

QUALITY ASSURANCE AND OPEN DATA FOR RANKING IN SERBIAN HIGHER EDUCATION – WE ARE READY FOR IT

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Summary

Quality assurance procedures in the higher education (HE) system in Serbia suffer from severe shortcomings. One of them is the work of the Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA) and the reports of external quality evaluation it issues. Currently, there are two main reporting mechanisms for ensuring quality in HE: reports of self-evaluation issued by higher education institutions (HEIs) themselves, which lack transparency, and reports of external quality evaluation issued by CAQA, which are long, technical and bureaucratic, therefore not appealing to the most relevant target group – students (future and current). In addition, reports of external quality evaluation are not comparable to one another, which in turn means that higher education institutions are not comparable by quality. CAQA has poor performance resulting from a number of issues. In this regard, the situation can be improved with different, easily accessible formats of external quality evaluation reports consisting of number grades defined according to the Standards for external quality evaluation of higher education institutions¹, and with open data reports. This would allow for the reports to be comparable and make quality assurance in Serbian HE system more public and transparent, and relevant for various stakeholders, such as students, employers, academic community, experts in the area of HE and parents of current and future students. Quality assurance is a drawback of Serbian HE, and it requires immediate attention and solution.

¹ Standards for external quality evaluation of higher education institutions, available on the CAQA webpage: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bwvr8qEMuakSJMklvWFMxV1kwTHpiRIJnWGPacTFTWWHqQnBR/view> (last visited 9th September 2017)

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DAMAGE TO HIGHER EDUCATION IN SERBIA

With regard to the quality of higher education¹, Serbia is still falling behind most European countries². The last European Commission Progress Report for Serbia from 2016 states that education remains a high-risk sector for corruption, especially in higher education, and that Serbia should pay particular attention to improve the quality of education.³ What represents a particular issue in higher education is the great autonomy of HEIs, the fact that many parties with high stakes are involved (student evaluation, enrolling process, career progression of professors, diploma issuing, etc.), and that there is little supervision regarding financing and other corruption-prone areas.

The quality assurance process in Serbian HE has two actors – HEIs themselves and CAQA. HEIs assess their quality through self-evaluation (at least once in a three-year period) and CAQA is responsible for external evaluation (in the 4th year of the seven-year accreditation cycle or, exceptionally, earlier if the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and National Council for Higher Education so require). Quality assurance is one of the steps in the process of accreditation of HEIs⁴. Namely, when a HEI is applying for accreditation, it has to submit its report on self-evaluation of quality, among other documents. Two reviewers hired by CAQA analyse and check the report, after which they draw up their report on the HEI's quality. CAQA forms a subcommission to visit the HEI and get an insight into its work. Based on the reviewers' report and the report on the visit to HEI issued by the subcommission, the subcommission makes a draft decision on accreditation and submits it to CAQA for final decision which is adopted by vote of the CAQA members. Therefore, the role of CAQA is very important in quality assurance.

1 The University of Belgrade scored overall 8.3 – 18.5 (ranked below the first 800 universities on the list, but the exact place is not available since the results do not show the exact place after the 800th place) on The World University rankings, on a scale 1–100 where 100 is the best score. In Teaching it scored 17.4, and in Research 12.5. The World University rankings list the 980 top universities in the world. Results of the 2016–2017 rankings can be found here: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/world-university-rankings/2017/world-ranking#/page/0/length/25/sort_by/rank/sort_order/asc/cols/stats (last visited 15th August 2017)

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3 Country report for Serbia, European Commission, 2016, p. 30. And 75 https://ec.europa.eu/neighbourhood-enlargement/sites/near/files/pdf/key_documents/2016/20161109_report_serbia.pdf (last visited 10th June 2017)

4 Bylaw on standards and procedures for accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes (Official Gazette of RS, 106/2006, 112/2008)

The Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance (CAQA)

Since the problem addressed in this paper constitutes a part of a much more complex issue, it is essential to put forward causes underlying this problem, the most important being the situation in CAQA. Established in 2007, CAQA is not a legal entity, and is funded directly from the budget of the Republic of Serbia. New Law on Higher Education, adopted on 27 September 2017, will change this situation, and transform CAQA into National Accreditation Body. Its previous status, according to the previous law, was defined as a 'working body', formed by the National Council of Higher Education. That negatively influenced the work of this institution, and therefore the quality assurance of Serbian HEIs. Even though it seemed that the problem could be solved if the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development provided enough funds for the CAQA, CAQA would still be unable to apply for foreign funds (European Union funds, for example). However, it was impossible to even consider this solution, since the state was not willing to allocate more funds for CAQA. Since the interview with a representative of the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development was unexpectedly terminated⁵, there was no chance to ask why the Ministry did not provide enough funds and how they made decisions on what would be financed. According to the interviewed member of CAQA⁶, shortage of funds is behind many problems, such as lack of human resources, lack of technical capacity etc. Even though CAQA collects enough funds from the accreditation of HEIs, by charging their accreditation services to HEIs⁷, it all flowed into the state budget without returning to CAQA. According to CAQA, the Ministry was aware of the problem, but delayed the solution to it, claiming that the new law will solve the problem. However, the adoption of the new law does not guarantee the solution to all problems regarding CAQA's work.

Given the importance of CAQA, low transparency of external quality evaluation reports poses a considerable issue in HE. CAQA does not regularly publish all reports on its webpage, while the reports that do get published are presented in a user-unfriendly format for the main stakeholders, predominately students. Furthermore, they are not comparable to one another which in turn means that higher education institutions are not comparable by quality. According to the Standards for self-evaluation and evaluation of the quality of higher education institutions, quality assurance should, among other things, ensure public insight into the work of every accredited HEI. If quality assurance is not transparent and inclusive for all stakeholders, the HE system becomes vulnerable to corruption and malpractice. Quality assurance is the essential ingredient for building trust among various stakeholders in HE, and transparency is one of the key principles in that process and one of its desired outcomes.

5 Interview with a member of the Ministry of Science, Education and Technological Development, conducted on 14 August 2017.

6 Interview with a member of CAQA, conducted on 2 June 2017.

7 Pricelist of the accreditation services is available on the CAQA webpage: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bwr8qEMuakSJZjVqWEhUQml3bVU/view> (last visited 20 September 2017).

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY AND RESOURCES

The Law on Higher Education in Serbia states that CAQA (National Accreditation Body) has an obligation to publish reports of external quality evaluation on its webpage, but HEIs do not have that obligation. HEIs are only obliged to inform the public about the results of self-evaluation⁸. However, it is not strictly prescribed that they have to publish reports on self-evaluation. Nonetheless, since the reports of external quality evaluation come from an independent body, certified to ensure quality, it is safe to say that HEIs are expected to publish these reports, too.

Conducting a desktop research, we wanted to check whether every HEI that had undergone the external evaluation of quality by CAQA, had published CAQA's report of external quality evaluation on its webpage, in addition to the report of self-evaluation. Within this research, we did not analyse the structure and the content of the reports of self-evaluation, since there are no means to know whether a HEI was biased, unless we were able to visit the institution, go through their documentation and see the real situation on the field. Only CAQA has that possibility, and the result of this procedure is the report of external quality evaluation. That is why our research has taken this document into account.

The data shows that most HEIs in our sample do not even publish their self-evaluation reports, much less the reports of external quality evaluation (see Table 1. Availability of reports of self-evaluation of quality and external quality evaluation of HEIs). Not only is the information unavailable on the webpages of HEIs, but issued reports of external quality evaluation, available on the webpage of CAQA, are incomprehensible and user-unfriendly for students. The desktop research included webpages of all 132 HEIs, whose quality CAQA⁹ evaluated (66 faculties, 56 colleges, 3 universities, 5 HEIs in additional following system¹⁰, and 2 HEIs in extraordinary evaluation system¹¹). The number 132 does not represent all accredited HEIs in the Republic of Serbia, only those HEIs whose reports are available on CAQA's webpage. In an interview conducted with a member of CAQA¹², it was pointed out that not all reports were available on the webpage of CAQA due to the

8 Standards for self-evaluation and evaluation of the quality of higher education institutions (according to the standard 14.6 HEIs have to inform the public about the results of self-evaluation).

9 Reports are available at: <http://www.kapk.org/sr/cnk/izveštaji-spoljashnje-provere/> (last visited 23 June 2017)

10 This system includes those HEIs where self-evaluation was not conducted according to the standards for self-evaluation and CAQA determined a low level of quality, so the HEI in question develops an action plan for additional following, in accordance with the recommendations of CAQA. This stage lasts no more than 6 months, and HEI draws up a report on the action plan, which CAQA analyses and writes the final report on the quality of the HEI in question.

11 This system includes those HEIs that have not been planned for external quality evaluation, but the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development sends a request to CAQA to include it, based on a violation of the professional and academic ethics code or a similar situation.

12 Interview with a member of CAQA, conducted on 2 June 2017.

work overload and the lack of resources in this institution, and that not all accredited HEIs were involved in the process of external quality evaluation. The correspondent said that they conduct quality evaluation of HEIs as they apply for accreditation. However, there are HEIs that are accredited, but have never undergone the process of external quality evaluation¹³. The reasons for that are unclear and the representative of CAQA was not aware whether the reason might be some problem or the fact that CAQA was overloaded with the scope of work and did not manage to include every HEI. Therefore, the sample of this research is defined by those reports that are available on the webpage of CAQA.

Total number of HEIs	Unavailable reports of self-evaluation of quality	Unavailable reports on external quality evaluation
132	41, 7 % of HEIs	84, 8 % of HEIs

Table 1. Availability of reports of self-evaluation of quality and external quality evaluation of HEIs

In the case of unavailable self-evaluation reports, there are 37 HEIs that do not have any kind of report of self-evaluation, 15 HEIs that only have out-dated reports available, and 3 HEIs whose webpage could not be accessed in the period of the desktop research (26 May – 1 June).

An online student questionnaire survey¹⁴ was conducted in order to learn how much students were informed about the process of quality assurance in the HE system, the role of CAQA and the reports. This online questionnaire is not representative, but it is instrumental in getting a general impression. The results show that students are not familiar with the process of quality assurance in the higher education system and that they do not consider the reports as the most relevant source of information regarding the quality of HEIs, even though they value quality as an important factor in their selection of the future academic path. Although the quality of HEI was an important factor for our respondents in their enrolment process (on a scale 1–10, where 10 stands for the most important, the average was 7.5), **more than half of them (53. 8%)** were not familiar with the process of quality assurance, and 61.3% were not familiar with the role of CAQA in that process. When it comes

¹³ For example, Faculty of Security Studies, University of Belgrade

¹⁴ The questionnaire survey was conducted online, in the period of 19 April–18 May 2017, and it had 77 respondents – students from the University of Belgrade and the University of Nis. Even though the sample is not representative, the questionnaire shows an overview of the situation in practice, and provides a general impression. The questionnaire was conducted because there is no similar research in that field that could provide the necessary information.

to sources of information regarding quality assurance, students do not consider the report on external quality evaluation as a particularly relevant source (see Chart 1. Relevant sources of information about the quality of HEIs).

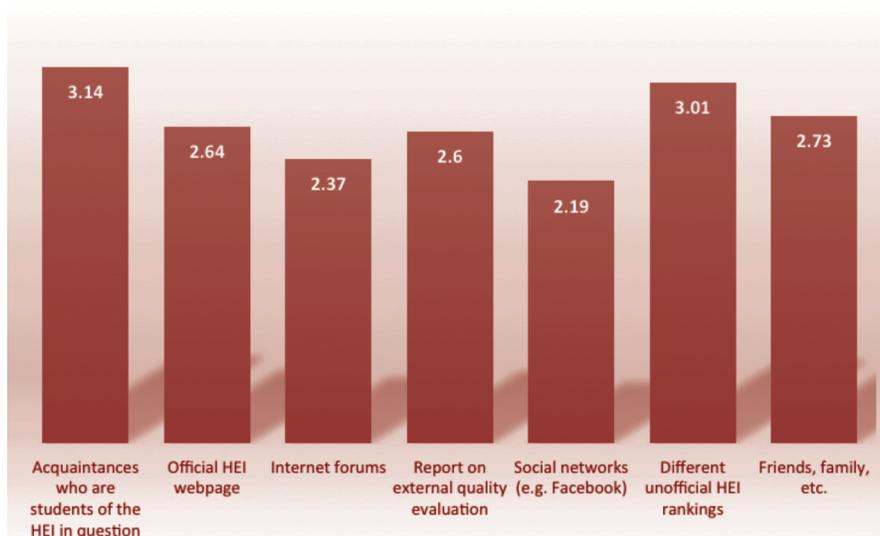


Chart 1. Relevant sources of information about the quality of HEIs

A small percentage of students who have actually read the report (24, 1%) find that the report is written in a technical bureaucratic language (on a scale 1–4, 4 being the most expressed attribute, this scored 2.83). A representative of the Students' Conference of Serbian Universities pointed out that students would definitely be more prone to inform themselves about the quality of HEIs from the reports if they were more understandable and user-friendly for student population. He also stressed that students had to be more involved in the decision-making process regarding quality assurance, within CAQA.¹⁵

CAQA confirmed these findings, admitting that the only transparent, up-to-date and user-friendly piece of information on its webpage at the moment was the Guide on accredited HEIs and study programmes in the Republic of Serbia.¹⁶ This Guide provides information on all universities and faculties accredited in Serbia, so that future students can have accurate information on whether their desired HEI is accredited or not. Other interviewed stakeholders in the academic field, such as a member of the Higher Education Reform Experts team and a member of the 'Club 500', a civil society organisation dealing with higher education, also find CAQA's work highly non-transparent.¹⁷

¹⁵ Interview with a member of the Students' Conference of Serbian Universities, conducted on 15 June 2017.

¹⁶ Interview with a member of CAQA, conducted on 2 June 2017.

¹⁷ Interview with a member of the Higher Education Reform Experts team (the team has been formed on the initiative of the European Commission and members are chosen by the Ministry of Education, Science and

As stated above, there are much more than 132 accredited HEIs (there are 212 accredited HEIs in the Republic of Serbia¹⁸), but many reports are still not available either on the CAQA webpage or the webpages of HEIs. Therefore, the public neither has access to them, nor does it know the number of unavailable reports. What is more, it is unknown why some reports have not been issued, except that one of the reasons is the lack of resources in CAQA.

This situation negatively affects many stakeholders in the field of higher education. Students are unable to make informed decisions and participate in the quality assurance process, employers do not have a good gauge of the quality of candidates' education background, or a mechanism to give their recommendations on the improvement of the quality based on the situation in practice and on the necessary adaptation of the education system to match the needs of the labour market. Furthermore, HEIs remain isolated, unable to compare and exchange good practices among themselves, with fertile ground for corruption. Quality standards ensure that the work of HEIs is public, but if those standards are not implemented, it lowers transparency, creating space for corruption. As a consequence, Serbian HEIs are less attractive to foreign students, since they are used to having the possibility to access the information on the quality of HEIs in an easy and understandable way, leaving Serbian HEIs far behind European and other HEIs worldwide, and with far less funds.

AN OPPORTUNITY TO SEIZE

A suggested alternative to the current situation, which we advocate for, is to **create brief comparable reports on external quality evaluation and make it mandatory for HEIs to publish them on their webpages**, alongside their reports of self-evaluation. The format of the self-evaluation reports would remain the same, since the main conclusions about the positive and negative aspect of the quality of a HEI are incorporated in the report of external quality evaluation. In addition, CAQA needs extensive self-evaluation reports in order to have enough information and data on the quality of a given HEI. CAQA does not solely rely on self-evaluation reports – they pay a visit to the HEI soon after it submits the self-evaluation report, and check whether the content of the self-evaluation report matches the reality.

This option is a supplement to recently adopted new Law on Higher Education, since the new Law provides for the development of a single information system for education.

Technological Development), conducted on 31 May 2017; interview with a member of the 'Club 500', civil society organisation established by PhD students who studied abroad and came back to Serbia with a desire to improve Serbian HE system, conducted on 30 May 2017.

18 Self-assessment report of the Commission for accreditation and quality assurance (CAQA) 2017, 26 July 2017, available at CAQA webpage: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/0Bwr8qEMuakSJaFBiRGphc3NDMFk/view> (last visited 14 September 2017)

Within the system, the Ministry of Science, Education and Technological Development will design the following registries and data sets: accredited institutions, accredited study programmes, data on students and employees. The majority of this information will be in the open data – machine readable format, according to the new law.¹⁹ New Law does not explain what the role of CAQA is in the system. However, since the registry of accredited institutions will also include the results of external quality evaluation, those reports also need to be improved and ready to be converted into the open data format. The open data format demands structured data, and as much numbered data as possible. The current format of the reports is far from meeting that requirement. The alternative that we are suggesting is that reports should be published in a short format, where each HEI could be graded according to a numbered scale, in line with the standards. Grades would be given on a scale from 5 to 10 (5 being the lowest and 10 being the highest grade), since those grades are already internally used by reviewers engaged in the process of external quality evaluation. New Law does not provide for any changes regarding the report on external quality evaluation. However, the Law includes the abovementioned open data sets as a novelty and will include the results of external quality evaluation, so the option we are advocating for is a complementary step.

The final outcome would be to have the average grade for each HEI – given according to the standards – available to the public and ready to become part of the single information system and be converted into the open data set. In order for the process to be credible, experts from abroad should be included in the process of external quality evaluation. This alternative can open various possible outputs and solutions – for example, a website comparing HEIs by quality. In this way, the interested public would have an easier and faster access to information about the quality and could compare different HEIs by quality. HEIs with lower grades would be motivated to improve their quality, which would, consequently, improve the overall quality of Serbian HE. The general public could raise the alarm if they notice a HEI falling behind in a specific standard, thus helping CAQA to react faster and improve their monitoring.

19 New Law on Higher Education (available in here: <http://www.parlament.gov.rs/upload/archive/files/cir/pdf/zakoni/2017/2477-17.pdf>).

THE WAY WE DO IT

For the purposes of improving the quality assurance process in Serbian HEI, the following steps should be undertaken:

1

Bylaw on the standards and method of external quality evaluation of higher education institutions should be amended in order to make it mandatory for HEIs to publish their reports on self-evaluation of quality, and reports of external quality evaluation once CAQA delivers the final reports to them. In addition, CAQA should monitor HEIs and issue a warning to those which do not publish these documents and lower their average grade by one mark until they fulfil their obligation (responsible authority: the Ministry of Education, Science Technological and Development)

This will increase the visibility and transparency of the information and data about self-evaluation of quality conducted by HEIs and external evaluation of quality conducted by CAQA, and thus ensure public monitoring of HEIs' quality and an informed decision-making process for future students and other stakeholders.

2

Bylaw on the standards and method of external quality evaluation of higher education institutions should be amended in order to prescribe a new format of reports on external quality evaluation that would include grades ranging from 5 to 10 (5 being the lowest and 10 being the highest grade) for each quality standard and the average grade of quality. The report should also be available in the open data format in accordance with the new Law on Higher Education, and should be incorporated into the single information system for education (responsible authorities: the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the National Council for Higher Education)

This measure would make HEIs comparable by quality, motivate HEIs with a lower-grade quality to improve by following the good examples, and would make it easier for CAQA to follow each HEI in the course of time and provide best possible inputs in order to raise their quality. Interested public would be able to compare HEIs by quality and make informed decisions regarding future studies, employment, funding, etc.

3

Bylaw on the standards and method of external quality evaluation of higher education institutions should be amended in order to make it mandatory to include at least one expert from abroad in the process of external quality evaluation of HEIs (responsible authorities: the Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development and the National Council for Higher Education).

This measure would strengthen the credibility of the process of external quality evaluation, reduce possibilities for malpractice and ultimately establish CAQA's grades of quality as trustworthy in the eyes of the public.



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