

1. Short overview of higher education system

1.1 Legal background and functioning context

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a complex country which is composed of two entities – Republic of Srpska and Federation of Bosnia and Herzegovina and Brcko District (municipality of Brcko). The country was established in 1995. by Dayton Peace Agreement which ended a civil war between three people who live in the country. According to Bosnia and Herzegovina Constitution all jurisdiction in all levels of education belongs to entity Republic of Srpska, Brcko District and cantons (administrative parts of Federation of B&H).

Ever since the mid-90s, the Higher Education of Republic Srpska has been undergoing permanent transformation lead by Bologna principles. This transformation, known as “higher education reform”, introduces systemic changes in the work of higher education institutions (HEIs) as well as in the functioning of republican institutions and bodies competent for this social sector, thus approximating higher education in Republic Srpska to the unique European higher education area. The higher education reform in Republic Srpska gains its formal and obligatory form in 2006 through the legal regulations in form of Law on Higher Education as well as the Bosnia and Herzegovina Framework Law on Higher Education from 2007. These laws introduce key systemic changes in the higher education such as integrated universities, treasury financing system, student organisations and their role in academic processes, private initiative and private capital investment as well as establishing the quality assurance system and infrastructure.

Activities on higher education quality assurance, as one of the pillars of Bologna process, have been ongoing since the start of reform activities, and its more intensive operationalisation has been realised since 2005 with the appearance of “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area”.

1.2 Higher Education Institutions

Pursuant to the Law on Higher Education, higher education institutions in Republic Srpska are universities and colleges. University is a higher education institution that performs teaching and scientific and research work, has three cycles of studying and realises at least five study programs from at least three educational areas.

College is higher education institution that performs teaching and scientific and research work and teaches first cycle of study and realises at least one study program from one educational area.

There are twenty one higher education institutions enlisted in the Register of higher education institutions of Republic Srpska-nine universities and 12 colleges, out of which two universities and two colleges are public whereas the other higher education institutions are private.

According to Republic Srpska Institute of Statistics, in academic 2018/2019 HEI's enrolled 29 006 students of which is 16 771 female students (in last two decades number of female students is slowly, but constantly increasing). Unfortunately, total number of students is constantly decreasing (for comparison in academic 2014/2015 total number of students was 39 735).

The teaching process on majority of universities in Republic Srpska is organised per 4+1+3 model, whereas colleges have first cycle of studies lasting for 3 and 4 years.

Higher education is organized in three cycles. First cycle lasts for at least three and mostly four years and is worth 180 ECTS, i.e. 240 ECTS. Second cycle of studies is organized after the first cycle, last for a year or two and is worth 60 ECTS, i.e. 120 ECTS, so the total of both cycles is 300 ECTS. Third cycle of studies is organized after the second cycle and is 180 ECTS worth. One semester of third cycle is 30 ECTS worth. Exceptions are medicine, dentistry, pharmaceutical medicine and veterinary medicine that last for five or six years and are at least 300 ECTS worth. These studies are integrated studies (unique study programs that comprise first and second cycle) and corresponding qualifications and titles.

Chapter in the Law on higher education of Republic Srpska regulates the Quality assurance in higher education. First part of this chapter refers to internal quality assurance in higher education institutions. Every higher education is obliged to conduct the procedure of self-evaluation and quality assessment of its study programs, teaching process and working conditions yearly, maximum in three year intervals. Higher education institution, i.e. its organizational unit, conducts the mentioned process in accordance with higher education institutions' quality assurance procedures and self-evaluation criteria. Self-evaluation and quality assessment report is published so it is available to the academic staff and students at the higher education institution.

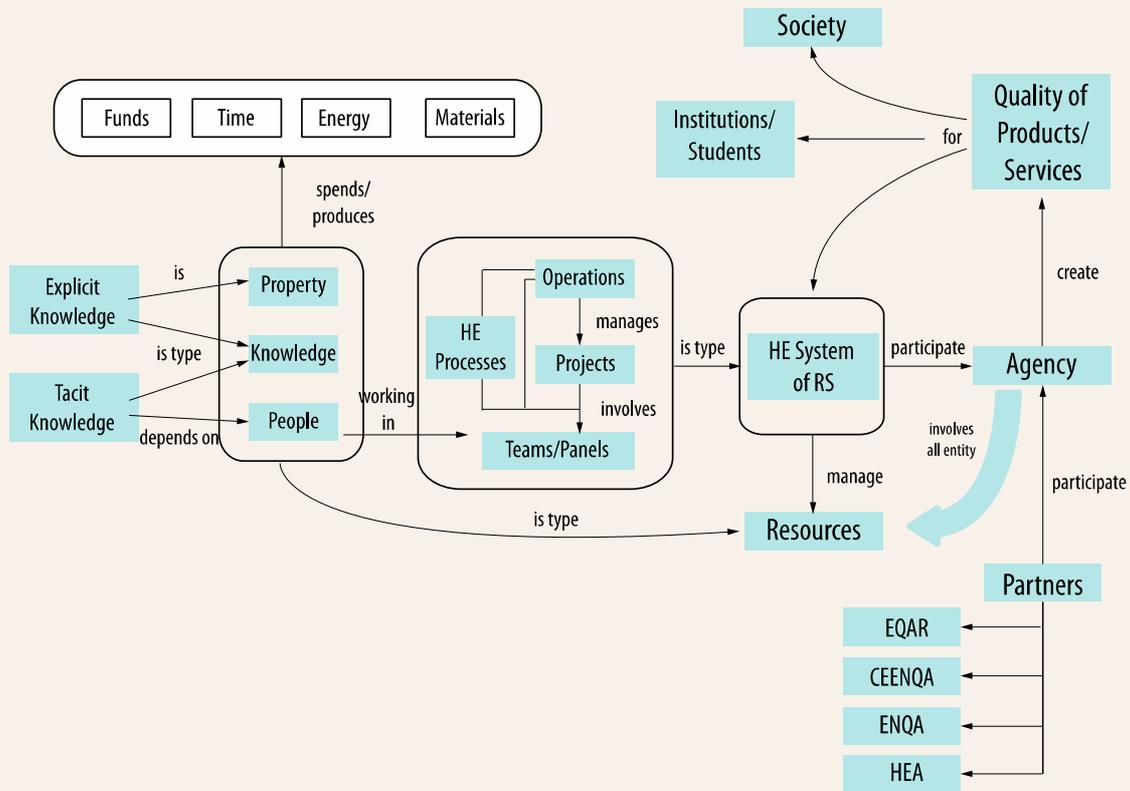
2. Higher Education Accreditation Agency

2.1 Legal background

The amended Law on Higher education of Republic of Srpska dated 2010, foresees establishment of Higher Education Accreditation Agency of Republic of Srpska which should integrate and further contribute to the development of activities started on internal and external quality assurance in higher education through formalised accreditation process. RSHEAA was formally established in May 2011.

Law on higher education of Republic of Srpska regulates accreditation as a quality assurance procedure based on the self-evaluation of higher education institution and evaluation of independent experts, with the purpose of recognizing and improving the quality of higher education within the European higher education area. Accreditation is conducted in three phases: a) self-evaluation by higher education institutions, b) external evaluation by a panel of experts and c) issuing a decision on accreditation. The accreditation procedure is conducted for: a) newly founded higher education institutions and for new study programs with the purpose of establishing to which level are the minimum standards met what represents the initial accreditation and b) for existing higher education institutions and study programs with the purpose of evaluating the reached quality level in accordance with valid standards and the criteria in the area of quality assurance. Licensing procedure results in initial accreditation and is for now conducted by the Ministry for Higher Education. Accreditation that follows up on the licensing is conducted by the RSHEAA for accreditation of higher education institutions of Republic of Srpska. RSHEAA has a status of a legal person with rights and liabilities set by this law, standards and instructions for

quality assurance. RSHEAA is by law independent institution founded by Government.



Picture 1: Context of RS HEAA functioning

2.2 Procedures, processes and activities

After first external evaluation conducted by ENQA in 2016/2017 based on the recommendations given in report, Agency developed its procedures and strengthened its resources including new premises, new employees and increased budget. The ENQA report was encouraging for the Agency since it assessed the main procedures and processes positively and at the same time gave the necessary base to demand more clear law articles regarding the accreditation as well as financial resources.

After the report was submitted to the Agency by the ENQA panel of experts, the Agency prepared a report for the Government and the competent Ministry with a detailed explanation of the parts that include the engagement of the Government, primarily recommendations related to the Agency's adequate resources. The Government adopted information on the state of accreditation, and the conclusion that it is necessary to provide full financial support to the Agency in further development and achieving compliance with the requirements of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Based on this Conclusion, significant increase in the budget was realised so the Agency's budget in 2019 is almost 40% higher than in the previous year. This change led to the employment of full-time associates, as well as changes of premises and more intensive activities in the field of international cooperation. The significant budget increase is also the basis for involvement of more study programs in review process.

Agency conducted first cycle of accreditation focusing on institutional accreditation (but with adequate sample of study programs per institution) in order to help HEI's to establish and develop internal quality assurance systems.

The Agency is now in a second cycle of accreditation which now focuses on accreditation of study programs which was designed as a unique process that includes both study programs and higher education institutions.

As the study programs that the institutions applied for accreditation included all scientific fields and disciplines, the Agency considered that it was necessary for reviewers who would be engaged in the review of study programs to be exclusively from the narrower scientific fields and disciplines for a specific study program in order to provide prerequisites for making better recommendations for the further development of study programs. For this reason, an open-type list of reviewers has been created, which currently has more than 250 reviewers from different countries. Reviewers are selected in accordance with the criteria adopted by the Steering Board of the Agency which are primarily focused on the experience in the field of accreditation and quality assurance in higher education. For each study program, two independent, anonymous reviewers were selected plus one student-reviewer. The identity of the reviewers is permanently kept and unknown to both the higher education institution and other reviewers.

Based on the review report for each study program plans for the implementation of the recommendations given in the reports were prepared. These plans, together with the review reports, were part of the entry documents for the commission of experts in charge of accreditation who visited the institution. During the on-site visit, it was noted that the representatives of the study programs and academic staff considered the review as a useful tool for quality assurance, and that they recognized that the reviewers were obviously experts from the specific scientific areas, since their recommendations pointed in that direction. Many study programs have already implemented certain recommendations of reviewers.

Regarding students-reviewers, the Agency directly uses the student scholarship lists of all three study cycles since these lists are continuously updated, and in that way will be able to recruit students who are the most successful during the course of their studies as well as numerous students studying abroad.

We are now in a process of preparing new Law on Higher Education and for the first time Law on Quality Assurance in Higher Education which foresees new competences and jurisdictions of the Agency (in initial accreditation area and recognition of foreign qualifications) and highest level of independence since the Draft of Law foresees that Agency responds to National Assembly directly.