

Quality assurance system in the Czech Republic

Higher education in the Czech Republic

At the end of 2003 there were 61 higher education institutions in the higher education system in the Czech Republic. There were 24 public HEI, 4 state HEI (Police Academy and 3 military HEI) and 33 private HEI. All the newly founded private HEI-s are non-university type institutions providing mostly vocational education in 32 bachelor and 5 master study programs.

Charles University in Prague, Palacký University in Olomouc and Masaryk University in Brno are traditional multi-field HEI of university type providing education in humanities, natural sciences, theology and medicine. There are 5 multi-field technical universities, 4 universities of art, 2 agricultural universities, 1 technological university, 1 university of economics, 1 veterinary university, 6 regional universities founded at the beginning of 1990s and 1 regional university established in 2001. The establishment of the new HEI has had a considerable influence on the regional structure of higher education. Opava and Zlín (since 2001) have become new seats of HEI, and new faculties have been established in several other Czech towns.

The basic mission of universities is to provide education (in 4 to 6 year master study programs or 3 to 4 year bachelor, 1.5 to 3 years master and 3 years doctoral study programs), and carry out research activities on which the university study programs are based.

The most important legislation governing the universities since the beginning of 1990s were the Higher Education Act of 1990 and the new Higher Education Act of 1998. According the new act on higher education the former state HEI (with an exception of the Police Academy and military HEI) were transformed into public institutions and their

financial management (both property rights and budgeting) has fundamentally changed. According to the new law the basic part of budget of public HEI is still based on state subsidy but other sources of finance are allowed (state funds and community budgets, yields from auxiliary activities, gifts and bequests etc.). State subsidy to individual HEI is determined mainly by the volume of its teaching activities (normative number of students and normative (cost of study) of particular accredited study program). The research budget consists of a part related to so called non-specified research activities (based on the ratio of professor and associate professors to the total number of teachers, and the ratio of graduates from doctoral study programs to the total number of students of the institution) and a part based on a specified research aims. Institutional financial support for research activities refers to grants newly introduced in 1998 which should increase the support for research, and gradually harmonize supported research and development with the European Union countries.

Universities select their own students, and the competition for openings especially in humanities is quite tough. Public HEI apply entrance restrictions on the basis of their limited capacities with entrance examinations as a key element. During the last ten years a considerable increase in the number of students occurred. The total number of students graduating from master study programs has risen by about 65% since 1990. In the academic year 2002/2003 there were about 235,000 students at public HEI, and about 8,000 in private ones.

Until recently master study programs of 4 to 6 years were the main type of higher education study programs but numbers of bachelor and doctoral study programs are growing rapidly. The situation has changed dramatically as a consequence of the amendment to the 1998 Act based on adherence to the ideas underlying the Bologna Declaration according to which the structure changes step by step to 3 to 4 year bachelor, 2 to 3 year master and 3 year doctoral (PhD) study programs. Currently the overall number of branches taught at the Czech

HEI is about 4,500 of which almost one third have been restructured according the Bologna Declaration requirements (1211 Bachelor degree branches, 1111 Master degree branches of 2 or 3 years and about 1071 Master degree branches of traditional 4 or 5 years).

According to the new 1998 Higher Education Act legal entities with their domicile in the Czech Republic are authorized to act as private HEI recognized by the state authorities if granted state permission by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The 1998 Act stipulates the required form of an application for state permission to establish such an institution. The Ministry then asks the Accreditation Commission to present its standpoint on the proposed study programs prior to its decision on granting state permission. 30 private HEI were established since 1998. These private HEI provide a non-university higher education in vocational bachelor and master study programs mostly in economics and management, humanities, law and arts. This sector is quite dynamic but until now only 3.4 % of all the students in the Czech higher education study in private HEI. Private higher education institutions are obliged to ensure funding for their activities (mostly on the bases of tuition). According to the law only non-profit private HEI may receive subsidies from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

Processes of evaluation and accreditation in the Czech higher education

The evaluation and accreditation procedures are used to enhance quality in the Czech higher education since 1990. These activities are carried out by the Accreditation Commission of the Government of the Czech Republic which was established in 1990 as an independent government body taking care of the quality in higher education. Until 1998 its activities comprised mostly evaluation of newly established HEI and judgement on accreditation of new study programs and evaluation of HEI as institutions. There was a wave of establishing

regional HEI at the beginning of 1990s. Existing study programs at traditional HEI (the “ivy league”) were accredited on the basis of the 1990 Act on Higher Education and there was no obligation to evaluate or issue standpoints over them by the Accreditation Commission until 1998.

According to the 1998 Act, the scope, obligations and rights of the Accreditation Commission were substantially increased, and evaluation and judgement on accreditation of all the study programs has become one of its main tasks (all the existing study programs were to be evaluated and accredited according the 1998 Act by the end of 2002). New obligations for the Accreditation Commission have arisen as a result of the possibility to establish private HEI. A legal entity with its domicile in the Czech Republic may act as a private HEI on the basis of state permission which is awarded by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports on the basis of the standpoint of the Accreditation Commission.

According the 1998 Act the Accreditation Commission is an expert body composed of 21 members (academics and professional experts) appointed by the Czech Government on the bases of a proposal by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The Minister discusses proposals for nomination with representatives of HEI (the Czech Rector’s Conference, Council of HEI), the Research and Development Council of the Government of the Czech Republic, and the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. Commission members are appointed for four- or six- year renewable terms. They are usually chairpersons of permanent working groups on different branches, but not all permanent working groups are headed by a Accreditation Commission member (some disciplines are not represented directly in the Accreditation Commission). Persons from an applying institution may be invited when the Commission discusses the application.

In 1999 a Secretariat was set up and has since expanded to include a staff of six, including the Secretary. Technically the Secretariat is a unit of the Department for Science and Higher

Education of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The Commission Secretary is appointed by the Minister on the proposal of the Chairperson of the Accreditation Commission. The Staff performs a coordinating and administrative function. The Commission members, who meet to discuss and vote on applications and other higher education issues according to the Statute of the Accreditation Commission of the Czech Republic at least three times a year (but in fact more frequently), carry the full load of work in preparing evaluations.

The Accreditation Commission takes care of the quality of higher education and performs comprehensive evaluation of educational, scholarly, research, developmental, artistic or other creative activities of higher education institutions. According to the 1998 Act and the Statute of Accreditation Commission it must perform in particular following activities:

- a) evaluate activities pursued by HEI and the quality of accredited activities, and publish the results of such evaluations;
- b) assess other issues concerning the system of higher education presented to it by the Minister, and express its standpoints over these issues.

Accreditation Commission is authorized to require from the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, public, state and private HEI and legal entities which participate in educational and scholarly, research, developmental, artistic or other creative activity of HEI the necessary information, documentation and co-operation in accomplishment of its obligations.

To carry out its activities the Accreditation Commission establishes permanent and special work groups to deal with the evaluation of specific matters and activities. These work groups are set up of specialists who are to consider particular study programs, HEI or other activities (peer review). The regulations for the Accreditation Commission and for its working groups are defined in the Statute approved by the Government. Material and financial support for the activities of the Accreditation Commission is provided by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports.

According to the 1998 Act the Accreditation Commission is obliged to issue its statement (judgement) on applications for accreditation of study programs, applications for the right to perform habilitation procedures and procedures for the appointment of professors, applications for establishment, merger, amalgamation, splitting or dissolution of a faculty of a public HEI, determination of the type (university or non-university) assigned to a HEI.

The Accreditation Commission is entrusted by the 1998 Act with general care for the quality of higher education, involving evaluation of all accredited activities and publication of the results. It is also obliged to elaborate a professional standpoint on further matters concerning higher education presented for its consideration by the Minister of Education, Youth and Sports.

The evaluation of activities of HEI

For evaluation the Accreditation Commission usually chooses one HEI or several institutions performing similar accredited study programs. The evaluation lasts one year and half and it is carried out according following procedures:

- a) selection of HEI by the Commission and authorization of a competent member of the Commission to implement the evaluation procedure;
- b) establishment of a special work group;
- c) notification to the Rector, dean or director of HEI of a fact that institution has been chosen for evaluation by the Accreditation Commission;
- d) elaboration of requirements concerning information used for the evaluation of HEI, and their submission to the head of HEI being evaluated;

- e) elaboration of gained information by the special work group;
- f) expression of the opinion of the evaluated HEI head concerning the composition of the special work group;
- g) visit of at least three members of the special work group in the evaluated HEI;
- h) elaboration of recommendations and conclusions from the evaluation carried out by the special work group and discussion with representatives of the evaluated HEI about these recommendations and conclusions;
- i) submission of recommendations and conclusions to the Accreditation Commission;
- j) approval of recommendations and conclusions related to the evaluated HEI by the Accreditation Commission in participation of its representatives.

The special working group evaluates the strong and weak aspects of the major fields of functioning of the evaluated HEI (management and organizational structures, quality assurance system, profile of graduate and quality of the study programs, quality of teaching staff, standards of academic and research activities, adequacy of material and technical resources (computer and information systems, library etc.) and prepares the analytical report in which recommendations and conclusions are formulated. This report is discussed in the Accreditation commission and then the report with all the recommendations and conclusions is together with the opinion of the representatives of evaluated HEI submitted to the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, and is published.

Accreditation of study programs

According to the 1998 Act, all types of study programs are subject to accreditation. The award of accreditation to a study program is a task within the competency of the Ministry of

Education, Youth and Sports, which involves state agreement with the way the program is to be delivered, including the right to award appropriate academic degrees. In the case that a study program is not accredited, no applicants can be admitted, no lectures may be held, no examinations can be held, and no academic degrees may be awarded.

Accreditation is granted by the Ministry on the basis of an expert assessment and standpoint (yes or no) of the Accreditation Commission. This assessment should consider both the content of the study program and the state of preparation (personal and material) of the HEI or other educational institution to deliver the program. A study program (and its broader personal and material aspects) is evaluated by a permanent work group of the Accreditation Commission. The evaluation concentrates on three basic aspects that become decisive indicators for the final judgement of the Accreditation Commission: quality of the teaching staff, quality of the study program offered, and standards of academic and research activities. Its expert opinion is then submitted to the Accreditation Commission to be reconsidered and assessed. The Ministry is bound by the 1998 Act not to award accreditation in the case of a negative assessment of a study program. In the case of the positive standpoint of the Accreditation Commission the Ministry is bound by an explicit list of grounds on which it may refuse to award accreditation.

Accreditation of a study program is granted for a limited period of time, maximally for twice the standard length of the program. In the case of doctoral study programs, accreditation should not be awarded for more than ten years (usually it is awarded for 8 years).

A HEI or a unit of such an institution may carry out procedures for habilitation (*venium docendi*) and procedures for the appointment of professors only on the basis of accreditation. A similar mechanism to that used for study programs also applies in the case of these procedures.

Internal and external evaluation

All HEI are obliged to implement a regular internal evaluation system and to make its results public. An additional requirement is to make a detailed description of the evaluation procedure within the internal regulations of a given HEI. The framework for this obligation is very open, and it is left to the institution to implement evaluation procedures and use its results. Until now, the developments in the field of internal evaluation are quite diverse, varying from very well organized systems to only some formal procedures of non-systemic nature. Until recently there was slight motivation to share information and disseminate good practice. According the 1998 Act, all HEI are obliged to elaborate and publish an annual report on its activities which should use results of internal evaluation as well. Well organized, systematic internal evaluation serves as a very good basis for external assessment and evaluation implemented by the Accreditation Commission.

The accreditation of study programs, of procedures for habilitation and for appointment of professors, and state permission for running a private HEI together with institutional evaluation serve as a very effective means for ensuring the quality of higher education. Since its establishment in 1992, the Accreditation Commission has conducted external evaluation of HEI on the basis of peer reviews and comparative evaluations of faculties and related fields of study. For this purpose it elaborated a mechanism to enable standard steps to be followed in evaluation processes, and provided help and guidance for institutions.

Evaluation focuses on the overall activity of a selected institution and the conditions under which study programs are provided. The Accreditation Commission requires data on general characteristics of the institution (faculty, institute), staff and organization structures, study programs, research and development activities, equipment and funding. More than three quarters of the total number of faculties have already been evaluated. There has been a serious

debate on the proper use of the evaluation results. The prevailing idea is to maintain an improvement-oriented approach, and provide institutions with enough time to improve in the case of negative findings before issuing any unfavorable decision. Public reports, including details about strengths and weaknesses of individual HEI (faculties, institutes) together with relevant recommendations, serve as effective means for further improvement and development. According to the 1998 Act, the Accreditation Commission may in the event of serious deficiencies occurring while implementing a study program make the following proposal to the Ministry depending on the nature of the matter:

- a) restriction of accreditation consisting in a ban on admitting new applicants to the studies in the pertinent study program;
- b) temporary termination of accreditation consisting in a ban on performing state examinations and awarding academic degrees;
- c) withdrawal of accreditation.

These restrictions serve as an efficient disciplinary device and in a limited number of cases were used during 1990s as a solution of serious deficiencies where other remedies were inefficient. Such restrictions are used only in cases when minimum standards of quality are not met, and the Czech Accreditation Commission does not consider them to be the major vehicle in enhancing quality in the Czech higher education. Since the beginning of 2003 when the campaign of accreditation of study programs according to the 1998 Act on Higher Education ended the Czech Accreditation Commission returned to evaluation of institutions and evaluation of accredited activities as the main approaches leading to quality enhancement in the Czech higher education. HEI are motivated to restructure their study programs according to Bologna Declaration requirements and to introduce reliable internal quality assurance systems. These developments create adequate conditions for meeting the

requirements of the Bologna Process but there are still some open problems. The first important issue is an adequate representation of major stakeholders in the quality assurance system. It is the question of involvement of students, graduates and employers in internal and external evaluations. The second big issue is the problem of participation of foreign experts as peers in external evaluation. The third important issue should concern financial requirements of quality assurance and enhancement systems relating to professionalization of activities of the Accreditation Committee.

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