Joint project 'Strengthening Higher Education in BiH III'

Expert consultations on the implementation of external quality assurance in BiH

Banja Luka 1-3 February 2010

Report by CoE experts Bruno Curvale and Peter Findlay

1 General considerations

In this 4th visit the experts were able to continue their work with the different parties involved in the introduction of a quality assurance framework for Bosnia Herzogovina (BiH). [1] On this occasion it was valuable to meet with all three partners in this initiative. The CoE experts are particularly grateful for the welcome and the positive dialogue at the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republika Srpska and at the University of Banja Luka. Meetings with the Agency (HEA) continued to be constructive and it was noted that considerable progress had been achieved in the development of criteria and procedures for the new external quality assurance arrangements.

The experts see their task as having three main elements: first, advising on the way in which the framework relates to the broader European model for quality assurance as set out in the Bologna process and the European Standards and Guidelines, so as to support eventual recognition by ENQA; secondly, giving advice and support to the newly established HEA as it lays the foundation for its future work; and thirdly contributing to the dialogue between the three partners so as to clarify the process and avoid any misunderstandings. The experts strongly take the view that in order for the Agency to make an effective start in its work, there must be a good level of understanding, agreement and support for the overall quality assurance framework from all sides.

The BiH Framework Law on Higher Education sets out a recognizable model for quality assurance, following a common European approach. This European model is based on agreement and collaboration between the three key participants: the responsible political authority (Ministry, the quality assurance agency, and the institutions). For success it is important that each of the partners recognizes its particular responsibilities and range of authority, and the authority of the other partners in the quality assurance framework.

---

[1] As outlined in Recommendation Nr.5 of the "Recommendations for Implementing Quality Assurance in Higher Education in BiH", published in the Official Gazette BiH 13/08.

These responsibilities are broadly as follows:

HE institution	Develop internal quality assurance systems, carry out self-review, present evidence to the quality assurance agency
Quality Assurance Agency	Develop and agree criteria and procedures for external quality assurance, carry out external reviews and produce reports with judgements and recommendations
Ministry	Receive reports and recommendations and make decisions based, in part, on this information

This approach is not based on a simple inspection process between an authority and an educational institution. It depends on agreed principles and interaction which produces development and change. Some tension between the different collaborating partners is normal, as they establish and protect their own areas of interest and operation. The Framework Law is helpful in setting out the various responsibilities for the introduction of the model in BiH, and in general they are clear; nevertheless some further interpretation and clarification of the Framework Law and a definition of the precise role of each of the partners in the process is recommended. A flowchart indicating the key relationships between the partners and the main points of communication will assist a common shared understanding, as would an agreed list of definitions of terms.

It was clear from the Agency's first consultation with its partners on its planned procedures that one area of possible misunderstanding could arise around differing views of the meaning of 'accreditation'. This is a dilemma which also occurs in other national systems. It is useful to distinguish between different meanings of the term:

- For the Ministry, accreditation means formal approval by the state authority of an institution, with a confirmation of its funding, its range of programmes, its management, and its accountability through effective quality systems. Here, accreditation means a decision about the status of the institution and its relationship with the state body. This is a governmental decision which exercises the political responsibility to confirm the quality of the education provided, and to protect society from inadequate or bogus providers of education. It will therefore apply to all the HEIs, private and public, that participate in the national higher education system. To make this decision, the Ministry will rely upon evidence and recommendations relating to the quality of provision that are communicated by the HEA.

- For the quality assurance agency (HEA) accreditation means a

process, supported by agreed criteria and procedures, for the external evaluation of a higher education institution and in particular evaluation of its internal quality assurance systems, producing recommendations. Accreditation can also relate to individual programmes within an institution but at this stage in the BiH context, the focus is on institutional accreditation.

- For the higher education institution, accreditation may refer to number of things: its initial application for recognition, its engagement in the external quality assurance review, or (most important) its successful recognition by the state authority.

These three aspects of accreditation are linked in the BiH model through other relationships and communications: of these the most important are the application from the institution to the Ministry for accreditation; the self-evaluation from the institution to the Agency; the recommendation from the Agency to the Ministry; and finally the confirmation from the Ministry to the Agency that the institution can be included in the Register of Accredited institutions.

On the basis of the discussions held during this visit, it is recommended that, to assist the agreed understanding, the Agency should make it clear in its published documents that its contribution to the process of accreditation is that of external quality assurance evaluation, producing recommendations to the Ministry.

In general, the various actors within the quality assurance framework will need to work together to develop the system and its ongoing operation. Thus consultation and collaboration should be the norm. There should be explicit and widespread agreement on the rules and procedures, so as to ensure fair and just outcomes based on consistent application.

An important general point is to remember that one of the purposes of the quality framework is to produce a range of information which will make clear the benefits of higher education to the wider society. An important outcome should be published external evaluation reports which provide clear information about the value of the higher education institution and its programmes, and serve to establish a level of trust between the institution and its main stakeholders in society. This means that all criteria and procedures should be not only subject to full agreement between the various partners, but also be clearly formulated and easily accessible to all.

Finally it should be noted that as the HEA develops its work there will be a closer involvement with the network of European quality assurance agencies, and this will include application and full membership of ENQA. In that process there is the requirement that the work of a member agency will be externally and independently reviewed and assessed, with regard to its work with institutions. The requirements for a full ENQA membership therefore offer a level of assurance to government and to institutions that a national agency is meeting the expectations of the European Standards and Guidelines as they

relate to external quality assurance.

2 Licensing

There was discussion in the meeting with the Ministry relating to the distinction between licensing and accreditation procedures. It was clear that the Ministry had given care to developing a systematic and thorough procedure to carry out its responsibilities for licensing. This process remains the responsibility of the competent Ministry. It will be helpful to make a clear distinction between the procedures and decisions relating to licensing and those relating to accreditation. The current understanding of the experts is as follows:

- Licensing is the responsibility of the relevant Ministry, which may develop its own procedures for the necessary checking and inspection. Licensing is primarily concerned with the establishment of a higher education institution, whether public or private, or with the licence to practice for an existing institution. It is the process by which the Ministry assures itself that the required inputs are in place to ensure that the institution can deliver what is planned. That may cover, inter alia, finance and budget, resources, staffing, estate, management structures, internal administration and the proposed systems for supporting the quality of learning and teaching. Licensing therefore relates primarily to resource inputs, to planning, and proposals for future development. Licensing will require the provision of firm evidence relating to resource inputs.

- Accreditation is based upon an assessment of the actual delivery, and the achieved outcomes, in an institution. It is therefore a confirmation that the institutional systems and provision are working as intended and expected. It measures achievement against agreed standards and criteria. It is therefore related to the demonstrated effectiveness of internal institutional systems, including its internal quality assurance and most importantly to the outcomes of those educational systems (e.g. quality of teaching and research; standards of awards; student achievement). Accreditation allows the institution to make recognised awards. The evidence which is the basis of accreditation is demonstrated through processes of evaluation, both internal and external.

Further discussion will be appropriate to establish the most appropriate relationship between licensing and accreditation, but it would seem sensible for licensing reports and relevant data on an institution to be made available to the HEA to inform its work, and possibly also made available, in summary form, to the expert group carrying out the external evaluation of an institution with a view to accreditation. This may of course depend upon how recent the licensing information is (i.e. the time gap between the licensing approval and the external evaluation linked to accreditation).

A question relating to licensing and raised by the Ministry remains to be resolved: what is the status of any awards made by an institution which has

been licensed but not yet been accredited? As only institutions with a defined range of provision may apply for accreditation, it may be possible for an institution offering good programmes to be denied accreditation. Has it yet been fully decided whether non-accredited institutions would continue to offer their own institutional awards, and how such awards must be different in name to awards in accredited institutions?

A further point that must be addressed is the status of programmes leading to recognised awards. As in the first stage of external quality assurance in BiH it is higher education institutions that will be the focus of accreditation, an outcome of the accreditation process is that the institution will be recognised as having the power to make awards recognised by the State. Since awards are linked to taught programmes, it will be necessary to give some form of provisional or interim recognition to the programmes offered by the institution. The accreditation procedure will therefore need to include some assurance that all institutions accredited at institutional level have the capacity to deliver programmes to a threshold level established by the criteria. At a later stage this interim recognition may be strengthened by the more detailed accreditation of individual programmes and subjects.

3 Points relating to the meeting with the Ministry of Education and Culture of the Republika Srpska

The Minister and colleagues were generally supportive of the new framework and were committed to supporting the successful establishment of the HEA. The new draft law on Higher Education currently proposed in the RS legislative procedure recognises the role and functions of the HEA, and the relationships described in the law were agreed to be in line with the Framework Law for Higher Education.

Ministry colleagues warned against any suggestion of 'transfer of competence' within the overall framework: it must remain explicit that the ministries have the final decision-making authority with regard to accreditation. The Agency has the responsibility to make recommendations, ensure consistency in the accreditation process (which makes necessary the development of explicit criteria and robust procedures). The Agency also has the right to question ministerial decision-making where this is considered to depart from the agreed criteria.

It was reported that the Ministry was supporting all HE institutions in the RS in preparing their internal self-evaluation report for submission to the Agency, and that many of these were now in the final stages, and should be completed in February 2010.

The Ministry emphasised the need to ensure effective training of the experts carrying out external evaluation, so that they understood fully the criteria and procedures for their work.

Attention was drawn to the evidence of good practice in carrying out licensing,

and to the effective control by the Ministry of illegal or poorly resourced higher education institutions over recent years.

4 Points relating to the visit to the University of Banja Luka

The University is actively working on the introduction of quality assurance procedures. It has actively participated in the institutional evaluation programme of the European University Association, and drawn upon that process in its strategic planning. It is carrying out internal evaluation and was in the process of completing a self-evaluation report. Quality assurance is a part of a wider development strategy for the University. The University looks towards active participation in the work of the Agency and is committed to the overall national project for a quality framework. The University considered that its reservations regarding competences within the framework had now been satisfactorily resolved. The University would welcome the opportunity to be the first institution to experience and external evaluation and gain accreditation through the new procedures.

It was reported that in the work of the senior management with the University faculties, good progress was being made with the ongoing introduction quality assurance systems. Nevertheless there were concerns being expressed regarding the burden of data gathering, and the questionable value of some of the indicators required. It was felt to be important that the needs of the quality assurance procedures did not unduly undermine the core business of teaching and research.

The expert advisers commented that it was well understood that the initial introduction of quality assurance systems and the institutional agreement to the experience of external evaluation both constituted considerable challenges for management, at institutional and faculty level. In the view of the experts, part of the change management strategy would be to have regard for the following points:

- As far as possible, internal quality assurance should be limited to the most productive procedures, and the dangers of introducing over-complicated requirements should be kept in mind
- Accordingly, in the first round of evaluations carried out by the Agency, the expectations made of institutions must be realistic, and supportive of development
- The purpose of reports, data, meetings, etc must be clear and reasonable in all parts of the quality assurance framework
- The criteria and procedures for both internal and external quality assurance may develop over time on the basis of experience
- New areas for evaluation and higher expectations can be introduced over an extended period of time; it is not advisable to try to tackle everything at the very start
- Good communication between all partners is important, so that the reasons for requests for information are clear and well-founded
- Academic staff must be able to see that there is a value and a gain for

the extra work carried out; perhaps the most important value is the process of self-examination and the readiness to develop professionally. There must be identifiable positive outcomes and these may be structural (in terms of institutional organisation) or individual (in terms of personal recognition, incentives and rewards).

- The implementation of quality assurance must preserve innovative capacity and encourage development and enhancement. With an effective institutional quality management system, quality assurance is used to provide information that can lead to reflection, and action for improvement.

5 Points relating to the ongoing development work of the HEA

5.1 Criteria for the external evaluation

The Agency has been able to progress significantly the development of its criteria and procedures; further consultation with institutions is necessary and this is now planned.

The Agency should continue to develop its criteria for external evaluation, bearing in mind that it will be helpful at this stage to decide on the key basic criteria that need to be met. Clarity and simplicity with regard to expectations are important. Very detailed and elaborate criteria will be more difficult to implement.

The experts have agreed to read the draft criteria and provide comments. It was suggested that it would be helpful to lay out the criteria in a slightly modified way, making the expected standard clear in a simple statement, and then following this with more general guidelines and possible indicators.

5.2 Timetable and prioritisation

It is important for all the partners in the process to understand that in introducing both internal and external quality assurance evaluation, more difficulty and resistance is likely to be encountered if procedures are unnecessarily demanding or introduced under pressure and to a short time frame. Experience shows that a gradual and developmental approach usually produces better final results, and with less problems.

It is therefore important for the Agency, at this time, to get the essential tools for evaluation established in order of priority, and to give emphasis to the consultation process in agreeing them. There is a potential danger of a timetable with unrealistic and pressured deadlines which will mean starting the whole process before there is a fully shared understanding between the partners on which to base the external quality assurance arrangements. This would lead to difficulties. The experts would advise that the established list of priorities is followed carefully. It is not always easy to work in the best sequence of development, but as far as possible the plan should be:
- Establish criteria – standards and guidelines

- Consult and agree criteria
- Develop procedures for evaluation which are appropriate for the agreed criteria
- These procedures include, most importantly, the design of the report and planning for the writing and editing of the report.
- The evaluation report is the end-product of the process and must be built upon the criteria. It needs careful attention in terms of design, preferably with guidance through a standard template
- Give advice on the form of the institutional self-evaluation, which should also reflect the agreed criteria
- Plan the *administrative* detail of the evaluation: timetables, programmes, organisational templates, communication with the expert team and the institution, standard letters, managing the report-writing stage
- Appoint and train experts, ensuring a good understanding of the criteria and procedures, and what is required to complete an evaluation report in accordance with the Agency guidance
- Agree on the basis for the pilot evaluation
- Conduct the pilot evaluation
- Critically evaluate the pilot evaluation
- Adjust the methodology and procedures as necessary on the basis of what has been learned from the pilot
- Publish the final procedures
- Start on the full cycle of accreditations

With regard to the demanding schedule for development of procedures, the experts noted that the Agency is currently at a stage where it has many project possibilities, some flowing from external funding. While this is much to be welcomed, it is important to keep the main goal clearly in focus and to use time and resources to ensure that the external evaluation procedure will be well established, efficiently organised, and clearly communicated. This will serve to strengthen understanding and trust and a greater level of confidence and therefore contribute to a successful first round of evaluations.

5.3 Institutional information and indicators

The experts do not believe that it is helpful for the process at this stage to ask institutions to provide a very large number of detailed indicators, especially if these require new work. Key performance indicators should be agreed and the majority of these should already be available in the institutions. A fuller range of indicators can be built up over a period of time, as far as they are necessary and useful. The data gathered for the evaluation process should in general be relevant, useful, straightforward to gather, and allow questions to be formulated for discussion (indicators) rather than being used for any kind of exact measurement or quantification.

5.4   Panel of experts

A standard procedure will be established by the Agency for the selection, work and remuneration of the panel of experts carrying out an external evaluation of an institution. In this regard, the Framework Law gives responsibilities to the Agency and the Ministry. To signal the necessary level of independence, the experts should be clearly understood to be working for the Agency, and reporting to it. The Agency appoints experts to its pool, it trains the experts, plans, arranges and monitors their work, receives their report, and pays them. In this sense the experts should be understood to be accountable in the first instance to the Agency. In order to support the necessary level of trust, the Ministry is responsible for selecting and proposing the members of the expert team for its local institution. It is also recommended that the institution and the Agency should have the right to confirm satisfaction with the membership of the expert team, or to object to membership of the team where there were acceptable grounds. Such grounds should be formally agreed (e.g. conflict of interest, prejudicial history of involvement with the institution, lack of relevant expertise). When the external evaluation is set up an institution should have the right to expect that the team would be put together with due regard to its distinctive character, status, and range of provision, and thus to be fit for purpose.

5.5   The external evaluation report and its consideration

Guidelines drawn up by the Agency should make clear the procedure for the consideration of the evaluation report from the expert team within the Agency and how this relates to recommendations on accreditation. As currently understood, the procedure would be:

- The draft report is produced by the expert team (exactly how this is done needs clarification)
- The report is submitted by the team to the Agency
- The Agency reviews the draft report and ensures it is consistent with requirements – if not it goes back to the team
- The draft report, with a description of the evidence seen the criteria headings, is then sent to the institution with a request to correct any factual errors
- The draft report is amended in the light of the institution's response
- A final version, of the report, now including the opinions of the experts, is agreed between the expert team and the Agency
- The report is considered formally by the Agency and on the basis of the opinions expressed by the expert team, the Agency makes a recommendation relating to accreditation
- The report and the recommendation by the Agency are sent to the relevant Ministry
- On the basis of the report, the recommendation, and any other relevant factors that it may take into account, the Ministry makes a decision on accreditation

5.6   Postponed accreditation

Strong consideration should be given to a qualified form of accreditation which would allow the Agency in its recommendation to take into account an institution's capacity to remedy rapidly an identified level of institutional weakness. This would take the form of a 'conditional' or 'limited' accreditation, which would stipulate one or more developments and changes that must be carried out by the institution within a defined time frame. Once these changes were effected, the postponed accreditation could be confirmed. This would allow for an advisory and developmental dimension to be included in the external evaluation which would make it both more flexible, and potentially more demanding. At the same time, such an approach would also protect demanding criteria and robust decision–making regarding final accreditation.

5.7   Other matters

With regard to the above points, the danger must be avoided of making unrealistic demands on institutions which, if implemented seriously by experts and the Agency, could result in a disproportionate number of failures in accreditation. Weak and failing institutions do of course need to be identified, but those with a commitment to quality must be encouraged.

It is also important to take care that the requirements of quality assurance should not be a constraint on development, and that the 'innovation capacity', along with an acceptable level of risk-taking, should not be inhibited. It is positive for the external evaluation to explicitly recognize and encourage in its report innovation, improvement, good practice and enhancement within an institution.

Finally, the Agency needs to be making plans for its own internal quality assurance. It is important in particular that the external evaluation process is subject to monitoring and evaluation. From the beginning, feedback on the process should be obtained from the experts and from institutions. Regular meetings with the relevant ministerial authorities should be arranged so that their satisfaction with the procedures can be confirmed. It is recommended that in its procedures, the Agency ensures that there is an appropriate level of involvement of its own officers in the work of the expert panels. This is necessary in order to take an overview of the procedures in action, to check that the criteria are being observed, and to ensure the necessary level of consistency in the interaction with institutions. At least in the early phase, there is a strong argument for an officer of the Agency having preliminary meetings with an institution in order to explain and prepare the process and agree the necessary timetable.

Bruno Curvale
Peter Findlay

February 18, 2010