

УДК 378.016:81'243(438)

Accreditation as a Mechanism for Providing High-quality Language Education in Higher Education in Poland

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Received 31.12.2011, received in revised form 19.01.2012, accepted 1.04.2012

The paper presents the process of formation and development of accreditation as a form of ensuring high quality teaching in higher education institutions in Poland for the past 20 years. New Accreditation Commission, created by the Association of Academic Foreign Languages Centres SERMO, is an organization that could guarantee in Poland high standards of education in the field of teaching foreign languages and have a positive impact on the quality of language education and the quality of graduates from different universities to work on international labor market.

Keywords: accreditation, academic foreign languages centre, Association of Academic Foreign Languages Centres SERMO, quality of foreign languages education, quality standards, quality assurance system, State Accreditation Committee.

Introduction

The quality of education has been extremely important for tertiary level schools since the beginning of their existence. Institutions responsible for assessing quality in higher education began to appear in Europe in the nineties of the last century. In countries that care about high quality studies there used to be national accreditation agencies representing state authorities and a number of environmental institutions specialising in different fields of knowledge or representing professional associations (Matynia, 2004). Accreditation is a procedure in which the empowered unit forwards a formal declaration that the organisation or a person is competent to perform specific tasks. The

essence of accreditation is a formal confirmation that a particular object, phenomenon or method meets the established threshold requirements and the accepted quality criteria. In case of higher education institutions, accreditation regulates the educational market according to the minimum criterion, dividing units (departments, directions, etc.) into those that meet this criterion, and those that do not meet it. Accreditation is a system of external quality assessment of education and one of the most important mechanisms for the development of higher education.

Accreditation in Poland

Twenty years ago, the subject of higher education Accreditation was unknown in Poland

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but nowadays all bodies either accredit themselves or are accredited. Today it is one of the topics that moves academic society the most. New elements of evaluation (accreditation, rankings) which were introduced into general practice in the late 90s of the twentieth century will increasingly affect the situation of the Polish higher education (Pawłowski, 2004). Accreditation is an essential quality control tool for the educational market, which has grown with us in an unprecedented way (The exam for schools..., 2002).

Since 1990 the number of universities in Poland has more than doubled and the number of students has grown four times. In 2004 in Poland there were about 350 universities (Matynia, 2004) and in the 2009/2010 academic year there were 457 education institutions, including 131 public schools and 326 private schools, with nearly 2 million students attending (over 40% of youth aged 19 – 24 years) (Wikipedia). In comparison, in Germany which is inhabited by twice as many people, the number of universities in the 2010/2011 academic year equals 418. Currently, there are more than 2 million people studying in Germany. In the opinion of German specialists the increase in the number of students in recent years is too drastic, which might be a threat to the quality of teaching and higher education funding (Federal Office...).

The popularisation of education in Europe, and especially Poland has reduced the quality of education and its effects on higher education. Too many higher education institutions and their diversity make it difficult for student candidates and employers to study the orientation of education quality offered. Accreditation is expected to provide reliable information stating that the school which holds an accreditation certificate offers really good quality education.

In Poland, when the first environmental accreditation commissions were formed they were bringing together educational institutions

of similar profiles. These were grassroots academics, independent of government actions. It was an expression of concern about the quality of academic education and understanding the need to evaluate and improve the quality of higher education. The environmental committees decided to see to the quality standards in higher education, first of all in non-state schools.

Within a few years in Poland the following committees of Environmental accreditation were formed: Association of Management Education FORUM (SEM FORUM), University Accreditation Commission (UKA), Accreditation Committee for Medical Universities (KAUM), Foundation for the Promotion and Accreditation of Economic Education (FPAKE), Accreditation Commission for Technical HEIs (KAUT) and the Accreditation Committee for Agricultural Universities (KAUR).

So far, very many faculties at Polish universities have been assessed by the environmental accreditation commissions. The State Accreditation Committee (SAC), established by the Ministry of National Education in 2002 comprises a compulsory assessment of quality of all faculties offered by higher education institutions in Poland, allows to conduct studies of a certain faculty and level of education. Previously, all the universities which received a permit to operate, automatically had the right to issue state diplomas. The role of the state accreditation is to ensure that all educational institutions to issue the diplomas meet specific state requirements. The State Accreditation Committee has been operating based on achievements of the environmental committees, not only on substantive achievements, but also organisational, even for record keeping, development of procedures or using experts' assistance (Matynia, 2004).

The below table presents the comparative characteristics of two accreditations on the basis of common criteria:

Environmental Accreditation	State Accreditation
1. Definition	
Environmental or academic accreditation is the most important method of external quality assessment of higher education in schools of a similar profile (universities, technical colleges, agricultural, medical, economic schools, etc.).	State accreditation is the concession accreditation, i.e., by giving permission to the new universities and new study programmes to function in an official public system.
2. Legal Status	
Voluntary Accreditation Environmental Accreditation is voluntary and has no universal character.	The state accreditation is compulsory and universal. Submission to the state accreditation is mandatory, it refers to all higher education institutions, virtually all higher education types, both state and non-state. Each existing unit of higher education must undergo the accreditation procedure, the same as each faculty (The exam for schools..., 2002), (Matynia, 2004).
3. Aim	
Environmental Accreditation results from the need to recognise and verify the level of education, ensuring adequate quality of educational processes in higher education. Its purpose is to confirm whether schools meet the quality standards of education set by the accrediting institution and launch the university quality improvement mechanisms. The purpose of voluntary accreditation associations is also to reveal universities and their units, which are characterised by high quality and to distinguish quality teaching practices.	The task of national accreditation systems is to provide concession for the implementation of study programmes and ensure that schools implement at least the minimum acceptable program of study and that they meet the required methods of its implementation. They establish common, the lowest and acceptable standards. The fact that they meet these requirements – minimum standards – entitles to receive accreditation. State accreditation is focused primarily on checking the formal requirements set by the ministry and defined by the teaching standards for particular fields of study and levels of education. The subject of accreditation are primarily formal cases (documents), secondarily the processes of teaching and quality of education for students and graduates (Pawłowski, 2004).
4. Who accredits?	
Environmental accreditations are made by committees and teams organised as the agreement framework among universities. In assessing the quality of education the teams engage academics of the highest prestige in the academic environment.	State accreditation is dealt with by the State Accreditation Committee (SAC), which is a higher education statutory body working for quality education. The university receives a permission to issue diplomas of accredited faculties at the discretion of the minister responsible for higher education, preceded by a favourable opinion of SAC.
5. Accreditation procedure	
Each accreditation includes the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - self-assessment conducted by a university, - a visit by the evaluation team appointed by the environmental accreditation committee, - report preparation by the evaluation team, the application accompanied by the justification, the evaluation result proposal and the report presented at the accreditation committee meeting, - accreditation commission decides to grant or refuse accreditation based on i.e. the opinion issued by the evaluation team. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - SAC determines the list of university faculties that need to be evaluated within a calendar year. - Universities are notified of the accreditation launch of the given faculty. The request is issued by SAC to provide a self-report within six weeks from the date of receiving the notice. - SAC report examines the self-evaluation report and sends the evaluation team. - The assessment team compares the information presented in the report and the facts. SAC meets university authorities, the faculty lecturers, students and observes selected classes. - Based on the data obtained during the visit the evaluation team prepares the report containing evaluation of higher education conditions. - SAC decides to grant or refuse accreditation.

6. What should be evaluated and how to do it?	
<p>Procedures and criteria for assessing the quality of education are created independently by the environmental committee of accreditation. They vary depending on the profile of accredited universities.</p> <p>The following criteria undergo a detailed review and evaluation by the accreditation teams:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the mission of the university, the manner and results of its implementation, - study programmes and organisation of teaching processes, - conditions of studying (premises, library, educational facilities, computerisation – lack of access to computers and the Internet may disqualify the university), - the qualifications of teaching staff and their research, - the competence of graduates and their adaptation to market requirements. <p>Highly valued are the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - internationalization of studies, - student satisfaction surveys, - internal systems ensuring the quality of education – the lack of such a system discredits the university. <p>The assessment of the entity may be held by the degree of criteria fulfilment (very good, sufficient, insufficient, inapplicable), and may be combined with the application, e.g., an application for accreditation is pursued when the estimated faculty meets at least 2/3 of all the evaluation criteria and can be marked as “sufficiently met” (Guidebook..., 2005).</p> <p>Obtaining accreditation may be deferred when the university gets marks that are not high enough. If it gets ratings which are too low, it does not receive accreditation.</p>	<p>First, the following aspects are analysed during the visit:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the formal and legal aspects of education in the visited unit - the educational and social base, - the state of academic staff (the number of professors given permission to teach, professional preparation for teaching at various faculties, lecturers and professors’ academic achievements), - the plans and study programmes, curriculum content minima, etc., - the level of theses, - inter and international cooperation, - student affairs. <p>SAC uses the following grading scale:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - outstanding and positive grades indicate that the next accreditation will be held after 5 years, - conditional grade indicates the need to introduce remedial program by the university and the next accreditation visit, - negative evaluation indicates that the university does not meet the minimum accreditation requirements (Matynia, 2004).
7. What are the consequences of not obtaining accreditation?	
<p>The only thing that results from not obtaining <u>environment</u> accreditation, is the decline in prestige and the position in the educational market (The exam for schools..., 2002).</p>	<p>The negative assessment of SAC will have important legal consequences: the Minister of the competent ministry may withhold, revoke or suspend the right to education in a given faculty of study and level of education, which may result in being deprived of the right to conduct educational activities (The exam for schools..., 2002). The lack of a favourable SAC opinion equals with the necessity to stop teaching at a given faculty instantly.</p>
8. Costs	
<p>The interested universities cover the costs of the accreditation procedure.</p>	<p>Accreditation costs are paid by the Ministry.</p>
9. Benefits	
<p>The accredited faculty provides an adequate level of education, which is recognisable and credible for potential study candidates (The exam for schools..., 2002). Accreditation is a good way to stimulate excellence within the university teaching personnel and programme offers. The fact of being granted environmental accreditation allows the university to gain prestige and become credible to potential candidates.</p>	

The environmental performance records of the accreditation committee can only be assessed in a positive way and their evaluation results do not cause any legal sanctions. It should be clear

that certificates given by the environmental committees are in the opinion of academic community the sign of high quality education at a given faculty and prestigious honours. As the

visited unit needs to develop the self-assessment report, and then undergo the evaluation team visits, the faculties needed to organise many issues involving the programmes, personnel and organisation of teaching processes, had to pay more attention to the materials for classes (Matynia, 2004).

Voluntary association accreditation bodies have from the standpoint of the education quality, much more important significance. They set much higher standards than those accepted as permitted by SAC, and thus distinguish a group of universities of a high or the highest standard. Accreditation of academic institutions formed an exclusive club that meets these standards. Therefore, they occupy a featured position in the education market (Guidebook..., 2005).

It is widely known that due to the above mentioned environmental differences between accreditation and state accreditation, the accreditation by the environment committees are not always taken into consideration by SAC, and possession of such accreditation may not be equivalent to obtaining or renewing the accreditation of the state (The exam for schools..., 2002).

It should be noted that in the future the role of voluntary accreditation will continue to grow. Environmental accreditations are of special importance when entering higher education international market. The problem of education quality becomes extremely important in the case of a decision to study abroad. In Polish conditions, the imbalance on the educational market will grow very quickly, you can anticipate that the leading state and private universities will intensify efforts to attract foreign students. Young people can be encouraged to study in Poland by being given attractive and complex offers, and the ensured quality of the studies. Undoubtedly, this brings a strong argument which can be granted by international accreditation associations.

A properly planned strategy to obtain further accreditation is a good way to stimulate academic excellence within the teaching personnel and a programme offer (Pawłowski, 2004).

Accreditation of Association of Academic Foreign Languages Centres SERMO

Academic foreign languages centres (AONJO) as an inter-university bodies have not yet been accredited by the SAC. Environmental accreditation committees have not been appointed yet, these would deal with the evaluation process of language learning in higher education. Therefore, the SERMO initiative was to appoint a committee of environmental accreditation, which will ensure high quality of language teaching at universities, deserves approval and support of the academic environment.

It is especially important, when equally important are candidates' language skills in the terms of opening the EU labour market, regarding the recognition of diplomas of Polish universities in Europe for candidates to work in EU countries with the Polish school diploma. Within the scope of the new higher education reform, the plan is to introduce an institutional assessment of the basic organisational units at the university, which would include an assessment of internal quality assurance system of education, the strategy of the individual, various forms of teaching and its relationship with scientific activity. Academic foreign languages centres as basic units of universities also need to be prepared for state accreditation. In about 10 years, the situation in higher education in Poland will change significantly – the number of candidates will probably be lower by twice the number of places offered for studying in all schools of higher education.

A wide range of language courses will be one of the major strengths of higher education.

Yet, as we know, the best way to predict the future is to create it. In order to prepare for the state accreditation of the academic foreign languages centres (AONJO) and ensure a high level of language learning in higher education, the SERMO association followed the footsteps of existing environmental accreditation committee and prepared the ground for the establishment of the Accreditation Committee, which will deal with accreditation of academic foreign languages centres .

SERMO has developed and published “Accreditation of academic foreign languages centres” which contains a package of documents that will serve the working basis for the new accreditation committee. These include accreditation procedures, conditions of accreditation, accreditation and regulations of the accreditation team, and sample documents necessary to carry out the accreditation procedure. Accreditation SERMO will be based on educational standards aiming at a student in the first place. These are the following:

- attractive teaching programmes for students,
- positive “teacher – student” relationships,
- good conditions for learning foreign languages,
- other than teaching offers that increase teaching attractiveness,
- widely promoting AONJO at academia, local, regional, national and global levels,
- using new communication techniques (Internet, etc.) and learning technologies,
- the engagement of secondary school graduates and university graduates in foreign language learning throughout life.

Obtaining SERMO accreditation will be a confirmation of high level quality language

learning and a way of quality management in AONJO. Accreditation SERMO brings benefits to all participants in the process of language learning in higher education. Obtaining accreditation by the academic foreign languages centres results in:

- improving the quality of teaching foreign languages,
- increase in confidence of the academic community and the increase of AONJO prestige,
- increase of motivation among teaching personnel to work actively and effectively, to develop professional skills,
- focus on AONJO development directions set by SERMO standards
- receiving the Certificate of Accreditation and Certificates of Teaching Quality SERMO.

Accredited academic centres of foreign language teaching are student-oriented and provide:

- high-level language teaching,
- possibility of taking a standardised central examination issued by SERMO and receiving a certificate confirming linguistic competences,
- increasing chances of studying at foreign universities and domestic or international employment.

The language certificate with the accreditation logo will reliably confirm students’ language skills and will distinguish the person from a number of other applicants after graduating. It seems that in the future the environmental accreditation will be of little need for state and non-state universities, because in large state universities, particularly at popular faculties there is a natural “lever” of quality – a large number of candidates apply for full-time study places, which allows to select the most talented individuals who are also strongly

motivated candidates. It facilitates creating high-quality graduate education (Pawłowski, 2004).

Conclusions

As everything what is new, environmental SERMO accreditation may encounter resistance and resentment on the part of academic environment. Each verification, especially by the outside entity and not mandatory, can arouse incomprehension. AONJO can just take the First Law of Mentat, "A process cannot be understood by stopping it. Understanding must move with

the flow of the process, must join it and flow with it." – and get involved in SERMO accreditation process. Otherwise, in a few years time AONJO may be in a situation, when the state accreditation will look like the art of Nikolai Gogol's satire, a grand master in "Inspector General", i.e. when one day the manager or director at AONJO will have to inform the lecturers the known all over the world and common statement today: "I invited you to communicate this incredibly unpleasant news – the Inspector is coming to visit us!".

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Аккредитация как механизм обеспечения высокого качества обучения иностранным языкам в высших учебных заведениях в Польше

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В статье представлен процесс становления и развития аккредитации как формы обеспечения высокого качества обучения в высших учебных заведениях Польши за последние 20 лет. Новая аккредитационная комиссия, созданная в Ассоциации Академических Центров Обучения Иностранным Языкам SERMO, является организацией, которая может стать в Польше гарантом высоких стандартов образования в сфере обучения иностранным языкам и оказать положительное влияние на качество языкового образования и качество подготовки выпускников различных вузов к трудовой деятельности на международном рынке труда.

Ключевые слова: аккредитация, академический центр иностранных языков, Ассоциация Академических Центров Обучения Иностранным Языкам SERMO, качество образования, стандарты качества, система обеспечения высокого качества обучения иностранным языкам, Государственная Аккредитационная Комиссия.
