

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

Criteria de evaluare a calității învățământului superior în Bulgaria

Eleonora Mileva

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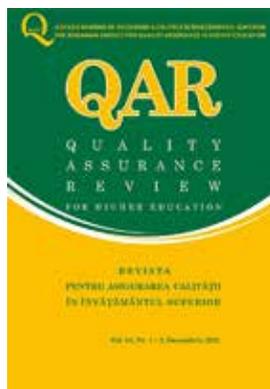
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Criteria for Assessing the Quality of Higher Education in Bulgaria

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Abstract: *The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) of Bulgaria regulates the accreditation process of higher educational institutions in the country. The Standing Committees by areas of higher education are also involved. The main activities of NEAA are connected with institutional accreditation, programme accreditation and evaluation of projects. Standards and criteria for the accreditation of higher schools in Bulgaria are adopted. Another important document is the Code of Ethics. The National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" (NSA) is among the universities with the highest accreditation ratings given by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency.*

Keywords: *institution, quality of education, accreditation, criteria, professional field*

Rezumat: *Agenția Națională de Evaluare și Acreditare (ANEA) din Bulgaria reglementează procesul de acreditare a instituțiilor de învățământ superior din țară. Sunt implicate, de asemenea, comitetele permanente pe domenii de învățământ superior. Principalele activități ale ANEA sunt legate de acreditarea instituțională, acreditarea programelor și evaluarea proiectelor. Sunt adoptate standarde și criterii pentru acreditarea școlilor superioare din Bulgaria. Un alt document important este Codul de etică. Academia Națională de Sport "Vassil Levski" (ANS) se numără printre universitățile cu cele mai ridicate ratinguri de acreditare acordate de Agenția Națională de Evaluare și Acreditare.*

Cuvinte cheie: *instituție, calitatea educației, acreditare, criterii, domeniu profesional*

Introduction

Bulgaria made decisive steps in European integration of higher education by signing the Bologna Declaration in 1999 (European Higher Education Area and Bologna Process 2021, available at: <https://www.ehea.info/>). One of the most important consequences for higher education is the impact of the Bologna Process on the management and quality of higher education. Placed in conditions of increased

competition, the universities must offer high-quality modern teaching and attractive programmes to enrol more students. This has a positive effect on employers, the business community and the labor market.

The most critical dimensions of the process of European integration in the field of higher education can be outlined in the following way (Mileva 2012, 22):

- Building a system for comparability and recognition of professional qualifications.
- Introduction of the European system of educational credits (ECTS).
- Implementation of the Erasmus academic exchange programme.
- Development of systems for assessing the quality of the educational process.

The adoption of the European Qualifications Framework in 2008 (EQF 2008) has a significant effect on the recognition of Bulgarian higher education qualifications in the European educational area. Under the influence of the mentioned processes, in 2002, the Bulgarian Classifier of the fields of higher education and professional directions came into force, introducing the generally accepted international educational fields and directions as a reference point for the bachelor programs (Classifier of the fields of higher education and professional directions, available at: <https://legislation.apis.bg/doc/15501/0>). The Classifier includes 9 areas of higher education and 52 professional fields, mainly in line with the UNESCO-ISCE-97 International Standard Classification of Education (ISCE 1997).

In February 2012, the National Qualifications Framework of the Republic of Bulgaria (NQF) was adopted, covering the entire education system and all qualifications in it (NQF 2012). It includes nine levels, incl. zero (preparatory) level. Thus, comparing the national strategies for higher education with the unified qualification framework positively impacts the social realization of the different categories of professionals within the European Union.

The Educational System in Bulgaria

The higher education system in Bulgaria is dynamic and is constantly changing and developing in terms of the structure of universities, curricula, educational management, funding and several other structural elements.

One of the main trends is related to the significant expansion of specialities within higher education institutions and their transformation into institutions of the university type. In addition, increasing competition and the dynamics of social development give rise to the need for continuous diversification of the product of the offered educational services. At the same time, there is a growing interest in various forms of continuing or lifelong learning like distance learning, training and qualification courses, or other activities after a basic Bachelor's degree (Tasheva, Pavlov 2000).

Higher education in Bulgaria is regulated by the Higher Educational Act, adopted in 1995 with numerous amendments until 2020 (Higher Educational Act 2020, available at: <https://www.mon.bg/bg/57>). This law regulates the structure,

functions, management and financing of higher education in the Republic of Bulgaria. According to Article 2 of the Act, "the purpose of higher education is the training of highly qualified specialists above secondary education and the development of science and culture" (Higher Educational Act 2020).

Higher education institutions in Bulgaria are public and private, and the National Assembly regulates their establishment and closure. Higher education is acquired only in higher schools, which have received accreditation by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) and have been established under conditions and by order, determined by the Higher Educational Act (Article 5). There are 52 accredited higher education institutions in Bulgaria; 38 of them are public, and 14 are private.

Higher education institutions in Bulgaria ensure the quality of education and scientific research through "an internal system for assessing and maintaining the quality of education and academic staff, which includes a survey of students' opinion at least once in the school year" (Higher Educational Act 2020, Article 6, paragraph 4).

The system of higher education in Bulgaria organizes courses of study after secondary school graduation and consists of the following educational degrees:

1. Bachelor - with a minimum term of preparation according to the curriculum of 4 years (240 credits).
2. Master - with a minimum term of preparation of not less than five years or one year after obtaining the degree "Bachelor" (from 60 to 120 credits).
3. Doctor - with a minimum term of preparation of 3 years after obtaining the degree of "Master". The respective higher school determines the number of credits in the doctoral programmes depending on the professional field, speciality, and education goals.

The Accreditation Process of Higher Education Institutions in Bulgaria

An essential point in the Higher Educational Act in Bulgaria is the accreditation of higher education institutions, which is a process of recognition by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) of the right of higher education institutions to provide higher education through educational qualifications in specific academic fields, professional fields and specialities by assessing the quality of various activities (Higher Educational Act 2020).

The activities of NEAA aim to stimulate and control higher education institutions, ensure and improve the quality of their education, and conduct it in accordance with the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (amended State Gazette 2020, 17).

The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency of Bulgaria was founded according to Article 11, paragraph 1 of the Higher Educational Act, passed by the National Assembly on December 27, 1995 (National Evaluation and Accreditation

Agency 2021, available at: <https://www.neaa.government.bg/>). The statute of NEAA and subordinate legislative background of the Agency was constituted with a Decree of the Council of Ministers of August 1, 1996.

The first Accreditation Council started its work by the end of 1996. However, due to lack of experience in the area of higher education evaluation and accreditation in Bulgaria, the primary approach in the process of establishing the Agency and elaborating the required documentation was studying the international experience and best practices, correlating them to the specifics, conditions and traditions of the Bulgarian higher education to find the best system suitable for the Bulgarian Education Area.

With the enforcement of the amendments of the Higher Educational Act on June 4, 2004, some changes occurred in the evaluation and accreditation procedures of higher education institutions, imposing on NEAA the functions of a specialized governmental body for carrying out evaluation, accreditation and quality control in the activities of higher education institutions and carrying out post-accreditation monitoring and control as a new task in the activity of NEAA (NEAA 2021).

The managing authorities of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency are the Accreditation Council and its Chairperson, who is also the President of NEAA.

The Accreditation Council carries out its activities through 8 Standing Committees by areas of higher education and 1 Standing Committee on Post-Accreditation Monitoring and Control that the Accreditation Council formed.

The Committees comprise 3 to 7 members, one of whom is Chairman of the Committee. The Chairman of the Accreditation Council appoints the members of the Committees for a three-year term.

The Standing Committees by areas of higher education are the following (NEAA 2021):

- Standing Committee on Economic Sciences and Management
- Standing Committee on Natural Sciences, Mathematics and Computing
- Standing Committee on Agrarian Sciences and Veterinary Medicine
- Standing Committee on Social and Legal Sciences, Security and Defence
- Standing Committee on Technical Sciences
- Standing Committee on Educational Sciences and Social Activities
- Standing Committee on Healthcare and Sports
- Standing Committee on Humanities and Arts.

The Accreditation Council, through its Standing Committees, implements the following main activities (NEAA 2021):

1. Institutional accreditation of a higher school was carried out according to a criteria system adopted in 2016.
2. Program accreditation - carried out according to specific criteria adopted in 2016 in the following main areas:

- programme accreditation of professional fields;
 - programme accreditation of professional fields/ majors from the regulated professions;
 - programme accreditation of doctoral programmes.
- 3. Evaluation of projects:**
- evaluation of projects for opening and transformation of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) under ESG (ESG 2015),
 - evaluation of projects to open and transform an HEI basic unit or affiliate under ESG (ESG 2015),
 - projects for opening a professional field/ major of the regulated professions under ESG (ESG 2015).

The main criteria for the accreditation of higher education institutions and individual professional fields can be summarized in the following ten standards (NEAA 2021):

1. Policy for quality assurance.
2. Design and approval of programmes.
3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment.
4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification.
5. Teaching staff.
6. Learning resources and student support.
7. Information management.
8. Public information.
9. On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes.
10. Cyclical external quality and assurance.

Each accreditation standard contains specific criteria and content, having the corresponding coefficient and number of points. The assessment is performed on a scale from 0 to 10 points, with 10 being the maximum accreditation assessment. Only higher education institutions with a grade above eight can conduct doctoral education.

The post-accreditation monitoring and control process criteria define the scope and content of post-accreditation monitoring and control on the implementation of the internal quality evaluation and assurance system for training and academic staff in higher schools (NEAA 2021). Following the European standards for the responsibility of higher schools to improve the quality of training as a result of interaction between teachers, students and institutional environment, the criteria focus on the education institution policy on the "life cycle" of students (admission, progression, graduation and realization).

The criteria are designed to ensure the effectiveness of post-accreditation interaction and dialogue between NEAA and higher schools in improving the quality of training to acquire educational and qualification degrees of higher education. In their entirety, the criteria are consistent with the objectives, principles and guidelines of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) and with the national law. This enables the achievement of measurable implementation of a given standard through an appropriate criterion. Thus the need to enrich the content and characteristics of the criteria for post-accreditation monitoring and control of the implementation of the internal quality evaluation and assurance system for training and academic staff of higher schools is justified.

Each accreditation procedure for higher education institutions and professional fields/specialities includes the following mandatory activities:

- development of a self-assessment report of the higher school;
- meetings of the Expert Group with representatives of the higher school or the faculties and preparation of an evaluation report on the relevant standards and criteria;
- report of the Standing Committee for Evaluation and Accreditation;
- final evaluation by the NEAA Accreditation Council.

New Rules of Procedure of the Agency were adopted in January 2021 (NEAA 2021). They regulate the changed procedures for accreditation of distance learning in higher education, conducted in practice since 2017. A particular aspect is assessing the educational environment for distance learning and the provision of necessary electronic resources.

An essential document for the proper functioning of NEAA is the Code of Ethics (Code of Ethics 2021, available at: <https://www.neaa.government.bg/>). This Code defines the principles, values and rules of conduct that should be considered as a model in the implementation of the activities related to external quality assurance and accreditation in higher education, thus contributing to spreading a culture of quality and building public confidence in the results of the evaluation and accreditation in the Republic of Bulgaria (Code of Ethics, Art. 1, para. 1).

The basic principles, which constitute the general framework of NEAA activities and are included in its mission and goals, are the following: 1. legality and institutional responsibility; 2. continuous improvement of the quality of NEAA activities; 3. compliance with European and world practices; 4. esteem and respect for the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of the institutions evaluated and their representatives; 5. public accountability (Code of Ethics, Art. 2).

Educational Activity of the National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski"

The National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" (NSA) is the only higher school in Bulgaria, specializing in the field of physical education, sports, tourism and kinesitherapy (National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" 2021, available

at: www.nsa.bg). The National Sports Academy received the highest accreditation ratings in 2019 by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency.

A total of 3 000 students in the Bachelor's, Master's and Doctoral degrees in 4 different professional fields study at the NSA.

- The first one is the professional field of Pedagogy, in which graduates acquire professional qualifications as teachers in physical education and sports, and they can work at all levels of the educational system.
- The second is the professional field of Sports, which provides specialized education and training for future coaches in different sports, sports managers, sports commentators, sports animators and coaches in adapted physical activity and sports (for people with disabilities).
- The third one is the professional field of Public Health, and specialists can work as physiotherapists.
- The fourth is the professional field of Health Care, where graduates can work in rehabilitation and spa centres, sports institutions, etc.

The National Sports Academy "Vassil Levski" offers a total of 17 Master's programmes in the four professional fields, in which there is a strong interest both from students who graduated from the NSA and from specialists who graduated from other universities in the country and abroad.

The National Sports Academy also conducts training courses for a Doctor's educational and scientific degree – three years for full-time education and four years for part-time education. The main doctoral programmes are the following:

1. Theory and methodology of sports science.
2. Sports psychology.
3. Physical education in the educational system.
4. Kinesitherapy.
5. Wellness - health promotion.

All curricula and programmes in the individual specialities and levels of education are constantly updated and modernized, undergoing a constant assessment and accreditation process in the individual professional fields. An internal system for the quality of education has been developed, with audits of curricula and students' opinions as an essential element. Graduates of the National Sports Academy in Sofia, Bulgaria find successful realization in the country and abroad.

Conclusions

The higher education system in Bulgaria is part of the European educational area. Therefore, the established high standards and criteria for evaluation and accreditation of Bulgarian universities are a prerequisite for the future positive development of higher education and a closer relationship between universities and employers' organizations on the labor market.

The intensive legislative and social changes currently underway in the country provide an optimistic perspective of degree holders for professional development, offering the qualification and future career growth opportunities.

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