"Four seasons" of Quality Assurance in Polish Higher Education: Lessons learned and future perspectives (0294)

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Background information and context of the study

Polish higher education has some distinctive features within the European Higher Education Area: its size (over 400 institutions, around 2 millions of students), diversity (coexistence of state and non-state sector) and strong academic self-organization (active role of Rectors' Conference, strong disciplinary structures, many bottom-up activities at the institutional level etc.). Polish higher education arena is a kind of "microcosm" in which one can mirror many developments occurring at the European level. As Polish Bologna reforms are mainly academia driven and are based on previous national experiences, we have rather "Polonia process" than "Bologna process". The main problem for now is how to adjust Polish "tradition of academic reforms" to European Bologna framework, not losing anything from our good and verified national solutions and building upon past good practice. In this context we have analyzed the development of Polish Quality Assurance in Higher Education. The history of Polish QA can be presented as a "four seasons" cycle (spring-summer-autumn-winter), with periodic changes in top-down and bottom-up activities. The issue of QA becomes crucial in the context of introduction of National Qualifications Framework, discussion on long-term strategy for HE and works on new Higher Education Act.

Methodology adopted:

1. SWOT analysis concerning quality enhancement in Polish HE sector based on desk research (analysis of documents).

2. Comparative analysis of "self-organizing" IQA systems at two Polish higher education institutions: Jagiellonian University (the oldest Polish university) and State Higher Vocational School in Tarnow (established in 1998). Both systems are

* Self-developing (not "constructed", but "cultivated")

* Adaptive (depending on external developments)

*Tailor-made (responding to the needs of institutional strategies)

3. Interviews on perception of Bologna Process among academic decision makers (deans), with special stress on QA (it is a part of research conducted by the Jagiellonian University Centre for Research on Higher Education).

Results and other findings

The main results are:

1. Development of state accreditation resulted in transient decrease of internal quality assurance activities among Polish HEIs

2. Formalization of requirements concerning IQA systems (e.g. by formal introduction of European Standards and Guidelines) results in ritualization of QA-oriented activities (design of IQA systems by 'cut-and-paste' method)

3. In some Polish HEIs new ways of introducing IQA systems are tested. One promising idea is a self-developing ("cultivated") system.

4. There is a strong need of "horizontal cooperation" on QA between HEIs. Quality enhancement is viewed as one of main benefits of the Bologna Process (although the Bologna model - the two-tier structure of degree courses is often criticized)

5. There is emerging interest in cross-sectoral QA (inter alia - in creating common quality standards for non-formal educational provisions at different levels)

Implications of the study

The study will contribute to the strategy of promotion of quality culture in Polish HE sector (also through activities of Polish Bologna Experts group). It will help in design of open adaptive IQA systems for various types of HEIs. It will also promote interaction of QA-

oriented activities in HE sector with other sectors of education and training. Last but not least, it will give a possibility to influence the course of HE reforms in Poland (the authors are involved in expert works on behalf of Polish Ministry of Science and Higher Education).

References:

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