

The impact of institutional accreditation process on higher education institutions: evidence from Armenia

T.S. Movsisyan

European University of Armenia, Yerevan, Armenia

This study explores the impact of the institutional accreditation process on higher education institutions in Armenia. It reveals that while accreditation improves internal quality assurance systems and university reputations, challenges such as accreditation site visit durations, excessive documentation, and incomplete expert-panel reports reduce its effectiveness. The study highlights gaps in Armenia's higher education system, including the lack of a state quality assurance policy and insufficient alignment with European approaches, urging a revision of accreditation criteria.

Keywords: *institutional accreditation, higher education quality assurance, Armenian accreditation process, educational reform, ESG, accreditation criteria and challenges.*

In the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the current reforms predominantly focus on the continuous enhancement of institutional operations and the academic programs offered by universities. This advancement is substantially conditioned by the meticulous organization and implementation of the accreditation process. The latter is justified by the fact that the outcomes of the accreditation process depend on the activities aimed at improving various domains of institutional activities and the quality of academic programs. On the other hand, the outcomes of the accreditation process also affect universities' competitiveness, ranking, and their integration into the EHEA. This paper presents an empirical research analyzing how the accreditation process influenced the efficiency of the Republic of Armenia (RA) universities, especially the activities in different domains as well as the quality of the provided academic programs. The research results are based on analysis of expert-panel reports and interviews among the key stakeholders of the 15 accredited universities, which show that an accreditation has exerted a profound influence on the functioning of universities in the RA, significantly enhancing their competitiveness on both national and European levels [1]. It acts as a continual «wake-up call» for institutions, compelling them to pursue self-improvement and ongoing enhancement. At the same time, the research has identified several issues regarding the organization and implementation of the accreditation process, as well as a misunderstanding of the core essence and importance of quality culture within the accreditation process. The identified issues are predominantly related to incomplete understanding and outdatedness of accreditation criteria, their partial alignment with the ESG, deficiencies in the templates of self-assessment and expert-panel reports, incomplete reflection of data on institutional activities, insufficient integration of state and labor market demands within reform initiatives, and other interrelated issues. The results of this research may help universities, higher education policy makers and other interested parties of the quality assurance in higher education to take steps to fill

the gaps, improve and further refine the revealed issues since the accreditation is currently the key mechanism for the increase and improvement of the efficiency of the universities being implemented in the EHEA.

Accreditation is one of the most common mechanisms of external quality assurance in the EHEA. In the professional literature there are different definitions and interpretations of the concept «accreditation». Particularly, accreditation is defined as a «collegial process based on self-assessment and peer evaluation, aimed at ensuring public accountability and improving academic quality» [2, p. 5]. In other words, accreditation is a periodically conducted process through which a public or private organization evaluates the quality of an educational institution's operations and its academic programs, with the aim of officially certifying their compliance with established criteria or standards [1]. Accreditation is also viewed as a cyclical process based on self-assessment, aimed at enhancing institutional performance, the quality of academic programs, and public accountability [6]. The study of professional literature indicates that accreditation has multiple benefits for all the key stakeholders of higher education sector. Research by education experts, states that the outcomes of the accreditation process have significant impact on many aspects of the universities [3, 4]. Firstly, it helps to increase the efficiency of the university through improving its policies, strategies, processes and core functional areas, such as management system, admissions, research and innovation, academic programs, reputation and ranking, teaching and learning environment, internationalization, quality management system, etc. Secondly, the accreditation status of a university plays a decisive role in shaping organizational decision-making, driving enhancements in infrastructure and resources, as well as defining terms and responsibilities.

In the context of Armenian higher education, accreditation functions as a critical mechanism for the enhancement of education quality, and assures key stakeholders that the education provided by the universities is trustworthy and that its quality is recognized by the state. Besides, in Armenia an accreditation enables the HEIs to receive state funding for tuition-free places, as well as for the implementation of targeted research activities. In addition, accreditation ensures the competitive advantages of universities, their engagement in academic processes, and the promotion of academic mobility [5]. The results of the expert-panel reports [1] and interviews were analyzed in three parts:

1. Preparation phase of accreditation: The questions in this section address structural and procedural issues related to the completion of the accreditation application form and e-questionnaire, the strengths and weaknesses of the self-analysis process, and the evaluation of the effectiveness of the consultations and guidance provided to universities by ANQA.

2. Expert evaluation phase: The questions in this section pertain to the activities of the accreditation expert-panels and coordinators, the effectiveness of site-visits, the application of ESG and Armenian accreditation criteria during the evaluation, the evaluation of the template and content of expert-panel reports, and

the evaluation of the activities of the observation committees and accreditation commission.

3. Post-accreditation phase: The questions in this section deal with the effectiveness of ongoing monitoring by the ANQA in preparation for subsequent accreditations, the connection between quality assurance and strategic planning in universities after accreditation, factors that facilitate or hinder strategic development in universities, and the professional preparedness of the staff in quality assurance departments in coordinating accreditation processes.

The results of the research are presented in a general manner below.

Preparation phase of accreditation. The majority of the interview participants (86%) mentioned that no procedural issues were encountered, as they have sufficient experience and their internal capacities fully met the requirements to organize the process smoothly. However, some universities (14%) highlighted the issue of excessive workload related to the preparation of documentation packages and the lack of guidelines for completing the application form or similar documents, which complicated the application process. To resolve this issue, it was suggested to simplify the template, replacing the need to provide extensive data about the university's activities. As for the completion of the e-questionnaire alongside the application form, according to 65% of universities, the e-questionnaire has a logical structure, reflects the core processes of the institution, and allows for the periodic monitoring of the university's documentation base. However, the template of the e-questionnaire requires revision for several reasons. The primary reason for revising the template is the volume of required documents, which causes technical issues. Universities claim that when attaching the required files, many sections of the e-questionnaire experience size limitations, preventing the completion of the questionnaire in its logical form. Another issue is the repetition of questions in the e-questionnaire, which leads to unnecessary documentation. Summarizing the universities' views on the first phase questions, it has been noted that the template includes criteria and questions related to the implementation of university management, infrastructure, organization of the educational process, as well as the planning, implementation, and evaluation of stakeholders' activities. This allows for the examination of all processes from different perspectives, considering both achievements and shortcomings. Nevertheless, it has been noted that the template is excessively extensive, and the comments under the criteria are too general. Additionally, there are numerous repetitions within it, which have limited the universities' ability to adequately present their work. It has also been observed that when developing the template, the existence of state regulatory documents, especially for sectoral universities, as well as the requirements of the ESG, were not taken into account. Overall, universities highly value the role of self-analysis in identifying the strengths and weaknesses of their operations. The data obtained for this study show that self-analysis has allowed universities to regulate their ongoing processes and establish and spread a quality culture across all levels of the institution. However, the issues

identified in the study reduce the effectiveness of the self-analysis process, which could lead to improper implementation of the expert evaluation phase.

Expert evaluation phase. Summarizing the results of the interviews related to the expert evaluation phase, it can be concluded that the evaluation is one of the most crucial parts of the accreditation process, and its outcome directly affects the future operations of universities. However, the policy and procedures for selecting experts need improvement, with a focus on considering the specific characteristics of universities and ensuring that experts are proficient in applying European quality assurance approaches and the EQAR framework. Furthermore, the issues identified in this study reduce the effectiveness of external evaluations. Universities also highly value the work of the coordinators. However, in terms of applying European quality assurance approaches, coordinators require further training. Expert visits in Armenia are generally effective, though the main issues are related to the duration of the visits and the conduct of open and online meetings, which do not fully serve their intended purpose. Therefore, it is necessary to reconsider the duration of these visits, taking into account the specific characteristics of universities. The template of the expert-panel reports is systematic and covers all aspects of university operations, including facts about the current state of the institution, which serve as the basis for evaluating standards and drawing conclusions. However, the template is not suitable for governmental universities, whose activities differ significantly from those of other institutions. Overall, the template needs to be revised, considering the issues identified in the research. The quality of expert-panel reports is largely determined by the analysis of the collected information. Expert reports are valuable institutional documents for universities because they contain analyses of strengths and weaknesses in various operational areas. However, the process and approaches for preparing expert reports need to be reconsidered, as they do not fully include information about the entire university's operations, especially targeted issues. This significantly affects the university's ranking and reduces the effectiveness of the accreditation process. Sometimes, this is further exacerbated by gaps in the connection between facts, conclusions, and recommendations. The research results show that the majority of universities are not fully aware of the purpose of accreditation standards, which prevents them from accurately presenting the information required under those standards. On the other hand, the accreditation standards partially align with the standards of the European Quality Assurance Framework, creating artificial barriers in areas such as qualification recognition and academic mobility. Therefore, there is an urgent need to revise the accreditation standards in Armenia, as they do not fully serve their purpose, including the identification of targeted issues. It is important to note that universities place high value on developing and implementing improvement plans based on expert reports, as these serve as the foundation for their future actions. However, the issues identified in this study significantly hinder the development of these improvement plans. Overall, universities are satisfied with the activity of

the Monitoring Committees. Some observations were made regarding the committees' data collection and identification of issues, but this has not diminished universities' expectations from the accreditation process. However, universities find problematic the changes in the accreditation commission's policy on awarding accreditation, which do not allow for a comprehensive evaluation of each university's specific characteristics and, consequently, decision-making.

Post-accreditation phase. Summarizing the findings of the study related to the post-accreditation phase, it can be concluded that the ongoing monitoring carried out by the ANQA supports the improvement of the internal quality assurance structures of universities and helps organize their activities systematically. However, the effectiveness of monitoring is reduced due to the insufficient duration of monitoring visits and the failure to provide universities with appropriate reports. The study results show that accreditation has had a significant impact on university operations, contributing to the preservation and enhancement of their reputation. This is evidenced by changes occurring in internal quality assurance systems after accreditation. The difficulties are influenced by external factors such as brain drain, insufficient state support for universities, psychological issues arising from unforeseen situations, a significant decline in the knowledge levels of applicants and students, and the requirement to address these gaps in a short period. In such conditions, the leadership of universities plays a crucial role in assisting quality assurance units through various means. Overall, the study concludes that some of the quality assurance issues in the Armenian higher education system are also related to gaps in the organization and implementation of the accreditation process. The current accreditation model requires revision, as it does not fully reflect the ongoing reforms in Armenia and the EHEA. The accreditation process based on the standards adopted in 2011 is especially problematic, as it serves a guiding purpose but does not enable the identification of targeted issues or contribute to the strategic development of universities. Additionally, the efficiency of the accreditation process is reduced by the insufficient time allocated for it, the shortcomings in self-analysis and expert report templates, the volume of required documents, and the incomplete reflection of university data in the reports. These factors decrease the objectivity of the evaluation of accreditation standards and pose a threat to the future development of the sector. The development of the Armenian quality assurance system in higher education is hindered by the lack of a specific quality assurance policy and strategy at the state level. As a result, universities develop and implement their own policies and strategies, often neglecting the targeted needs and demands of stakeholders and the latest trends in the field of quality assurance. Thus, the aforementioned issues in the Armenian higher education quality assurance system hinder the full integration of EHEA standards into the country and the advanced development of the system. The identified challenges point to weak collaboration between education sector stakeholders, non-targeted research of international best practices, limited participation of external stakeholders in

educational processes, and the development of incomplete trust in quality assurance processes. These contradictions are in conflict with the principles of the Bologna Process that underpin educational reforms in Armenia.

REFERENCES

1. Accreditation reports of Armenian Universities// URL: <https://www.anqa.am/en/accreditation/#ExpertReports> .
2. Council for Higher Education Accreditation. An Overview of U.S. Accreditation. 2015. URL: <https://www.chea.org/sites/default/files/other-content/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202015.pdf>
3. Duarte N. & Vardasca R. Literature Review of Accreditation Systems in Higher Education // Education Sciences 2023. V. 13(6). P. 582 // URL: <https://www.mdpi.com/2227-7102/13/6/582>
4. Kempenich W.J., Willis E. P., Campi D. H., Schenarts J. P. The Cost of Compliance: The Financial Burden of Fulfilling Accreditation Council for Graduate Medical Education and American Board of Surgery Requirements // National Library of Medicine. 2018. V. 75(6). P. 47–53.
5. Khachatryan R., & Movsisyan T. Higher Education Quality Assurance System: Accreditation as an External Quality Assurance Mechanism // BSU, Bulletin. Pedagogy and Social Sciences. 2020. V. 2(51). Yerevan, Lingva. P. 135–151.
6. Kumar P., Balvinder Sh., Passey D., Don. Impact of Accreditation on Quality and Excellence of Higher Education Institutions // Revista Investigacion Operacional. 2020. V. 41(2). P. 151–167.

About the author:

MOVSISYAN Tatevik Slavik – PhD in Pedagogy, European University of Armenia (Armenia, 0037, Yerevan, Davit Anghaght, 10), e-mail: tatevmovsisyan1907@gmail.com

Влияние процесса институциональной аккредитации на высшие учебные заведения: данные из Армении

Т.С. Мовсисян

Европейский университет Армении, Ереван, Армения

Изучается влияние процесса институциональной аккредитации на высшие учебные заведения Армении. Оно показывает, что, хотя аккредитация улучшает внутренние системы обеспечения качества и репутацию университетов, такие проблемы, как длительность посещения аккредитационных объектов, чрезмерная документация и неполные отчеты экспертной комиссии, снижают ее эффективность. Исследование подчеркивает пробелы в системе высшего образования Армении, включая отсутствие государственной политики обеспечения качества и недостаточное соответствие европейским подходам, что требует пересмотра критериев аккредитации.

Ключевые слова: институциональная аккредитация, обеспечение качества высшего образования, процесс аккредитации в Армении, образовательная реформа, ESG, критерии и проблемы аккредитации.

Об авторе:

МОВСИСЯН Татевик Славиковна – доктор педагогических наук, Европейский университет Армении (Армения, 0037, г. Ереван, Давид Анахт, 10), e-mail: tatevmovsisyan1907@gmail.com

Дата поступления рукописи в редакцию: 09.04.2025.

Дата принятия рукописи в печать: 14.04.2025.