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Meta-evaluation of external quality assurance audits in 2010

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Introduction

In 2010, Agency for Science and Higher Education (hereinafter: the Agency) launched the first 5-year cycle of external quality assurance audits of Croatian higher education institutions. Audit procedure was developed within CARDS 2003 project and tested through pilot-project that involved University of Osijek Faculty of Civil Engineering, University of Rijeka Faculty of Engineering and the University of Zagreb Faculty of Organization and Informatics. Based on the results of audit pilot, the procedure was additionally improved.

In accordance with the ESG standard 2.8., which calls for agencies to analyse data collected during external evaluations - on existing conditions, trends, good practices and areas where improvements are needed - ASHE conducted an analysis of audit procedures carried out in 2010. Data collected and analyses carried out form the basis for decision and policy making in terms of quality development of external QA audit procedure, higher education institutions, and higher education system in general.

Methodology of external QA audit procedure

Every year the Agency surveys higher education institutions and collects information on their QA systems. Based on data collected, the Agency proposes an annual plan of external audits for the following year. In selecting higher education institutions that will be subject to external QA audit, ASHE selects those that meet the prerequisites for a successful implementation of the procedure.

The annual Plan of external QA audits for 2011 (CLASS: 003-08/10-02/0004, REG.NO: 355-01-10-3), adopted on 2 June 2010, included the following institutions:

1. Faculty of Civil Engineering, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
2. Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek
3. Faculty of Metallurgy, University of Zagreb

Quality assurance systems (hereinafter: QAS) at HEIs were evaluated in line with ESG standards 1.1 - 1.7., Ordinance on External Audit of Quality Assurance Systems at Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia (CLASS:003-08/10-02/0004, REG.NO.:355-02-03-10-2) and Criteria for assessing the level of development and efficiency of QA systems at higher education institutions in the Republic of Croatia, as defined by the Manual for Audit of Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia (2nd edition, CLASS:003-08/10-02/0004, REG.NO.:355-01-10-5).

Criteria are:

- Preliminary phase - preliminary quality assurance activities are underway (agreements have been made at the level of HEI, documentation is being drafted)
- Initial phase - Quality assurance system is established but not fully functional (basic documents are drafted and adopted)

- Developed phase - Quality assurance system is functional, internal audit is implemented and system is improved on the basis of internal audit results
- Advanced phase - Quality assurance system is continuously developed on the basis of results of both internal and external audit.

All documents and criteria are published on ASHE website:

<https://www.azvo.hr/en/evaluations/evaluations-in-higher-education/audit-of-higher-education-institution> and are consistently used in all external QA audit procedures. Since the documents that define the external QA audit procedure have been tested through a pilot-project, there was no need to revise/amend them.

The external quality assurance procedure includes the following elements: review of HEI's submitted documentation (the base of which is the adopted internal QA audit report); site-visit of the Audit Committee; drafting of the external QA audit report with recommendations for improvement (ESG 2.5.); the follow-up phase resulting in an analysis of the efficiency of activities carried out (ESG 2.6.); drafting of the final audit report, including a final assessment of the degree of development and efficiency of the evaluated QAS and recommendations for the following period, until the next external audit. The final audit report is adopted by ASHE Accreditation Council and published on Agency website.

Quality assurance systems that have met the set criteria and provided evidence of being functional, efficient and fit for purpose, in accordance with national and ESG standards, are awarded with a 5-year certificate by ASHE Accreditation Council, based on expert panel recommendation.

Seminars and workshops for HEIs

Investing in development of human resources is one of priorities; one of the main tasks of the Agency is to carry out trainings of all the stakeholders in this procedure (HEIs and audit panels), and to continuously develop and improve the external QA audit procedure based on experience and data collected.

On 9 July 2010, a workshop was organised for the representatives of HEIs (QA units) included in the annual Plan of audits for 2010. Workshop was attended by 8 representatives of HEIs, who were informed on the procedure, standards, criteria, good national and international practice, and were provided with guidelines for preparing the necessary audit documentation. Participants assessed the quality of this workshop with an average grade of 4.7/5.

Training of audit panel members

External QA audits are carried out by panels of trained and certified audit experts, selected from ASHE audit expert database.

Credibility and quality of QA audit directly depends on the selection of competent panel members and their training. The Agency periodically organises training of new audit experts. After completing the training, the participants are awarded with a certificate and are included in

ASHE audit expert database, from which panel members are selected. Certified audit experts are required to participate in audit workshops organised by the Agency.

Five-member audit panels comprise 1 Croatian and 1 foreign representative of HEIs, 1 student representative, 1 representative of the industry/business sector and 1 representative of ASHE. The experience so far shows that such a composition of panel provides for an objective implementation of the procedure, encourages synergy and stimulates discussion - both among the panel members and stakeholders at HEIs. It should also be noted that decisions regarding the final assessment of HEI's QAS, as well as recommendations for its improvement, are reached by consensus. Quality of audit committee's work also depends on the selection of committee chair. Role and responsibilities of committee chair are demanding; since the chair coordinates the work of panel members, adequate leadership skills are required. In addition to training, important factor for the overall success of audit procedure is the experience of appointed committee chairs.

Assessment of audit committee's work is carried out by satisfaction survey of committee members and HEI that was subject to external QA audit procedure (see: Tables 2 and 3).

External QA audit in 2010

After the workshop for representatives of HEIs that were included in 2011 Plan of external QA audits, HEIs appointed their coordinators that coordinated the procedure together with ASHE coordinators and audit panel members.

The procedures were carried out within the agreed timescale. During the procedures, panel members followed ethical and professional principles, Agency guidelines and good international practice in their work, with an affirmative approach to encouraging the development of quality culture at higher education institutions.

All the procedures were carried out without appeals. Final audit reports were adopted by the Accreditation Council and published on ASHE website (full version in Croatian and a summary in English). In accordance with recommendations included in final reports, Accreditation Council issued decisions on certification or re-audit.

Final assessments of the evaluated QAS are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - Efficiency assessment of the evaluated QAS at HEIs included in Plan of external QA audits for 2010

Higher education institution	ESG 1.1.	ESG 1.2.1.	ESG 1.2.2.	ESG 1.3.	ESG 1.4.	ESG 1.5.	ESG 1.6.	ESG 1.7.	Overall assessment of QA system:
Faculty of Civil Engineering, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	DEVELOPED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL/DEVELOPED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	ADVANCED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE - CERTIFICATE
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL/DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL PHASE
Faculty of Metallurgy, University of Zagreb	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL/DEVELOPED PHASE	DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL PHASE	INITIAL/DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL/DEVELOPED PHASE	INITIAL PHASE

Efficiency analysis of the evaluated quality assurance systems at higher education institutions

Of the 3 HEIs included in the 2010 Plan of external QA audits, quality assurance systems at 2 HEIs (Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek and Faculty of Metallurgy, University of Zagreb) were assessed to be in an initial stage of development, and Accreditation Council adopted panels' recommendation for a re-audit of these institutions after 18 months. QAS of the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek was assessed as developed, therefore meeting the criteria for a certificate, which was awarded to the institution.

The results of the procedure showed that the experience, which the stakeholders of QAS of the Faculty of Civil Engineering, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek gained through CARDS 2003 pilot-project, had a positive impact on further system development. With active support and involvement of the management, as well as the inclusion of all the stakeholders, a synergy was achieved that - in addition to continuous efforts and implementation of guidelines for system development received during the pilot-project - allowed for further improvement and development of QAS. Since the Faculty of Civil Engineering in Osijek is a higher education institution from the field of technical sciences, institutional quality system was initially developed through ISO 9001 QMS, and later improved upon it by introducing a quality assurance system that integrated the requirements of ESG Part I with ISO 9001.

All 3 HEIs recognised the need for opening a position of quality officer, and employing a person for managing and developing of institutional quality assurance system. At all 3 institutions teaching staff reported that administrative responsibilities hinder their participation in continuous development of QAS, and that a full-time QA professional is needed for such a duty.

Evaluated HEIs recognise the need for systematic development of quality culture, in line with the ESG. Table 1 shows that ESG 1.1. represents the greatest challenge for institutions. ESG 1 is closely related to an overall quality culture of a higher education institution, its openness and readiness to change and improve the existing level of quality.

Since Croatian universities do not have a long tradition of strategic planning, evaluated university constituents expressed a need for well-developed university strategies that would be used as a basis for development of constituents. This is also a prerequisite for development of good sub-strategies, including a sub-strategy for quality assurance system. Strategic planning is closely related to development of QA mechanisms, as well as defining performance indicators and efficiency analysis for the implementation of the set strategic goals. With these, HEIs can keep track of the achieved level of quality of the implemented activities, which also serves as a basis for future strategies and positioning of the institution.

It has been noted that universities have defined the organizational structure of QAS, however, what is still lacking is an active coordinating role of university QAS, guidelines for development of QAS at the level of university constituents, and support to professional development in the area of quality assurance. This also had an impact on the development of basic QA documentation: quality policy, QA regulations and manual. First versions of basic QA documents will need to be revised and harmonised with university documentation, and some documents are yet to be developed, adopted, implemented and if necessary revised. Faculty of Civil Engineering in Osijek has successfully completed the first stage of development and

implementation of QA documentation, and has structured an integrated quality system in line with ISO 9001 and ESG, which should be systematically developed.

In order to ensure that internal audit contributes to development of QAS, the task of QA units in the following period is to encourage self-evaluation and evidence-based development of QA system, with systematic use of analyses. Students are involved in quality assurance activities. Faculty of Metallurgy and Faculty of humanities and Social Sciences need to define and improve the role of external stakeholders in QAS development. Faculty of Civil Engineering actively encourages the participation of all the stakeholders in development of quality culture.

Assuring the quality of study programmes and teaching is at the very core of QAS. Although all study programmes are accredited, descriptions of programmes mostly do not include clear learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are also not defined at the level of courses. Students are involved in quality assurance of teaching and are also informed on QA activities pertaining to the evaluation of teaching process. ECTS need to be revised (except at Faculty of Civil Engineering, which has already implemented this). Development goals and activities related to study programme improvement should in the future be based on the results of self-evaluation, as well as participation of alumni in the improvement of students' competencies.

Formal evaluation of teachers' competencies is carried out when they are elected to teaching grades, however, there are not enough opportunities for continuous development of teaching competencies. Additional efforts are needed towards creating opportunities for employment of new teachers and introduction of new teaching methods and technologies. Although there are some opportunities for participation in exchange programmes, the mobility of students and teachers is rather low, and for non-teaching staff practically non-existent.

Teachers at the Faculty of Civil Engineering and Faculty of Metallurgy have well-established cooperation (providing expertise) with industry/business sector. This allows them to generate some income, which is directly linked to quality of research.

Highest grades were given for ESG 1.7. - publishing relevant, unbiased information on study programmes and levels. However, there is some room for improvement, in particularly with regard to availability of information in English.

Quality analysis of external QA audits in 2010

Analysis of the panel members' feedback (a survey that was carried out as a form of self-evaluation and evaluation of implemented procedures) shows that all procedures have been carried out in line with the adopted documents, standards and criteria (average grade of 4.9). Panel members assessed their own performance and efficiency with the average grade of 4.4. (Table 2)

Table 2 - Results of the satisfaction surveys for audit committees in 2010 external QA audits

Higher education institution	Faculty of Civil Engineering, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	Faculty of Metallurgy, University of Zagreb	Average grade
Clarity of the QA audit procedure	4.75	4.75	4.80	4.77
Clarity of QA audit standards and criteria	4.75	5.00	4.60	4.78
Applicability of QA audit standards and criteria	4.25	5.00	4.60	4.62
Clarity of guidelines for preparing audit documentation	4.50	4.75	4.60	4.62
Usefulness of training for QA audit procedure	4.50	5.00	4.80	4.77
Cooperation with coordinator: a) before the site-visit	3.75	5.00	5.00	4.58
b) during the procedure	4.25	5.00	5.00	4.75
Overall assessment of the procedure	4.50	5.00	4.80	4.77
Quality of panel's work at the 1st panel meeting	4.00	4.25	4.80	4.35
Quality of panel's work at the 2nd panel meeting	4.25	4.75	4.80	4.60
Audit was conducted in accordance with the ASHE QA Manual, ASHE QA Ordinance and ESG	5.00	5.00	4.80	4.93
All the stages of audit procedure were carried out in accordance with planned goals and adopted methods of work	4.75	5.00	4.80	4.85
Satisfaction with own performance	4.50	4.50	4.20	4.40
Average grade	4.44	4.85	4.74	4.68

Satisfaction surveys were also sent to evaluated HEIs at the end of audit procedure (Table 3). The survey analysis shows that the evaluated HEIs recognise the added value of external evaluations, and that they are mostly satisfied with the quality of audit panels and communication with ASHE during the procedure. The biggest challenge for HEIs is the issue of applicability of standards and criteria.

Table 3 - Results of the satisfaction surveys for evaluated HEIs in 2010 external QA audits

Higher education institution	Faculty of Civil Engineering, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek	Faculty of Metallurgy, University of Zagreb	Average grade
Clarity of the QA audit procedure	3.68	4.38	3.80	3.95
Clarity of QA audit standards and criteria	3.56	3.92	3.50	3.66
Applicability of QA audit standards and criteria	3.25	3.53	3.20	3.33
Clarity of guidelines for preparing audit documentation	3.56	3.84	3.60	3.67
Overall assessment of the procedure	3.50	4.07	3.60	3.72
Cooperation with ASHE coordinator during the procedure	3.93	4.53	4.40	4.29
HEI was given opportunity to adequately present its QAS	3.93	4.46	4.00	4.13
Communication between audit panel and QAS stakeholders	3.87	4.84	3.90	4.20
Audit Committee was: a) Competent	4.43	5.00	4.10	4.51
b) Objective	3.68	4.76	3.40	3.95
c) Well-informed	3.93	4.46	4.00	4.13
d) Well-intentioned	3.87	5.00	4.00	4.29
e) Constructive	3.93	4.76	3.80	4.16
Observations were clearly, objectively and appropriately presented in the reports	3.50	4.38	3.20	3.69
Recommendations for improvement are clear and applicable	3.68	4.23	3.50	3.80
External QA audit provided added value to HEI	4.00	4.53	3.60	4.04
Assessment of own contribution to discussions with audit panel during the site-visit:	3.50	4.46	3.55	3.84
External QA audit allows for improvement of HEI QAS	4.12	4.92	3.66	4.23
Average grade	3.77	4.45	3.71	3.98

Conclusion:

The concept of quality assurance system presented a novelty for Croatian higher education institutions. Evaluated HEIs recognise that functional quality assurance systems require active support of the management and all the stakeholders. Implemented audit procedures made the institutions more aware of the quality of activities they carry out, and encouraged them towards further, focused development. Evaluated HEIs are aware that development of institutional quality culture and a functional quality assurance system bring forth an added value that needs to be maintained.

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