

# Impact of Accreditation Process on Higher Education Internationalization Developments Case of Armenia

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*Internationalization is firmly connected with the improvement of the quality of higher education. It is multifaceted and is interconnected with almost all dimensions within Tertiary Level Institution (here after in this article TLLs).*

*Internationalization is one of the most vital elements in quality review processes. The role of quality assurance system in the enhancement of internationalization is getting of higher importance addressing the issue of assessing, assuring and enhancing the quality of internationalization dimension according to the stated aims and objectives of TLLs, as well as national and international requirements.*

*In this article we draw your attention to overall accreditation process in the Republic of Armenia (here after in this article RA) by emphasizing how it contributes to the review of the internationalization quality. The article intends to provide an introduction of components and key activities which are integral to the internationalization process and have to work in unison to achieve the internationalization of TLLs.*

*Paper draws upon mostly primary sources, including institutions self-evaluations, panel member national/international expert reports of evaluation for accreditation, follow up plan on panel recommendations, ANQA manual, ANQA strategic plan, experience gained in different projects regarding internationalization ANQA has taken part in etc.*

**Keywords:** Internationalization, Higher Education, accreditation, quality enhancement

## Introduction

Internationalisation plays a key role in the higher education developments and enhancement of the quality of higher education. It is significant that TLIs address the issue of assessing and assuring the quality of their international dimension.

As stakes get higher, the role of national level Quality Assurance system becomes important. Accreditation process helps TLIs to assess and enhance the internationalization dimension according to their own stated aims and objectives, yet at the same time assuring the compliance with the national and international requirements.

In general, international dimension is a key component in institutional and programme quality review processes. The role of quality assurance agencies is not only to affirm the quality achieved by the TLIs, for instance in internationalization dimension, but what is more important to guide and assist them in the quality enhancement.

In case of Armenia, the Armenian National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance( here after ANQA) is a national level Quality Assurance foundation which conducts accreditation processes based on the RA state Accreditation Criteria and Standards which serve as basis for assessing institutional and programme performance and are identifying needed areas of improvement. Internationalization, as such, has its elements almost in all institutional and academic programme accreditation criteria and standards (10 criterion for institutional and 7 criterion at academic programme level) and the 9th criteria and its standards are directly referring to external relations and internationalization and their evaluation looks at the extent to which the criteria and standards are met.

Internationalization is one of the ANQA's main goals and is one of the most vital elements of its activities, regarding to both promoting internationalization in TLIs, as well as promoting ANQA international recognition, which is also promoting the recognition of TLIs who passed accreditation process with the coordination of ANQA.

### Accreditation process with special reference to internationalization quality review

External quality assurance system, mainly said the accreditation process is an essential tool for enhancing the quality of internationalization in TLIs. Accreditation is carried out by a state authorized body. It is a process by which an external body assesses the quality of an institutional or specific academic programme with a view to officially recognize its compliance with minimum predetermined criteria and standards, but what is as much important according to their own needs, aims and objectives aiming to assess to what extent are TLIs actually achieving them.

In Armenia, the external quality assurance is carried out through accreditation process, which is being coordinated by ANQA in most cases. The Armenian external quality assurance entails two types of accreditation: institutional and programme accreditations.

*Institutional Accreditation* allows to evaluate the effectiveness of TLI operations, as well as to find out whether the TLI is in compliance with its mission, whether it follows the policy of continuous improvement and enhances the development of implemented academic programmes. *Programme Accreditation* is the recognition of academic programmes and the correspondence of quality with state accreditation standards and programme accreditation criteria. This procedure allows to periodically evaluate and develop the internationalization dimension in academic programmes.

The accreditation process involves mainly the following three steps: Self-evaluation by the institution or programme undergoing accreditation, External Review by independent experts and Decision-making by the accreditation body.

**Emphasizing internationalization in the accreditation process steps:** While undergoing the Armenian external quality assurance process TLIs are passing above mentioned three general phases. Below are referred those steps with emphasize on internationalization.

*Self-evaluation* is an evaluation procedure of the institution or its academic programme, which is followed by a written report based on the standards adopted by RA Government.

The purpose of the self-evaluation is to collect the necessary information, undertake a critical analysis of a variety of provisions, including internationalization dimension of the institution.

The self-assessment should be much more than a description of the type and extent of internationalisation efforts as well; it is meant to critically assess and address ways to assure and improve the quality of internationalisation of the teaching, research and public service functions of the institution in the light of existing issues and forthcoming challenges. This should be seen as not an activity for only providing information for reviewers, but an opportunity to realize the responsibility of the institution for the quality improvement and the ways of promoting internationalization within it.

*External Review* is a process whereby an expert panel carries out desk review, which involves examining the self-evaluation report and all other important documents submitted by the institution. This is followed by a *site visit* and as an outcome the expert panel prepares a written report, where the major issues to be addressed are state of the art of internationalization as well, the extent to which it achieves the aims and objectives it has set for itself, clearly articulated strengths and weaknesses of the institution's international dimension

The task is to examine also the goals for internationalisation of the institution and whether they are clearly formulated, how these goals are translated into the institution's curriculum, research and public service functions and if the institution is providing the necessary support and infrastructure for successful internationalisation, how the institution monitors its internationalisation efforts, the institution's capacity to change; and its autonomy in order to improve its internationalisation strategies, the adequacy of its diagnosis and proposals for change and improvement.

The next phase in the process is the development of follow-up plan by clearly presenting the future specific steps aimed at developing the strengths of the TLI, as well as ways of eliminating the weaknesses in realistic and timely manner.

Surely the follow-up activities as well as using the results of the expert panel report are the responsibility of the institution, but both the report of expert panel, as well as the follow-up plan of the TLI are in the list of main factors which play crucial role in *decision making process*, which involves fact reviewing, decision making and indication of areas in need of urgent solutions.

And it is very important to be mentioned that the review process is not aimed at standardising the internationalization approaches and activities. The general purpose is to give feedback, also on internationalization dimension and specify the areas of improvement by giving recommendations taking into consideration the aims institution has set for itself and the specifications of TLIs.

All this process serves as a catalyst to changes and improvements. And this is an opportunity of sharing findings, seeing innovations and disseminating good practice.

### **Components of internationalization dimension evaluation in RA**

Promoting internationalization and external relation development in TLIs is an interconnected and holistic process. Internationalization in higher education is multifaceted and is connected with almost all dimensions within TLIs and has its elements in them.

Below are stated components and key activities which are integral to the internationalization process and have to work in unison to achieve the internationalization of TLIs and it also introduces the approach of evaluating the internationalization dimension during accreditation processes coordinated by ANQA, state of the art in TLIs in Armenia indicating both current achievements, as well as challenges which are going to be overcome considering also the results of accreditation process.

## ***Institutional framework for internationalization***

### **State of the art in Armenia:**

Internationalization is gradually being highlighted in TLI in RA. It has already been articulated in basic documents of many TLIs and been part of institutional planning. Many TLIs after passing the accreditation processes has embarked on developing policies, strategies, plans on external relation and internationalization activities.

Different processes are being implemented in different TLIs towards promoting internationalization. In many cases they do not have systemised approach, and the reason is mostly the lack of articulation of the reason for undertaking certain internationalization activities. Internationalization is usually being seen as a goal in itself and the understanding about how it is contributing to institutional mission and main goals is not so clear.

The vision and motives on internationalization are different from university to university, but the lack of common understanding and expressed commitment towards internationalization is being observed in many TLIs.

### **Provisions for future development:**

At first university should have clear vision of internationalization and articulate motives for itself before undertaking certain measures of promoting it. Hence one of the main factors and basis of the development of internationalization is institutions mission, which would be beneficial to articulate the elements and commitment of internationalization dimension in it. This is very important, because it will serve as a basis for translation of internationalization mission into a clear policy, and then the adequate translation of policy into a strategic plan, which will reflect the priorities set, and then be the translation into achievable and operationalised aims and objectives. The latter should also clearly reflect both internal and external stakeholders' needs, standards set by the institution itself and also an outside body.

## *The system of governance of external relations and internationalization*

### **State of the art in Armenia:**

Many TLI in RA started to establish external relations infrastructure tending to ensure regulated process. In many cases there are being established offices for external relations, with their individual charter, strategy and work plans. Generally they are being accountable to higher management (rector or vice-rector). Also internationalization aspects are commonly being discussed during different meetings in universities (councils, faculty and chair sittings etc.).

But the establishment of the infrastructure in most cases does not apply to branches of TLIs. Though, central administration plays an essential role in facilitation of the development of internationalization, but the involvement and close collaboration between international relations offices, faculties, chairs and different divisions involved in the process, as well as the involvement of lecturers and students in the process are one of the main obstacles to the smooth operation of activities aimed at external relations and internationalization.

### **Provisions for future development:**

The TLI's system of governance of external relations and internationalization, its administrative structures should intend to accomplish the vision and purposes of external relations and internationalization. Surely it is TLI's responsibility to choose the structure of governance and certain type of governing model, whether it would be centralised, decentralised etc. But what is important that the system should ensure regulated decision-making process, also with the involvement of students and staff in it.

The roles, functions and responsibilities of different structures and individuals should be clearly fixed.

The management of external relations and internationalization should draw on the quality management principle (plan-do-check-act).

Also external relations and internationalization processes and procedures should be transparent and based on clear institutional accountability system. There should be policy statements, mechanisms and necessary resources (human, financial, material), which will

enable the evaluation of activities and projects regarding internationalization and external relations and which will ensure their effectiveness regarding their impact, sustainability and regarding how they serve the implementation of TLIs mission and goals of internationalization. This will serve a base for appropriate adjustments for further improvements.

### ***Internationalization in the framework of academic programmes***

#### **State of the art in Armenia:**

Different TLIs in RA have already accumulated good practice in the development of academic programmes, which creates prerequisites for development of experience exchange and internationalization.

TLIs have introduced Diploma Supplement and European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System as a basis for organization of educational process. Also actions have been taken towards development of regulatory framework, guidelines, procedures for formulation of academic programmes based on learning outcomes approach, as well as for aligning teaching, learning and assessment methods. But still works should be done towards their implementation and effective use. As well as many TLIs in Armenia are still keeping the traditional approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, and yet have to face the challenge of moving onto student-centred teaching and learning.

It is vital to note that large number of TLIs are participating in many both national and international projects and are members of different international educational networks, which ensure experience exchange, as well as mobility of students and staff, and thereby contributing recognition of educational experience.

Also many universities are doing benchmarking activities, trying to adapt the results in line with RA education system requirements, but it is mostly being done in the framework of divisions and not in the institutional level.



### **Provisions for future development:**

Introduction of internationalization components into academic programmes has a crucial role on overall internationalization of TLI's and their credibility on that front.

It is very important for the programmes and their goals and objectives to be developed in such way, which will promote internationalization. Hence, the intended learning outcomes, based on which the academic programme is formulated can include international and intercultural competencies as well. The alignment between teaching and learning approaches, assessment methods and the intended learning outcomes should be achieved, as well as gearing towards student-centred teaching and learning will ensure effective learning.

The programmes should articulate well with other relevant programmes and draw on progressive approaches accepted at international level. Comparative analyses and benchmarking for identifying both national and international good practice case studies will surely benefit it, if done effectively according to clear criteria set and adapted to meet the demands of the particular educational system.

Internationalization of academic programmes can be promoted by mobility programmes of students and staff regarding both studies, internship and work, developing joint and double degree programmes, effectively introducing of ECTS System, Diploma Supplement, and mechanisms for recognition of prior learning, ensuring the appropriate level of a foreign language (language courses, foreign language study, programmes offered in foreign language, international materials, language clubs).

From the perspective of academic programmes the programme accreditation process and its result have a great impact on recognition of qualifications, promoting the development of internationalization, and recruiting international students.

### ***Financial resources for the development of external relations and internationalization***

#### **State of the art in Armenia:**

Many TLI's in Armenia are participating in different projects, which give vast amount of opportunities for internationalization developments and financing of different activities.

They also gain different grants from government, different national and international projects, foundations, agencies etc. But in many cases not sufficient financial and other resources are being provided for the development of external relations and internationalization, or even in many cases there is also no allocation of internationalization funding with separate line in the universities' budgets

#### **Provisions for future development:**

The financing of external relations and internationalization activities should be integrated into institution-wide and department planning and budgeting systems.

Hence, TLIs should set off adequate financial and other resources (e.g. ICT) and allocate them appropriately and according to clear financial policy of implementing external relations and internationalization objectives and initiatives, giving a great importance to and ensuring the internationalization of academic programmes as well.

Institution may also pay attention to external funding performance, which would be effective to be implemented by clear policy of grant involvement aimed at promoting of internationalization and external relations.

But it is important that the resources gained from external relations and internationalization activities to be directed towards promoting the same dimension, and that great importance to be put towards improvement of education quality and enrichment of learners' experience.

#### ***Human resources for accomplishment of internationalization vision and goals***

##### **State of the art in Armenia:**

For accomplishment of internationalization vision and goals most TLIs envisage human resources both in higher management sector, and providing that many TLIs have external relation offices, also staff for that. In case of need they recruit new people, ensure their orientation.

Providing that many TLIs are participating in different projects, it gives them opportunity for their staff mobility for participation in different trainings and ensuring experience exchange.

Some obstacles that are remaining currently is connected with the experience of young staff members, who are involved in internationalization activities and resistance from elder staff members and lecturers to different new approaches, ideas and proposals.

#### **Provisions for future development:**

For accomplishment of TLIs' internationalization vision and goals, there is a need for highly qualified staff, capable of ensuring external relations and internationalization provisions. Their recruitment and selection should be based on clear policy, procedure, requirements and selection criteria, which will recognise their international and intercultural competencies and expertise, appropriate level of knowledge of foreign languages, which then will serve as a base for their function distributions.

It's very important to ensure that they are motivated before their selection as well as during their performance. Ensuring appropriate support for their assignments, rewards based on the evaluation results of their performance on a regular basis may be beneficial in this regard.

And also institution should ensure their professional development and sustainability by providing them systemized training opportunities (e.g. regarding the development of international projects), and in case there are groups of professionals regarding external relations and internationalization in faculty and division level, by providing close cooperation between them and ensuring the exchange of experience.

#### ***Internationalization of research***

##### **State of the art in Armenia:**

In strategies of many TLIs in RA the internationalization of their research activities is being reflected as an important aspect. Many TLIs have research centres, are organizing different scientific events, where international scientists are also taking part in different occasions. TLIs to ensure cooperation in internationalization of research are sometimes conducting joint researches with counterparts, are participating in different national and international symposiums and making reports there, making publications in different peer-reviewed

journals in international level, as well as in RA and CIS countries, taking part in activities of different international scientific organizations etc.

The main obstacles that are remaining are students (both national and international) involvement in research activities, as well as commercialization of their research activities both in national and international level.

#### **Provisions for future development:**

TLLs should ensure the implementation and promotion of internationalization of their research incentives through clear strategy, policies and procedures. Such incentives can include joint research projects, organization of both international and national conferences, exchange programmes of research for students and staff etc. In this regard the involvement of both national and international students' in international research activities and the link between their learning and research is as much important.

One of the key activities in internationalizing research is development of partnerships for international research and international collaboration. Surely, it is not the quantity of institutions with whom the TLI is collaborating that counts, but its quality and results. Therefore, some priorities should be identified, and also specific criteria of collaboration according to stated goals. This will have its direct effect on promoting the publications in journals at international level and hence on promoting the international recognition of research done by TLLs.

#### ***International students***

##### **State of the art in Armenia:**

Some part of foreign students from different regions of the world studying in Armenia are exchange students and some are regular international students. International students as due to language barrier have separate classes from the national students. Some TLL's has attached hostels specially for international students.

The level of awareness within international students regarding national and international projects and other opportunities is not high. Also in many TLIs there are mostly no formal mechanisms for the involvement of international students in quality assurance processes.

Also it is to be mentioned that by attracting foreign students TLIs are increasing their financial incomes from tuition fees.

**Provisions for future development:**

There is a requirement of clear strategy for the recruitment of outstanding international students. It can include clear identification of regions of recruitment and as well as region expanding.

It can be beneficial to implement marketing activities, such as publications about TLI and programmes offered by it, international student handbook etc., but it should be based solely on genuine information.

The TLI should have set mechanisms, procedures and criteria for recruitment, selection and admission of foreign students.

There should be orientation, support services and extra-curricular activities for international students studying, as well as domestic students, who are going abroad (e.g. advisors, orientation, cross-cultural teaching and learning, which will promote internationalization at home as well).

The TLIs should ensure the involvement of international students' in quality assurance processes, implementing feedback mechanisms for get valuable information from them (e.g. their needs, satisfaction, suggestions) out of improvement considerations.

Both national and international students should be acquainted about the national and international opportunities.

## *Collaboration with local and international counterparts*

### **State of the art in Armenia:**

Many TLIs are collaborating with different counterparts in the base of bilateral and multilateral agreements and treaties, also with participation in different projects with collaboration with many institution which gives them vast amount of opportunities for development and experience exchange through mutual projects, involvement of international experts in TLIs' activities, joint programmes, researches, mobility, work, internships, study and training opportunities abroad, integration in professional and scientific international networks etc.

But many times the implementation of different agreements lacks effectiveness due to not providing enough financial, human and other resources by TLIs for implementation of corresponding activities.

### **Provisions for future development**

TLIs should ensure that the agreements signed between institutions are having practical results, based on clear plans, activities, aims and goals, which are in line with the ones set in institutional level. There should be clear understanding that for effective collaboration and results there is a need for resource provision and commitment towards their implementation. There should also be clear mechanisms set for promoting dialogue between institutions and dissemination of good practice, and not only in international, but also in national level.

### **Conclusion**

It is significant that TLIs address the issue of assessing, assuring and enhancing the quality of their international dimension. External quality assurance system can play an essential role in those processes. But it is very important to be noticed that it is TLIs' primary responsibility to choose certain approach towards internationalization and to develop their internationalization

dimension through an integrated and systemised process according to their own vision and goals.

TLLs should not concentrate primary on corresponding to accreditation requirements, because the process is not aimed at standardising the internationalization approaches and activities. Accreditation process helps TLLs to assess and enhance the internationalization dimension according to their own stated aims, objectives, as well as their specifications, yet at the same time assuring the compliance with the national and international requirements. It helps to realize the importance of different components and key activities which are integral to the internationalization process and have to work in unison to achieve the internationalization of TLLs.

TLLs may see this as an opportunity to realize their responsibility for the quality improvement and the ways of promoting internationalization within them, as well as to share findings, see innovations and promote the dissemination good practice.

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