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ACADEMIC COMMUNITY'S OPINION REGARDING EVALUATION
AND ACCREDITATION PROCEDURES

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***Abstract:** Academic Community's Opinion regarding Evaluation and Accreditation Procedures: The opinion of the national academic community (rectors, students and university representatives) is an element of the quality assurance system of the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA).*

The methodology of the study was exposed in a specialized quality procedure. A survey among 1079 people from the academic community was carried out (54 questions, 3 questionnaire forms) and 20719 answers were presented. They were integrated in tables and graph worksheets.

Representative information of the activities of the NEAA concerning higher education quality in Bulgaria was obtained.

Keywords: Opinion, Evaluation, Accreditation, Quality System, Procedure, Questionnaire Form, Higher Education.

JEL: I20, I22

INTRODUCTION

Higher education quality is a subject of discussion and planning in European structures [1], in the national higher education system [2], in the evaluation and accreditation activity [3]. The National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) has a legally regulated function to encourage higher education institutions to develop their own potential and maintain the quality of the education they offer through evaluation and accreditation procedures. The Agency implements a Programme for the Application of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and an Action Plan [4].

The NEAA disposes of a Quality Assurance System of its own [5]. The System establishes the methodology for the adopted quality improvement approach.

In compliance with the evaluation and accreditation procedures, higher education institutions present in their self-evaluation reports the results of their own surveys varying in topic and content. Active NEAA surveys allow to obtain unified and structured information on the activities concerned. One of the elements of the System of Quality Assurance of NEAA activities is the quality procedure "Surveys". It was adopted by a Decision of the Commission on the quality of NEAA's work in 2015. The aim of the procedure is to establish: rules for conducting surveys; nomenclature and content of questionnaire forms; results verification and use.

EXPOSITION

1. NEAA's Quality Procedure "Surveys".

When performing the evaluation and accreditation procedures, the NEAA conducts its own survey. The purpose is:

- to assess the state of NEAA Quality Assurance System (its compliance with the requirements, as well as the satisfaction of external experts, rectors, representatives of higher education institutions and members of standing committees with the quality of the NEAA's activities);

• to obtain assessment information on the state of the accredited institution/programme (ensuring objective assessment by conducting NEAA surveys actively).

The surveys help to receive feedback on the opinion regarding the quality of NEAA activities in order to take preventive and corrective actions, as well as fact-based management decisions.

The procedure consists of the following parts:

1. *General*
2. *The purpose of the procedure*
3. *Field of application*
4. *Responsibilities*
5. *Conducting surveys*
 - 5.1. *Survey target groups*
 - 5.2. *Content and layout of survey questionnaire forms*
 - 5.3. *Survey organization*
 - 5.4. *Dissemination of survey results*
 - 5.5. *Survey results use*
6. *Survey data records management*
7. *Annexes: Nomenclature of the survey questionnaire forms and Questionnaire forms*

The questionnaire forms are designed using a sample template containing:

- *the topic of the survey;*
- *the date of completion of the questionnaire;*
- *an introductory instructive section;*
- *a question section with preliminary filter questions and main questions for retrieving factual survey information;*
- *a section for respondents' freely expressed opinion (evaluation refinement, additional important information retrieval, personal position statement, etc.).*

2. Nomenclature and Content of Questionnaire Forms

The nomenclature of the questionnaire forms from the procedure contains a total of 8 questionnaire forms divided into two groups (Table 1). All opinion surveys are non-anonymous, especially the surveys on the opinions of graduate employers that have to be non-anonymous.

Table 1 Survey Questionnaire Form Nomenclature

Sequence №	Target Group	Title of the Questionnaire Form
1	2	3
1	A survey assessing the state of NEAA quality system	
1.1	<p><i>Experts designated by the Accreditation Council (AC) of the NEAA to participate in expert groups in accordance with the stated procedures:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Bulgarian experts;</i> • <i>Foreign experts;</i> • <i>Representatives of professional and trade organizations and of employers' associations;</i> • <i>Representatives of students and doctoral candidates.</i> 	<p><i>A survey on the opinion experts from expert groups have regarding the way NEAA accreditation and evaluation procedures are organized and performed.</i></p>
1.2	<p><i>Representatives of higher education institutions (HEI):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>HEI officials in charge of accreditation and evaluation procedures;</i> 	<p><i>A survey on the opinion representatives of higher education institutions have regarding the way project accreditation or evaluation procedures are organized and performed.</i></p>

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HEI working group leaders and members who have prepared the self-evaluation report under the relevant procedure. 	
1.3	The Council of Rectors of higher education institutions in Bulgaria.	A survey on the opinion rectors of higher education institutions in Bulgaria have regarding the way NEAA accreditation and evaluation procedures are organized and performed.
1.4	Members of NEAA standing committees (SC) by areas of higher education and on post-accreditation monitoring and control (PAMC).	A survey on the opinion members of NEAA standing committees have regarding the way NEAA accreditation and evaluation procedures are organized and performed.
1.5	General and specialized NEAA administration employees.	A survey on the opinion general and specialized NEAA administration employees have regarding the way NEAA accreditation and evaluation procedures are organized and performed.
2	A survey for obtaining assessment information on the state of the accredited institution/programme	
2.1	Students and doctoral candidates from a higher education institution where an accreditation procedure is implemented.	A survey on the opinion students and doctoral candidates have regarding an institution (higher education institution), professional field/specialty from the regulated professions list, doctoral programme for which an accreditation procedure is being implemented.
2.2	Students from the accredited higher education institution.	A survey on the opinion students have regarding the objective and fair assessment of their knowledge and skills.
2.3	Graduate employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Heads of state and municipal entities; • Heads of national trade organizations; • Owners and managers of leading companies; • Nationally recognized practitioners. 	A survey on the opinion graduate employers have regarding: the accredited institution (higher education institution); the accredited professional field/specialty from the regulated professions list; the accredited academic training; the project under assessment.

3. A survey on the opinion Academic Community representatives have regarding the way project accreditation or evaluation procedures are organized and implemented

In December 2015 and January 2016 there was a survey on the opinion rectors, students, doctoral candidates and higher education representatives have regarding the way project accreditation or evaluation procedures were organized and performed. The survey was conducted under the Programme for the Application of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and the Action Plan adopted by NEAA Accreditation Council [4].

The survey was carried out in compliance with the Quality Procedure "Surveys", part of NEAA Quality Assurance System, using the following questionnaire templates:

- *QUESTIONNAIRE FORM № 1.3. A survey on the opinion rectors of higher education institutions in Bulgaria have regarding the organization and implementation of NEAA accreditation and evaluation procedures;*

- *QUESTIONNAIRE FORM № 1.2. A survey on the opinion representatives of higher education institutions have regarding the organization and implementation of project accreditation or evaluation procedures;*

- *QUESTIONNAIRE FORM № 2.1. A survey on the opinion students and doctoral candidates have regarding an institution (higher education institution), professional field, specialty from the regulated professions list, doctoral programme for which an accreditation procedure is being implemented.*

The invitation for participation in the survey based on Questionnaire Forms № 1.2 and 2.1 was stated in Letter № 1229/11.12.2015 of NEAA President. The invitation for participation in the survey based on Questionnaire Form № 1.3 came from NEAA President.

Table 2 summarizes the results from the survey conducted.

Table 2 Summary of the survey results

Sequence №	Indicator	Questionnaire Form №			Total
		1.2	1.3	2.1	
1	2	3	4	5	6
1	Number of respondents	458	18	603	1079
2	Number of respondents who freely expressed their opinion	56	6	30	92 (8.53 % of the respondents)
3	Number of questions on the questionnaire form	12	18	24	54
4	The total number of responses provided	5438	332	14949	20719

The questionnaire forms filled in by the respondents were processed and the results from each of them were presented in 3 tables with identical headers:

- Table 1. Number of answers provided for each of the questions
- Table 2. Relative share of the provided answer to each of the questions
- Table 3. Graphic interpretation of the survey results

Apart from this, the information from the Freely Expressed Opinion Section was summarized (separately for Questionnaire Forms 1.2, 1.3 and 2.1).

Fig. 1 shows the graphic interpretation of the results as they were obtained for each question of each questionnaire form.

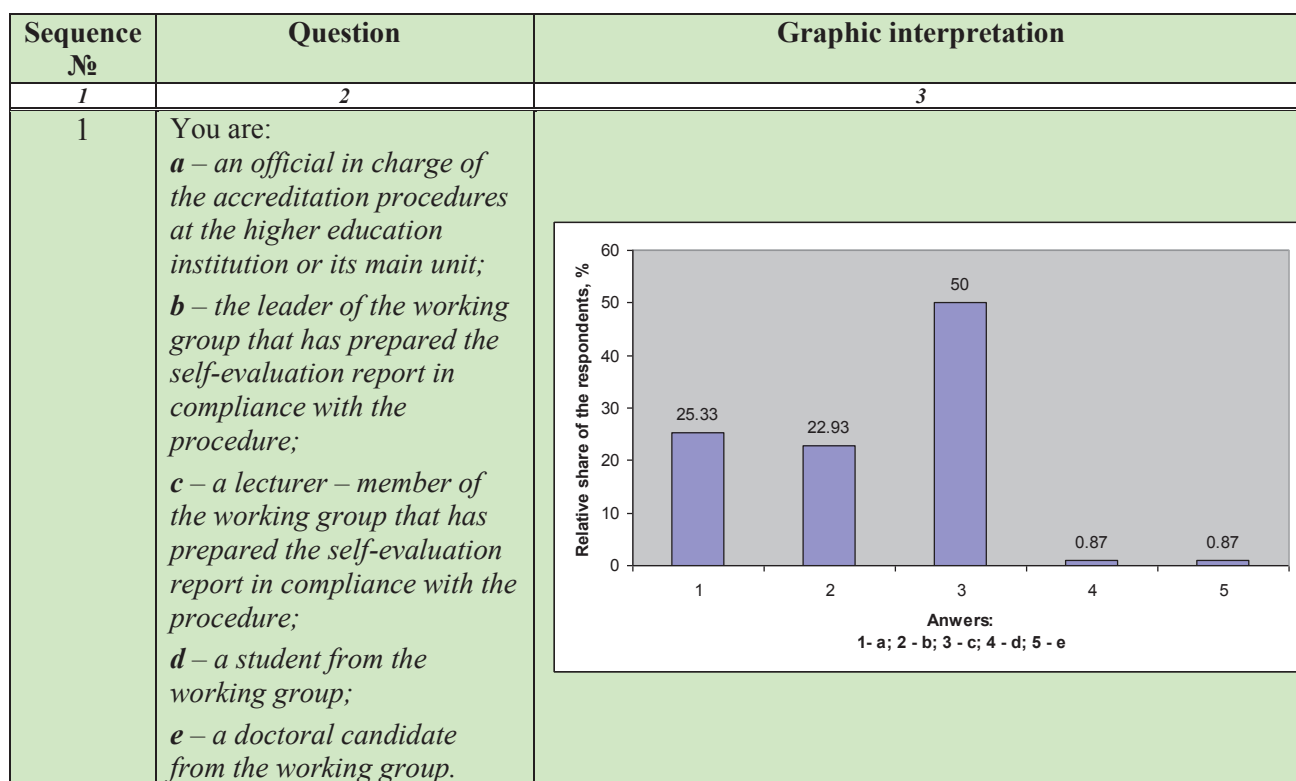


Fig. 1. Graphic interpretation of the survey results

4. Findings

QUESTIONNAIRE FORM № 1.3

A survey on the opinion rectors of higher education institutions in Bulgaria have regarding the organization and implementation of NEAA accreditation and evaluation procedures

The survey conducted using this questionnaire form contains 18 questions with 5 possible answer choices. The questionnaire form consists of the following sections: General information (5 questions); Relations and NEAA's work assessment (4 questions); Accreditation model (3 questions); Implementation of accreditation and evaluation procedures (6 questions).

The total number of rectors of higher education institutions who participated in the survey was 18, the majority of them (83.33 %) being rectors of state-run higher education institutions.

6 of them provided answers in the Freely Expressed Opinion Section. Only two of the questions were answered by less than 100 % of the respondents.

Out of the rectors who participated in the survey:

- half (50.00 %) have been part of expert groups on NEAA procedures;
- 12.5 % have been in charge of expert groups.

The respondents have taken part practically in all kinds of project accreditation and evaluation procedures.

The following are definitely positively assessed („thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent”):

- the dialogue between the Council of Rectors and the NEAA (77.78 %);
- the overall evaluation of NEAA's work (86.67 %);
- the benefit of conducting NEAA accreditation procedures (100.00 %);
- the confidence in the NEAA and its evaluation (88.89 %).

The majority of the respondents (77.78 %) believe that the applied model should consolidate the institutional and programme accreditation activities in a single procedure.

There is no consensus regarding the evaluation by a foreign accreditation agency:

- none of the respondents opted for „thoroughly and completely”;
- 38.89 % answered „to a great extent” and „yes”;
- 41.11 % answered „to some extent” and „no”.

Among the respondents prevails the opinion that the NEAA should be a state authority:

- 61.11 % approve of the NEAA being a „state authority as it has been so far”;
- 22.22 % approve of the „state and public authority” status of the NEAA.

The selection of members for the expert groups in charge of NEAA evaluation and accreditation procedures is positively evaluated - 94.45 % answered „thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent”.

About half of the respondents have established preliminary contacts with NEAA officials and expert groups for action coordination.

The following are positively evaluated:

- the meetings and activities, part of the planned programme for the visit („thoroughly and completely” - 83.34 %);
- the discussion of documents presented by the higher education institution („thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent” – 94.45 %).

As for the participation of the higher education institutions in the evaluation and accreditation procedures, the overall impression of the respondents is that it is:

- „excellent” – 50.00 %;
- „very good” – 50.00 %.

QUESTIONNAIRE FORM № 1.2

A survey on the opinion representatives of higher education institutions have regarding the organization and implementation of project accreditation or evaluation procedures

The survey using this questionnaire form contains 12 questions with 5 possible answer choices. The first three questions concern general information about the respondent and the rest are main survey questions.

The total number of respondents was 458, 56 of whom stated their opinion in the relevant section. Not less than 97.82 % of the respondents provided answers to the questions asked.

The majority of the interviewed representatives of the higher education institutions who were part of the working group that prepared the self-evaluation report were officials and academic staff and 1.74 % were students and doctoral candidates.

By the time the survey was conducted, only 3.74 % of the respondents had not participated in accreditation procedures at their higher education institution.

About one third (29.59 %) of the respondents have not taken part in accreditation procedures of other higher education institutions.

The selection of members for the expert groups in charge of NEAA evaluation and accreditation procedures is positively evaluated – 81.91 % answered „thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent”.

Less than half of the respondents have established preliminary contacts for action coordination with NEAA (thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent” – 44.00 %).

The following are positively evaluated:

- the meetings and activities, part of the planned programme for the visit („thoroughly and completely” – 73.88 %);
- the discussion of documents presented by the higher education institution („thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent” – 83.41 %).

The respondents evaluate the overall participation of their higher education institutions in evaluation and accreditation procedures as:

- „excellent” – 58.46 %;
- „very good” – 37.58 %.

Regarding the accreditation model:

- 40.75 % of the respondents are in favour of the existing model (institutional accreditation followed by a programme accreditation);
- 15.2 % support the institutional accreditation only;
- 37.00 % prefer the consolidation of the institutional and programme accreditation procedures;
- 5.51 % want only a programme accreditation;
- 1.54 % - other.

There is no consensus regarding the evaluation by a foreign accreditation agency:

- 28.19 % of the respondents opted for „thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent”;
- 21.81 % answered „yes”;

- 50.00 % answered „to some extent” and „no”.

Among the respondents prevails the opinion that the NEAA should be a state authority:

- 59.12 % approve of the NEAA being a „state authority as it has been so far”;
- 26.81 % think the NEAA should be a „state and public authority”.

QUESTIONNAIRE FORM № 2.1

A survey on the opinion students and doctoral candidates have regarding an institution (higher education institution), professional field, specialty from the regulated professions list, doctoral programme for which an accreditation procedure is being implemented

The survey using this questionnaire form contains 18 questions with 5 possible answer choices. The first three questions concern general information about the respondent and the rest are main survey questions.

The total number of respondents was 603. 5 % of them (30 respondents) expressed their opinion in the relevant section. Not less than 96.68 % of the respondents provided answers to the questions asked.

Of all the respondents:

- 48.26 % were asked to express their opinion regarding an institutional accreditation procedure;
- 41.29 % - regarding programme accreditation of a professional field and specialty from the list of regulated professions;
- 14.1 % - regarding programme accreditation of a doctoral programme;
- 3.15 % - regarding project evaluation.
- The respondents have enrolled in the following programmes:
 - Bachelor’s degree programmes – 49.25 %;
 - Master’s degree programmes – 27.29 %;
 - Doctoral degree programmes – 22.63 %.
- The respondents’ fields of study include:
 - Humanities – 16.98 %;
 - Natural Sciences – 8.23 %;
 - Social Sciences – 30.87 %;
 - Engineering – 41.17 %.

The administrative service at the higher education institution is positively evaluated, the „thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent” answers are given for:

- the administrative office of the main unit (faculty, college, additional instructional location) – 76.04 %;
- the administrative office of the higher education institution – 72.83 %.
- Regarding the satisfaction with the library, the „thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent” answers are given for:
 - the library’s collection – 74.96 %;
 - the service quality – 81.5 %;
 - the services provided – 76.92 %;
 - the opening hours – 75.94 %.

Respondents' satisfaction with the following is „through and complete” and „to a great extent”:

- sporting opportunities at the higher education institution - 69.36 %;
- opportunities for involvement in student clubs – 67.18 %.
- The respondents have taken part in projects of the higher education institution as follows:
- participation in one or more national projects – 56.00 %;
- participation in one or more international projects – 36.68 %;
- rewarded project participation – 42.57 %.

Regarding contact maintenance with the academic staff:

- 40.75 % of the respondents stated they maintained very intensive contacts with academic staff to help with their professional development;
- 31.95 % of the respondents maintained such contacts on a regular basis.

With regard to practical training, the „thoroughly and completely” and „to a great extent” answers are given for:

- the practical training organization (81.68 %);
- the participation of the academic staff in managing and conducting the practical training (84.2 %);
- the participation of specialists from off-campus companies and organizations where practical training takes place (65.00 %);
- the practical training facilities and conditions at the higher education institution (76.52%);
- the practical training facilities and conditions in the off-campus companies and organizations (68.65 %);
- the appropriate level of practical training that helps the received theoretical knowledge instruction (87.12 %);
- the objective evaluation of the acquired practical knowledge and skills (83.14 %);
- the use of the acquired practical knowledge and skills for learning the next academic disciplines (84.54 %);
- the use of the received practical training and the acquired practical knowledge and skills for labour market integration (85.23 %).

CONCLUSION

This is the first survey that has been conducted to implement the Programme for the Application of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and the Action Plan adopted by NEAA Accreditation Council on 15.10.2016. It involved a considerable number of respondents (1079 in total) who completed three questionnaire forms in accordance with the quality procedure "Surveys" from the System of Quality Assurance of NEAA's work.

The experience that has been gained paves the way for conducting surveys using the complete range of questionnaire forms pursuant to quality procedure "Surveys". The methodology of the surveys is open to improvement.

The representative results obtained during the surveys ensure that NEAA's work for the benefit of the quality of Bulgarian higher education is successful.

REFERENCES

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