

## THE ACCREDITATION PROCESS AND CHALLENGES OF SHKODRA UNIVERSITY “LUIGJ GURAKUQI”

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### Abstract

Higher education accreditation is a type of quality assurance process under which services and operations of post-secondary educational institutions or programs are evaluated by an external body to determine if applicable standards are met. If standards are met, accredited status is granted by the agency. Accreditation procedures contribute to the continued quality development of the accredited academic unit: Institutions receive advice about quality improvement throughout the accreditation process, which may extend beyond the “yes/no” decision itself. The importance of accreditation process for University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi” serves to assure and develop quality: it can focus on the institution, constituent parts thereof, and study programmes, in order to: ensure or facilitate recognition of “credits” and university degrees in an academic context, such as when changing from one university to another, in order to promote mobility; students’ information on the value of certain study programmes; allow employers to check the value and status of qualifications; give institutions of higher education the opportunity to demonstrate appropriate allocation and use of public funds. This article aim to give the current challenges that University of Shkodra “Luigj Gurakuqi” faces in the accreditation process.

**Keywords:** *accreditation, process, challenges, university.*

## 1. Introduction

In recent decades, higher education has entered a series of production stages that determined the growing concern on the part of those responsible for the evolution of higher education, for the permanent improvement of the quality and efficiency of the educational process.

The concern first appeared in the elaboration, on the priority foundations, of the national policy related to higher education in some countries. Decrees, laws and various decisions, etc., were taken in order to regulate the strategic objectives of higher education and the modality by which they will be completed.

In the context of this interest, the accreditation of public or private institutions of higher education holds the main place. Accreditation as a process has witnessed a significant evolution in contents and mechanisms, etc.

This evolution is determined by the fact that accreditation is understood as a process of evolution of higher education with the aim of recognizing and continuously improving the quality and effectiveness of the educational process. Academic recognition which is the main objective of accreditation has transcended national borders.

This is a constant concern of various international governmental, non-governmental academic, professional and social agencies. Programs such as Erasmus undertaken by the EU are examples of concrete actions aimed at eliminating existing difficulties in the field of academic mobility and facilitating inter-university cooperation.

## 2. The importance of the accreditation process for a higher education institution

Accreditation is a process through which the educational activity of a higher education institution is periodically subject to a full evaluation. The purpose of this assessment is to determine whether or how many educational objectives of the institution have been completed. The results obtained are analyzed in accordance with some standards which are specific to other comparable educational institutions in question.

The accreditation process involves the activity of an external body, or accreditation institution, which, with the help of an expert, closely monitors and assists the institution designated for accreditation in evaluating and improving its educational objectives.

In this process, the institution of higher education adapts itself and constantly improves its quality. As a result, accreditation protects higher education institutions from political interference or from executive and legislative bodies.

This process is in the interest of higher education institutions as well as of the study programs that the higher education institution offers. An institution that has been evaluated for accreditation purposes should be able to prove this in terms of its educational objectives which should be well defined, thus allowing students to complete their studies at a good level; educational facilities to provide appropriate conditions for the learning process; the institution uses appropriate assessment criteria that guarantee the granting of the necessary competencies to students in their fields of study; the institution supports the known effective teaching methods.

The Accreditation Council in Higher Education Institutions (2010) states that the status that a Higher Education Institution receives as accredited means for the students and the general public that the institution keeps its promises. This institution also states that the public but also students who are the primary interest group can have confidence in the value of the institution, study programs and diplomas that an accredited institution issues. The process and status of an accredited educational institution helps students not only make judgments about quality but also about employment, as well as the transfer of credits from one higher education institution to another. The Accreditation Council in Higher Education Institutions (2010) also states that:

- Accreditation encourages confidence that the educational activities of an accredited institution or program are of satisfactory levels.
- Assists in student mobility by making transfers when required
- Signals potential employers that a study program meets the standards
- Promotes credibility through external evaluations of the institution or program
- Identify institutions and programs that have undertaken external activities to improve the quality of institutions and study programs and which successfully fulfill them.

### 3. Challenges of the accreditation process for the University of Shkodra "Luigj Gurakuqi"

The accreditation process at the University of Shkodra is a process during which many challenges are encountered, among which:

- Well-structured quality assurance strategy. According to ESG (2015) institutions should have an internal quality assurance policy that has been made public and is part of the strategic management of the university. One of the main challenges regarding a quality assurance strategy that a HEI should have is to be well structured and then implemented in relevant structures and processes including external stakeholders.
- Accreditation costs. According to Decision no. 141 dated 18.02.2015 for some changes in the decision no. 424 dated 02.06.2010 of the PM, the costs of accreditation for the institution and study programs in an HEI are high given the large number of study programs at USH.
- Ambiguity and lack of transparency. All documentation with which HEIs protect the fulfillment of standards must be public. A challenge in the accreditation process and in obtaining the certificate for the years gained in accreditation is the transparency of the HEI in making public all the documentation with which the HEI tries to ensure the longevity of accreditation. Reliability and validity of measurement rather than meeting a certain standard is a challenge in itself.
- Quality culture in higher education institutions. According to Ehlers (2009) cited in Loukkola and Zhang (2010) it is very important to distinguish two concepts like quality culture as well as quality assurance. While quality assurance processes are something that can be managed by an institution's decisions, the real challenge remains in terms of quality culture which is about shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment - which remain very difficult to change.
- Adaptation to the labor market. Labor market research is an indispensable tool and integral part of academic institutions, but it always remains a challenge in itself. A thorough labor market study not only helps to establish alumni employment but also highlights the need to adapt or change the study program.
- Internationalization of scientific research. One of the challenges of scientific research in higher education institutions remains the internationalization of scientific research conducted by academic staff. A well-structured strategy of internationalization of scientific research helps to achieve the objectives set by the academic staff.

### 4. Conclusions

Improving the quality of education is important for every country. In recent years, many changes have been made and are being made both in the legal framework and in relation to the quality framework in higher education. However, despite these changes, processes such as accreditation remain a challenge for any higher education institution. Accreditation at USH is a voluntary process which requires the full commitment of the entire institution. Meeting the standards at the

minimum level and above, is a task which requires cooperation but also continuous monitoring. Establishing and maintaining a quality culture in the standards related to the study programs that USH offers; the way these programs are organized; quality in teaching and learning processes; quality in human resource management; infrastructure, finance; quality in providing various support to students, etc. helps each HEI to go through processes such as institutional accreditation more easily but also to serve as a tool to further promote HEIs alongside other public and private higher education institutions.

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