

**The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency's
Approach to Quality Assurance: Recent
Developments**

**A Report Prepared for the Bologna Follow-up Seminar on
Cooperation between accreditation Committees/Agencies**

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By Prof. DSc I. PANAYOTOV,

President of the NEAA and

Chairman of the Accreditation Council

Short description of national higher education system

- **Main coordinating bodies at the national level**

The main coordinating bodies at the national level are (i) the National Assembly; (ii) the Council of Ministers; (iii) the Ministry of Education and Science; (iv) the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency. With regard to evaluation and the final approval of part of the Accreditation decisions, these bodies have the following powers:

- (i) **the National Assembly:** makes the final decision about establishment, transformation and closing down of higher education institutions, as well as branches and faculties where there are provisions for study programmes of the regulated professions.
- (ii) **the Council of Ministers:** makes the final decision about establishment, transformation and closing down of faculties, institutes, branches and colleges at the public universities.
- (iii) **The Ministry of Education and Science:** controls whether higher education institutions respect the law and in the cases of legal infringement addresses the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency with proposals to revoke the accreditation status.
- (iv) **The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency:** as the only national statutory body for evaluation and accreditation, it recognizes the degree awarding powers of higher education institutions. The Agency organizes also a follow-up procedure at institutional and programme levels. It aims at a post-accreditation monitoring and control of the capability of an institution to assure quality and standards of its provision, as well as whether the institution properly addresses the issues and follows recommendations set in the evaluation report.

- **Size and structure of the institutional network**

The network of higher education institutions in Bulgaria includes 37 public and 14 private institutions (See the Table). There are three types of higher education institutions in Bulgaria: universities, equivalent to universities specialized higher education institutions, and higher education colleges. Of the 42 universities and equivalent higher education institutions 35 are public and 7 are private. Colleges are either independent (i.e., outside universities), or at the universities. There are 9 independent and 41 colleges at the universities out of the total number of 50. All types of institutions from the public and private sector are subject for evaluation and accreditation by the NEAA.

- **The national degree structure, admission rules between degree levels, titles and awards**

The national degree structure (See Table 2 below) follows the Bologna 3-phases model. A non-university type of degree is the so called “Specialist in...” degree, which is awarded by colleges offering professional oriented programmes of study with a duration of three years. Holders of that degree are given the rights to continue their studies at Bachelor's level or to access the labour market. University type degrees are: (i) First degree- *Bachelor*- requires a minimum 4-year course of study and 240 credits. (ii) Second or *Master's* degree requires a minimum 5-year course of instruction, or an extra year after the *Bachelor's* degree, and 300 credits. (iii) Third degree requires minimum of a 3-year research study after the *Master's* degree. Graduates are awarded a *Doctor's* degree upon successful defence of their doctoral thesis.

Since 2004 students receive upon graduation in addition to their national diploma a European diploma supplement.

In the academic year 2003/2004 there were 228468 students in Bulgarian higher education institutions, with 86% of them in public higher education institutions.

Study programmes are offered in 52 broad fields of study, introduced in 2002 with the National Classification of Areas and Fields of Study in Higher Education System.

- **Legal framework for the external quality assurance: the NEAA' legal powers and activities.**

Accreditation in Bulgaria involves 4 types of procedures, designed to gather evidence to enable a decision about whether an institution or programme should be granted accredited status. These procedures are based on evaluation and accreditation of: (i) an institution; (ii) a subject with all programmes of study at different qualification levels; (iii) a single programme of study that is in the list of regulated professions; (iv) a doctoral programme of study.

NEAA also evaluates ex ante projects for establishment of new higher education institutions, new branches and faculties, new subjects and new programmes of study dealing with regulated professions. For these the Agency have a separate set of procedures.

Legal base of committees establishment

- **The main evaluation and accreditation bodies of the Agency and their responsibilities**

The main evaluation and accreditation bodies of the Agency are the Accreditation Council, the 8 Standing Committees in the main fields of higher education and the Standing Committee for Post-Accreditation Monitoring.

The Accreditation Council consists of 10 members and a Chairman, who is also the President of NEAA. They serve for a 6 –year's term of office. 6 members are nominated by the Rectors' Conference, 2 are nominated from Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the National Center for Agrarian Sciences and 2 are nominated by the Minister of Education and Science. The Vice-President is nominated among the 6- nominees of the Rectors' Conference and is responsible for the Post-Accreditation Monitoring. The President, the Vice-President and all members of the Accreditation Council are appointed by the Prime-Minister. The Accreditation Council approves nominations for the members of the Standing Committees and expert groups. The Council makes decisions about the accreditation status of existing and newly established institutions, faculties, branches and programmes included in the list of regulated professions.

The Standing Committees are in the main fields of study (Education; Arts and Humanities; Social Sciences; Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Informatics; Engineering and Technology; Health Sciences; Agriculture and Forestry; Security services). They consists of 3 to 7 representatives of universities who are subject specialists in the respective field. The 8 committees nominate peer group members for site visits and prepare them for the evaluation. They make decisions about the accreditation status of an existing or a new subject with all programmes of study at different qualification levels.

The Standing Committee for Post-Accreditation Monitoring is responsible for the organization of follow-up audits aimed at: (i) formal implementation of the institutional quality assurance system; (ii) the accomplishment by the institution of the recommendations in the evaluation report.

All standing committees serve a 3-year's term of office in the Agency.

Review and Assessment Peer Groups serve on short-term contracts with the Agency. The duration of contracts depends on the type of procedure: 5 months for ex ante evaluations and 12 months for ex post evaluations.

Tasks and procedures

The 4-steps model for external quality assurance : NEAA uses a model that includes the following:

- ✓ a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- ✓ an external assessment by a group of experts, including site visits;
- ✓ publication of reports from the institutional evaluation and of decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes for all the rest;
- ✓ a follow-up procedure to review (i) actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report, and (ii) official implementation of the institutional quality assurance processes.

The graded profile and criteria for assigning grades: The Agency makes its evaluation and accreditation decisions on the basis of (i) a 4 grades scale of ratings, namely “Very Good”, “Good”, “Satisfactory” and “Non-satisfactory”, when they concern institutional or programme accreditation procedures; and (ii) a “Yes” or “No” scale, when they concern evaluation of projects for the establishment of new institutions or programmes of study. Institutions or programmes that are rated “Very Good” or “Good” receive 6 years term for their accreditation status. Those rated “Satisfactory” receive 3-years term of accreditation status. The assignment of grades is a matter for the peer judgement of the evaluation team, drawing on the evidence from both self-evaluation and the site visit. The final decision is based on the graded profile of the institution or programme, created by applying a grade to each aspect of provision.

The aspects of provision in (institutional and programme) accreditation: there are 8 aspects of provision for institutional evaluation and 6 aspects of provision for programme evaluation (See the outline below).

Current Results

- In 2004 the Agency took 539 decisions for institutional and programme evaluations, which represents 78% growth regarding the previous year (See Table 3 below).
- **Re-accreditation of institutions in 2004-2005:** Currently all higher education institutions in Bulgaria are institutionally accredited and a new round for re-accreditation starts from 2004-2005. Already 26 higher education institutions applied for institutional re-accreditation. This number represents over 50% of the national higher education network.

Recognition of evaluation results

- **Legal provisions:** provisions for the recognition of evaluation results are set by the Higher Education Act (Art. 81-84) and by the Agency Statute. Applications for evaluation and accreditation are directly submitted to the Agency by the Rector of the institution concerned. Depending on the type of request, the procedure starts with a decision made either by the Accreditation Council, or by the respective Standing Committee. Procedures dealing with the evaluation and accreditation of existing institutions, branches, faculties and other institutional units, or with the establishment of new ones, end upon consideration of the Accreditation Council. The same is valid

for the evaluation of programmes listed as belonging to regulated professions. The rest end upon consideration of the Standing Committee concerned.

National and international cooperation in the field of quality assurance

- **Cooperation with the Rectors' Conference:** The Agency management body has contacts with the Rectors' Conference on a regular basis. The Agency receives feedback from the Rectors' Conference regarding its evaluation criteria and procedures, and annually informs the Rectors for the accreditation results.
- **Cooperation with the National representative committee of the student councils:** Agency representatives have contributed to different student forums dealing with the role of students in quality assurance processes.
- **Cooperation with the agencies in the CEEN:** Since 2002 NEAA is a member of the CEEN and contributes to its activities.
- **Cooperation with ENQA:** in 2003-2004 NEAA contributed to the Europe-wide consultations and discussions regarding the development of an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies' and an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance.

Table 1: Higher Education Institutions in Bulgaria by type and form of ownership (2004)

	Total	Universities and equivalent HEIs	Colleges	
			At the universities	Independent
Total	51	42	41	9
Public	37	45	41	2
Private	14	7	0	7

Table 2: *National System of Higher Education Degrees*

Degree		Type	Issued by:	Min. Years of Study
Higher Education Diploma of “A Specialist in...”		Post-secondary higher education	College	3
Bachelor		First Qualification Degree	University or Equivalent institution	4
Master:	After Bachelor	Second Qualification Degree	University or Equivalent institution	1
	Integrated (long-term) Master	Qualification Degree	University or Equivalent institution	5
Doctor		Scientific Qualification Degree	Academy, University or Equivalent institution	3

Outline of the Aspects of Provision in Institutional Evaluation

1. The effectiveness of the internal system for quality assurance
2. the effectiveness of the internal procedures for approval, monitoring and updating of study programmes
3. the effectiveness of procedures dealing with actions taken with regard to previous accreditations and other external reviews of the quality
4. the effectiveness of the overall institutional management and control over the processes of student and staff assessment
5. the management of the credit accumulation and credit transfer system
6. the management of cooperation with other higher education institutions and organizations
7. maintenance, management and improvement of the facilities and learning resources
8. research activity and the involvement of students in it.

Outline of the Aspects of Provision in Programme evaluation

1. Structure, design and content of curricula
2. academic staff profile and qualification
3. learning resources
4. Teaching methods and assessment of student achievements

5. the quality management
6. the research activity of teaching staff and students.

Table 3: Evaluation and Accreditation Results in 2003-2004

Type of Evaluation Procedure	2003		2004	
	Total Nr. of evaluations	Unsatisfactory/Failed	Total Nr. of evaluations	Unsatisfactory/Failed
Institutional accreditation/re-accreditation	5	1	2	To be updated
Programme accreditation (Bachelor and Master Programmes)	107	1	258	To be updated
Programme accreditation of Doctoral Programmes	146	31	238	To be updated
Projects for new programmes	33	9	31	To be updated
Projects for transformation of existing or establishment of new institutions and faculties	10	3	10	To be updated
Total	302	45	539	