
- External QA processes used by the Agency can foster internal efforts to improve quality
- Internal institutional integrity is a prerequisite for a useful and improvement-oriented self-evaluation exercise
- Improved quality involves improved employability of graduates
- When evaluation of quality forms the basis for accreditation decisions it is less prone to improvement

# The way ahead:

- Internal quality assurance processes need to be sufficiently financed on a continuous basis
- decisions about course and programme design, monitoring and approval should be informed with employers' views
- quality management bodies inside the HEIs should involve students on a more systematic basis
- involvement of international reviewers has to be financially supported by the government

# Conclusion

- The implementation of Bergen standards implies a level of operational autonomy of both HEIs and the Agency in order to achieve good results
- Future changes in the Higher Education Act should avoid further elaboration of Agency statute and the model statute of institutions