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QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE CZECH HIGHER EDUCATION: THE CASE OF EVALUATION OF ECONOMIC FACULTIES

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Quality Assurance System in the Czech Higher Education

According to the Higher Education Act 111/1998 („new law“), similarly as according to the previous Higher Education Act 172/1990 it is mainly the responsibility of the Accreditation Commission of the Czech Government to monitor the quality of higher education and to propose measures to ensure quality.

The Accreditation Commission is established by the Czech Government, it has 21 members (distinguished experts from national and international higher education, scientific and professional institutions). The Accreditation Commission is an independent body. The new law gives to this body more rights and responsibilities in evaluation and accreditation of the higher education institutions and their study programs.

The evaluation process is primarily aiming at enhancing the quality of study programs and institutions. However, in case of important shortcomings and unacceptable level of quality the Accreditation Commission can propose some rights to be removed from a higher education institution (right to enrol first year students, right to perform state examinations, accreditation of certain study programs, right to nominate professors and "habilitate" associate professors).

Since its formation the Accreditation Commission has begun to evaluate continuously the quality of higher education institutions and branches of study (according the new law aggregated in study programs). This activity concerned an institutional evaluation mainly. It was based on evaluation of groups of faculties dealing with similar study fields and the procedures do not differ significantly from those adopted in other European countries.

The faculty which undergoes the evaluation is asked to prepare a self-evaluation report which is submitted to the working group of the Accreditation Commission for respective field of study. It is followed by the visit of external experts nominated by the working group (peer review) and preparation of the experts' report. In the next stage these reports are considered by the working group, a final report and recommendations are prepared, and discussed with the representatives of the institutions concerned. This report is submitted to the Accreditation Commission which discusses it in the presence of the representatives of faculties and universities again. The report is made public and the Ministry of Education takes measures to enforce the recommendations where needed. This process has been carried over in case of pedagogical faculties, engineering, economic faculties, faculties of law and medical faculties. Because of a big number of institutions and complicated situation in the economics field of studies the case of faculties of economics can be used to demonstrate how the quality assurance system works in the Czech higher education in reality.

Evaluation of Economic Faculties

During the first half of 1990s the Czech Republic experienced a wave of founding new higher education institutions, and we experienced a very rapid increase of the number of economic faculties (8 regional economic faculties at the newly created regional universities, and 2 new economic faculties at traditional universities) and study programs. Some of these faculties had serious difficulties in guaranteeing an adequate quality of pedagogical and scientific activities due to lack of experienced teaching staff.

Even the situation of "traditional" economic faculties was quite difficult due to heredity of soviet type society and Marxist ideology that had a very negative impact especially on the theoretical bases of study programs in economics, management and other types of economic curricula. Better situation could be found in applied economic sciences and in informatics, econometrics, statistics and foreign languages.

After 1990 we have experienced a very quick process of changes in the quality of study programs and staff at economic faculties. This process went on through two stages. The first one was a stage of transition to "Western" type study programs in economics, finance and other related branches. During this stage an important part of teaching staff went through a very rapid process of self-education in modern economic subjects (economics, finance etc.), and many textbooks were translated from English and German (*Economics* by P. A. Samuelson and W. D. Nordhaus, *Principles of Economics* by N. Gregory Mankiw, *Macroeconomics* by R. Dornbusch, S. Fischer, *Public Finance* by J. Stiglitz, *Microeconomics* by R. Frank to mention only some of them). This process of changes was aided in an important way by Tempus and Phare projects of the European Union.

But due to the creation of a quite considerable number of new economic faculties the problem of lack of experienced teaching staff remains the most pressing issue especially at the newly founded regional faculties till today.

During the first stage economic faculties concentrated their attention on restructuring and introducing modern study programs and educating teaching staff. Scientific and research activities were of secondary importance and in many newly founded higher education institutions almost completely absent. During the first half of 1990s the situation changed in some of the traditional economic faculties and the importance of research and scientific activities increased and some of them has achieved European standards (Prague University of Economics, Economic Faculty of The Agriculture University, Prague and Economic Faculty of the Technical University Ostrava and three economic faculties in Brno).

To help in strengthening this process of positive development and to assess the situation at different faculties the Accreditation Commission decided on the Czech government request to start the process of evaluation of economic faculties and study programs beginning in the academic year 1995\1996. The Working Group for Economics was entrusted to prepare and co-ordinate the evaluation process.

The principle of self-evaluation was partly introduced and the faculties had to fill in "self-study" forms answering questions about the faculty and its pedagogical, scientific and research activities, quality of its staff and economic situation. These characteristics were to provide necessary preliminary information for evaluating the major fields of activities: quality of staff (professors and associate professors per student), quality of study programs, and quality of scientific and research activities

(research projects, publications, citation index etc.). The evaluation process concentrated on evaluation of faculties as such, and evaluation of study programs was considered at that time to be an integral and central part of the whole process.

The Working Group for Economics has established external experts' working groups (experienced professors and associate professors from economic faculties served as peer reviewers) whose function was to consider the situation at the relevant faculty, to assure that the information in the "self-study" submitted to the Working Group for Economics corresponded to reality and to consider the tendencies of development of the faculty.

These experts' working groups were to discuss with the leadership of the faculty, members of its staff and students, to consider the study programs, examinations and quality of research and publications. The head of the ad hoc experts' working group, usually member of the Working Group for Economics, had to prepare an Evaluation Report on the state of relevant faculty or study program. In this report major problems and deficiencies found should be addressed and proper recommendations should be proposed.

Due to a high number of evaluated faculties and study programs a relatively high number of experts' working groups had to be created. Because of this, it was important to guarantee that the same standards were applied and that findings of the experts' working groups were comparable. To attain the Working Group for Economics prepared a methodical advice on the base of experience gathered by the Accreditation Commission in the process of evaluation of pedagogical and other noneconomic faculties.

The process of evaluation of economic faculties and their study programs was completed in the first half of 1998. Reports of experts' working groups on economic faculties were considered in the Working Group for Economics in April 1998, and a final version of the Report on the evaluation of economic faculties was submitted to the Accreditation Commission, which discussed it in the presence of Deans of relevant faculties at the end of June 1998.

The Working Group for Economics in discussing the Evaluation reports of the experts' working groups decided to apply principle of minimum standards based on three basic criteria in evaluating the faculties and their study programs.

The first one aims at assessing the quality of the teaching staff (number of full professors and associate professors in basic subjects of the study programs). If a faculty does not have full time professors and/or associate professors in the basic subjects of their study programs, its ability to perform master's and PhD study programs should be questioned, and a recommendation to remove from such a faculty the right to carry on masters' degree or PhD study programs or to perform state examinations in the respective study programs could follow.

The second one aims at assessing the quality of research and scientific activities (number and quality of research projects carried over, number and quality of publications). If the faculty does not perform research of an acknowledged quality in the basic fields of its study programs this should be considered a sign of an important feebleness and such a faculty after an overall consideration should not be permitted to perform doctoral study programs and have the right to nominate professors and habilitate associate professors

The third one concerns the branch of study (study program) as such. Its composition is a balance of theoretical subjects and subjects of specialisation, profile of graduates. How it compares to similar study programs abroad (in The European Union and USA)

In the process of evaluation of economic faculties in the Czech Republic the Working Group for Economics discussed major drawbacks of the higher education in economics. Some inadequacy of theoretical basis of masters' degree study programs was found at most of the faculties. The theoretical bases of the masters' degree study programs and doctoral study programs should be strengthened especially in law, European law, open economy macroeconomics and history of economic thought.

Respective fields for nomination of professors and habilitation of associate professors should be strictly based on respective doctoral study programs as stated by the new Higher Education Act. The process of nomination of professors and habilitation of associate professors should be based on explicit criteria considering scientific and research activities (stating number of monographic publications, number of research papers published in scientific journals, number of years of pedagogical experience). These criteria should be established by scientific councils of relative faculties and submitted to the Working Group for Economics.

The application of the minimum standards principle connected with an overall consideration of the activities and possibilities of economic faculties has brought the Working Group for Economics to recommend in its Report on Evaluation of Economic Faculties in The Czech Republic to remove the right to perform state examinations in the case of one regional faculty and to condition for two years performance of masters' degree study programs at four other newly founded regional faculties. All these faculties had to be re-evaluated in 2000.

All the evaluated faculties had been informed about their evaluation and recommendations before they were invited to the meeting of The Accreditation Commission where the Report on Evaluation of Economic Faculties was discussed. These recommendations were discussed at the Accreditation Commission of the Government of the Czech Republic which only has the right to accept the fundamental recommendations and transmit them to the Ministry of Education of the Czech Republic which has the right to take decisions.

Almost all the recommendation were accepted by the Accreditation Commission, only in the case of one faculty the recommendation to condition its master's study program for two years was changed for the removal of the right to perform state examinations.

To inform the public about the results of the evaluation process the Report should be published. Its publication should be considered as one of preconditions for enforcement of the principle of accountability of higher education institutions. It is a valuable source of information about the quality of teaching and scientific activities of economic faculties. It should help to induce the drive for improvement within economic faculties and enable the public to have better understanding of the functioning of higher education institutions in the Czech Republic and to create conditions for parents to be able to select good faculties and study programs for their children.

Reevaluation in 2000

All the five economic faculties in whose performance some important drawbacks were found had to prepare a new self evaluating report in the first half of 2000, and submit it to the Working group for economics of the Accreditation Commission. In this report the management of the faculty should show all the important changes in all the relevant fields of evaluation since 1998, and explain how solved all the problems found during the evaluation in 1998. After considering these reports and meeting and discussions with the representatives of these faculties the Working Group for Economics proposed to return the right to perform state examinations to the Social-Economic Faculty of the J. E. Purkyně University at Ústí nad Labem, and re-evaluate this faculty in 2002. In the case of two other regional faculties we arrived to the proposal to re-evaluate them in 2002. The Report on Reevaluation of Economic faculties was then submitted to the Accreditation Commission in December 2000. All the proposals and conclusions prepared by the Working Group on Economics were accepted.