

The Role of Quality Assurance System in Increasing the Quality of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia

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A scientific paper

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THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE SYSTEM IN INCREASING THE QUALITY OF HIGHER EDUCATION IN THE REPUBLIC OF CROATIA

ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the opinion of the academic staff on relationship between quality assurance system and improvement of teaching quality. The Quality Assurance System (QAS) was introduced in Croatian higher education institutions in 2009 by the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Official Gazette 45/09), following the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The basic goal of establishing the QAS is to improve the quality of higher education institutions, respectively learning and teaching process. In this context, the aim of this paper is to examine the effectiveness of the implemented QAS in the opinion of the academic staff at institutions in the field of economics and business in the Republic of Croatia. The research for this paper was conducted using an online questionnaire in 2019, based on a sample of 100 academic staff at seven institutions in the field of economics and business in the Republic of Croatia. The views of the academic staff on the contribution of QAS to the quality of their work in the domain of teaching, curriculum, learning outcomes, methods of evaluating knowledge, and research work were examined. The results show that despite all the efforts in implementing the QAS in all institutions surveyed, only 22% of the surveyed academic staff recognize the contribution of the QAS to the quality of their academic work.

Keywords: *Quality Assurance System, Quality of Higher Education, Academic Staff Perspectives, Higher Education Institutions, the Republic of Croatia.*

1. Introduction

As a signatory of the Bologna Declaration, Croatia has, with the reforms already implemented, committed itself to implement a system of quality assurance for higher education (HE), following the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Fulfilment of the commitment began in 2009, when the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education (Official Gazette 45/09) was adopted, establishing the Quality Assurance System (QAS) at Croatian higher education institutions. The establishment of the QAS has done a lot, in addition to adopting the mentioned Act (Official Gazette 45/09), institutional capacity to implement the quality

system has been founded (quality offices, quality committees, persons in charge for quality implementation at higher education institutions (HEIs), vice deans for quality, etc.). In addition to strengthening the institutional capacity at each HEI, the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE), in accordance with the mentioned Act, has undertaken responsibility for ensuring and improving the quality of science and HE. The ASHE is in charge of implementing activities within the scope of the mentioned Act and other regulations. In addition to institutional capacity building (ASHE and HEIs), each HEI had to define a strategic framework for QAS. Quality System Regulations, Quality Policy, Quality Strategies, Activity Plans, and QAS Implementation and Improvement Measures, Quality Assurance Manuals, Strategic Quality Goals, Activities, Indicators are defined as well as mechanisms for ensuring, improving and promoting the quality of HEIs. Mechanisms for collecting feedback about the quality system have also been identified, as well as measures to improve quality indicators. In general, a great effort has been put into establishing the QAS at Croatian HEIs.

Ten years from the enactment of the mentioned Act on Quality Assurance, which has started the process of establishing the QAS at Croatian HEIs, it is justified to wonder what has been achieved. After all the efforts and activities undertaken in implementation and evaluation of the QAS at HEIs in the Republic of Croatia, at all levels, from the state (ministry, agency), HEIs and at the micro-level of all stakeholders in HE process, it is quite fair to ask what improvements has the QAS and external evaluation contributed to HE? That is, have all the undertaken activities and formalized procedures made HE any better, from the perspective of the Croatian academic staff? Since it is not possible to measure quality quantitatively and check whether it has really improved or not, it is only possible to ask the stakeholders of HE process what they think about it. There are many stakeholders in the HE process, primarily students, academic staff, state, public, employers and the like. This paper is focused on the academic staff, that is, people who teach in HEIs in Croatia. It is difficult to get students' feedback about the QAS since they are not familiar with the situation before the QAS was established. The academic staff is very familiar with the situation before, with QAS complexity and its achievements. So it is fully justified to ask them what they think about the QAS and whether the quality of their teaching has been improved or not.

Within the mentioned context, the aim of this paper is to present the results of the conducted research on the mentioned sample in Croatia. The question is whether the QAS at their HEI really improved the quality of their work? Whether all the effort – legal and strategic framework, management, new units, and formalized procedures – has made HE any better, especially learning and teaching (the declared goal of the ESG standard)? The research was conducted in 2019 at 7 (public) institutions in the field of economics and business in the Republic of Croatia. An on-line questionnaire, compiled by the authors of this paper, was sent to all academic staff at the aforementioned HEIs. The questionnaire sought to answer the question of how much QAS has improved the quality of their work.

The paper is structured into five chapters. After the introduction, a brief overview of the QAS in the Republic of Croatia and the European Union (EU) is provided. The third chapter presents an overview of the literature on critical evaluation of the QAS. The fourth chapter presents the methodology of the conducted research and its main results. The final chapter presents the main conclusions and implications of the paper.

2. Quality Assurance System at HEIs in the European Union and the Republic of Croatia

Quality assurance is a continuous and dynamic process that ensures the fulfilment of predefined standards and guidelines adopted by the ministers responsible for HE in the

European Higher Education Area (EHEA). As defined by the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) in Croatia, quality assurance is a comprehensive term referring to the ongoing process of evaluating (evaluating, monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining and improving) the quality of higher education system, institutions and study programs. Quality assurance begins with the quality of an individual study program and the responsibility of the individual HEI for their quality (Ivkovic, 2009, 20).

2.1. Ensuring the Quality of HEIs in the EU

In order to increase the quality of HE, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education has developed Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), based on request from the Bologna Conference in Berlin (2003), with the aim of developing and improving the quality of study programs for students and other users of HE (Ivković, 2009, 21). European standards and guidelines were adopted by the ministers responsible for HE in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2005 on the proposal of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (in cooperation with the European Students' Union, the European Association of Higher Education Institutions and the European University Association) (ESG, 2015, 3). As significant progress has been made in the quality assurance system (QAS) and all comments and suggestions for further improvement of the system have been taken into account, a new proposal of the revised ESG has been prepared. The draft of the revised document was adopted by the Bologna Process Monitoring Group in 2014 and adopted by the Ministers of the European Higher Education Area in 2015. The content of the document is generic enough to allow it to be used at a national level by all signatories of the Bologna Declaration, regardless of the diversity of political and HE systems as well as a legal framework across countries.

In order to increase the quality of HE, the European standards and guidelines have been divided into three parts: (according to ESG, 2015, 7)

1. Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs),
2. Standards and Guidelines for External Quality Assurance of HEIs,
3. Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance Agencies.

These three parts are interconnected and together form the basis of the European Quality Assurance Framework (ESG, 2015, 7) and one unit. The Standards include quality assurance practices in HE that are accepted throughout the EHEA, while the Guidelines explain why a particular standard is important and describe how it can be implemented (ESG, 2015, 7).

Internal quality assurance refers to the strategic development of the quality system and the quality assurance processes by which HEIs guarantee that the Standards and quality of the offered education are continually maintained and improved. According to the ASHE, internal quality assurance is a system of measures and activities introduced and implemented by an institution to monitor and improve the quality of HE.

External quality assurance refers to systematic monitoring and the effectiveness of internal QAS, that is, to the processes by which an independent institution guarantees that the standards and quality of HE offered by the institution are maintained and improved (Horvat Novak and Hunjet, 2015, 464). The result of external quality system audits is an assessment of the level of development and compliance of HEI's QAS with European standards and guidelines (ESG) and Audit criteria. Depending on the level of development, each of the

criteria can be in one of the following stages (according to the Criteria for Audit and Dolaček-Alduk, Sigmund and Lončar Vicković, 2008, 41):

- Initial phase – the QAS is implemented but out of service (basic quality system documents are created),
- Developed phase – the QAS is operational and an internal audit has been carried out,
- Advanced phase – the QAS is continuously improved based on the results of internal and external audits.

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance Agencies should ensure that professionalism, credibility and integrity of agencies are visible and transparent to their stakeholders and must allow comparability to be observable among agencies and allow the necessary European dimension (ESG, 2015, 23). There are seven standards related to ensuring the external quality of agencies. The content of the standards and guidelines indicates that certain criteria must be met by agencies in terms of their status, activities, resources (human, financial), independence in work and activity, reporting, etc. Standards do also contribute naturally to the work being done towards mutual recognition of agencies and the results of agency evaluations or accreditations (ESG, 2015, 23).

The purpose of the ESG standards is to (ESG, 2015, 6):

- constitute a common framework for quality assurance systems for teaching and learning at European, national and institutional levels,
- enable maintaining and improving the quality of higher education in the EHEA,
- encourage mutual trust, facilitating mobility within and across national borders,
- provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.

The aforementioned purposes of the ESG form a framework within which various HEIs, agencies, and states can use and implement the ESG in a variety of ways.

2.2. Quality Assurance of Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia

As a signatory to the Bologna Declaration, the Republic of Croatia has since 2001 committed itself to implement the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ESG). The ESG were introduced in the Republic of Croatia in 2009 by Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education Act (Official Gazette 45/09). By adopting the mentioned Act, Quality Assurance Systems (QAS) for HEIs were established following the ESG. The key elements that national QAS should contain are (according to Predojević and Kolanović, 2015, 330): internal evaluation, external assessment, students' involvement, a publication of results and international assessment. The ESG envision that HEIs will independently conduct internal quality assurance procedures, while external evaluations of HEIs will be conducted by the ASHE.

Quality assurance in HE in the Republic of Croatia is based on:

- Science and Higher Education Act (Official Gazette, 123/03, 198/03, 105/04, 174/04, 02/07, 46/07, 45/09, 63/11, 94/13, 139/13, 101/14, 60/15 and 131/17);
- Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education Act (Official Gazette 45/09);
- Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (newer version from 2015);
- Audit Ordinance (Ordinance on Audit of Quality Assurance Systems at Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Croatia (2017));
- Audit Criteria (2017);

- Standards for the evaluation of the quality of universities and university constituents in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions;
- Standards for the evaluation of the quality of polytechnics and colleges in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions.

The ASHE was established in 2005. Since its establishment, the ASHE has started to implement the QAS in science and HE. The process of implementation took place in several stages. In the first phase, a quality management system was established according to ISO 9001, which harmonized the quality level of all its activities, according to the Act on Scientific Activity and Higher Education. After many years of work on improving the documents of the quality management system, the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education has started a new phase of the organization of the QAS in science and HE. With this Act, the ASHE becomes responsible for all types of quality evaluation in science and HE in the Republic of Croatia.

3. Critical Assessment of the QAS - Literature Review

The impact of the QAS on HE has received increasing attention lately, both in practice and in the academic literature. Considering that it is almost impossible to quantitatively measure the contribution of quality and ESG standards to real quality improvement in science and HE, this section will present the literature review on the issues related to the critical assessment of HEIs quality assurance.

Baldwin (1997) looked at how the national QAS of the early 1990s in Australia impact on universities. Baldwin argued that the QAS had some positive results: more rigorous course approval procedures; increased awareness of students' perspectives on teaching and learning; and a shift in climate, with a new attention to teaching issues and effective learning. On the negative side were four key issues: an excessive bureaucratization of procedures, with associated pedantry and legalism; a greatly increased administrative workload for academic staff, taking them away from their "core business"; a formalism that can stifle creativity and individuality, and a de-professionalization of the academic staff.

Barrow (1999) shows how quality management in New Zealand was considered as an instrument of governmentality developed to ensure the surveillance of the work of academic staff in an educational institution. It is suggested that surveillance has not led to an improvement in quality, or to institutional definitions of quality being realized; rather, that dramaturgical compliance to the system has been achieved. His conclusion is that "although the staff may be able to articulate and use the elements of the quality management system, this does not mean that the institution's definition of quality is understood, far less achieved" (Barrow, 1999, 35).

Newton (2000) examined academic staff perceptions of quality assurance. His study highlights that academic staff has a different view from academic managers and external quality monitoring bodies on the achievements of the quality system. Their view of the QAS is as "accountability-led" rather than "improvement-led". Regarding that QAS may become a shield for the purposes of addressing accountability requirements rather than providing a basis for quality development.

Harrison and Lockwood (2001) argue that the QAA (Quality Assurance Agency) fails to deliver on its avowed aim of assuring the quality of teaching and learning within universities as it does not aim to enhance teaching quality. The QAA aims to enhance confidence in teaching quality, not teaching quality itself. Furthermore, they argue that QAA scores do not

measure teaching quality; they only measure the degree of honesty of institutions' claims to teaching quality.

Morley (2003) and the academic staff she interviewed see little good in quality assurance and quality assessment, in both concept and implementation. According to her radical opinion, quality assurance and the like in HEIs is mostly about surveillance and control. She concludes that QA mechanisms in the UK could become instruments of declined creativity and less meaningful teaching and learning. QA processes have created a compliance culture and, paradoxically, are generating mediocrity rather than improvement.

Stensaker (2003) argues that the impact of quality assurance on teaching and learning seemed quite ambiguous. There were positive effects, such as increased attention towards teaching and learning, and signs of a cultural change in the attitudes of academic staff. Some negative effects were also revealed, such as the feeling academic staff had of being scrutinized and inspected; greater centralization and more "bureaucratization" in HEIs.

Harvey and Newton (2004) argue that most of the impact studies they reviewed assert the view that quality is more about accountability and compliance and, in some countries, control rather than improvement, and has, in itself, contributed little to any effective transformation of the student learning experience.

Anderson (2006) shows that academic staff, although committed to quality in research and teaching, continue to resist quality assurance processes within their universities. The results of the study argued that until university management, university quality agencies and academic staff draw on mutually agreed understandings of the quality concept, academic staff will continue to resist quality processes.

Weber (2007) points out two arguments in describing the need for quality assurance in HEIs. The first is related to the autonomy of HEIs. The restrictions on the autonomy of universities – even those honestly intended for their own good – reduce their quality, instead of improving it. This is justified by the ability of HEIs to adopt a proactive and entrepreneurial stance, rather than being stuck in the classic vicious circle of administration. The second argument is related to the lack of funding, which further emphasizes the importance of university management, which means that it is necessary to ensure that they respond as effectively as possible to the most pressing needs. He states that the QAS at HEIs is necessary, from the point of view of public authorities and the administration of HEIs. It is necessary to consider what can be done to bring the QAS to the real improvements and to minimize adverse side effects. That is actually the question he raised in his paper. His conclusion is that he hopes his chapter in the book "will convince the sceptics that developing a culture of quality in view of improving it is essential, and also convince the perfectionists that HEIs are complex, but generally mature entities. This being so, we must let them do the job they were meant to do..." (Weber, 2007, 29).

Banta (2010) indicates that quality assurance processes have improved pedagogical techniques, curricula, and student support programs in the United States like advising and learning communities and measurement instruments. But there is limited evidence supporting that student learning had improved, which is one of the main outcomes we expect from the QAS.

Cheng (2010) conducted a study that explores how academic staff perceived the impact of audit and audit-related quality assurance mechanisms on four aspects of their work: undergraduate classroom teaching practices, curriculum development, power relations between academics and students, and academics workload (Cheng, 2010). The results of

Cheng's study showed that quality audits remain a source of controversy. "Two-thirds of the respondents considered audit and quality assurance mechanisms as an ineffective bureaucratic practice that had little impacts on their work. The remaining one-third of respondents found the audit useful for improving teaching practice, particularly increasing academic staff awareness of the importance of good teaching" (Cheng, 2010, 269).

Harvey and Williams (2010) in their review suggest that it is still not clear that, even after 15 years, QAS have really enhanced HE. The review suggests that it has resulted in clear documentation and transparency, although external processes could be better aligned with everyday academic activity. The link between external processes, internal processes and improvements in teaching and learning seems to be tenuous and patchy (Harvey and Williams, 2010, 107). In this view, quality assurance fails to be a part of the everyday activity of academic staff because they perceive no real link between the quality of their academic work (which includes teaching and research) and the performance embodied in quality assurance processes.

Ryan (2015) provides a review of the literature on the effectiveness of quality assurance practices. In her paper she states the authors and their papers as an example of prevailing scepticism, and, on the other hand, she states the authors who are positive about the relation between quality assurance and its effectiveness on academic work.

According to Smidt (2015), the implementation of the Bologna Process, and Quality Insurance as one of the pillars on which Bologna is based, was designed to create a competitive and flexible European Higher Education Area through e.g. introducing three-cycle systems, curriculum development, learning outcomes linked to qualification frameworks, ECTS for transfer and accumulation and diploma supplements, all to increase transparency and flexibility. These very ambitious goals may not have been achieved in all 48 countries, but they have supported and highlighted the importance of HE for the future of Europe in all countries.

Brady and Bates (2016) indicate that the balance between core aims of the Quality Assurance Agency in the United Kingdom (UK) (accountability and enhancement) has been lost and the discourse of accountability and efficiency prevails. The results of the research confirm that a combination of standards and excessive institutional control may result in a decline in the quality of teaching and learning rather than a "quality culture".

Looking back at the first decade of the journal *Quality in Higher Education* Harvey (2016) concluded that there were few studies of the impact of quality assurance reflecting a general failure in the literature to adequately explore it. Harvey (2016) states that "quality assurance fails to be a part of the everyday activity of academics because they perceive no real link between the quality of their academic work (teaching and research) and the performance embodied in quality assurance processes. This leads to a degree of cynicism about the efficacy of assurance processes" (Harvey, 2016, 8-9).

Liu (2016) in her book gives a literature review regarding the understanding how quality assessment causes university change. After the research she has done, she concludes that the impact of quality assessment on university change, especially on teaching and learning, is not as great as expected. She highlights the papers with both positive and negative effects of the QAS.

Williams (2016) outlines in his paper a brief reflection that highlights a variety of perspectives on the relationship between quality assurance and quality enhancement. On the one hand, it is arguable that quality assurance and quality enhancement have little real contact

and work in isolation from each other (he stated some authors with such research findings). At the other end of the spectrum, quality assurance and quality management are integral to each other (he also stated some authors with such research findings).

The main question in Beerkens' paper (2018) is "if all this – stronger leadership, management, new units, and formalized procedures – has made education any better?" (Beerkens, 2018, 274). The conclusion is that the impact of various quality assurance policies on student learning – which is presumably the primary target of quality policies – is to a large extent unknown. There is thus quite a lot of evidence on positive (and some negative) effects of external quality assurance on universities "but the question of whether graduates now walk out with better knowledge and skills as a result of all the quality reforms is still hard to counter" (Beerkens, 2018, 273-274).

The presented literature review indicates all the complexity of assessing the impact of the QAS on quality improvement in HEIs. Namely, it is almost impossible to draw a general conclusion from the analysed papers. The estimation is that the impact depends on a number of factors, which is the method of evaluation, the subject of evaluation, what is considered as the quality of HE, the quality assessment schemes, the characteristics of the evaluated institutions, etc. While many studies argue that quality assessment has not caused university change as much as expected, the others are stating that quality assessment is an effective technology for supporting change in HEIs.

However, this kind of research is still inadequate. After reviewing the literature, it can be stated that there is no consensus on the methodology for evaluating the impact of QAS on quality improvement in HEIs. Nor there are defined quality parameters that should be assessed when evaluating the QAS influence. Likewise, there is no universally accepted uniform definition of the quality of HE, which complicates any further form of research. Research of this kind, as mentioned, is still scarce, at the European level, and especially in the Republic of Croatia. The research presented in the next chapter of this paper is the first of its kind in the Republic of Croatia and is a great contribution to the discussion on the impact of QAS on improving the quality of learning and teaching, as the main declared objectives of the quality system in general.

4. Methodological Framework and Results of Empirical Research

Empirical studies have indicated that the impact of a quality assurance system (QAS) is not straightforward, i.e. it is extremely complex. It affects different spheres of higher education (HE) and research process and it is impossible to enumerate all its impacts. There is currently a debate on whether the QAS raises the quality of learning and teaching, or it is a purpose in itself? Is the QAS opportunity or a threat? The literature review indicates that there are divided opinions on the effectiveness of QAS. On the one hand, there are advocates who believe that this is an effective way of influencing the quality of teachers (Banta, 2010; Smidt, 2015; Weber, 2007). On the other hand, there is a view that QAS is a pointless process because it focuses on measuring quantitative indicators rather than qualitative ones (for example Anderson, 2006; Barrow, 1999; Harrison and Lockwood, 2001; Harvey and Newton, 2004; Harvey, 2016; Newton, 2000). The question is, can quality academic staff, i.e. those who deliver and transfer knowledge qualitatively, be identified by quality indicators?

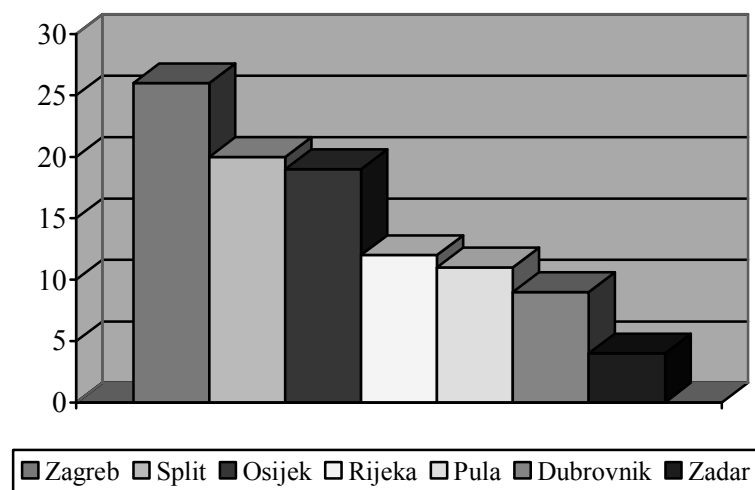
It is almost impossible to answer those questions uniquely because the quality is in the eyes of a beholder and does not represent equal value for all. The quality of HE depends on the expectations and satisfaction of users, preferably students, employers, teachers, local and wider community. In this paper, the emphasis is on the perceptions of the academic staff. Given that academic staff is the most qualified to achieve an appropriate level of quality and directly influence its achievement with their work, the aim of this paper is to examine their

views. Regarding that 10 years have passed since the introduction of the QAS in Croatia, it is quite reasonable to ask what the academic staff thinks about it. This part of the paper presents the methodology of the conducted research and its main results.

4.1. Methodological Framework of the Research

The aim of this paper is to examine the perception of the academic staff at the institutions in the field of economics and business in Croatia about the QAS and its influence on their quality. An online questionnaire was compiled for the purpose of this paper. The questionnaire was compiled by the authors of this paper after a detailed analysis of the literature and after a research of all the essential aspects of the QAS and quality of HE. The questionnaire, in addition to a few general questions, offered 9 statements and academic staff were required to express their degree of agreement or disagreement (Likert scale). The statements related to the contribution of QAS to the particular segments of their work at HEIs: quality of their teaching, curriculum, learning outcomes, methods of knowledge evaluation, research work and the like. The contribution of the QAS to those key activities academic staff should evaluate from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The questionnaire was constructed online at the limesurvey.srce.hr site. The survey was conducted in 2019 (June / July). Public institutions in the field of economics and business in the Republic of Croatia were selected as a sample (Zagreb, Osijek, Rijeka, Pula, Split, Zadar, Dubrovnik). A link for fulfilling the questionnaire was sent to all the academic staff at the mentioned HEIs. The questionnaire was completely filled out by 100 academic staff. The structure of the respondents is presented in graph 1.

Graph 1: The structure of the respondents by affiliation with a HEI (%)



Source: Results of empirical research

Most respondents answered from the Faculty of Economics and Business in Zagreb (since it is the largest institution in the sample). By age, the majority of respondents belong to the age group of 31-40 years (39%), followed by 41-50 (35%). By gender, 68% of females and 32% of male respondents answered. According to the academic title, most respondents were associate professors (30%) and assistant professors (25%).

4.2. Results of the Empirical Research

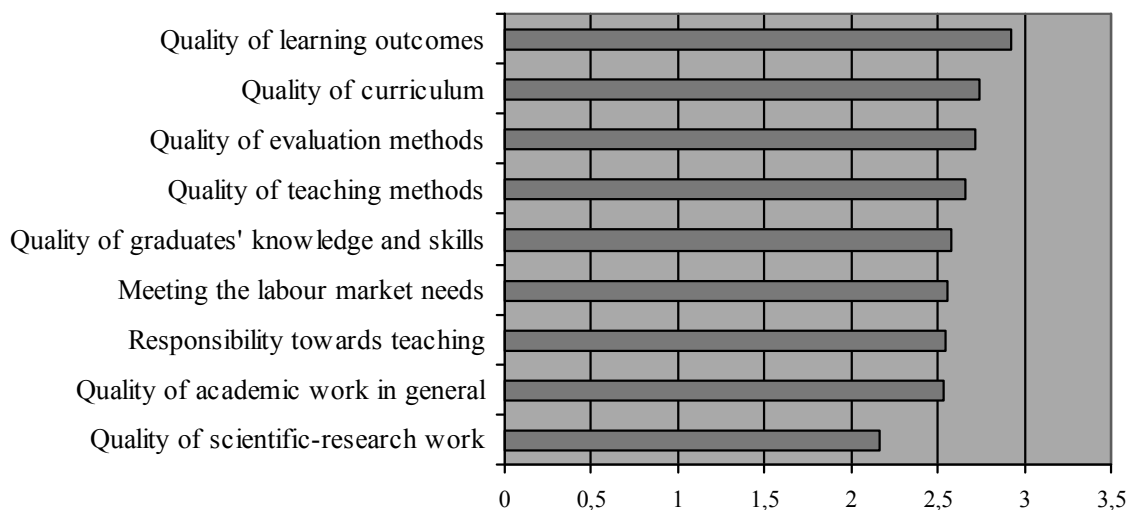
The aim of the questionnaire was to examine the views of the academic staff in Croatia on how much the QAS has contributed to the quality of their teaching methods/processes, curriculum, learning outcomes, knowledge evaluation method, academic work in general, etc.

Nine statements that represent the quality of the HE process were offered in the questionnaire. Respondents were asked to indicate the degree of their agreement with the given statements according to the Likert scale. The question was: The QAS has improved the quality of:

1. my teaching methods (teaching)
2. curriculum of my courses
3. learning outcomes of my courses
4. my evaluation methods
5. meeting the labour market needs
6. my scientific/research work
7. my responsibility towards teaching
8. my academic work in general
9. graduates' knowledge and skills.

Graph 2 presents level of agreement (from 1 to 5) of all respondents according to the given statements. The respondents had to eliminate their progress due to some other reasons and assess their progress solely due to the QAS (as much as it is possible).

Graph 2: The average level of agreement with the contribution of the QAS to the offered determinants of quality in HE



Note: Degree of agreement: 1 – not at all, 2 – mostly no, 3 neither yes nor no, 4 – mostly yes, 5 – completely yes.

Source: Results of empirical research

Based on the results presented in Graph 2, it is noted that the greatest contribution of the QAS is recognized in raising the quality of learning outcomes and in raising the quality of the curriculum. On the other hand, the smallest impact of the QAS is perceived in raising the quality of scientific / research work, which is expected. Namely, the goal of establishing the QAS at the European level is to improve the quality of learning and teaching. Focus is not on promoting research directly, and it is, therefore, no surprise that, according to the respondents, the smallest contribution of QAS is reflected in the quality of research work. The results of the research also indicate that the average degree of agreement for all respondents according to the given quality parameters is 2.6. That indicates negative as well as the indifferent attitude of the respondents about the QAS and its impact on quality, which is quite worrying. Ten years after the introduction of the QAS into Croatian HEIs, there is still a large number of academic staff who do not have an opinion about QAS. That means that they are either not sufficiently familiar with the QAS or do not clearly recognize its

contribution. Based on the results of the research, it is evident that QAS either did not obtain the results expected from it or it is not recognized from the surveyed academic staff.

In order to further analyse the respondents' answers to the same question, Table 1 presents all the statements from the questionnaire with the number of respondents who selected each degree of agreement (from 1 to 5). The purpose of the analysis is to gain an insight into a proportion (%) of the respondents who recognize the contribution of QAS, those who do not recognize its contribution and those who do not have an attitude.

Table 1: Percentages of respondents' level of agreement with given statements (analysis 1)

| | Statements | Degree of agreement | | | | | Respondents |
|---|--|---------------------|----|----|----|---|-------------|
| | | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | TOTAL |
| | The QAS has contributed to: | | | | | | |
| 1 | Quality of my teaching methods/process | 18 | 25 | 35 | 17 | 5 | 100 |
| 2 | Quality of curriculum of my courses | 17 | 23 | 32 | 25 | 3 | 100 |
| 3 | Quality of learning outcomes at my courses | 16 | 21 | 24 | 32 | 7 | 100 |
| 4 | Quality of my methods of evaluation | 18 | 22 | 34 | 22 | 4 | 100 |
| 5 | Meeting the labour market needs | 22 | 23 | 35 | 17 | 3 | 100 |
| 6 | Quality of my scientific/research work | 35 | 27 | 27 | 9 | 2 | 100 |
| 7 | My responsibility towards teaching | 24 | 18 | 39 | 17 | 2 | 100 |
| 8 | Quality of my academic work in general | 23 | 23 | 36 | 14 | 4 | 100 |
| 9 | Quality of graduates' knowledge and skills | 20 | 23 | 38 | 17 | 2 | 100 |

Note: Degree of agreement: 1 – not at all, 2 – mostly no, 3 neither yes nor no, 4 – mostly yes, 5 – completely yes.

Source: Results of empirical research

Only 22% of the surveyed academic staff (those who chose degree 4 and 5, or mostly yes and completely yes) have a positive attitude on the relationship between QAS and their quality of teaching and teaching methods. 43% of them think that QAS did not contribute to the improving the quality of their teaching (those who chose degree 1 and 2, or not at all and mostly no), while the remaining 35% thought that QAS's contribution was neither positive nor negative (neither yes nor no). The highest proportion of positive responses was seen in QAS's contributions to the quality of learning outcomes, 39% of them stated that they agreed or generally agreed with the above statement. The next statement with the highest proportion of agreement is the improvement of curriculum thanks to the QAS (28%). Analysing the respondents' answers regarding the statement: the QAS has contributed to the quality of my academic work in general, it is visible that only 18% of respondents agree with it, 46% of the surveyed academic staff disagree with this statement, and 36% chose rank 3 (neither agree nor disagree).

Table 2 presents a summary analysis of those who have a positive attitude towards QAS and those who lacked it. Respondents that do not agree (degree 1 and 2) with the given statements were characterized with negative attitude and respondents that agree with given statements, i.e. those who choose degree 4 and 5, where characterised with positive attitude.

Table 2: Percentages of respondents' level of agreement with given statements (analysis 2)

| | Statements | Attitude | | | Respondents |
|---|--|---------------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|-------------|
| | | Negative (degree 1 and 2) | Neutral (degree 3) | Positive (degree 4 and 5) | TOTAL |
| 1 | Quality of my teaching methods/process | 43 | 35 | 22 | 100 |

| | Statements | Attitude | | | Respondents |
|---|--|---------------------------------|-----------------------|---------------------------------|-------------|
| | | Negative (degree 1 and 2) | Neutral (degree 3) | Positive (degree 4 and 5) | TOTAL |
| 2 | Quality of my curriculum | 40 | 32 | 25 | 100 |
| 3 | Quality of my learning outcomes | 37 | 24 | 39 | 100 |
| 4 | Quality of my methods of evaluation | 40 | 34 | 26 | 100 |
| 5 | Meeting the labour market needs | 46 | 35 | 20 | 100 |
| 6 | Quality of my scientific/research work | 62 | 27 | 11 | 100 |
| 7 | Responsibility towards teaching | 42 | 39 | 19 | 100 |
| 8 | Quality of my academic work in general | 46 | 36 | 18 | 100 |
| 9 | Quality of graduates' knowledge and skills | 43 | 38 | 19 | 100 |
| | Average (\bar{x}) | 44.5 | 33.5 | 22 | - |

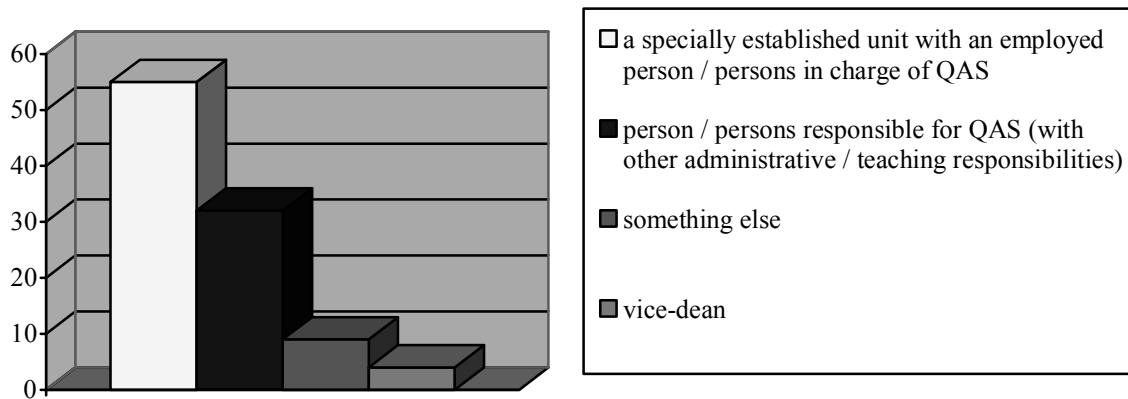
Note: Degree of agreement: 1 – not at all, 2 – mostly no, 3 neither yes nor no, 4 – mostly yes, 5 – completely yes.

Source: Results of empirical research

According to the survey results presented in Table 2, on average, only 22% of the total surveyed academic staff have answered positive (degree 4 and 5 of agreement) for all nine statements. It means that they have a generally positive perception of QAS and its impact on the quality of their work. The proportion of “pessimists” (those with negative attitude, i.e. those who have chosen rank 1 and 2 (not at all and mostly no)) is 44%. They represent the proportion of the surveyed academic staff with a negative attitude towards the QAS, that is, they do not recognize its contribution to improving the quality of their work (teaching, curriculum, learning outcomes, knowledge evaluation, and the like). The rest of the 33% are the respondents who have chosen degree 3 of agreement (neither yes nor no). They represent those who have a neutral attitude towards the QAS. The aforementioned analysis reveals the attitude of the surveyed academic staff on the QAS. If the respondents who positively evaluate the relationship between QAS and quality of teaching are those who have chosen rank 4 and 5, it turns out that only 22% of the examined academic staff are optimists. The rest of 78% of the examined academic staff do not recognize the positive link between the QAS and the quality of their work.

One of the questions in the questionnaire was related to the organisation of the unit that carries out the QAS at HEI. The respondents' answers are presented in graph 3.

Graph 3: Organization of the QAS implementation unit (number of respondents who selected each organisational form)

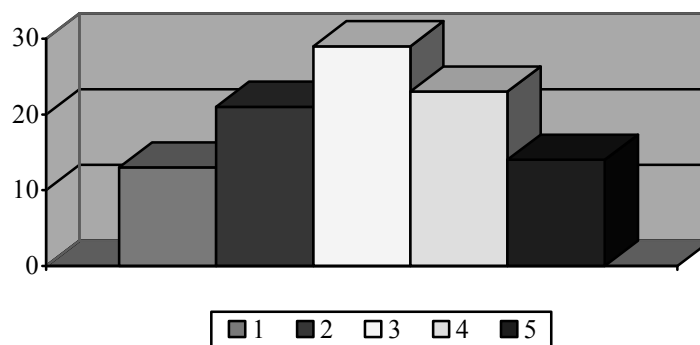


Source: Results of empirical research

The analysis of the answers in Graph 3 indicates the institutional framework for the implementation of QAS at HEIs. Respondents were offered three different organisational forms of QAS implementation at their HEI and also they were given the opportunity for an open answer. The most common form of institutional organisation for QAS is a specially established unit with an employed person (s) in charge of QAS (55%). Person/persons responsible for QAS (with other responsibilities) choose 32%. The quality management committee was mostly cited by the respondents in an open answer. This analysis indicates the seriousness of all the surveyed institutions when establishing an institutional framework for quality management. They all have either person/s or entire departments dealing with quality assurance at their institution.

Respondents' answers to the question of whether the QAS takes too much time on administrative workloads, can be seen in Graph 4.

Graph 4: Administrative Requirements of the QAS



Note: Degree of agreement: 1 – not at all, 2 – mostly no, 3 neither yes nor no, 4 – mostly yes, 5 – completely yes.

Source: Results of empirical research

Thirty-seven percent (37%) of the respondents agree or fully agree that QAS takes too much time for administrative work, 34% of them do not consider it, while 29% neither agree nor disagree. It follows that the surveyed academic staff is roughly divided over whether or not QAS imposes additional administrative work on them.

5. Conclusion

The main objective of this paper was to examine the views and reflections of the Croatian academic staff at the institutions in the field of economics and business on QAS and its impact on quality of their teaching. The aim of the paper was not, in any way, to objectively evaluate or measure the impact of QAS on raising the quality of HE, nor is there a consensus on how to assess it. The aim of the paper was, as stated above, only to examine the views of the mentioned academic staff on the QAS and its impact on the quality of teaching.

The literature review indicates that there are divided opinions on the effectiveness of QAS. On the one hand, there are advocates who believe that this is an effective way of influencing the quality of academic staff. On the other hand, there is a view that QAS is a pointless process because it focuses on measuring quantitative indicators rather than qualitative ones. While the internationalisation of quality systems and the standardization of procedures is fairly clear, their impact on teaching and learning processes is less clear. A review of the Croatian literature indicates that there is a lack of research about this topic. No papers have been found about critical assessment of the impact of QAS on teaching and learning process.

The research for the purpose of this paper was conducted by an online questionnaire, compiled by the authors of this paper, and was forwarded to the seven public institutions in the field of economics and business in the Republic of Croatia. The questionnaire was completely fulfilled by 100 academic staff. The research results are similar to the results presented in the literature review. Approximately one-quarter of the respondents are satisfied with the QAS and believe in its contribution to the quality of their own work. While the rest of the respondents, about three-quarters, do not believe that QAS can achieve the expected results and affect their quality.

It can be concluded that the surveyed academic staff in the Republic of Croatia still have a mostly negative attitude towards the QAS. In other words, the surveyed academic staff believe that the QAS results are either missing or they are simply not recognised. As one of the respondents said, quality by its definition cannot be measured, that is, quantification of quality is an oxymoron by the very definition of a word. It follows that relevant services and institutions in Croatia should reconsider the actual role of the QAS and its further redefinition.

The main limitation of the paper is the inability to objectively evaluate the contribution of QAS to the actual quality of learning and teaching. Namely, there is no consensus at a national level what quality is, nor is there a consensus on how to measure it. This paper was based solely on the attitudes and perceptions of the academic staff.

Based on the empirical analysis in this paper, it can be concluded that QAS has not yet produced an efficient contribution to the quality of teaching. Regarding that QAS has been implemented only 10 years ago in Croatia, we can say that quality assurance is still a work in progress in HE, and it seems that universities need a highly distinctive paradigm for quality assurance. The proportion of the population recognizing the positive contribution of QAS to quality is extremely low and does not justify all the effort put into establishing a QAS. For future research, it is necessary to expand the research sample and to conduct an interview instead of a survey. The reason for this is to highlight the shortcomings of QAS more clearly. Those shortcomings could serve as basic recommendations for future improvements of the system. Through a questionnaire, it is possible to conduct research on a similar sample for five years, for example, to see if there are any improvements within the QAS in the opinion of the academic staff. The basic recommendation of this paper is to reconsider the QAS, its goals, the implementation, and possible redefinition.

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