



**Public Accreditation Agency
for Higher Education, Albania**



**REPORT from the “Peer learning and networking visit of SEE experts
to the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Albania”
11-14 June 2009, Tirana, Albania**

Hosted by and jointly organized with the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education in Albania (PAAHE)

1. Background and Justification

Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Research are among the most important issues for the development of the European Higher Education Area of knowledge and competitiveness in Europe. As Bologna signatory countries, the countries of South Eastern Europe (SEE) have expressed and shown their commitment to work permanently for the improvement and assuring the quality in higher education in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines. Regional cooperation through experience sharing, good practice and information exchange, among others, are the main instruments and tools for this purpose.

In line with the above principles, ERI SEE in cooperation with the Public Accreditation Agency in Albania organized on 23-24 May 2008 a Workshop on Regional Cooperation for QA in Higher Education, linked to the CEE Network Assembly meeting of QA Agencies in Higher Education. During this meeting, the participants from some ERI SEE countries had the opportunity to network with other agencies from the region and other CEE countries, as well as to exchange information and good practice with SEE countries and their institutional representatives. Willingness for participation in peer-learning activities within the ERI SEE region, thus enabling sharing of knowledge and experience among the SEE countries, was expressed by the representatives of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo¹ at the Meeting on cooperation between the SEE countries in the field of quality assurance in higher education, which took place back to back with the CEEN events. Therefore, one of the main conclusions and recommendations of this meeting was the need and demand to support and organize further events on peer-learning among SEE bodies for QA in HE and to build expertise for external evaluation.

¹ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

As a quick response to these necessities identified at the first Regional (SEE) QA meeting, PAAHE and ERI SEE agreed to coorganise the “**Peer-learning and networking visit of SEE experts to the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Albania**” which took place in Tirana, Albania on 11-14 May 2009 at the premises of PAAHE.

2. Objectives of the “Peer learning and networking visit of SEE experts to the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Albania”

The main objective of the peer-learning event was to further foster exchange of knowledge, experiences and good practice between the already and the newly established agencies in the region, but with particular focus on capacity strengthening in the field of external QA. Therefore, the peer-learning and networking visit primarily meant to target the staff members of the recently established national agencies (or other bodies at national level) for quality assurance in higher education in SEE countries. Some countries agencies/institutions responded to the invitation by expressing interest for participation to this event, but only representants of the QA Agencies of Bosnia & Herzegovina and Kosovo² sent their representants to this visit. The span of the peer-learning visit was widened and synergy with the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) was achieved by involvement of one staff member of the Building Human Capital and Cross-Cutting Issues Unit of the RCC in the peer-learning visit.

The programme of the peer-learning visit had foreseen, besides visits and getting to know the organization and working practice at APAAL, visits to higher education institutions in order to be acquainted with the internal evaluation systems, as well as an on-site peer visit for accreditation purposes to a new private higher education institution.

3. Organisers of the peer-learning visit

The Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Albania (PAAHE-APAAL) organized and hosted this event. The ERI SEE Agency contributed to the formulation of the peer-learning programme, the nomination and registration of the participants, and covered the expenses of the SEE representants. In the preparation of the event PAAHE closely cooperated with ERI SEE Agency, local peers, the Accreditation Council of Albania and with the HE Institutions where visits were organized.

4. Participants to the peer-learning visit

Total of 5 participants took part at the peer-learning visit at PAAHE, representing two SEE countries’ agencies; two participants from the Higher Education Development and QA Agency of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Director Mr. Nihad Fejzic and deputy Director Mr. Boris Curkovic) and two from the Accreditation Agency of Kosovo³ (Head of the Accreditation Board Mrs Ferdije Etemi and Director of the Agency Mr. Basri Muja). The

² Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

³ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

Regional Cooperation Council was also represented at this event through Ms Mimika Loshi (Building Human Capital and Parliamentary Cooperation Unit of the RCC)

The staff members of PAAHE provided support to this event and to the social programme as well. The social programme enabled the participants to get acquainted with the history and traditions of Albania.

5. Language of the peer-learning visit

The working language of the visit was English. Simultaneous translation was provided during the meetings with different actors (experts, Council members, social programme) and during the three on-site visits at the Higher Education Institutions.

6. Activities performed during the peer-learning visit at PAAHE

Working programme

Before the arrival of participants, PAAHE in collaboration with ERI SEE prepared and agreed about a working programme which aimed to get acquainted the participants with the structure, organization and working practice of the Albania Agency, to give the participants the opportunity to follow in practice a procedure of peer review and also to be acquainted with the Internal Quality Management of an Albanian HEI, as well as to better know and (on practical ground), on one hand, the harmonization between the internal and the external processes for QA, and, on the other hand, the coherence and the continuity between the evaluation outcome and the decision making process. Enclosed to this Report is General Agenda (Annex 1) and Working Agenda, as it was actually implemented (Annex 2).

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After the welcome address of the Director of PAAHE and getting to know each other, Mrs Bozo (Director of the Agency) held a presentation on the HE System in Albania, the QA institutions and system, their tasks and responsibilities, the evaluation and accreditation procedure, as well as the national criteria, requirements and standards used as reference for the evaluation and accreditation process.

Following the presentation of the Director of PAAHE, the Deputy Director of the Agency for Development of Higher Education and Quality Assurance of Bosnia and Herzegovina presented the national HE system, the organization and functioning of the Agency and the work in the area of quality assurance in higher education. The Head of the Kosovo⁴ Agency Board, Mrs Ferdije Zhushi, after presenting the QA system in the country, informed and emphasized that, in 2008, a governmental decision was taken to invite an International agency to evaluate and the private institutions in Kosovo⁵; this

⁴ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

⁵ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

due the fact that Kosovo⁶ accreditation agency (KAA) was in its early stage of establishing. The second round of the accreditation currently is carried out by the KAA.

The participants used these presentations to intervene with questions and also discussions on each situation, making this part of the programme highly interactive and exchanging of knowledge, opinions and contextualities of each country. The main questions and discussions were about the criteria for the recruitment of peers, involvement of foreign experts in the process, problems and limitations faced in this process, how Bologna issues are included in the QA criteria and practices, the differences between the QA approach towards the public and private sector of HE and other items dealing with regional expertise and experts exchange (regional pool of experts), as well as involvement of students in the external evaluation processes and at decisional level of the accreditation purposes.

The second part of the morning activities of this day consisted in two options for the participants; the participants were invited to choose between 2 options:

1. to stay at APPAL and getting to know better and in practice the normal practical work of the Agency, or
2. to attend a typical External Evaluation procedure; the first meeting of the *on site* at "M. Barleti" University. The meeting had been scheduled in advance by the Agency. Three participants opted for the visit at the University, while two of them preferred to stay at the Agency to get acquainted into more details with the practical work.

Group 1: The group which stayed at the Agency (the 2 representants from BiH), following the Option 1, were attended by the Director of the Agency and two staff members. For about 1 hour were discussions and exchanges on practical items of the work at the Agency, such as: how an institution applies for accreditation, what is the normal procedure to file an application, how the documentation should be prepared, what are the differentiated criteria used for the evaluation of a new study programme/institution compared to those of an existing programme/institutions, what is the difference in practice between a programme and an institutional evaluation and accreditation, and many others. For another 1 hour, the 2 participants visited each office of the Agency, consulted the application folders, external evaluation reports (at the Evaluation and Analysis Department), the publication of the information and of the results (at the Department of Information and Publication), as well as at the Finance and Human Resources Department, where they were informed on how the budget items are proposed, managed and allocated to ensure the financial autonomy of the Agency.

Group 2: The group which chose Option 2 (i.e. attendance of an External Evaluation meeting), accompanied by two staff members of the Agency, attended the first meeting of a normal external evaluation procedure (part of the normal evaluation schedule of the Agency). This group of 3 participants (two participants from Kosovo⁷ and the RCC re-

⁶ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

⁷ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

presentative), attended the first part of the first meeting of the peer group (6 peers) with the HEI under evaluation. The group could follow in practice the presentation of the peer group to the institution, the meeting of the peers with the Internal Evaluation group and the discussions between them (as an example of harmonization between the two processes and procedures), as well as the confrontation of ideas and opinions between the two. The group appreciated particularly the positive constructive spirit of the communication (not tolerance) with the institution and the efforts put by the Albanian Agency to build this feature, very important for the process itself and the quality culture of the institution in long term. The group visited also the premises of this University, paying particular attention to the studying and students services in accordance with the particularity of the study programmes this institution offers (mainly Humanities).

In the afternoon programme (the first part), was organised a visit at the University “Zoja e Keshillit te Mire”, as an example of an accredited, non profit institution which offers cross-border joint HE programmes with 5 Public Italian HEIs. The whole group got to know how this institution operates in the national context of Albania, how they ensure the same programme quality as at the home (Italian) institutions, how they organize the didactic activities with local and foreign professors, and how their Internal Quality System fits both with the European and national local requirements and standards. The group could also visit the whole institution including the Clinical Units of this HEI, given the special area of programmes they offer (mainly Health and Medicine). One staff member of the Agency and one of the peers that had evaluated this institution in their accreditation process (2006), accompanied the participants to this visit.

The afternoon programme (the second part) ended with an informal meeting of the participants with two peers, close collaborators involved in several external programme and institutional evaluations performed by PAAHE for new programmes or accreditation purposes. The main aim of this meeting was to give the participants the opportunity to better know the external evaluation process from a peer perspective and as a lesson learned reflection, through many practices on the ground. The participants were invited to intervene in an informal and interactive way; actually they asked the peers many questions about practicalities of the evaluation process, how the experts assess the institutional components and management of a HEI, what is different, or more focused in the approach to a new or to an experienced HEI, how they assess the relations/balance (especially for a private for-profit HEI) between the academic and administrative decision-making and responsibilities, how they see the role of the student in this process and how they deal with the flying academic staff (staff going from one HEI to another at the same time). The discussions and exchange of ideas and contextual approaches were very lively and it was a real and very useful exchange of good practices, approaches and contextual solution, which was appreciated as very instructive for the participants.

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The programme of the 2nd day started with the meeting of the participants with two representatives of the Accreditation Council which is the national body in charge for deci-

sion making and recommending to the Minister of Education and Science the final accreditation decision. The Deputy/ Head of the Council, Prof. Gezim Hadaj introduced to the participants the main tasks and responsibilities of the Accreditation Council, the operative issues of its work, the close collaboration and link with the Agency, the problems and difficulties encountered in the final decision-making phase, and how they ensure objectivity, fairness, transparency and impartiality in their final judgement. Participants put several questions to the two Council members on specific decisions, on how and if they judge with the same criteria and standards both the public and the private providers of HE, how different stakeholders are represented in the Council (students including), on how they bear and avoid pressure of any kind, if incoherence is encountered between, the evaluation and the Council decision on one side, and between the Council recommendation and the final decision of the Minister, on the other, as well as how they ensure independence in their decisions. The two parties discussed and exchanged opinions also over specific cases in Albania and other examples from the region as, for example, the initiative of 1 year ago of the Accreditation Agency in Kosovo⁸ for the evaluation/accreditation of numerous Private HEIs by an international agency.

The second part of the programme was dedicated to participation of the entire group in the final meeting of an external evaluation procedure at a private University which operates in the fields of Architecture and Urban Planning. The group was accompanied and supported by two staff members of the Agency at this visit. The group could attend the final meeting of the peers with the highest representatives of the institution, during which, the final external evaluation findings and outcomes were presented. The group could experience how the institution is being informed about the strong and weak points found out during the process, but also to hear the comments and arguments used by the representatives of the institution, and how these arguments may influence the final External Evaluation report. The group could learn in practice that, however, this is not a negotiation process, but a collaborative, constructive and instructive meeting, whose transparency and openness helps institutions to improve their quality and to foster the internal quality culture the institutions themselves.

The closing activity of the day and of the whole peer-learning visit was the final meeting of the participants at the Agency premises.

The Director of the Agency, Dhurata Bozo made a synthesis of all the activities during the two days and asked the participants for their comments, conclusions and recommendations for further plans.

7. Conclusions and Recommendations

The participants extended their thanks and appreciation for ERI SEE and PAAHE for supporting, hosting and organizing the peer-learning event. They proposed, discussed and finally adopted the following conclusions and recommendations:

⁸ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.

1. The density of activities and efficiency in organizing, the practical approach and getting to know the practical aspects of the systems, practices and specificities in the field of QA in HE of the countries involved in the peer-learning event proved the usefulness and relevance of this format of capacity building measures for organizing further events at regional level.
2. Participants appreciated the opportunity provided during the two days event to meet almost all actors and to discuss different components of QA (organization of the national structures: Agency & Council, self-evaluation, external evaluation, decision making process);
3. The importance of the on site visits was emphasized and they were considered as extremely valuable for familiarizing with both the procedural and practical approach to QA in HE.
4. Participants appreciated the mole of knowledge and information they got on the whole Albanian HE system and QA institutions and practices. They highlighted that the free and interactive exchange of ideas, opinions and practices was very useful and instructive.
5. As during the first regional QA meeting in Durrës in 2008, participants stressed once again the outstanding importance of European networking and internationalization of QA bodies in the region in the SEE countries efforts to become part of the European Higher Education Area.

Recommendations for further regional cooperation

1. The organization of peer learning visits to continue in the future, but to ensure involvement of participants from more SEE countries;
2. The peer-learning to be organized in small groups, since they enable more efficient work and focus on practical issues;
3. Regional events to be organized with the objective to discuss different aspects of QA (e.g. the European and international perspective of QA institutions and practices; identification of the state of art of QA, common problems and difficulties, as well as possible solutions);
4. ERI SEE to support round visits around the SEE region;
5. SEE QA bodies and institutions to welcome the involvement of international experts in different procedures and working processes;
6. Support to be provided for expertise exchange between agencies and to building and strengthening the bilateral and multilateral relations between the SEE agencies for QA in HE;
7. Preparation and implementation of joint, QA centered projects, involving both agencies and HE institutions from two or more countries from the region (regional projects);
8. The Regional Cooperation Council expressed readiness to support the regional networking activities by focusing on building wider networking,

linking and collaboration, and through linking with RESPA for human capacity building amongst agencies' staffs and peers;

9. Participants recommend to ERI SEE, for issues directly related to QA, to keep direct contacts with and to act through the legal national institutions that are in charge of QA.

Tirana, on 16th June 2009



Public Accreditation Agency
for Higher Education, Albania

ERI SEE

EDUCATION REFORM INITIATIVE
OF SOUTH EASTERN EUROPE

**“Peer learning and networking visit of SEE experts to the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Albania”
11-14 June 2009, Tirana, Albania**

Hosted by and jointly organized with the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education in Albania (PAAHE)

GENERAL AGENDA

11 June - Thursday

Afternoon Arrival of participants and accommodation at Hotel “Nirvana”
http://www.travel-tirana.com/Hotel_Nirvana_Tirana

One person with arriving persons names will wait you in front of the Exit at the airport “Mother Teresa”

16.00 – 19.00	Social Programme
16.00 - 17.00	Visit to the National Museum
17.30 - 19.00	Visit to the Art Gallery

Participants are kindly asked to confirm their participation to the social programme.
Çlirim Duro will accompany the participants to these visits

20.00 **DINNER** offered by Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education

12 June - Friday

09.00 – 10.30 - Presentation of the Quality Assurance (QA) System in Albania. (**Dhurata Bozo**; Director of PAAHE); evaluation procedure. Questions and Discussions.

10.30 – 13.00

Option 1:

10.30-11.00

Coffee - break

11.00 – 12.30

QA; Acknowledgement of the participants with the practical aspects of the work:

- application form for accreditation and accreditation procedure;
- criteria and documentation for evaluation of new study programme;
- procedure and documentation for the first and periodical accreditation of higher education institutions.

Questions and Discussions

Option 2:

Participation in the first meeting of an external evaluation of a private HEI “Marin Barleti”

Participants have to choose one of the options in advance

13.00 – 14.30

LUNCH

14.30 – 16.30

Visit to UniZKM (non profit, cross-border, accredited institution); the group will also get acquainted with the Internal QA System

17.00 – 18.30

Harmonisation between Internal and External Evaluation; procedure and external expertise from a peer view. (Experts: Mimoza Cukalla and Erleta Mato – practical experience)

18.30 –

Free time

13 June - Saturday

9.00 – 10.00

Accreditation procedure: Short meeting with representatives of the Accreditation Council; collaboration and coherence between evaluation and accreditation. Questions and Discussions.

10.00 – 10.30

Coffee – break

10.30 – 10.45

Walking to “Polis” building

10.45 – 12.00

Participation in the final meeting of external evaluation for accreditation purposes of the HEI “Polis”. (Mimoza Gjika) Questions and Discussions.

12.00 – 12.30

Return to PAAHE

12.30 – 14.00 **Coffee and Working Discussion** about the two days peer-learning experience and closing remarks on the activity, including recommendations for future regional cooperation.

14.00 – 15.00 **Lunch**

15.00 – 20.00 Social Programme (Visit to Kruja and Durrës)

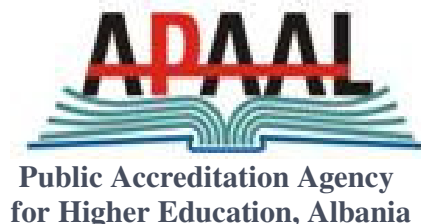
14 June - Sunday

Departure of participants

05.00am – Transport to the airport (Participants from Kosovo⁹)
(Departure time 06.30 a.m.)

12.30 – Transport to the airport (Mrs. M.Loshi and participants from B.& H.)
(Departure time 14.20)

⁹ Under the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1244.



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for Higher Education, Albania



**Peer learning and networking visit of SEE experts to the Public
Accreditation Agency for Higher Education of Albania
12-13 June 2009, Tirana, Albania**

*Hosted by and jointly organized with the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher
Education in Albania (PAAHE)*

WORKING AGENDA

12 June - Friday

09.00 – 10.30 - Presentation of the Quality Assurance (QA) System in Albania. (**Dhurata Bozo**; Director of PAAHE); evaluation procedure.
Questions and Discussions.

10.30 – 13.00

Parallel activities:

Activity 1: Participants: **Nihad Fejzic and Boris Curkovic**

10.30-11.00 Coffee - break

11.00 – 12.30 **QA;** Acknowledgement of the participants with the practical aspects of the work:

- application form for accreditation and accreditation procedure;
- criteria and documentation for evaluation of new study programme;
- procedure and documentation for the first and periodical accreditation of higher education institutions.

Questions and Discussions

Activity 2: Participants: **Ferdije Zhushi; Basri Muja; Mimika Loshi**

Participation at the first meeting of an external evaluation of a private HEI “Marin Barleti”; Anyla Bulo; expert

13.00 – 14.30	LUNCH
14.30 – 16.30	Visit to UniZKM (non profit, cross-border, accredited institution); the group will also get acquainted with the Internal QA System; Edmond Hajderi; expert
17.00 – 18.30	Harmonisation between Internal and External Evaluation; procedure and external expertise from a peer view. (Experts: Mimoza Cukalla and Erleta Mato – practical experience)
18.30 –	Free time

13 June - Saturday

9.00 – 10.00	Accreditation procedure: Short meeting with representatives of the Accreditation Council; Prof. Gezim Hadaj and Prof. Shyqyri Llaci; decision making; collaboration and coherence between evaluation and accreditation; conflict of interest avoidance, impartiality, objectiveness and transparency in decision making. Questions and Discussions.
10.00 – 10.30	Coffee – break
10.30 – 10.45	Walking to “Polis” building
10.45 – 12.00	Participation in the final meeting of external evaluation for accreditation purposes of the HEI “Polis”. (Mimoza Gjika; expert) Questions and Discussions.
12.00 – 12.30	Return to PAAHE
12.30 – 14.00	Coffee and Working Discussion about the two days peer-learning experience and closing remarks on the activity, including recommendations for future regional cooperation.
14.00 – 15.30	Lunch