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Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Internal and External Challenges Facing Academic Quality Assurance Objectives and Procedures – FIBAA’s Approach

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Quality Assurance Review, Vol. 1, Nr. 2, Decembrie 2009, p 135 – 144.

Publicat de: Consiliul Agenției Române de Asigurare a Calității în Învățământul Superior -
ARACIS

Locul publicării: București, România

Tipul publicației: tipărit, online

Quality Assurance Review este editată în cadrul proiectului „Asigurarea calității în învățământul superior din România în context european. Dezvoltarea managementului calității academice la nivel de sistem și instituțional“, Contract POSDRU/2/1.2/S/1, cod proiect 3933.

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Internal and External Challenges Facing Academic Quality Assurance Objectives and Procedures – FIBAA’s Approach

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Abstract: *Internal and external challenges within quality assurance in HEIs are two sides of the same coin within programme accreditation. FIBAA as an internationally recognised (included in EQAR) and internationally acting quality assurance agency observes worldwide some crucial challenges, HEIs use to have difficulties with: to argue about objectives and strategy of the programme (fitness of purpose) and to demonstrate convincingly the appropriate tools (fitness for purpose); to understand the integrating approach of modularisation, which is more than the sum of some courses, and the respective module descriptions; to define sufficiently precisely the learning outcomes of the modules and the programme, which are closely related to employability; to use ECTS as an appropriate instrument. FIBAA has developed an assessment guide for HEIs, which contains internationally/nationally recognised quality criteria, defines the benchmarks for meeting the quality requirements and makes them transparent for both, HEIs and experts.*

Keywords: *fitness of purpose-fitness for purpose, module description, learning outcome, ECTS, FIBAA’s assessment guide.*

It is my honour and pleasure having been invited by the organisers of this conference to talk about “Internal and External Challenges Facing Academic Quality Assurance Objectives and Procedures - FIBAA’s Approach”.

I would like to say beforehand that I don’t see a real difference between internal and external challenges. Both are two sides of the same coin. However, they have different target groups and effects: on the one hand regarding higher education institutions and on the other hand regarding external quality assurance agencies.

The basic conditions and requirements for internal and external quality assurance are laid down in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). I don’t have the intention - as I think there is no need to anyway - to talk about the content of the European Standards and Guidelines to this well-informed audience. I only want to depict

1. which, from our point of view, are the main challenges, not to say problems, facing academic quality assurance objectives and procedures;
2. in what way FIBAA faces these challenges in a quality assurance procedure (FIBAA’s approach).

But first, if you admit, I would like to introduce to you the agency, I am working with:

FIBAA is a quality assurance agency for higher education, which was already founded in 1994 by the trade and business associations in Germany, Austria and Switzerland. It is an agency which due to its transparent quality requirements and assessment criteria is nationally recognized in Switzerland, Germany and the Netherlands as well as internationally, as it is member of ENQA and is included in EQAR. On the basis of the ESG FIBAA awards a quality label to the accredited programmes and institutions. Outstanding programmes are awarded a premium label, which forms a reliable orientation with regard to the outstanding quality of a particular programme for prospective students, students, graduates, higher education institutions and employers.

Box 1: FIBAA Profile: a) General Information

- FIBAA was already established in 1994 by economical associations of Germany, Austria and Switzerland. Mission and vision of FIBAA is the quality assurance in Higher Education.
- Focused, not limited on the fields of business administration, economics, law and social sciences.
- Programme accreditation as well as institutional audit/evaluation

FIBAA has so far accredited more than 800 programmes since the beginning of the Bologna Process, but has less experience in system accreditation procedures, because system accreditation was introduced in Germany not until 2008. We are doing institutional audits and institutional evaluations in foreign countries.

Box 2: FIBAA Profile: b) Accreditation to Date

- FIBAA has accredited more than 800 study programmes until end of September, 2009
- Round about 65% of all accredited study programmes in business administration or economics in Germany are accredited by FIBAA
- Accreditation in foreign countries (more than 100):
 - All German speaking countries,
 - Northern and eastern Europe,
 - Africa, Asia and USA

Box 3: FIBAA Profile: c) Memberships

- ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education);
- ECA (European Consortium for Accreditation);
- APQN (Asia-Pacific Quality Network) with „Observer Status“;
- CEENet (Central and Eastern European Networking Association) with “Observer Status”;
- FIBAA is included in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR);
- INQAAHE (International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education).

- 1. The most important challenges for HEIs, from our point of view, are:**
- a) to meet the requirement of “fitness of purpose – fitness for purpose”;
 - b) to really modularise the study programmes and describe adequately the modules;
 - c) to adequately define learning outcomes;
 - d) to adequately introduce ECTS.

a) *fitness of purpose – fitness for purpose*

Many higher education institutions have difficulties depicting, what are or should be the objectives of a study programme with regard to the targeted learning outcomes and the positioning on the education and the job market. To meet the requirement of fitness of purpose, the objectives of a study programme have to be formulated in a logical and transparent manner to decide, whether fitness of purpose is given. It has to be demonstrated that the objectives of the programme design are set out consistently in relation to the occupational area. In doing so they have at least to take into account the following academic requirements

- the targeted academic empowerment;
- the targeted employability;
- the targeted personality/ personal development, as an academic education should not provide only professional qualifications.

The most important thing is that the objectives of the programme design are in line with the requirements of the national qualifications framework, which were usually determined for this purpose, and that the overall programme design is based on subject-specific and generic learning outcomes, which are in line with the level of the degree to be awarded on completion.

In short: Does the programme sufficiently take into account the requirements of the Dublin Descriptors, which define the level of a Bachelor and a Master programme in such a way that a Bachelor is a Bachelor in any Bologna country and a Master is a Master in any Bologna country? There must not be neither Bachelor lite nor Master lite!

Box 4: Dublin Descriptors

At the centre of the Dublin Descriptors are the following five elements, which are defined for both levels:

1. Knowledge and comprehension
2. Application and apprehension of knowledge
3. Competence to judge
4. Communicative competence
5. Apprehension competence.

If the objectives of the programme design are documented in a systematic manner and a comprehensive, convincing explanation of the rationale behind them is given and the achievement of the targeted competence goals is regularly and systematically verified, “fitness of purpose” is usually given in a transparent way.

The positioning on the education market and on the job market is, from my point of view, also relevant for “fitness of purpose”.

The higher education institution has to give reasons for having chosen this particular profile and the targeted qualification and competence goals, in order to place a programme successfully on the education market, i.e. especially when competing with higher education institutions offering similar programmes. Is there an analysis of comparable study programmes? Has the competitiveness of the profile been analysed with regard to the targeted qualification and competence goals? This is also of significance for the positioning on the job market, since by means of an academic education students are supposed to acquire employability. Consequently, it is absolutely necessary that higher education institutions think about employability when developing a study programme. Unfortunately, higher education institutions still have difficulties in doing so, because so far they have considered “employability” mainly with regard to a university career.

Box 5: Fitness of purpose - Strategy and objectives

Programme objectives:

- Logic and transparency of programme objectives;
- Rationale for degree title;
- Qualification and competence goals. Positioning of programme (education market, labour market)

Due to a growing globalisation the international orientation of a programme is of major importance for being competitive on the education and job market. If increasing the mobility of students is one of the objectives of the Bologna Convention, it is more likely to realise this objective the stronger the international dimension of a programme. An international dimension does not only refer to internationality in teaching and studying but also to the internationality of the teaching staff, whether they have international experience in professional and/or academic fields. In addition it refers to the question whether the curriculum includes specific intercultural content according to the requirements of the programme. To sum up we can say: Do the programme objectives and its strategy explicitly take into account internationality in teaching and studying along with the graduates' employability?

Structural and content indicators are important as well for internationality. Does the programme make use of, for instance, international elements such as case studies, projects and specialized literature? Are semesters abroad accompanied by examinations? From the students' point of view this is a significant issue, since the lecture periods may differ in the individual countries. Therefore, it is important that students can do their examinations in due time when going abroad or returning from a foreign higher education institution. In an international accreditation agency's perspective a minimum proportion of lectures in a foreign language and the use of foreign language material are essential to "fitness of purpose".

And finally: Is the higher education institution involved in cooperation with other higher education institutions, other academic institutions/networks, enterprises and other organisations for the particular programme? Such cooperation does not only matter for the concrete results in project work, work experience placements, teaching activities and the students' final theses. It is rather decisive that the higher education institution actively pursues such cooperation and that it produces concrete results on the part of the students. These challenges contain development potential for the higher education institutions regarding the study programmes.

This was about "fitness of purpose" and now I want to talk about "fitness for purpose"!

Fitness for purpose aims at the question whether the programme design and the programme objectives are adequately reflected in their concrete implementation, i.e. in the curricular structure, in the curricular content, in the teaching and learning methodology, in teaching generic skills, but also in the resources and services and whether they are suited to the defined objectives and take them into account in an appropriate manner. Many HEIs have difficulties in establishing proof of the consistency between the objectives and their realisation. An assessment is neither easy for external agencies, since it must not depend on the random composition of a peer panel. It rather has to be aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines and an equal evaluation has to be ensured for the individual programmes. This requires the experts' training along with transparent benchmarks.

Another challenge the HEI and the agency have to deal with is the requirement of an organized circuit of quality assurance (plan, do, check, act). What matters in connection with the programme objectives is a quality assurance and enhancement procedure to control and monitor the quality assurance of content, processes and outcomes. It is a lot easier to succeed by establishing a successful quality assurance system, if it not only refers to individual programmes but is included in the cooperation between the higher education institution's management, the faculty and the programme directors. On the part of the HEI quite often still prevails the misunderstanding that a centuries-old

tradition is a sufficient evidence for quality. Therefore, the efforts, if there are any, are frequently only half-hearted ones and they are not made because the HEI has realised the necessity for them. In addition the sole instrument for quality assurance is quite often the evaluation by the students. Moreover, the results and how they are put into practice lack transparency. Therefore, it would be desirable to also have quality assurance by the teaching staff and not only external evaluation by alumni, employers and accreditation agencies.

The interaction between the conditions for and the realisation of “fitness of purpose” and “fitness for purpose” is one of the crucial challenges, internally for the HEI and externally for the peers and the accreditation agency. Now I want to go briefly into three further challenges.

b) Modularisation and module descriptions

A modularisation of study programmes, which meets the objective of supporting the students' mobility, needs to reach a consensus on the definition of modules - a consensus that involves all HEIs. A module is a self-contained fraction of a student's programme workload for the year with a unique examination and a clear set of learning outcomes and appropriate assessment criteria.

The mutual recognition of modules, e.g. when moving from one HEI to another, requires that the modules are comparable. For this it is necessary to determine formal criteria along with criteria in terms of content. These criteria are based on the trust in the academic performance and thus are not supposed to ensure uniformity but equivalence. HEIs often have difficulties to meet this requirement.

The equivalence of modules is given if they basically correspond to each other in terms of content, workload and requirements. This does not require a schematic comparison but rather an overall consideration and assessment. Modularisation is the concentration of topics in units, which conclude with an exam. They are complete in themselves, both time and content wise, and count for a certain number of credits.

Modules may be composed of different teaching and learning methods (e.g. lectures, tutorials, internships etc.). A module may comprise the content of one or two semesters. However, it may as well comprise the content of several semesters. Modules always conclude with an exam. On the basis of the exam the students earn credit points. A module is the unit and the frame of reference for the European Credit Accumulation and Transfer System (ECTS). The module descriptions require details about the workload and the credit points to be acquired. A module description should include at least:

- Aim of course (expected learning outcomes and competencies to be acquired);
- Teaching methods
- Content
- Entry requirements
- Credit points and grades
- Methods and duration of examination
- Emphasis of the grade for the final grade
- Literature (compulsory reading, recommended literature)

An outstanding challenge within the module description is the definition of

c) Learning outcomes

In my opinion it is decisive that the paradigm shift which was intended by the Bologna Process is not yet in the minds of most of the involved faculty members. They are either not able or not willing to have a stronger focus on the student oriented learning outcomes in their lectures/ seminars and to shift from a teacher oriented input to a student oriented output. The problem here is not only the programme content but most of all the definition of the learning outcomes and how they are implemented by adequate teaching methods with regard to the targeted employability.

Table 1, which I friendly got from Prof. Wildt, University of Dortmund, is not intended to be exhaustive, but contains the differences between classic teaching methods before Bologna and desirable teaching methods in the sense of Bologna.

Table 1

Lecturer-oriented teaching	Student-oriented teaching
Lecturer is the centre of attention	Student is the centre of attention
Transmission of information by the lecturer	Active knowledge acquisition by the student
The learning method is a general, firm and standardized one	There are different individual learning methods
Lecturer for the student	Student is self-controlling
Lecturer explains the correct answers to the particular problems	Lecturer asks questions, which are answered by the students
Lecturer leads the learning process	Lecturer accompanies the learning process
Lecture room as workshop	Media library and group room as workshop
Static and invariable	Dynamic and variable
Lecturer and student stand opposite one another	Lecturer and student work together
Programme planning is adapted to the examinations	Programme planning is adapted to feedback
Student can isolate himself/herself and can turn up from time to time	Social competences gain importance
Lectures	Discussions
Assessment on the basis of an exam	Continuous assessment
Timetable	Programme plan

A very convincing description I found to illustrate the paradigm shift within the Bologna process was a comic. The professor says: “I have taught Tiger how to whistle.” The other person says: “I don’t hear him whistling!” The professor replies: “Well, I said that I have taught him how to do it and not that he has actually learnt it.” This is a very good example, which illustrates the misunderstandings with regard to learning outcome oriented and input oriented teaching.

HEIs often find it difficult to appropriately define the learning outcomes. Accreditation agencies are confronted with the same problems when they have to verify the learning outcomes. It is necessary to define them from the students’ point of view as future employees. For example:

- After having completed the module the student is able to explain, to describe, to analyse, to distinguish, to solve, to interpret, to criticise etc.
- It is not sufficient to determine: He or she is able to understand, to know...
- It is wrong to define a learning outcome from the lecturers’ point of view: The students receive an overview of... This is the misunderstanding and it is difficult to convey that this is the wrong way.

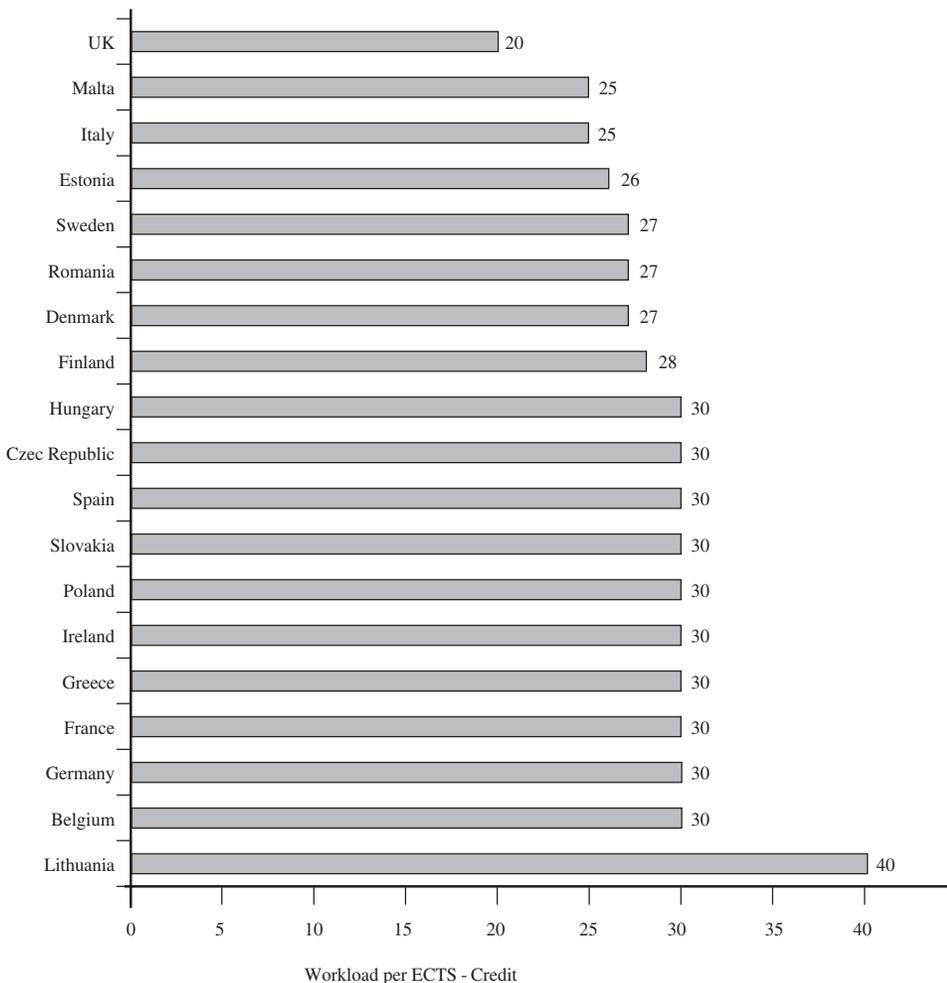
Those faculty members, who are interested in the success of the Bologna Process and who work for it as well as the agencies, which direct particular attention to the definition of learning outcomes during an accreditation procedure, have to convince the other persons involved in the higher education institutions.

And why? This question can be answered quite easily. The definition of the learning outcomes is connected, or rather should be connected, with the content of the integrative module examinations. One of the misunderstandings of the Bologna Process in Germany is that instead of less exams, namely one integrated exam per module, an inflation of part-examinations took place. The reason for this development is that there is one exam for each lecture/seminar instead of one integrated module examination, i.e. only one single exam for all lectures/seminars of a module. This is by no means a far-fetched idea, since one of the programme objectives is that the graduates have achieved a certain degree of employability. They are not trained for a specific job but rather for a specific job segment they have to cope with quickly. The graduates will be able to cope quickly if the learning outcomes, the teaching and learning methods along with the lecturers' demands together serve this particular purpose.

d) ECTS

The HEIs still find it difficult to introduce ECTS credit points. ECTS is a common currency among the Bologna countries with different buying power.

The fact that an ECTS point corresponds to a different workload in different countries (one ECTS point is equivalent to a workload of 20 hours in the UK up to 40 hours in Lithuania), which does not make the students' mobility much easier and from which to conclude that the students in the UK are twice as clever as in Lithuania, is not a convincing explanation. No, the problem is that it is difficult to correctly estimate the students' workload.



From the point of view of the lecturers, who often want to keep their previous teaching load due to the importance of their subject, the average workload is assessed rather on the basis of their previous expectations and not on the basis of a realistic assessment of the workload after the amount of topics has been reduced. The best way would be that the lecturers at first define the content which is necessary to reach the programme objectives and that afterwards they would assess the corresponding workload. Very often it is just the other way round: The workload is not assessed on the basis of the necessary content but on the basis of the previous content. This results in an unrealistic workload. You cannot go past making a plausible assessment beforehand.

It is necessary to verify the reality content of a preceding assessment by means of an empirical review in the course of a programme and, if required, to adjust the ECTS credit points. So far, this has not been very popular, although in Germany such an empirical review is demanded in connection with programme re-accreditation. Another plausible argument is that the periods of class attendance decrease in the course of a study programme and that the proportion of independent study increases concluding with writing the thesis on one's own.

This was a brief overview of the challenges HEIs and FIBAA are confronted with when implementing the objectives and the procedures of quality assurance in the course of the Bologna Process. In this context, FIBAA can be regarded as some sort of midwife and not as an executioner. In an accreditation procedure we try to unveil what has already been put into effect but maybe has not yet been adequately documented and presented. FIBAA reveals the strengths and weaknesses and thus contributes to the further development of a higher education institution's quality profile. Therefore, it may perhaps be of interest to conclude with showing how FIBAA handles these challenges.

2. FIBAA's Approach

FIBAA developed a procedure for programme accreditation, which leads to a quality profile with approximately 85 quality elements and which reveals the strengths and weaknesses of a programme. Some of the criteria are regarded as decisive and therefore have to be met for the programme to be accredited. Other criteria are less important but still essential.

In case they are not met, the higher education institution has to make up for it within a limited period of time. Finally, there are quality criteria which do not hamper a positive accreditation decision, in case they are not met. Nonetheless, they are labelled as weaknesses.

Box 6: FIBAA Assessment Guide

1. Strategy and objectives;
2. Admission (admission process and procedures);
3. Programme design;
4. resources and services;
5. Quality Assurance

How does a HEI know, whether it meets the international and national quality requirements? FIBAA developed from the relatively abstract ESG, the Dublin Descriptors and the national requirements internationally recognised concrete benchmarks to demonstrate that the particular criteria are met and provides the HEIs and the reviewers with them. In this way, we achieve transparency for the HEIs and a permanent equal assessment by the reviewers. The definition of "Meets quality requirements" is transparent for the HEI from the beginning. Thus they know right from the beginning the prospects of a positive accreditation decision.

Quality ratings	Exceptional	Exceeds quality requirements	Meets quality requirements	Does not meet quality requirements	N.O. N.A. N.R.
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1.	STRATEGY AND OBJECTIVES				
1.1	Programme Objectives				
1.1.1	Logic and Transparency of Programme Objectives				
1.1.2	Rationale for qualification title				
1.1.3	Programme profile (only relevant for Master programmes in Germany for which the German Accreditation Council's Quality Label is being sought)				
1.1.4	Competence goals				
1.2	Positioning of Programme				
1.2.1	Positioning on education market				
1.2.2	Positioning on Job market (employability of graduates)				
1.2.3	Positioning within HEI's overall strategy				

Box 7: Example: Logic and Transparency of Programme Objectives

Meets quality requirements:

The programme objectives are set out consistently in relation to the occupational area. In doing so they take into account the areas: empowerment, employability (based on various tools, including a field-specific job market analysis), democratic citizenship and personality/personal development.

The programme objectives set out in the programme description are explained in an intelligible manner. The overall programme design is based on subject-specific and generic learning outcomes, which are in line with the level of the qualification to be awarded on completion.

In addition, for re-accreditation: When defining the learning objectives, the HEI also takes into account the findings of alumni-tracking studies.

The requirements for a standard assessment by the reviewers ensure that the result of the site visit is not dependent on the particular composition of the audit teams but is based on defined and internationally recognised benchmarks. Consequently, the transparency for the HEI and the standardisation of the assessments are the two unique selling points (USP) of FIBAA. These USPs earned us a high international reputation and developed persuasiveness for HEIs as well as reviewers both nationally and internationally.

Now, after the start more than ten years ago, what matters is no longer only meeting the minimum requirements, although the development may take place at different speeds. However, we are far from having reached the final stage. Therefore, the ministers were right to call, first of all, for consolidating and stabilising the present results. This is not opposed to a further development of the Bologna Process after 2010. Yet, in the first instance, the results which have been achieved so far have to be improved. If our exchange of ideas and the contributions at this conference will facilitate an improvement, this would be a useful step forward into the right direction.