

Introducing Accreditation in (Central) Europe: Lessons from Slovakia

Pavol Návrat

Chairman, Accreditation Commission of the Republic of Slovakia
Slovak University of Technology in Bratislava,
Ilkovičova 3, SK-81219 Bratislava, Slovakia

Abstract. Accreditation has been introduced in several countries of Central Europe a little more than a decade ago. Slovakia, as one of the first such countries, has already some history record that is in some sense respectable in the European context. Role of these first generation accreditation endeavours has been generally acknowledged. Lessons from them, including both the positive and negative ones can thus be very useful. Slovak accreditation, its legislative basis and its development showing both strengths and weaknesses, is presented in the paper. We discuss accreditation principles, procedures and outcomes and how these evolved throughout the last decade. Special attention is given to the legal status of the accrediting body, and possible frameworks for future solutions are outlined. The paper thus offers a relatively comprehensive account of the Slovak experience. Moreover, we include comments on the recently adopted completely new higher education law (in 2002), which redefines and strengthens the role of accreditation. We can see what lessons Slovakia itself has learnt and what ways for the future it has taken.

1. Introduction

Accreditation has been introduced in several countries of Central Europe a little more than a decade ago. Slovakia as one of the first such countries has already some history record that is in some sense respectable in the European context. In general, role of these first generation accreditation endeavours has been acknowledged [5].

In describing the circumstances that led to it, we can hardly avoid mentioning the broader societal context. In 1989, totalitarian communist regime was overthrown in (former) Czechoslovakia. The consequences of this have been fundamental – both in breadth and depth. A transformation started of almost all aspects of the society. The transition process has been a unique historical experience. It has been a process without a precedent in history. Czechoslovakia has been able to adopt a completely new Higher Education Law already in spring of 1990 (Law No. 172/1990).

The Law ment a radical and complete turn away from the previous system. It introduced:

- academic liberties
- institutional autonomy
- a provision for 2-tier Bc/Mgr degree system
- processes of evaluation and accreditation.

The first two items might seem in standard circumstances to be self-evident. However, even these issues deserve a careful consideration. In the concrete historical setting, when almost everything was under a tight centralised control, the situation called for granting institutional autonomy as broadly as possible. Only very recently, the new Slovak legislation has abandoned the concept of Faculties as independent legal bodies in return for a set of guaranteed rights for Faculties.

The third item is interesting in that it is somewhat similar to the provision of § 19 of the Hochschulrahmengesetz from 1998, only it was introduced already in 1990. Both opened door for the 2-tier Bc/Mgr degree programme structure which was made possible as an option, besides the traditional long first degree programmes, lasting five years. However, the new option was not accompanied in Slovakia (and similarly in other Central and Eastern European countries) by any political, financial or even moral endorsement, or a programmatic strategy (please bear in mind, those were the pre-Bolognian times). The Slovak experience is such that only relatively few higher education institutions have introduced such a structure. Even fewer of them have done it consequently, not as an “parallel” option [2]. Again, only very recently, the new Slovak legislation has turned the options around by making the 2-tier (actually, the 3-tier) system a rule and the long first degrees only an exception.

From the point of view of this Conference, most important novelty was the introduction of the processes of evaluation and accreditation. Accreditation Commission was established as a body responsible for both of these tasks. Technically, it was created as an “advisory body of the government”. Only in the Government Decree that implemented the Law it was stated that it should act “independently”. Having in mind the time when the legislation was adopted, one can tolerate that perhaps there were not other realistic solutions available.

However, with the independence stated only in a loose declarative way, but with an actual dependence on government in terms of being nominated by it, and being provided resources for its acting, the Commission’s independence became an issue that was far from self-evident. Another tricky point in this regard was the provision that the Commission’s scope of competence is restricted to making recommendations to the Minister of Education. It is always the Minister who decides in all matters.

2. Accreditation Commission

Let us describe the basic facts on the Slovak Accreditation Commission. Its mission is:

to assist in development of higher education system in Slovakia by evaluating level of educational and research activities of institutions and by accrediting degree programmes.

2.1 Legal Status

We have already mentioned the Commission’s legal status according to the original Law from 1990. Slovak Parliament adopted an entirely new Law on Higher Education in 2002 (Law No. 131/2002).

There have been some discussions about the future legal status of the Commission. A proposal to make it institutionally independent from the government could not find enough support. Similarly, a proposal to give the Commission a kind of veto in negative opinions (i.e., Minister would not be able to make a positive decision where the Commission has recommended a negative one; similar provision can be found e.g. in a new Czech legislation) remains only a topic for discussion. On the other hand, there were opinions voiced that it would more properly be an advisory body of the Minister, not of the government. This idea also could not find sufficient support. The resulting solution is to leave the legal status as it was: the Accreditation Commission is an advisory body of the government. Also, the procedure of forming the Commission remains essentially the same: it is nominated by the government.

However, the issue of independence has thus not been resolved and it remains open for the days to come. Obviously, the present scheme has its drawbacks and staying with it is an element of risk. Any future scheme should not focus on independence only, but should see it in connection with transparency and accountability of the Commission. Perhaps there is a rôle for legitimate representations of higher education institutions (i.e., Slovak Rectors' Conference and Council of Higher Education Institutions) in facilitating a transformation of the Commission into an independent agency in the future.

The new Law has defined more precisely constraints on composition of the Commission. At least one third of its members must come from non-academic institutions, and there should be also foreign members included. Moreover, the practice of composing its working groups (evaluation committees) where the recommendations are actually being prepared has been increasingly oriented towards incorporating representatives of corresponding professional community, too.

2.2 Principal Tasks

The Law defines principal tasks of the Commission:

- to accredit newly proposed degree programmes and re-accredit the running degree programmes
- to accredit institutions
- to evaluate institutions
- to give opinions on proposals to establish / close down institutes / institutions (Faculties or higher education institutions)
- to give opinions on proposals to establish / close down institutes / institutions (Faculties or higher education institutions)
- to make recommendations regarding the status of the higher education institution.

The new Law has introduced three kinds of higher education institutions: universities, polytechnics, and research universities. This is the higher education institution's status, which can be changed, if its evaluation results in a corresponding recommendation. Currently, all the higher education institutions enjoy the status of a university except one private polytechnic. However, a door has been open for diversification of the higher education system. This is commented as a positive feature of the new Law. On the other hand, the actual procedure prescribed to change institution's status is quite complicated with several decision making levels, including a political one, which can effectively block a recommended change.

2.3 Principles

The most important principles guiding the Commission in accreditation can be summarised as follows:

- accreditation is compulsory for all degree programmes at all three levels
- accreditation is performed periodically
- accreditation criteria are based:
 - mostly on evaluating resources: human, infrastructure, information, material, financial, laboratory etc.
 - programmatic reviews
 - to some extent, outcomes.

That the accreditation is compulsory at all three levels, including PhD studies, may come as a surprise. To explain, why this is found useful, or even necessary, let us list sample concerns typically raised

during accreditation of such a programme: the institute does not have a record of previous research with respectable results, neither a record of research grants it was able to get in the past in the area of prospective studies, nor individual researchers with such records, nor they have any international research collaboration, nor a suitable research laboratory etc. Simply put, there are cases where there is no guarantee of a minimum standard of quality. It should be also said, however, that even with this compulsory accreditation, it is very difficult to assure a quality of research by such measures from outside. The institute should be the first in an uncompromising effort to assure quality of its programmes and should have enough academic self appraisal not to push for a right to confer doctoral degrees where there is no corresponding quality of a research work.

The accreditation criteria in general terms have been outlined in the Law, as indicated above. Comparing to the practice until now, the criteria are more balanced. There is a clear shift from input based criteria towards a combination of input, process and output based ones. For the future, one can expect even more stress on the outcomes.

Another important issue is accountability of the Commission with respect to its outcomes. Here, rules for evaluating accreditation criteria should be

- formulated by the Commission,
- discussed with the representative bodies of the higher education institutions,
- made publicly available.

The Law sets a general framework for such a procedure.

2.4 Outcomes from Accreditation

In a sense, most important are the outcomes of the Commission's work. As already explained above, the Commission's competence is restricted to:

- recommendations to the Minister:
 - to grant the right to confer degrees
 - to grant the right to nominate professors
 - to suspend respective rights ...
 - to establish a new university,
- recommendations to the Rector:
 - to establish a new Faculty.

A recommendation becomes a decision only after it has been adopted by the Minister. However, the Commission has acquired a considerable informal respect in the public throughout the years so that its recommendations are frequently treated as relevant decisions. In the future, the informal respect may very well become even more important. This is one of the great challenges for a new Commission that will serve in the future. A gentleman's arrangement with the Minister may reduce number of overruled recommendations to a minimum, or to nil ideally. However, the experience shows that there is always a nonzero risk of a political influence, especially when strong lobbying is in background that eventually finds its path to the Minister. For the future, a discussion is inevitable on empowering the Commission with the ultimate right to make decisions in accreditation matters.

According to the new Law No. 131/2002, students can only be enrolled to accredited degree programmes. However, it remains to be seen what, if any, problems may emerge in the future. The new provision is stricter in some sense. It is also clear that even for a good university, it may not be easy, and even reasonable, to have all the resources available for a degree programme to be launched next year. Therefore, the Law makes it possible to seek a "provisional" accreditation for degree programmes to be opened, with special rules to accredit them. Still, some critics find this scheme not sufficiently flexible, and even refer to the principle of University autonomy.

To complete the information, the institutional accreditation results in a detailed report that

- identifies strengths and weaknesses
- makes recommendations to the Institution.

3. A road to future

3.1 Legislative environment

A road to future has been marked by the new Law from 2002. It defines a significantly different legislative environment for higher education comparing to the previous one. Higher education institutions have been de-etatised (with minor exceptions of military and police academies). They become public legal entities. They gain all the property that was state-owned that they were just using till now. Their autonomy has been strengthened. A relatively consequent implementation of the 3-tier degree studies structure has been introduced.

3.2 Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in higher education institutions has been left up to their responsibility. The Law requires that the Scientific Council of a public higher education institution evaluates at least once a year the level of education and research. It leaves up to the institution what mechanisms, if any, it uses for quality assurance.

There are several positive examples with respect to promoting quality in higher education. Several Slovak universities participated in various international projects implementing the concept of quality assurance [6]. It is increasingly understood that quality assurance is in the institution's own best interest and some institutions attempt to introduce internal mechanisms for it.

3.3 Accreditation

The accreditation process has an international dimension that is becoming more and more important. Formally, Slovak Accreditation Commission has recently become a member of both INQAAHE and ENQA. A new Commission that will be nominated according to the new Law will include members from abroad. The Commission has been maintaining very good working contacts with the Czech Accreditation Commission, the Hungarian one and more recently also with the Austrian one.

Besides strengthening the international dimension of accreditation, strengthening the professional dimension is another important issue for the future. The Slovak accreditation is in some sense "academic" in its essence. To get some balance in opinions, the Commission has a policy of incorporating experts from professional communities or industry in the evaluating committees.

There are also interesting examples of a combination of international and professional accreditation in Slovakia. One such a success story is Slovak University of Technology [3]. Its Bc and Ing degree programmes in Informatics have been accredited by the Institution of Electrical Engineers (UK) which acts on behalf of the Engineering Council (UK). The accreditation implies recognition not only in all the countries of the Washington Accord, but also as a professional qualification in the UK.

With respect to quality of education, some might say the Slovak Accreditation Commission serves practically also as a kind of "safeguard" against attempts to open new degree programmes below any reasonable threshold of quality or amount of resources available. I myself would prefer a more optimistic vision. The Slovak experience as described e.g. in this paper is a contribution to the current European process. Some experience is positive, some is less [4]. For the future, it is important for Slovakia that the processes of accreditation and evaluation are increasingly becoming all-European. Slovakia offers its experience and learns from experiences of others [1].

References

- [1] J. Brennan: Comparison of higher education in developed democracies and in post communist countries with special regard to comparison of quality assurance and accreditation. ESIM Board Meeting, Bratislava, 2001. http://esib.tnuni.sk/en/documents/Brennan_ESIB.html
- [2] P. Návrat and L. Molnár: Curricula transformation in the countries in transition: An experience from Slovakia. IEEE Transactions in Education, Vol. 41, 2(1998), 48-51.

- [3] P. Návrat and M. Kotočová: International Voluntary Accreditation - Meeting the Requirements of Professional Institutions. In: L. Molnár, M. Bielíková (Eds.): 1st Workshop on Higher Education in Informatics, Smolenice, 13-22, 1999.
- [4] J. Šafařík, V. Smieško, J. Galanová, J. Lelák: View of FEI STU on University Engineering Education in Future. In: Proceedings of the Conference "Engineer of the 21st Century, Bratislava, pp. 98-101.
- [5] D. Westerheijden: Ex oriente lux?: national and multiple accreditation in Europe after the fall of the Wall and after Bologna. Quality in Higher Education, Vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 65-75.
- [6] Team: Model institutional evaluation of selected Slovak universities. TEMPUS project UM_JEP 14170-99, Comenius University, Bratislava 2000.