

# Methodology For External Quality Control of Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract** – This paper presents the methodology for external quality control of higher education institutions with an emphasis on the obligations of the institution. It is assumed that the standards and procedure for external quality control of higher education institutions are prescribed by the provisions of the Rulebook on standards and procedure for external quality control of higher education institutions. Higher education institutions are obliged to prepare documentation for external quality control also, and in accordance with the Instructions for preparation of documentation for external quality control. The procedure is initiated by the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (as the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education-NEAQA body), in accordance with the conditions and deadlines prescribed by the Law on higher education. The NEAQA prescribes a standardized, independent and professional procedure for quality assurance of higher education institutions on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. The head of the higher education institution manages external quality control procedure. The application of the unified procedure contributes to the development of the system of quality assurance of higher education institutions and their competitiveness on the EU education market.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In accordance with the Law on Higher Education [1] and the Strategy of the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education [2]; the National Entity for Accreditation and Quality Assurance in Higher Education (hereinafter: the NEAQA) performs the following tasks: accreditation, external quality control of higher education institutions and units in their composition, evaluation of study programs, quality assurance in higher education.

The NEAQA's vision is to become a leader in the development of quality assurance systems in the Western Balkans and thus become a significant partner in the European Higher Education Area [2].

The mission and tasks of the NEAQA are to establish and improve the quality of higher education in the Republic of Serbia in accordance with international standards [3] in cooperation with key partners, which will increase the level of competitiveness of domestic higher education [2]. The key partners of the NEAQA in the system of

quality assurance and quality improvement of higher education institutions are students, business entities and public institutions. The Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (hereinafter: the Commission) is a professional and executive body of the NEAQA [1,2,4]. The role of the Commissions is the external control of the quality management system in higher education institutions. (in according to a predetermined methodology by the National Council for Higher Education). The control of the implementation of the prescribed quality management system should result in the improvement of quality and the inclusion of higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area.

The subject of this paper is the external quality control of higher education institutions. The aim of this paper is to present the methodology (procedure) of the external quality control of higher education institutions with an emphasis on the obligations of the institutions. In this paper, it is assumed that the standards and procedure for external quality control of higher education institutions are prescribed by the provisions of the Rulebook on standards and procedures for external quality control of higher education institutions [5] (hereinafter: the Rulebook). It is also assumed that higher education institutions are obliged to prepare documentation for external quality control and in accordance with the Instructions for preparation of documentation for external quality control of higher education institutions [6].

## II. THE PROCEDURE FOR EXTERNAL QUALITY CONTROL OF HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

### A. *The review of the prescribed methodology for external quality control of higher education institutions*

The National Council for Higher Education has prescribed rules for the external quality control of higher education institutions, which is implemented by the NEAQA. The procedure of external quality control of higher education institutions according to

the standardized procedure is carried out by the Commission. This is derived from the Law on Higher Education [1].

The Rulebook [5] sets out the standards and procedure for external quality control of higher education institutions. All higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia shall be subject to the procedure for external quality control of higher education institutions. The procedure is required to be carried out by universities, faculties, colleges, colleges of applied studies, academies of applied studies. The procedure is mandatory by all higher education institutions, regardless of the type of founding act and ownership.

The procedure for external quality control of higher education institutions is carried out by the Commission [1,5] on a regular basis: in the fourth year of the accreditation cycle; during the accreditation of a higher education institution. The procedure can also be carried out extraordinary, as well as at the request of the Ministry or the National Council for Higher Education. Regular procedure for external quality control is based on a self-evaluation report submitted by a higher education institution [1,5]. The self-evaluation report is an integral part of the quality assurance system of the institution.

Procedure for external quality control of a higher education institution is initiated by the Commission [5]. The Commission has developed and prescribed the Instruction for the preparation of documentation for external quality control of higher education institutions [6] which serves as a binding basis and guide for institutions for systematic implementation of external quality control methodology and preparation of required documentation according to prescribed standards [5].

The Commission shall obtain the documentation necessary for conducting the procedure for external quality control from a higher education institution that is subject to external quality control. The documentation shall contain [5]:

- name, headquarters, responsible person (rector, dean, president, director);
- memorandum of association and work permits issued;
- study programmes conducted;
- self-evaluation report;
- a work plan for at least the current and next year and a report on work in the previous year;

- data on students;
- data on enrollment policy: criteria and manner of ranking and enrollment of candidates;
- data on teaching staff;
- data on library and IT equipment;
- data on premises and equipment: proof of ownership/lease, evidence of urban conditions, data on area and structure and data on technical equipment (number, purpose, age);
- balance sheet and income statement for the previous year, financial plan for the current and next year, report on operations with sources of financing and method of use of financial assets.

A higher education institution shall submit referred documentation within 15 days from the date of receipt of the Commission's request.

In order to determine the facts of importance for an external quality control, the Commission for Accreditation shall propose a review committee consisting of [5]:

- three teachers from higher education institutions from the list established by the National Council [7], and shall propose one of these teachers for a president of the review committee;
- one student from the list of students established by the Student Conference of the Serbian Universities, ie Student Conference of Academies for Applied Studies of Serbia;
- one expert for certain areas from among employers, professional or vocational associations, labour markets, chambers, proposed by appropriate organizations.

Members of the review committee must not be in conflict of interest, especially if they or their close relatives are in employment or any business or other arrangement in an institution that is the subject of an external quality control procedure. The Commission shall submit the referred proposal to the Director of the NEAQA [5]. Director of the NEAQA shall appoint the review committee and its president with the prior declaration of the reviewers that they are not in conflict of interest. The Director of the NEAQA shall also appoint a coordinator from the professional service of the NEAQA.

Decision on appointment of a review committee for external quality control of a higher education

institution with the indicated names of the president and members of the committee shall be published on the website of the NEAQA [5].

The review committee for external quality control of a higher education institution shall determine facts of importance for decision making by direct inspection of the work of a higher education institution, and the coordinator shall deliver notification about its visit to the higher education institution not later than 15 days before the planned visit.

The higher education institution is obliged to provide the review committee with all required information, free access to and inspection of the teaching process and management process, inspection of the available premises, meeting with teachers, students, non-teaching staff, self-evaluation commission, alumni organization, as well as everything else of importance for the procedure of external quality control [5].

The review committee shall analyse the documentation for an external quality control and prepare the preliminary report on the reviewer's report template, in accordance with the instructions [8,9], in which it assesses [5]:

- whether self-evaluation was carried out on the basis of standards for self-evaluation and quality assessment of higher education institutions and study programmes [10];
- which standards [10] during self-evaluation and quality assessment were fully fulfilled, which were partially fulfilled, and which were not fulfilled;
- which areas of operation of the higher education institution in a qualitative way are satisfactory, which are partially satisfactory and which are unsatisfactory.

Based on the analysis and assessment, and after visiting the institution, the review committee shall produce the Report and submit it to the coordinator. The coordinator shall submit the Report to the higher education institution which may, within 15 days from the date of submission of the report, submit any objections on the facts specified in the Report [5].

After expiry of the deadline, the review committee shall prepare a proposal of the Final Report, in Serbian and a summary in English, based on the Report and accepted objections from the higher education institution, and submit it to the Commission for consideration.

The Final Report shall contain the following [5]:

- analysis and assessment of fulfillment of the standards for external quality control of the higher education institution;
- deficiencies regarding the fulfillment of the standards for external quality control of the higher education institution;
- proposals and suggestions for improving the quality of the higher education institution.

Commission shall consider the proposal of the Final Report at its first session after obtaining the proposal. In the process of consideration of the Final Report proposal, the Commission may ask the review committee for additional explanations and supplements to the Report. If the Commission fails to adopt the Final Report it will order the review committee to supplement the Final Report proposal, in accordance with the Commission's objections and suggestions within a deadline not exceeding 30 days. The Commission shall submit the Final Report to the higher education institution which was subject to the external quality control and the applicant for an extraordinary control within 15 days from the date of adoption [5].

If the higher education institution fails to fulfill its quality obligations, in the Final Report the Commission shall impose remedy to the higher education institution for correction of identified deficiencies and follow-up for a period of six months from the date of submission of the report. A higher education institution that is not satisfied with the Final Report may express an objection to the NEAQA within 15 days from the date of receipt of the Final Report [5].

The Final Report to which the higher education institution did not express an objection within the deadline, as well as the report adopted by the Commission after expiration of a period of six months, shall be published on the official website of the NEAQA.

If the Final Report is negative, the NEAQA shall, within 30 days from the date of publication of the Final Report, issue a decision on revoking the accreditation of the study programme or accreditation of the higher education institution [5].

Against the decision on revoking the accreditation, a higher education institution may file a complaint to the National Council of Higher Education, through the NEAQA, within 15 days from the date of receipt of the decision. The National Council of Higher Education shall reject

the complaint when it finds it to be inadmissible, untimely, or filed by an unauthorized person. The National Council shall appoint a Complaints Board within 30 days from the date of receipt of the complaint on the decision [5]. The National Council of Higher Education shall, within 30 days from the submission of the proposal of the Complaints Board, issue a decision by which it may refuse the complaint or annul the first instance decision if it determines that there was any failure in the procedure of external quality control and refer it back to the NEAQA for reconsideration.

*B. Standards for external quality control of higher educational institutions*

Standards for external quality control of higher education institutions (hereinafter: Standards) are an integral part of the Rulebook [5] and Instructions for the preparation of documentation for external quality control of higher education institutions [6].

One of the important segments in the process of external quality control is to determine the facts whether the higher education institution, which is the subject of external quality control, meets the prescribed Standards. Based on the established facts about the fulfillment of the Standards, the appropriate steps in the algorithm for external quality control are applied, as shown in the previous subchapter of this paper.

Standards for external quality control include [5,6]:

- Standard 1: Using the results of self-evaluation of a higher education institution.
- Standard 2: Method of external quality control.
- Standard 3: Areas of the external quality control.
- Standard 4: Result of the external quality control of a higher education institution.
- Standard 5: Organization of and participants in the procedure for external quality control.
- Standard 6: Procedure for the external quality control.
- Standard 7: Reporting.
- Standard 8: Periodical controls.
- Standard 9: Improvement of the procedure for external quality control.

Each Standard [5] is structured. It contains a descriptive part, accompanying documentation,

tables, appendices [5,6]. Standards [5,6] require appropriate interpretation of data from the institution, which is the subject of external quality control. They form an integral part of the documentation for the external quality control and are filled in by the institution according to the presented methodology.

**III. ANALYSIS OF THE OBLIGATIONS OF THE HIGHER EDUCATION AND THE HEAD OF INSTITUTION**

In the prescribed and presented procedure of external quality control [1,5] the higher education institution has appropriate obligations related to the preparation of documentation. The higher education institution must fulfill his obligations in a certain order and within predetermined deadlines.

In order to successfully implement the external quality control procedure, the higher education institution may appoint a special team (e.g. commission, board, etc.) to prepare the documentation. It is very important to systematically follow the individual steps from the Instructions for preparation of documentation for external quality control of higher education institutions [6] and correctly interpret the required data according to the tables. It is also necessary to prepare the annexes according to the Standards.

It is extremely important in the process of external quality control to establish communication with the NEAQA, as a key partner in the process of submitting/reviewing of documentation.

The head of the higher education institution should pay attention to the fact of the level of responsibility, which it bears on behalf of the institution. The head of the higher education institution (e.g. director, dean, president of the academy of vocational studies) of a higher education institution, in accordance with the Law of higher education [1] shall guarantee [5]:

- that the external quality control documentation has been produced in accordance with the standards for external quality control;
- for the accuracy of the data in the external quality control documentation of a higher education institution.

The head of the higher education institution signs the documentation from the request for external quality control on behalf of the institution, which is the subject of external quality control. The head of the higher education institution should timely approve and make the payment of the appropriate

fee for external quality control, according to the valid price list determined by the NEAQA. He is also responsible for the preparation of the protocol of the visit of the review committee.

The head of the higher education institution, in essence, manages the entire procedure of external quality control in the institution, which is the subject of the same, because according to the Law on Higher Education [1] it is responsible for the legality of the work of the institution he heads.

According to the above, the head of the higher education institution organizes and monitors the entire work of the institution and consequently, all segments of the implementation of the external quality control procedure. He is also responsible, on behalf of the institution, in the procedure of administrative supervision [1], the timeliness and accuracy of the execution of the work entrusted to him.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

In accordance with the Law on Higher Education, the National Council for Higher Education has prescribed rules for external quality control, in order to establish a system of quality assurance (and control) in all higher education institutions in the Republic of Serbia. The NEAQA performs quality control of all higher education institutions in a standardized, independent and professional manner. The methodology for external quality control is prescribed by the Rulebook on standards and procedures for external quality control of higher education institutions. The Instructions for preparation of documentation for external quality control of higher education institutions serves as a detailed guide to higher education institutions for the practical application of standards and the entire methodology. As a result of the performed procedure of external quality control by the NEAQA, the higher education institution received the Final Report which states the advantages but also and the shortcomings noticed in the procedure of external quality control. Partial non-compliance of the quality assurance system, which was noticed in the institution, must be corrected and brought to the prescribed level of quality through the prescribed measures. The submitted proposals and

suggestions in the Final Report represent a challenge for the institution in terms of improving the quality of all segments.

The head of the higher education institution is responsible for the entire work of the institution and thus for the implementation of the procedure of external quality control of the higher education institution (according to the dynamics and methodology) which is prescribed and presented in this paper.

By applying the standardized methodology, the unique system of quality assurance (and control) enables higher education institutions to raise the quality of their own work in a transparent way with key partners.

The application of the unified procedure contributes to the development of the system of quality assurance of higher education institutions and their competitiveness on the EU education market.

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