ACADEMIC ATTITUDES TO THE REFORM OF BOLOGNA: QUALITY ASSURANCE

Juljana laze, University Aleksandër Moisiu

ABSTRACT

Increasing the quality of higher education institutions has been the focus of the academic leaders in Albania since the Bologna reform was signed. Quality assurance also affects the academic community who have to implement the reform. The purpose of the research is to reflect and evaluate the academic attitudes to quality assurance.

This research is based on a mixed methodology that consists of a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods, primary and secondary data. Participants in this study were invited to assess the quality of higher education. To increase the reliability and validity of combined methods such as focus groups with lecturers (50), and semi-structured interviews with rectors (7) were used in the study. The analysis of secondary data in this study consisted of a review of existing international and national literature including studies, reports, assessments related to trends and quality issues of higher education.

It shows that quality assurance has been proclaimed as the main and long-term challenge for the Albania higher education system.

As a result, the establishment of quality systems continues to be one of the most sensitive issues in the field of higher education in Albania.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Bologna Process, Education Policy, Challenge, Reform

INTRODUCTİON

For several years, higher education in Albania has entered a profound reform that consists in the approximation of European standards of Bologna, European conventions and communications adopted at the Sorbonne (1998); Bologna (1999); Berlin (2003); Bergen (2005); London (2007); Leuven (2009); Budapest-Vienna (2010); Bucharest (2012); Yerevan (2015) & Paris (2018). This initiative laid the foundation for the establishment of a European Higher Education Area. Albania signed its participation in the Bologna Process in 2003. The time when the Berlin communication was held established the qualifying framework at the national level and in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The National Strategy for Higher Education 2008-2013 (Council of Ministers) and the Law on Higher Education (2007) and (2015), have been the two main instruments for the implementation of the Bologna Process in Albania. Also, important regulations within the framework of the Bologna Process have been the National Quality Framework (2010) and the quality assurance guidelines and standards in Albania (2004-2012). The period 1999-2007 is conceived as the period of reform of the higher education system and adaptation of the curricula according to the Bologna Process (Sulstarova, 2017). Several amendments were made to the law on higher education, which allowed a diversified system in terms of types of higher education institutions (law no. 80/2015), but only the law of 2007 had a comprehensive approach with all processes.

The Quality Assurance Agency was established in 1999, where assessments were initially made in terms of quality assurance for study programs, and only in 2007, it included study programs and institutions. In December 2014, it was signed an agreement with the British accreditation agency "Quality Assurance Agency", a member of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), for the accreditation of higher education institutions in the country. This process was undertaken for the first time in Albania and aimed to assess the quality criteria of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the country. The Albanian government has consistently affirmed the importance of European cooperation in quality assurance, but, as in other European countries, this system has been confusing (Ursin, Huuskko, Muhoen, Honkimäki, Kivinemi, Aitola et al., 2008).

At the European level the EUA has set up a database for quality assurance, and it turns out that 4 (6%) of the 66 institutions in higher education have QA reports So, comparing data to other countries is not possible and remains a challenge.

According to the Eurydice report (2018), Albania has met mainly the formal criteria for the establishment of internal quality assurance systems, because in Albania the laws of 2007 and 2015 have certain clauses for the functioning and organization of internal quality assurance, always from research results that Albania has no published strategy for quality issues, moving away from good European practices. Meanwhile, for external quality assurance in Albania, the ASCAL (Agency for External Quality Assurance) has been established, which operates according to law no. 109/2017 "On the organization and functioning of the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education and the Accreditation Board and on setting tariffs for quality assurance processes in higher education". But the practices of ASCAL, especially its dependence on government decisions, have not yet created the conditions for membership in EQAR - European Quality Assurance Register, where a large number of agencies in European countries are registered. Decision-making for the evaluation process in European countries is mainly of agencies (in 28 countries), while in Albania (Eurydice, 2018, p.131) the Ministry of Education and the Council of Ministers (2008) are involved, both in preparing the legal framework and determining the functioning, but also in that of human resources. Also, quality assurance standards in Albania seem to have begun to be considered.

Whereas, Involvement of students in external assessment processes is guaranteed in 22 European countries (Eurydice, 2018, p.133) and also in Albania thanks to the law of 2007, where the board has a member from the National Student Council this practice works. However, the level of student participation has not changed since 2013; it has remained at 7 points, with participation in three of the 5 levels of study. But according to the Eurydice 2018 report, accreditation boards are not included.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Influenced by European policies different countries have adopted their local development reforms to the Bologna Process. The core goal of the Bologna reforms, the creation of a European Higher Education Area, presupposed to be qualitative for its members and the outside world can be achieved if the concern for quality is not reduced only to the creation or optimization of processes for external quality assurance, but considers all institutional development processes. This is especially important at the national level, where the facts show that there are countries that have achieved quality improvement by the realization of a European knowledge society. At the European level, supporting the realization of quality in all countries participating in the process is considered a challenge (Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2015) while it is necessary to adhere to unifying principles and values (Crosier et al., 2013, p. 97).

From an institutional point of view, students, academic and administrative staff are meaningful by engaging constructively in internal and external quality in the assurance processes. Quality processes need to be oriented towards improvement. It is shifting towards institutional

audits and evaluations led by the mission and institutional expansion, while quality assurance agencies emphasize student involvement in dialogue with all stakeholders (Surdock, 2015, p. 12). One of the most important changes in the last ten years for 60% of HEIs has been the expansion of internal quality processes, especially for institutions interested in European partnership (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010, p. 75). While the results of higher education trends in 2015 confirm both the progress of quality assurance and that of internationalization, which has been identified as important since the trends of 2010. Thus, 92% of institutions show that internationalization has contributed to the improvement of quality of learning and teaching, especially through student mobility, staffing, and international cooperation. The use of information and communication technology has become necessary; it has joined quality assurance and internationalization as the third priority of Higher Education Institutions. Institutions have invested in technological tools to expand participation, increase access and give greater learning flexibility (Esterman, Claeys & Lena, 2015, p. 7).

From a policy perspective, internal quality assurance should require a balance between autonomy and responsibility, considering internal quality, processes that emphasize the self-assessment phase as crucial in improving quality levels. Quality assurance processes need to be less bureaucratic, but with particular impact to lead to real change and improvement.

At the regional level, Quality Assurance in Balkan countries faces serious problems related to the quality of higher education. According to a study conducted by Toby, Nina & Kirill (2008, p. 8), the quality of higher education is the reason why students from the region drop out of higher. Existing accreditation mechanisms in the region are typically based on criteria and indicators for evaluating study programs, and the achievement of minimum quality indicators is required for institutions to be accredited. According to the study entitled "Public and Private Dynamics in Higher Education in the Western Balkans", although external procedures are recognized by all countries, academics in the region expressed concern about the degree of their credibility in practice and how these standards are measured (Zgaga & Manja, 2014. p. 36). The countries of the region face a significant challenge, which is to set up effective external quality assurance systems at the national level. European Universities Association (2007, p. 12) has noted that these issues need to be addressed at the regional level In Southeast Europe, there has also been no informational debate on balancing internal and external quality assurance mechanisms.

The current developments in Europe may pose particular problems for Southeast European countries in terms of quality assurance (Toby, Nina & Kirill, 2008, p. 20). It is difficult to say when the countries of Southeast Europe will meet the European quality assurance and to register their national quality agencies.

Research Questions/Aims of the Research

This paper aims to highlight the importance of the need to understand the challenges and the issues of quality assurance in the response to the European Higher Education Area. The purpose of raising this issue in our analysis is to reflect on the situation, challenges, and progress made to quality assurance through the academic attitudes in the country. These discussions are required to be seen from the perspective of the reforms undertaken in the framework of quality assurance in higher education in Albania, as an effort towards the European Higher Education Area.

Some of the goals of this paper are:
- To analyze the dynamic development of the quality process in the higher education system;
- To provide information on the institution's policies on involvement and the benefits of quality assurance in the process of education;
- To analyze the perception of academic staff and their role in the development of the Bologna process in the university;

To achieve the goals of the paper, the following research questions are used:
- What are the situation and the nature of the quality assurance?
- Which are the challenges of the academic staff to this approach?
- Which are the leadership attributes of HEIs to quality assurance?
- What are some future perspectives of the Bologna Process to this issue?

During data reporting, was highlight the importance of the issue of quality assurance (Ceader, 2019), which raises questions that aimed to explore the extent of this problem in the higher education system in the country. It was intended to highlight the quality of the information received regarding the internal evaluation of study programs and the institution's approach to systematic quantitative data on their research activities. It was also aimed to highlight information on institutional accreditation and the accreditation of study programs. So, it was intended to recognize the quality assurance, which is directly related to the criteria for the implementation of the Bologna Process (Amaral, Veiga & Sin 2016)

The limitations of the paper we can mention the fact that other stakeholders are important to include, such as students, businesses, other actors at the policy-making and decision-making level. The study contributes to the answer to the call for more quantitative and qualitative research and, at times argues the need for more in-depth studies suggesting a variety of challenges to practice, policy, and research in this area to Albania context. Based on these findings, conclusions, as well as recommendations for practice and research, are offered.

METHODS

Considering the nature of the study a mixed methodology is used. For each method used in the study, there were different sampling approaches and different instruments. Thus, for quantitative data, a combination between the quota sample and the intentional sample was used (Matthews, Ross, 2010 p. 68-166). The study combines qualitative and quantitative study methods (mixed methods approach). This approach is chosen in function of the research questions defined in this study. Based on the categorization of Tight (2012), the study uses the analysis document, comparison analysis, interviews, surveys, and various analyzes.

Analysis of documentation, study with the qualitative method, making a historical presentation of the quality assurance in Albania, review of the literature on the reforms, and as well as policy analysis of government initiatives in the implementation of the reform of Bologna Process. Literature research was conducted such as research of the legal framework; studies of organization reports operating locally, regionally, and internationally; theory and research studies of authors that have contributed to this field, as well as analysing the needs of target groups and documents affecting issues that focus on the education sector.

Comparison analysis, qualitative method, making this study the comparison and the ideal model of Bologna with the implementation of higher education in Albania.

Interview, qualitative interpretation of the findings, includes 7 semi-structured interviews with higher education leaders, which have been identified by their positions in government in the field of education. The questionnaires conducted at the level of public and private HEIs (7 rectors) helped us to obtain information on the implementation of the Bologna Process, on the challenges and future visions of higher education. For focus groups, a combination of bargain and quota was used. This selection aimed to collect the most diverse data. Given that quality data collection requires a lot of time and resources, and the data collected are very rich in details, the number of cases included in qualitative studies is limited (Matthews & Ross, 2010, p. 169).

Survey, qualitative and quantitative interpretation of the findings, conducted with 50 lecturers. The questionnaire used in focus groups with academic staff consisted of open-ended

questions. The focus group is attended by 50 professors of the category Professor, Doctor, and Lecturer from public and non-public universities in the country. Ten of the respondents have held the rank of Prof. Ph. D. and Prof. Assoc. Ph. D., fifteen have held a Ph.D. degree as their highest level of education, while twenty-five others the degree of lecturer (MSc). They were from private and public universities in the country. The geographical location of the HEI, the institutional size, the field of study it covers, the degree of involvement in the Bologna Process were considered as criteria for the selection of universities.

The analysis of the responses focused on two considerations: First, the central issues offered by the lecturers were identified. So, we were allowed to assess the level of this group how it recognizes and understands the objective of the Bologna Process and especially analyse their attitudes on educational quality assurance. Secondly, we were interested in identifying the challenges posed by the implementation of the Bologna Process, as well as the attitude towards the paradigm for change and overcoming the difficulties it brings to quality and other objectives of the Bologna Process. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The combination of quantitative and qualitative methods provides a broader picture of the issue and contributes to a more reliable analysis. Also, according to Tight (2012, p. 21), the selected methods are the most used in studying the problems of higher education.

The study was conducted in three main phases:

a. Qualitative study through interviews with experts, the information obtained from which serves to design questionnaires for the second phase, the quantitative one.
b. Quantitative study through the analysis of questionnaires. The method is that of the survey.
c. Qualitative documentary study and literature review.

More importance has been given to qualitative methods due to the nature of the problem in this study, the effects of the Bologna Process, (Ursin, Huusko, Muhonen, Honkimäki, Kiviniemi & Aittola, 2009) and the implementation of this process in Albania. While these phases are performed in a linear (exploratory sequential design) for the design of questionnaires.

In our case, some in-depth interviews were conducted, which were followed by the survey. According to Creswell (2012, p. 535), this approach shows that the researcher does not start from the perceptions of the subject, but considers the perceptions of the interviewees and other participants in the study. According to Creswell (2012, p.543), research through a framework of mixed methods is a procedure for collecting, analysing, and combining qualitative and quantitative methods in a single study to understand the issue under research. Here it is assumed that the use of both methods makes it possible to better understand the problem, compared to the use of one method. This approach is especially true for higher education problems, which are complex and the use of a single method is insufficient. Furthermore, using many sources of information (experts, students, policymakers, professors), the purpose of this study is to provide an alternative to the way of analysing problems in higher education in Albania.

FINDINGS

Rectors Responds to Quality Assurance

Since the Berlin Communication (2003), great efforts have been made to develop internal quality processes, seeing the Bologna Process as an opportunity to improve teaching and learning. There seems to have been progressed in the formal development of quality agreements, as well as some other elements of the Bologna reforms, but it remains a challenge for higher education in the country. The reform of the Bologna Process has had a positive impact on the establishment of quality assurance systems by some European standards in Albania, but it remains in its initial stages.

Thus, the institutional responses to the questionnaire reveal that the process and functioning of the quality assurance system is one of the most important challenges in recent years for universities in the country. Quality is another very important aspect of higher education. In recent years, with the closure of some non-public universities or branches of public universities, also because of their quality liberalization of the education market, quality has often been debated at the political level, part of which is the ranking or evaluation by international institutions. In this context, it is worth mentioning.

- Regarding if the institution applies internal evaluation of study programs, 6 of the respondents answered that this evaluation is performed regularly by themselves, and only in one case it is reported that this evaluation is sometimes performed.
- Regarding the existence of regulation for students and the evaluation of academic staff, the respondents answered shows that 6 universities have regulations for student evaluation, while only one there is no such regulation.
- Regarding the internal evaluation of academic staff, there is a regulation in 5 universities, while two of them do not have one. This is because, in these universities, this issue is regulated in different forms, such as in the regulation of ethics, internal regulation, etc.
- Regarding if the institution evaluates student services (e.g. libraries, career services/counseling, etc.). For 5 universities this evaluation is performed regularly, while for two others it either happens sometimes.
- Regarding if the institution systematically collects quantitative data on its research activities, all rectors express themselves positively.
- Regarding if the institution has completed institutional accreditation or accreditation for study programs, the answers are as follows: 42.9% of them have completed institutional accreditation, while the rest have not yet completed.
- Regarding the accreditation of study programs, 6 of them answered that they have completed this accreditation except for the University of Durrës. From the confrontation of these data with the data of the Agency for External Quality Assurance, we get another picture. Apart from the Polytechnic University which is in the process of accreditation, none of the public HEIs included in this study has institutional and program accreditation. Perhaps the answers given refer to the pre-accreditation process for obtaining permission to open new study programs. Private universities seem to be ahead in this regard.

Academic Staff Responds to Quality Assurance

The qualitative analysis was thematic and the coding of the problems was performed in a simple scheme, according to the importance they have in this study.
The main topics covered by the participants were:

1. Knowledge and attitude to the benefits of the Bologna Process for quality assurance.
2. Involvement of participants in this process.

Knowledge and Benefits: All study participants had sufficient knowledge of the Bologna Process. Most of them focused on the benefits that the process brought to the higher education system in Albania, but some also mentioned the shortcomings. Academic staff emphases the need to be placed on the quality of education provided. Thus, the respondents identified quality as an important point in the implementation of the Bologna Process. Most respondents rate quality assurance based on similar standards and procedures, which make higher education systems more comparable and compatible across Europe. Regarding them, it has come as a result of a better organization of studies making the process and changing perspective more complete.

The perception of the academic staff is that there is poor quality in education, especially in doctoral programs. This still appears to be a great challenge of our education system because, according to professors, doctoral programs are set up without knowing well the interests of the country, there is no cooperation at the university level with other universities, but these are mainly individual initiatives that take more very time consuming and require high financial levels. However, the Bologna Process has created more conditions for benefits to this program, because it includes more exchange programs.

Public universities occupy the largest specific weight in the country and most professors express concerns about the sustainability of the implementation of the Bologna Process. The quality of the level of infrastructure and professionalism, the value system, and the independence of the education system in universities are still influenced by the political climate. Also, some criticize that the Bologna Process has negatively influenced the study programs by calling them insufficient for some areas of specialization. The implementation of the Bologna Process has not always brought the desired effects, "Changes have also taken place within universities, with the establishment of internal quality assessment units, although it must be said that in this regard the process is very slow, superficial, and academically very unsupported. I value it as a very dangerous flow for the future of the quality of higher education and youth training for the labor market if the process continues with so much bureaucracy on paper and with so many low-quality developments in reality"

The reform of the Bologna Process has had a positive impact on the establishment of quality assurance systems by some European standards in Albania. But to the benefits, all participants are more or less in agreement when it comes to studying programs, even though this has only happened formally. According to them, there has been a diversification of the offer; it has stimulated the mobility of professors and students. İt is only done a formal structuring of study cycles, but nothing else has happened. İt is believed that shortly the whole legal framework needs to be revised to finally break away from some populist policies, often dressed in the guise of university democracy so that universities can function well in the preparation of students, conduct research. Meanwhile (Re) accreditation of all programs (bachelor and master) automatically has increased the time spent in faculties for mainly administrative matters and was a direct consequence of the Bologna Process, where most of the academic staff is involved.

Involvement: Regarding the involvement in decision-making related to the aspect of quality, this has been identified as a major problem not only in Albania but also in the studies of international literature that refer to the Bologna Process.

The perception of the academic staff is that policymaking at the national level has been a top-down process; it has not lacked public discussion and consultation, with the commitment of the academic staff, the management of the universities. Meanwhile, these discussions have not significantly included groups outside the academy such as e.g. businesses and labour market representatives, students, and parents. Most focus group responses converge on the fact that consultations should have permanent forums for discussion and participation in reforms. This approach is lacking in the development of higher education in the country and consequently has directly affected the quality of higher education.

DISCUSSIONS

The quality assurance system has been sanctioned by law since 1999, but formal requirements were not sufficiently consolidated in practice (Sulstarova, 2017, 56). An appropriate balance needs to be struck between creating and developing a culture of internal quality assurance and the role that external quality assurance procedures can play.

The managing institutions of this process are the universities themselves and the national quality assurance agencies. Quality Assurance Agencies in member countries must apply for

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membership in the European Quality Assurance Network. Membership in this network means that national agencies follow these guidelines in quality assurance processes.

Quality assurance from within the institution is also provided by law, but institutions have been very slow in setting up these structures and consolidating them. The government drafts and approves in detail the legislation on functioning, institutional organization, quality assurance and monitors their effectiveness. The decision-making process is relatively centralized, as the government regulates the financial sphere, while universities are autonomous in terms of administration, promotion of academic staff, and institutional organization. Monitoring of the activity of higher education institutions is done with inspection and bureaucratic formality (Sulstarova, 2017, 56-57).

At the European level, the EUA has set up a quality assurance database but Albania is not part of or has not submitted data. So, the comparison with other countries to have an overview with empirical data on the level of congruence is truncated. Indeed, Higher Education Institutions tend to a European focus, as they regularly show interest in evaluating research activities and teaching. Changes in Higher Education Institutions are currently implemented, but, the concept of a culture of quality achieved is still far from the strategic orientation of the institution. The involvement of staff in internal and student quality is also far from European. A "complacency culture" seems to develop, through negatively expressing the importance of student participation in assessment processes, as they are unable to assess teaching and staff quality.

The main concern of some institutions is responding to national quality assurance requirements. According to them, ASCAL does not make clear the connection between its requirements and European quality assurance standards. Considering the institutional, national context, and requirements of the European agency, in particular, the needs of HEIs to respond to change, should be more strategic and contribute effectively to the knowledge of society. At the same time, students, academics, and administrative staff need to engage constructively in internal quality and quality assurance processes.

Quality processes should be oriented towards improvement by linking strategic institutional developments and external evaluations, particularly internal quality processes need to be comprehensive, they can be used to track progress towards the Bologna Process quality assurance of the learning environment. From a policy perspective, internal quality assurance requires a balance between autonomy and accountability (Bacevic & Nokkala, 2014) to ensure the institution's commitment to its evaluation and implementation processes, leading to improved quality levels.

CONCLUSIONS

Understanding the changes that have taken place in higher education worldwide is a difficult task due to the scope and complexity of trends. Understanding a dynamic process as it unfolds is by no means an easy task, especially when change seems to have accelerated in recent years. Higher education has been at the centre of global transformation, from an industrial to a post-industrial knowledge society. In this evolving knowledge society, higher education is no longer under the development of social and political realities, which have traditionally influenced it, but on the contrary, it is already a key factor in the development of national competition and the modernization of society.

The greatest achievements reported at the international level have been the creation of policies for sustainable development in education, (Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2014) the reorientation of curricula in many areas, as well as the establishment of new approaches to teaching. Meanwhile, international higher education policies still carry many problems. First, the institutional leadership of higher education systems is an important factor in supporting and ensuring the operation of educational policies. *Second*, the institutional and individual elements

bring stakeholders together in collaborative action to support efforts in the coming years. Finally, efforts to develop international higher education policies need to be based on practices for reorienting education, training, and public awareness towards sustainable development, which contributes to achieving the goals of society.

From a global view, only raising awareness of sustainable education has been successful, but stakeholders have moved slightly towards intensifying research, demonstrating projects, and intensifying capacity-building, partnership, and networks. Although challenges remain, best practices developed globally, regionally, nationally, and locally require more careful treatment in the future.

From a European point of view, the analysis of reports and studies shows that the European Higher Education Area is facing serious challenges. Higher education institutions in the European region have been hit by the financial crisis. The consequences can lead to a long-term negative impact on the quality of higher education. Given the financial and economic situation, as well as the socio-cultural aspects in many European countries, the future of higher education systems needs to be considered more than ever the notion of "academic moral solidarity" needs to become the norm and source for seeking new ways of international cooperation. Cooperation between higher education actors and society in institutions can be beneficial in increasing employment but needs to be addressed with caution.

From a local perspective the priorities for action in higher education, undertaken in the context of global and European developments by the Western Balkan countries, including common issues. Regional universities need to strengthen programs through their collaboration. Also, the results of the paper show that the higher education system in the country faces significant challenges; it needs a common European approach. The successful implementation of Bologna is partly conditioned by the capacity of institutional leaders to develop an institutional coherence of multidimensional change, to link the implementation of the Bologna Process with the specifics of their goals, mission, and objectives while respecting institutional diversity.

The challenges are global, but solutions may vary in detail, although they seem to have many similarities. In the next millennium, higher education in the country is likely to undergo a complex set of changes. It remains to be seen whether 21st-century universities will play their traditional role, rather than a more liberal one, and adapt them to the role and demands of the market.

There is no doubt that the. Communication on the objectives of the Bologna Process needs to be more effective to achieve a smooth, sustainable transformation/management of universities towards the European Higher Education Area. An appropriate balance needs to be struck between creating and developing a culture of internal quality assurance and the role that external quality assurance procedures can play. The managing institutions of this process are the higher education institutions themselves and the national quality assurance agencies. Quality assurance agencies in member countries must apply for membership in the European Quality Assurance Network. Membership in this network means that national agencies follow these guidelines in quality assurance processes.

In conclusion: In the quality dimension, Albania formally meets a set of European standards and practices of the Bologna Process, but more is required to be done in terms of transparency and independence of external quality assurance agencies by the state authorities.

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