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THE IMPLEMENTATION OF AN INTERNAL EDUCATION QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM AT MATEJ BEL UNIVERSITY IN BANSKÁ BYSTRICA

Abstract

Slovakia's Matej Bel University (UMB) is an institution that links educational--process quality to key academic and practical outcomes. Adopting a long-term development plan, UMB decided to apply ISO quality standardisation and to implement an ESG-compatible system (Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area) – the former for its focus on the management and continual improvement of processes, and the latter for its concentration on student and stakeholder involvement in evaluating educational quality, its provisions for transparency, and its projection of a quality assurance framework for increased awareness of study programmes and procedures.

Keywords: norms and standards, quality assurance, quality policy, quality system, quality at MBU.

1. Introduction

The Bologna Process[1] aims to synchronise higher education in European countries throughout an area that became known as the European Higher

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[1] Magna Charta Universitatum, which was signed in Bologna in 1988, sets out basic principles for universities, including the continuous adaptation of college education and research systems and the protection of the European humanist tradition. The Bologna Process (which was prefigured in May 1998 by the Sorbonne declaration On Harmonisation of the Architecture of the European Higher Education System made by the French, German, Italian and British education ministers) was signed in the Italian city of Bologna on 19 June 1999 by the ministers of higher education of 29 European countries. Its aim

Education Area (EHEA). Its goal was to achieve a unified, European dimension in higher education by enabling the comparison of diverse national education systems and thereby benefitting graduates who will gain greater mobility and credibility in both national and European labour markets.

Support for efficient quality assurance systems in higher education was declared in Berlin at the 2003 meeting of 33 ministers of education. Their cause was to be substantially advanced by going beyond the focus on two main cycles (of Bachelor's and Master's degrees) and including a third – doctoral studies – in the Bologna process. The ministers decided that they would review progress on quality assurance, the two-cycle system and recognition of degrees and periods of study at a further conference in Bergen. The meeting gave the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) the task of examining quality assurance and the qualifications framework, on which they would work with the European Centre for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA), and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) to find ways to accomplish the mutual evaluation of quality assurance systems across Europe.

A quality assurance system was not introduced in Slovakian higher education until January 2013. Quality strategies had been set before that through self-evaluation reports with reference to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), the European Foundation for Quality Management (EQFM), evaluation reports processed by EUA, and ISO quality standards. The diversity and disunity of the systems was evident even at the faculty level.

Matej Bel University (UMB) had also not implemented a system for assuring educational quality according to the norms and standards defined for the European area. This was the reason for the decision to participate in IBAR (Identifying barriers in promoting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance at institutional level and making recommendations as to how these might be addressed).

The primary impulse for cooperation emerged from a combination of the following factors: the opportunity to identify barriers to implementing the

was to create a unified higher education area based on a system of comprehensible and comparable diplomas, two-cycle studies, a credits system, improved mobility, improved cooperation on quality assurance and the strengthening of the European dimension in college education. By 2005, a total of 45 countries, all of whom were represented in the Bologna follow-up workgroup (BFUG), were involved in the Bologna process. The European Commission was also a full member, while the European Universities Association, the National Unions of Students in Europe, the Council of Europe, the European Centre for Higher Education, and the European Centre for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) were consultant members. The summit held in Bucharest in 2012 was attended by 47 education ministers. The BFUG approved the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in October 2014, which now awaits approval by EHEA (European Higher Education Area) ministers.

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) at UMB, the opportunity to address pivotal issues in management, and the need to standardise practices and prepare for quality certification.

The prerequisite for an efficient quality system that meets the approval of European countries is the interoperability and interconnectedness of national education systems. In this way durable systems conducive to continuous improvement in education quality can be established.

Though changes inevitably affect all university and college processes, particular attention will be given to the social dimension, student mobility, and the presentation of educational outcomes in the form of evaluation reports.

2. Objective and Materials

This paper describes the implementation of a quality assurance system for higher education, which was based on theoretical knowledge and on an analysis of educational quality conducted according to ESG principles and procedures, at UMB in 2011–13. The self-evaluation investigated policies enabling students with specific needs to pursue their studies, the monitoring of educational programmes, the assessment of educational quality, the extent of responsibility for quality, the inclusion of external partners in the assessment process, the quality of the teachers and the collection, and application of information on education.

The main technique used to collect information from primary sources was sociological research in the form of personal interviews with students, college teachers, UMB management, faculty management, and selected employees and partners, who also completed questionnaires. The selection of respondents varied depending on the research subject. The results of the research were compared with the Bologna Process documents and notable contributions to the literature of institutional, national, and European education policy.

Studying the documents supporting the creation of an internationally approved common European Higher Education Area and conducting the analysis of educational quality led to the introduction of an internal system regulating norms and educational quality, whose gradual implementation within all of the organisational bodies of UMB began in July 2013.

3. The Theoretical Framework of Educational Results within the European Area

The generation, measurement, and evaluation of educational results represents a substantial part of assessing quality in education. According to Blaško (2012), given its educational and other procedures are subject to an objective process of continuous measurement, the quality of a school lies in its optimal operation to the satisfaction of all of its partners. The quality of a school is often connected with terms such as rank, level, and success (Wiktor 2014). Rank (level) is concerned with results, while success is concerned with the procedures and processes that produce the results.

We cannot begin the process of approving educational quality at the national and institutional level without knowing the broader, multinational contexts that impose certain limits when implementing educational quality systems (Čikešová 2006). The mutual comparison, cooperation, and acceptance of educational achievements will only be possible if, taking account of the specifics of each national education system, a common methodology is established for determining educational results.

The Lifelong Learning European Qualifications Framework (EQF), which was designed to align the national qualifications systems and frameworks of European countries to produce a unified European reference system, took effect in 2008. Its eight levels, which are described in terms of learning outcomes, range from the basic to the advanced. The learning outcomes define what students know, understand and are able to do when they have finished the course of study in question. The main emphasis within the EQF is on outcomes, that is, theoretical knowledge, practical and technical skills, decision-making and communication. The results are given in verifiable statements of what students graduating from a particular educational programme should know, understand, and be able to do.

The educational results also provide an account of the relationship between the teaching, education, and assessment processes, which is expressed in terms of a set of assessment criteria in the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) handbook.

The achievements expected from graduates upon completing their education are contained within the Dublin Descriptors (Dublinské deskriptory), which are phrased in terms of competence levels, not learning outcomes, and enable a broad distinction to be made between the different levels of higher education a student has reached. The descriptors that apply to students' achievements at all levels are knowledge and

understanding, applying knowledge and understanding, making judgements, communication, and lifelong learning skills.

The descriptions of educational results (outcomes of the educational process) generally involve using verbs in active forms (to explain, to create, to design, to analyse, to summarise, to describe, to compare) that express knowledge, the ability to implement something, the capacity for analysis and synthesis, and the skill of evaluation. The accent is on the knowledge expected from students as well as on their skills, which means an emphasis on what they are capable of doing.

The following combine to produce the educational results:

a) information regarding educational profiling (the curriculum),

b) descriptions of educational programmes,

c) descriptions of modules and subjects,

d) assignment of ECTS credits,

e) approval of qualifications,

f) approval of partial studies,

g) one of the components of the internal and external quality assurance process.

The next step taken in Slovakia following the publication of the EQF document was the establishment of the National Qualifications Framework (Ministry of Education), which obliges universities and colleges to provide education and to be directly responsible for its quality.

The educational results are defined for the individual subjects, modules[2] and educational programmes to ensure that course components are linked and that material is not repeated. The overall educational programme is completed by passing its component courses.

A variety of methodological approaches can be adopted to describe educational results:

a) KSC typology (knowledge, skills, competences),

b) Tuning methodology,

c) Biggs's theory in relation to educational results: the SOLO taxonomy.

d) Bloom's theory and revised theory in relation to educational results.

The KSC typology (Lewis 2007) defines the basic conditions, graduate profile, programme objectives and education results expressed as competences that are obtained by students during study programmes. The knowledge, skills, and competences acquired throughout study programmes are described in relation to course content and to the

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[2] The module is a group (block) of optional courses within the educational programme.

knowledge, skills, and competences particular subjects require. Emphasis is laid on development of personality in the gradual acquisition of knowledge, skills, and competences.

According to Verešová and Čerešník (2013, p. 28), taxonomies signal, "(…) a distinct turn towards higher cognitive processes and the ability to redefine a problem, situation or context, and a retreat from dichotomous perception and thinking in favour of the acquisition of human autonomy by the person who is about to be educated".

Tuning methodology makes a clear distinction between educational results and competences. In this understanding, competences represent a dynamic combination of students' knowledge, understanding, skills, and attitudes, while also telling readers whether they are able to perform particular activities. This methodology provides for general competences, which are generic and relate to various subjects and educational programmes, and specific competences, which relate to particular subjects and/or educational programmes.

Educational results express the level of competences obtained by students. They are defined by university and college teachers based on communication between the internal and external customers of the institution (if applicable).

The need to improve students' educational performance is discussed by Gonzáles and Wagenaar (2008), whose model of improved performance has eight steps:

1) meeting the basic educational conditions,

2) defining the graduate profile,

3) describing the goals of the educational programme and the required results,

4) identifying the general and subject-specific competences the students can acquire,

5) translating the competences into the educational objectives (curriculum and course content) and into the structure (subjects, ECTS credits and workload),

6) translation into educational units and activities to achieve the defined educational results,

7) deciding approaches to learning and teaching (method types, techniques, formats) and the method of assessment,

8) developing an evaluation system that will continuously improve students' educational performance.

The model implies a direct relationship between degree profile, goals, and results. The gradual process of quality improvement means

1) permanent revision of the education system and educational contents in respect of changes in the labour market (new technologies and jobs) and 2) permanent revision of methods and forms of teaching in accordance with modern trends and approaches. Lokhoff and Wagenaar (2010) state that educational results must be specific, objective, achievable, acceptable, useful (corresponding to the educational programme and the graduate profile), and have a default setting. The definition of competences should lay a platform for achieving as much educational and labour market success as possible.

The SOLO taxonomy (Structure of Observed Learning Outcomes) devised by Biggs & Tang (2007) describes students' level of understanding of a subject or topic using a five-level assessment:

1) students are incapable of getting the correct answer. They focus on irrelevant details, misinterpret, and are unable to work in a team or to solve problems;

2) students are capable of solving simple algorithmic tasks or a part of a complex problem. Work with the literature is limited; students cling to a single approach and solution, which they apply to various challenges. The educational results are at the following level: students notice, name, stipulate, recognise, and remember;

3) the third level represents a much higher level of quality. Students apply logic to solve multi-structural problems. However, the preparation of the complete project or the solving of open tasks is limited: they work with large amounts of data without any conceptual explanation and reasoning. Theoretical conclusions are weak. Educational results: students explain, define, arrange, solve, and interpret;

4) students are now capable of solving a complex task and verifying hypotheses (research questions). Their solutions are well-structured. They can formulate their thoughts clearly. The contents and structure of the project are clear and logically justifiable. The project's introduction and conclusion are suitably structured and supported by arguments and facts. Students are able to explain, distinguish, analyse, compare, summarise, and categorise;

5) the fifth level lies beyond any expected educational results. The clarification of the problem presented (input, conclusions) is well--structured, clear, and comprehensible. Students' work with relevant sources includes academic discussion, their own insights and points of view, critical analysis, and sophisticated and innovative thinking. The educational results are that students are able to create, synthesise (summarise), deduce, verify, theorise, dispute, and contemplate.

Based on teachers and students, who are the main actors in education, Biggs & Tang (2007) distinguishes two approaches to the assessment of educational results. Teachers define the goals, educational results, and teaching activities and perform the assessment. Students assess the educational process, participate in teaching activities, and obtain the expected educational results.

Bloom's taxonomy and its revision is perhaps the most widely used classification of learning objectives. It represents a progressive contextualisation of gradually more complicated material that allows students' educational results to be described and assessed. It is popular because – mainly in its cognitive domain[3] – it offers prepared structures and detailed lists of verbs in their active forms. Bloom's model is completed by the affective and psychomotor domains (Stašková 2012).

Krathwohl (2002) points out that Bloom's revised taxonomy is a two--dimensional model in which the descriptions of cognitive processes use verbs rather than nouns. The first dimension contains a factual, a conceptual, a procedural, and a metacognitive category, while the second describes educational results as follows: to memorise, to understand, to apply, to analyse, to assess, and to create. The level at which students are required to master the topics being taught, and what they must do, are determined by reference to both dimensions. The individual result levels are focused on competences, that is, on the outcome or educational process, but not on teaching.

The affective domain (feelings, attitudes, values, postures) expresses the processes (to perceive, to react, to judge, to organise, and to create) used in experimentally oriented subjects (to experiment, to test), while the psychomotor domain (practical skills, behavioural abilities: the coordination of brain activity with motion) expresses the processes typical of subjects such as sport and physical education. The performances are characterised using the following verbs: to observe, to prepare, to imitate, to manipulate, to adapt, and to create.

The Dublin descriptors, and KSC and Tuning methodologies, offer "tools" for processing educational results and balancing them with regard

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[3] Because the Slovakian Ministry of Education had not established uniform criteria for the description of educational results in higher education, the Slovakian educational institutions chose Bloom's revised taxonomy to accomplish the task. A few simple examples of the formulation of educational results: the student remembers (performance); the theory of motivation at work (content); the student is capable of creating (performance); the work-analysis document (content); student analyses (performance); the personality of the manager according to personality traits (content).

to the educational programme and the needs of real life (job description). In this way, careful consideration is given to real life requirements when preparing graduate profiles. Descriptions of educational results related to particular educational programmes are always adjusted according to the description of the educational specification performed with the help of the KSC methodology and Bloom's revised taxonomy. In this way coherence is achieved between the educational results and the educational programme. The SOLO taxonomy offers a versatile "toolbox" for the description of educational results and the application of assessment criteria.

4. Internal and External Barriers to ESG Implementation

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area process at Matej Bel University is based on the analysis of educational quality conducted from 2011–13, which revealed strengths and weaknesses in educational quality assurance resulting from internal and external factors. The following main risks of implementing the ESG into the educational quality system at UMB were identified:

a) loss of time in analysing existing documents and in marking-up the quality assurance system according to valid organisational and legislative norms: the time loss was avoided by efficient data-collection management and mark-up processing;

b) loss of time in the preparation and performance of the sociological surveys, which took the form of mediated interviews with the management and faculties at UMB: the task was streamlined and centralised;

c) the inclusion of competent college teacher representatives, specialised referees and students in the surveys: respondents were selected in cooperation with the faculties;

d) monitoring the educational process and processing mandatory internal audits meant the need to coordinate all internal auditors at UMB. A new centralised job position – quality manager – was created to eliminate this risk. The quality manager's tasks included coordinating the internal auditors and all of the monitoring processes at UMB.

The barriers to implementing an internal quality assurance system in line with the ESG were identified within both the internal and external environments. The central obstruction was defining a common strategy for quality assurance given the diversity of specialisations at the university (Zákon 2002). Each faculty would have to specify a quality assurance policy

based on their educational programmes and research priorities, which would inevitably slow overall implementation.

The diverse approaches to assessing teaching performance, for example, meant there was a need for a quality committee and quality manager to coordinate continuous measurement of quality in education, research and publishing. The national budget lacked the financial resources needed to maintain a quality assurance system according to ISO and ESG. Furthermore, the increasing administrative load on teachers meant that they were unwilling to participate in the quality assurance system. Few employees had any knowledge of the ESG requirements, and informing them of the benefits of a quality assurance system would take a good deal of time. What is more, a credible quality assessment system would mean changing the way information was disclosed to the public and training personnel. University entry requirements were being lowered every year and financial shortfalls and uneven quality assessment were affecting the loyalty and performance of schoolteachers.

The following external barriers, which definitely do not motivate college teachers and other employees to participate in the implementation of quality assurance systems, can be identified:

– the disunity of methodology regarding quality assurance strategy across colleges;

– constantly varying conditions of college quality assurance (complex accreditation criteria), the external independent agency's (ARRA) criteria for quality assessment of colleges and the criteria for the allocation of financial resources from the Ministry of Education, Science, Research, and Sports of the Slovak Republic;

– the Ministry allocates insufficient resources based on research quality and publishing segment and the criteria for receiving them do not respect the specificity of social science and humanities colleges.

There is a lack of information available from the state about secondary--school pupils' skill level, knowledge and aptitude for university studies. Graduates' certificates do not describe their skills, knowledge and competences and are therefore out of alignment with the real world (referring to a state-level document released in 2008). The only source of information when preparing educational programmes is the state-level description (rather than the European level one) of the core knowledge of a particular specialisation. If graduate profiling is to be united throughout Europe, consideration should be given to the constantly varying conditions of both the national and European labour market. No representatives from potential

employers were present at the stage of curriculum design. Meanwhile, the quality of course-content development is different in different parts of Slovakia: in some areas the flexibility exists to modify it, while in others it is strictly dictated and there is little or no room for amendment.

College studies can only be provided in the form of accredited educational programmes. Publicising information about educational programmes is one of the basic prerequisites of organisation in education. The main sources of such information[4] are the web pages of UMB and the individual faculties, open days for students and their parents, young researchers' night, the references of graduates and students, and printed publicity material.

A survey of selected students helped identify weaknesses in access--to-study policy at the university. The feedback revealed that 37.5% of respondents were not aware that faculties – or even central UMB management – have specific information regarding study access for cohorts[5]. Almost one-fifth of applicants (18.75%), the majority of whom were from abroad, said they had not been able to get clear information about study access and the availability of courses. This prompted the UMB management to perform a complete overhaul of the English version of the website so that it would display important information from the internal academic information system (AIS) step-by-step in both Slovak and English. This system allows foreign students to call upon the help of their classmates to solve problems with registration and information searches. In addition, technical problems at the system level are being resolved in direct cooperation with its designers.

The following criteria were most important when selecting a course: interest in the educational programme and its availability in a foreign language, distance from home, the university's good reputation, feedback from graduates about the quality of courses, the general need in life for further education and, in the case of a particular department established by the Church, faith. The most substantial indicators of course quality for disabled students were the availability of source materials, an accommodating attitude, contact with the subject teachers, feedback from students, links and cooperation with the world beyond the university, efficient communication, and the creation of a technically up-to-date environment at the university that retains a human feel.

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[4] Of the 2,700 students surveyed, 75% said they looked for information on the UMB website.

[5] The so-called cohorts are students with specific needs, such as students aged over 45, disabled students, members of different ethnic groups, socially disadvantaged students and foreigners. Of the 1,235 cohorts, 57 were included in the survey.

The survey also revealed hidden internal barriers, whose roots lay in the declaration of equal conditions and treatment for every student. A good practical example from one of the UMB faculties was a situation in which a teacher let another student help a heavily visually impaired classmate to take a written test. If the equality policy were strictly applied, this accommodating and generous attitude could trigger a very different response from other students and teachers.

An external barrier well-known to the faculties is disabled-access to all workplaces. Here, though the requirement to provide facilities for the disabled had been accepted by the Ministry, insufficient financial sources were available to install them.

There is a difference between the demand for higher education and the number of graduates that can be absorbed by the labour market. Despite employers' interest in social science and humanities graduates, their numbers are such that only approximately 50% of them can find jobs that match their level and specialisation. The remainder find jobs that require lower qualifications or seek their fortunes abroad. The situation is a direct consequence of the unregulated growth in the number of universities and colleges – and hence in the number of graduates – in Slovakia compared to the actual needs of the labour market. A further difficulty is raised by the stagnation of job opportunities due to other factors.

The basic principles for assessing students are laid down in UMB's statutes and ordinances and in the descriptions of individual subjects and faculties that are disseminated to the public. In addition, the student assessment documents are published on AIS or LMS MOODLE. It is the duty of teachers to inform students of the assessment conditions for a particular subject at the beginning of each semester, and the requirements for successful completion of a course cannot be altered once teaching has begun. The tendency of some teachers to stick with their old routines is an internal barrier with regard to assessing students' progress all the way from admission to graduation. The assessment criteria for the majority of subjects are neither set according to the level of cognitive processes, nor adjusted to monitor affective and psychomotor goals. Written tests still prevail in the assessment process and the inclusion of external assessors is minimal. While written tests can very quickly check memorised knowledge, they are unable to evaluate a students' progress, creativity or even their ability to apply the knowledge in real life. Teachers who use ICT and associated techniques to continuously monitor students' knowledge during the semester (including

students' self-feedback), and teachers who communicate with their students online, assess students more successfully.

The implementation of teacher evaluation is obstructed because state--level and institutional-level criteria for assessing the quality of teachers are not unified. University teachers are required to have a level of specialised education corresponding to their position and title. At UMB there are further specific requirements for these positions in the form of a pedagogic qualification, mastery of at least one foreign language, and computer literacy.

No exhaustive and authoritative document concerning teaching loads is in force at the state level. Many faculties of UMB have, though, accepted the norms ("duty papers"), which apply a range of hours worked in the evaluation of teachers' performance in pedagogy, research, publishing, and other areas. The methodology by which financial resources are allocated to faculties is, however, used as a source of information during the actual assessment of teachers' performance at UMB.

The actual sets of teaching, research, and other responsibilities of a particular teacher or researcher depend on decisions taken by heads of department or faculty presidents. A further internal barrier is represented by the limited opportunities to employ qualified and renowned specialists from other universities in Slovakia or from abroad.

The viability of many language-oriented educational programmes is guaranteed by foreign teachers, who have the opportunity while at a different college to obtain better conditions for adding to their qualifications, absorb new ideas to implement on return to their home faculty, and take advantage of better research facilities. If teachers' material and financial conditions are sufficient for them to stay with one institution, their loyalty will be secured. Many qualified specialists have left academic soil in favour of the private business sector. The multiple workloads visiting teachers take on have a variety of disadvantages however. These include writing research reports and publishing papers that will not be credited to their home institution, more complicated communication with students, and problems with the continuity of their work records. A final difficulty could lie in their being resented for creating a competitive environment.

According to a survey[6], very nearly all students (99%) favoured assessing teachers' performance and quality, which they saw as an efficient student-

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[6] A survey of teachers and students regarding the quality of teachers' performance was conducted in the form of interviews and questionnaires. A total of 117 students were involved, of which 81 were following second level studies. The opinions of some teachers and managers in particular faculties and departments were not polled.

-to-teacher feedback channel. More than a casual enquiry, this was about the right of any student to present their opinion of the teaching process and the quality of teachers' performance in the knowledge that serious consideration would be given to the results. According to students, good teachers are those who are able to give absorbing lectures and to present their subjects in an interesting way (52.4%), who are competent and qualified specialists (47.6%), who the students can respect and trust but who interact in a cooperative and positive manner (28.6%), who have natural authority (23.8%), who are able to teach (to transfer knowledge), who give students space to express their opinions, but are strict and precise at the same time (19.1%), who manage both the theoretical and practical dimensions while being caring, understanding, open to compromise and patient (14.3%), who are able to appreciate students' work and attitude while remaining a dynamic leader (9.5%), and who demand much of themselves and the students while understanding that individual students' levels and abilities will vary (80%).

Opinion surveys of internal and external stakeholders represent a time--based internal barrier to providing quality assurance. Their results are, however, valuable sources of information when implementing positive change. Information on student satisfaction with teaching, the educational programme, and the overall conditions is gathered twice a year. An average sample size of 200 teachers is assessed annually (33% of all teachers). Over the last few years the average mark for their performance quality has been B (1.68). An average of 5,000 students take part in the sociological surveys (40% of all UMB students). The information from the assessment of the educational programmes, which is performed after the state exam has been passed, is more valuable. It is aimed at programme content and structure, applicability of knowledge, whether particular subjects can be taught in a foreign language and whether students can register for their preferred subjects – all of which information is related to the graduate profile. The second part of the survey assesses the conditions created for students within particular programmes. Students award marks for the timetable, departmental performance, libraries, access to Internet and computer technology, the technical aspects of teaching provision, opportunities to study abroad and the information available on the everyday conditions and procedures involved in following a particular course. The proportion of students participating in the assessment fluctuates between 72% and 78%. Any positive or negative experience is always valuable feedback for faculty managers, tutors, and teachers.

External stakeholders' opinions of educational quality have been surveyed sporadically – mainly at conferences – and by contacting graduates or investigating the different ways in which their skills have been employed on the labour market. Students have written a number of final theses analysing this, as well as assessing employers' actual opinions of how well graduates are prepared for real life. Meetings initiated by graduates, which are attended by a representative of faculty management, the tutor of the educational programme and teachers, are held at the university every five years on the anniversary of the former students' graduation. The regular feedback inquiry began in 2013 on the initiative of UMB management.

Additional information is gathered from external stakeholders, who actively participate in the teaching process while also being members of state exam committees and consultant bodies of either the principal, the presidents of the faculties, or the board of directors. They are also often members of project teams or research teams. Contact with graduates via the activities of the ALUMNI club, the issuing of the graduates' calendar, and the publishing of the alumni bulletin "Svedectvá o čase" (Testimonies of time), which contains edited interviews with renowned UMB graduates, are all good examples of links and cooperation with the real world.

5. The Educational Quality Assurance System at UMB

From the regular feedback obtained from students and from the quality assurance analysis conducted in 2011–13 according to ESG, it emerged that the UMB faculties offer a good experience and observe good practices. On the other hand, it was clear from the results that there is a need to implement a complex system for internal quality assurance. UMB management duly took a strategic decision to implement an Education Quality Assurance System (EQAS). The system covers the policy and procedures of quality assurance according to ESG and also takes the educational results of particular educational programmes into consideration.

The survey of UMB and its faculties indicated that the policy and strategy of quality assurance provision should be based on the following:
a) the satisfaction of all the parties involved,
b) the achievement of clear and approved quality goals,
c) the monitoring and measurement of educational processes.

These aspirations underpin the direction UMB will take in quality assurance in all processes and what the university is willing to accomplish.

Quality assurance policy in higher education and research depends on organising the EQAS so that it wins the willing support of all stakeholders.

The structure of the document defining the procedures for educational quality assurance at UMB stipulates the overall and specific goals to be achieved within the monitored quality areas, as well as the tasks, responsibilities and deadlines involved. The EQAS is open to the changes that result from regular monitoring and assessment, including the perfection of processes and procedures, changes in the general form of the EQAS or even its annulment.

Based on experience of the methodology used for the internal monitoring of education at UMB, which took place in 2011–13, regular analyses and assessments of educational quality assurance procedures will take place in three-year cycles. The measures accommodated in this way will be projected into the goals and tasks of the quality assurance policy. Regular monitoring, which reveals weaknesses that can be addressed to perfect educational and research processes, increases transparency. This is the primary intention of UMB's educational development and policy strategy.

The creative research and development dynamic of higher education entails the continuous renewal of innovative endeavour within the university and its translation into real world solutions. In view of this it is vital for UMB's organisational norms that the responsibilities and competences of the employees involved in quality assurance systems are specified. The structure of UMB's internal quality assurance system is shown in Fig. 1.

To secure the overall quality goals, all of the university's organisational bodies operate in accordance with the established quality assurance policy by reference to the quality assurance handbook and the ESG procedures for quality assurance provision. Within these terms, UMB's system concentrates on eight principles of internal quality assurance:

a) the student (as the customer of the services provided),

b) the teacher,

c) the matching of educational results with the needs of the labour market and the real world,

d) research into the educational market (applicants),

e) new trends and the international dimensions of higher education,

f) the symbiosis of education and research,

g) generating and publishing information from technical and library sources,

h) the processes and procedures of quality assurance monitoring.

Students' expectations and needs are considered in terms of those of the real world and the European labour market. The establishment of the Education Quality Assurance System is the university's public declaration of its commitment to provide products and services of a quality that will at the least satisfy the requirements of students. At the same time, UMB will cease to provide products and services that the public show no interest in and that are not required by binding legislation.
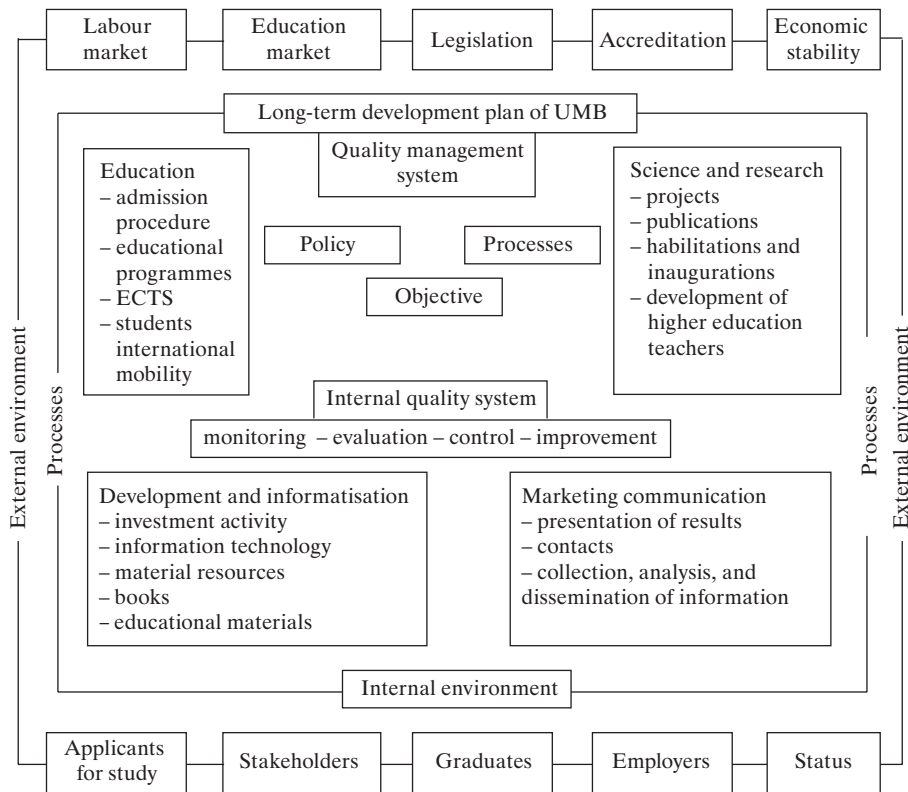

Fig. 1. Internal Education Quality Assurance System at UMB

Source: authors' own elaboration.

The university's internal EQAS is based on student involvement in its creation, implementation and continuous improvement. This means that students apply quality assessment to educational programmes and that up-to-date objective and quality information about educational programmes and their graduates is published regularly. The quality council monitors the

quality management system and ensures that it is run according to both ISO and EQAS standards.

The aspects monitored and reported on include: applicants' interest in particular educational programmes, the educational and labour market, the admissions procedure, the educational procedure and its results, studies that are terminated prematurely, the performance of teachers, the credits system, the efficiency of the educational programme, meeting the needs of individuals for resources, and graduate placement on the labour market. Quality assurance means reaching, maintaining, and improving quality levels within all of the university's processes.

The strategy of quality assessment and assurance in education is defined in the measurement of information from students about teachers and teaching, and of information about teachers from observations and other inspection techniques. The results of sociological surveys will be made available to the public. The level of pedagogic research and publishing activity will be assessed regularly. This will be done at meetings of vice-presidents of faculties, departmental directors, teachers, and student representatives. The summary evaluation of academic and educational quality assurance will be a mandatory part of the annual reports made available to the public following the consultations within UMB bodies and faculties.

An assessment of information sources and their usefulness will form a mandatory component of the assessment. This will include library acquisitions (domestic and foreign publications, magazines), making an e-database available, equipping lecture theatres and rooms with computer and presentation technology, and upgrading study rooms and student accommodation. Student services, such as the performance of educational departments and the careers service, accommodation, food, mobility, and social support, will also be evaluated.

The university's development and quality assurance strategy was projected into a system of quality-related policies and goals. The emphasis at faculty levels is on preparing long-term development plans to allocate tasks and responsibilities and instigate regular monitoring. This will make the indicators ever more transparent and help uncover institutional policy weaknesses in process management.

Research results are a matter for the university as a whole. They are considered when assessing the accreditation of educational programmes and teacher performance (including gaining new qualifications), as well as in terms of the motivation students have shown in their own research activity and its documented analogues in the form of the best final theses.

Connecting basic and applied research with the contents of educational programmes and particular subjects is a vital aspect of quality.

A system for rewarding excellent research results, which includes publishing and presenting them at conferences and in journals, has been established at selected bodies of UMB, while an annual Principal's Prize for research has also been introduced. In addition, an academic programme has been launched to attract the best foreign specialists and further improve the university's education and research. Last but not least, is the reward system supported by UMB's Scholarship fund which, apart from its traditional academic function, is used for making awards to students who enhance UMB's reputation through their activities at international level.

Quality-oriented strategy implementation is based on process monitoring, which is run from top to bottom at the management level of UMB and its faculties at regular meetings and assessment sessions (college boards, college panels, academic senates, research boards). The following questions are monitored: writing and modifying educational programmes, organisation and content, documentation, satisfaction with educational content and conditions, the opinions of internal and external customers on the educational programmes, and the work done and careers pursued by graduates in the real world. Profiling, and the monitoring of accredited educational programmes, will be accomplished using self-assessment questionnaires and statistics in the following scope:

– interest in the courses offered within an educational programme,

– competition between the educational programmes offered at domestic and foreign institutions,

– established procedures for monitoring course content (duplication of material taught, relevance to the graduate profile),

– assessment processes and conditions to measure teaching efficiency against educational results,

– assessment and results measurement in accordance with the goals of the teaching process and the graduate profile of educational programmes,

– the international dimension of education within an educational programme and how this is considered,

– assessment of teachers' performance (who and how),

– feedback from employers on graduates,

– the placement of graduates in the labour market,

– the standard of library services, the standard and availability of study rooms and study materials, the availability and quality of electronic databases, and access to the Internet,

– the frequency with which the contents of educational programmes are modified and the extent to which the modifications are put into practice.

UMB, in the quality practices it has unanimously instituted, presents a unified approach to creating the graduate profile that links course and programme content to educational results and articulates the whole in terms of the needs of real life and the real employment opportunities open to graduates. Without cooperating extensively with current and potential employers, it will not be possible to ensure educational quality. Employers' views of graduates must inform learning outcomes, the graduate profile and course content and, in this and other ways, they must take an active role in university education.

6. Conclusion

Though Slovakia has joined the EQF and publicly declared the need to improve the quality of higher education, there remains no distinct or specific stipulation of measurable educational outcomes at the central, institutional level. The legislation regulates the procedures involved in the duty to establish internal quality assurance systems for education but does not lay down the criteria to follow to set up an assessment system.

Colleges or universities will select their approaches to setting up quality assurance systems according to their aims, objectives, and knowledge of the topic. The internal quality assurance system established at UMB is based on the monitoring and regular assessment of educational programmes, students and teachers, including the information, material, and educational resources that support education and the work of teachers and students. We should emphasise that official institutions, such as accreditation commissions, are not the only sources of quality assessment. The external evaluation of higher education should be based mainly on employers' opinions and on the findings of independent rating and ranking agencies. Though a great deal of time was required to set the cumbersome machinery of indicators and guidelines in motion, the new quality assurance system is finally offering genuine added value to the students and teachers who are its customers.

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Abstract

Wprowadzenie wewnętrznego systemu monitorowania jakości kształcenia na Uniwersytecie Mateja Bela w Bańskiej Bystrzycy

Uniwersytet Mateja Bela w Bańskiej Bystrzycy na Słowacji (UMB) jest instytucją, która łączy jakość procesów edukacyjnych z kluczowymi wynikami naukowymi i praktycznymi. Przyjmując plan długoterminowego rozwoju, UMB postanowił zastosować

standaryzację jakości opartą na normach ISO oraz wdrożyć system zgodny z ESG (normy i wytyczne dotyczące zapewnienia jakości w Europejskim Obszarze Szkolnictwa Wyższego). Pierwsze działanie zostało podjęte z racji jego orientacji na poprawę zarządzania i ciągłe doskonalenie procesów, a drugie – z uwagi na jego koncentrację na zaangażowaniu studentów i innych interesariuszy w ocenę jakości kształcenia, zapewnienie przejrzystości oraz możliwość przełożenia struktur zapewniania jakości na zwiększoną świadomość odnośnie do programów i procedur związanych ze studiowaniem.

Słowa kluczowe: normy i standardy, zapewnienie jakości, polityka jakości, jakość w UMB.