Quality Assurance in Slovenian Teacher Education: between National Regulation and Internationalization

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Abstract

Initial teacher education in Slovenia is today performed at three public universities following the same general trends and challenges seen in other segments of higher education. Internal quality assurance forms part of university self-evaluation activities organized in annual cycles, while external quality assurance is part of a national system based on institutional and programme evaluation and accreditation. In addition, there are some specific demands for teacher education study programmes on the national level. Teacher education is still a nationally regulated profession like in other countries; however, international co-operation has been on the increase and is proving to be an important vehicle for further developing academic standards in this study field and enhancing its quality.

Keywords: teacher education, quality assurance, national regulation, internationalization, Slovenia

Introduction: teacher education within higher education

Teacher education is a nationally regulated discipline and teachers are still educated for national education systems. Although this has basically not changed for about two centuries, teacher education has undergone some important changes since the 1980s. On one hand, teacher education has been positioning within the academic world, while on the other it has been influenced by external societal and political changes. These two trends closely connect national traditions to Europeanization processes and the internationalization of (higher) education.

Despite being an old profession, teacher education has long been perceived as 'training only' – with all the related implications. Only teachers for secondary education were partly trained – yet as 'subject specialists' – at universities; mainstream teacher education was performed at non-university institutions (in Slovenia at 'academies'; two years of study). Thus, teacher education was not a recognized academic study field and – most importantly – it was not a scientific research area. Since the 1980s, it was 'upgraded' almost everywhere: it entered universities and started to receive recognition as such. Faculties of education were formed, master and doctoral courses were established and research in education and teaching was brought forward. In Slovenia, these trends occurred between the mid-1980s and mid-1990s, i.e. during the turbulent period of the country striving for independence.[i]

[i] Slovenia, with a population of 2 million, declared its independence in 1991, joined the EU in 2004 and the eurozone in 2007. According to official statistics, in 2010 there were 160,000 pupils in the nine-year primary school, 85,000 students in upper secondary schools and 115,000 students in tertiary education (see www.stat.si).

By contrast, in the past three decades many societal and political changes – closely connected to internationalization and globalization processes – have deeply influenced higher education: the massification and commodification of studies, deregulation (new governance models), transnational provision etc. Substantial literature exists on these issues, which are not elaborated on in this chapter. The Bologna Process (1999) and the European Union initiatives (in particular the Lisbon Strategy; 2000) have had a strong impact on higher education structures in Europe, bringing new priorities, tools and support mechanisms and thus affecting national systems (Kolar, Komljenovič, 2011). Teacher education has faced a particular challenge: after the exhausting reforms of the previous decade(s) at the national level it entered universities 'tired' but without any 'rest' and had to respond to a new wave of university reforms, this time on the European level.

A decade later, teacher education may be described as:

- 'a young "academic discipline" and therefore;
- having a relatively lower "critical mass" than traditional academic disciplines;
- being at a higher level of political (governmental) influence than traditional professions;
- more vulnerable with regard to "national interests";
- the beginning of a true internationalisation process; and
- confronted by the challenge to contribute to the emerging knowledge society' (Zgaga, 2010).

One of the leading demands on contemporary higher education is the call for 'better quality' leading to accountability tools and systems of quality assurance (QA). QA in higher education as we know it in the Europe of today has much to do with the Bologna Process; it is often assessed as one of its most successful action lines. The *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) were adopted in 2005 and the *European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education* (EQAR) was established in 2008. In the past decade practically all countries changed their legislation and arrangements in this field. Where they did not already exist, independent 'buffer' bodies (national QA agencies) were established to provide external QA in line with the ESG. Other initiatives also gained interest and importance, such as sector 'quality labels', e.g. EFMD-EQUIS as the leading international business school accreditation system with the fundamental objective to raise the standard of management education worldwide or networks e.g. ENAEE (European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education) etc. However, no initiative of this kind has appeared so far in European teacher education.

In Slovenia, teacher education programmes have so far been performed by three public universities. In total, there are around a total of 90,000 students at universities and about 8,500 (10%) of them are enrolled in teacher education programmes. Within each of these three universities there are specialized Faculties of Education but teacher education (in certain subject areas) is also performed by other faculties (e.g. science, arts, sport). Only about one-half of future teachers study at Faculties of Education. Master and doctoral programmes in teacher education are also offered by all three universities, now mainly by Faculties of Education. Like elsewhere, while caring for quality Slovenian universities are trying to improve their quality culture and internal QA systems.

Overview of teacher education in Slovenia

Teacher education is regulated by both pre-tertiary and higher education legislation. The former specifies teacher and educator (i.e. a pre-school teacher in Slovenian) profiles required at certain levels of the education system, educational qualifications for teachers etc. It also specifies further elements of the regulated profession which are not in the focus of this chapter (e.g. induction into work, working conditions, professional development, and salaries). Today, an educator needs to complete the 1st study cycle (Bachelor, although this term is not used in Slovenian), while a teacher in primary and secondary schools must complete a 2nd study cycle (Master).

The curricula for initial teacher education lie in the autonomous domain of universities, are designed at the faculty level and approved by university senates. No 'state' regulations specify the content of programmes, although there are formal provisions in higher education legislation. Thus, universities need to accredit teacher education programmes like any other higher education programme. The ministry responsible for pre-tertiary education, which acts as an employer for pre-school and school teachers, is not included in the accreditation procedure. It therefore cannot influence a curriculum or an institution which educates future teachers. QA in initial teacher education is part of the national – internal and external – QA system in higher education developed within a European and international context.

There are two models of constructing teacher education programmes: concurrent and consecutive. Traditionally, 'educational contents' were only marginal for future teachers in (upper) secondary schools (provided by faculties other than faculties of education) but relatively comprehensive for class teachers and educators. Recently (2008), a 'common denominator' has been broadly agreed and entered national regulation: for *all* future teachers, at least 60 ECTS credits out of 300 ECTS credits (2nd cycle) should be dedicated to 'educational' contents. This has been an important step forward.

National legislation set basic requirements for the enrolment of students in the 1st cycle; more specific demands, including the criteria for selection if there are more applicants than places available, are determined by a study programme. The number of free places for freshmen is also determined by universities; however, as teaching is paid from the national budget (there are no fees for undergraduates) they need governmental approval.

After they graduate, acting teachers have the right to further professional training (supported by public funds) at least 5 days per year. In-service courses are offered by several providers; we return to this issue later.

Overview of the external QA system in Slovenia

External QA in Slovenia dates back to the Higher Education Act of 1993. The *Council for Higher Education* was established, a buffer body to discuss strategic questions concerning higher education in the country. The Council was also responsible for external QA and established new criteria and procedures for the accreditation of all higher education institutions as well as their study programmes. On the other hand, universities formed the *National Commission for Quality in Higher Education* to promote and co-ordinate internal QA

processes at the level of institutions. It was composed of representatives of all higher education institutions in the country. The Higher Education Act had been amended a few times but the QA system had remained unchanged for 10 years.

Since the Berlin conference within the Bologna Process (2003) two opposite policy trends have been noticed in Slovenian external QA; both of them based on the political option of the government and consequently on legislative changes. The first one appeared in a 2004 amendment law and represents the continuation of existing systems with 'updates' based on European and international developments; it was soon abolished and replaced by the second one. Yet, since 2009 this line of QA development has returned. Thus, both the amendment laws of 2004 and 2009 predict a national QA agency, a professional body independent of the government that includes all stakeholders, operates professionally and in line with the ESG.

The second trend appeared during the 2005–2008 period within the government which took a political decision to cancel the legal stipulation on the Agency and gave the accreditation tasks back to the Council for Higher Education while adjusting its structure and competencies and associating it more closely with ministerial administration. The reformed Council was known for its '*laissez faire*' approach to the evaluation and accreditation of new (private) institutions and programmes; their number expanded substantially. The underlying logic was to reduce regulation and endorse 'competition as a driver of quality'. This trend did not affect teacher education much. Yet numerous higher education stakeholders were unsatisfied with the operation of the new body. As a result, even greater demand for professionalization of the QA system emerged and, consequently, the new government formed in late 2008 amended the Act again and finally established the *Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency* (SQAA; in operation since spring 2010).

In the current QA system every institution or study programme must be reaccredited at least every seven years. The SQAA can also react earlier if it suspects problems in institutional operation and can perform so-called 'extraordinary evaluations'. In every case, external evaluation precedes the accreditation of institutions and programmes. As regards teacher education, the SQAA has already been processing new – so-called 'Bologna' – programmes while there has not been yet any institutional evaluation in this area.

External evaluations of institutions and programmes are to be made by independent evaluation teams composed of at least three members; at least one must come from abroad to ensure the objectivity of the evaluation and at least one has to be a student. Evaluation teams prepare evaluation reports based on which the Agency Council makes accreditation decisions. Appeals are to be handled by an Appeals Committee of three members. Finally, all reports have to be published and be easily available to the public. On the other hand, internal QA has also been reformed and strengthened by the new legislation.

QA and teacher education in Slovenia

As in higher education in general, the differentiation between the internal and external systems of QA also exists in teacher education.

I. Internal QA

As mentioned, internal QA in teacher education is part of the university QA system. In Slovenia, each higher education institution is legally obliged to have an internal QA system in place and to produce annual self-evaluation reports. The Act on Higher Education stipulates that quality is assessed by institutions themselves as well as by the SQAA. Further, it makes the rector and dean responsible for carrying out the internal QA. In addition to the Act, the criteria for (re)accreditation set by the SQAA oblige higher education institutions to not only have an internal QA system in place but to also develop a QA strategy to monitor performance regularly, to produce analyses and strive for improvements by including all institutional stakeholders.

A university defines the type, criteria and procedures of the internal QA system itself. On these bases, each faculty prepares its own QA process, defines the responsible body for the execution of the process and produces its own self-evaluation report which is submitted to university bodies. There are slightly different approaches among the faculties but in the past few years universities have been trying to integrate the core QA processes and to develop common criteria for evaluation at the faculty level.

Internal QA systems have an annual cycle which finishes with self-evaluation reports. Each faculty sends its report to the university and publishes it on its web page. The university prepares an integrated self-evaluation report. There are also other constant measures such as student surveys about their teachers and assistants. Based on their results, student councils produce 'student opinions' on higher education teachers which are influential in the process of *habilitation* (promotion to academic titles).

Like any other faculty, Faculties of Education also produce their own annual self-evaluation reports which provide rich pools of material. Partly, they are an expression of sincere concerns for quality; on the other hand, they are also a tool of inter-institutional as well as intra-institutional competition. (See Tables 1 – 5; 'internal rankings' of the University of Ljubljana and the position of the Faculty of Education are presented using data from self-evaluation reports).

Institutional quality reports have quite a common structure. They start with enrolment figures (Table 1), and later focus on transition rates from the 1st to the 2nd year (Table 3), graduation rates and the student/teacher ratio (Table 1). The findings are always accompanied by comments. A section on teaching and learning is usually followed by sections on research (see Table 4, 5), international co-operation and mobility (Table 2), students' cooperation in QA (surveys and student participation in QA processes) and, finally, on the proposed improvement activities. In contrast, special attention is paid to *habilitation* procedures. Individual research outcomes are the most important factor but the quality of teaching has also become increasingly important during the last few years.

Table 1: Students – total and per teaching staff member

	Students	*Per teaching staff member*
Total	*48,352*	*11.5*
'Top' 3 faculties		
Drama	85	1.8
Veterinary Sciences	347	2.0
Medicine	1,622	3.0
'Average' faculties		
Nursing	1,435	13.4
Teacher Education	***2,165***	***14.0***
Computing, Informatics	1,412	15.2
'Bottom' 3 faculties		
Economics	6,569	25.6
Law	1,972	40.7
Public Administration	2,543	46.6

Note: University of Ljubljana, 2008.

Table 2: Mobile students – outgoing and incoming

	Outgoing	*Incoming*
Total	*959*	*718*
'Top' 3 faculties		
Economics	217	183
Arts	239	137
Social Sciences	63	134
'Average' faculties		
Teacher Education	***38***	***32***
Architecture . . . Nursing	33 … 15	25 … 17
Medicine	10	4
'Bottom' 3 faculties		
Maritime, Transport	3	2
Drama . . . Veterinary Sciences	3 … 2	1 … 2
Theology	3	0

Note: University of Ljubljana, 2007.

With regard to enrolled students, the Faculty of Education ranks as an average size faculty; in terms of mobile students it stands out a little and leads a group of average faculties (Tables 1, 2). With regard to teaching and learning, it again ranks among average faculties (Table 3) but there are huge internal disparities between the 'absolute top' programmes (e.g. 100% in special and social pedagogy) and very weak ones (e.g. 22% in chemistry and physics). These disparities can mainly be explained by distinguishing 'selective' programmes (with more applicants than places available) from 'non-selective' (open admission). With regard to research, the Faculty is found at the bottom of the average group of faculties (Tables 4, 5), but this represents the huge progress of the last decade. It is important to note that the Faculty of Education has entered the group of faculties with at least 100 registered researchers.

Table 3: Transition from the 1st to the 2nd year of study (in %);

Average (25 faculties)	*58.7*
'Top' 3 faculties	
Architecture	95.4
Medicine	92.3
Music	91.1
'Average' faculties	
Theology	59.7
Teacher Education & Education	***58.3***
Mechanical Engineering	57.4
'Bottom' 3 faculties	
Computing & Informatics	41.6
Chemistry	39.7
Technology	38.9

Note: University of Ljubljana, 2008.

Table 4: National research project workload (in FTE)

	FTE
Total (25 faculties)	*390.4*
'Top' 3 faculties	
Medicine	48.2
Mechanical Engineering	43.8
Biology	42.4
'Average' faculties	
Civil Engineering	17.3
Law . . . Economics	7.7 … 4.2
Teacher Education	***3.9***
'Bottom' 3 faculties	
Public Administration	2.0
Nursing	1.3
Maritime and Transportation	0.4

Note: University of Ljubljana, 2008

Table 5: International publications per registered researcher

	Publ.
Average (14 faculties out of 25)	*0.54*
'Top' 3 faculties	
Mathematics and Physics	1.86
Chemistry; Medicine	0.73
Economics	0.67
'Average' faculties	
Computing & Informatics	0.39
Technology	0.38
Teacher Education	***0.36***
'Bottom' 3 faculties	
Veterinary Sciences	0.32
Civil Engineering	0.29
Arts	0.27

Note: University of Ljubljana, 2008.

(a) N > 100 researchers.

II. External QA

Faculties of Education should pass an external evaluation and accreditation following the same general rules as other faculties and/or institutions (only the evaluation and accreditation of courses for in-service teacher education provision is a partial exception). However, since 1998 some specific criteria for the accreditation of teacher education study programmes have been set at the national level. They are compulsory for Faculties of Education and other faculties which educate teachers: only programmes which incorporate modules in education sciences and so-called subject didactics (a minimum one out of eight semesters) and teaching practice in schools (a minimum 2 or 4 weeks) are labelled teacher education programmes. This definition inherently shows what has for a long time represented the centre of the discussion on the quality of teachers: the conflict between 'subject knowledge' versus 'educational competencies'. Since the 1990s, there has been growing criticism that novice teachers have relatively *solid subject knowledge* but are most often *lacking real educational competencies*. In particular, these criticisms have been addressed to faculties that are traditionally focused almost exclusively on 'subject knowledge'.

The criteria were updated slightly in 2004 and more importantly in 2008 due to the renewed, the so-called 'Bologna' programmes and the transition from the 1st cycle to the 2nd cycle as a 'standard' teacher qualification. The new criteria define the scope of the 'educational' modules: 60 ECTS credits of educational competencies and 15 ECTS credits of teaching practice in schools. They are also broader than before as they define the competencies graduates are supposed to achieve within teacher education programmes: the ability to cooperate with others, effective teaching, the ability to cooperate with the work and civil environments, the ability to constantly develop professionally, organizational and leadership skills etc. Each of these competencies is further developed. It is important to add that this development has been due to internationalization efforts as well as developmental projects within EU programmes.

III. In-service teacher education

In-service teacher education forms a special subsystem in Slovenia; it is regulated and financially supported by the Ministry of Education (and not the Ministry of Higher Education). Its providers can be higher education institutions, in particular institutions for initial teacher education, but also public in-service teacher education centres, teacher unions and teacher associations, private-sector training centres (e.g. language schools) and others (e.g. NGOs, private companies). The accreditation and evaluation of in-service courses is regulated and processed, but not by the SQAA: a special committee – under the auspices of the Ministry of Education – is responsible in this case.

The main procedure used for accreditation is an analysis of written plans and other background documents (e.g. evaluation reports); site visits are also possible, but not necessary. The scope of accreditation is the content of a programme, teaching methods,

trainers' competencies, infrastructure and participants' opinions. The evaluation of the programme providers' performance is carried out by participants at the end of the course. These reports are analysed by the *Council for Programmes in Continuing Education and Training of Professional Staff of Schools and Kindergartens*. On the basis of the reports, an overall national report is prepared, discussed and assessed by the Council before being sent to the Minister of Education. The national evaluation report is published. The evaluation and accreditation procedure which is conducted annually provides the bases for selecting programmes following a public tender.

State of affairs and challenges in the QA of teacher education

Teacher education in Slovenia is today facing similar challenges as in other parts of Europe. One of them is the traditional 'dispute' between disciplines and addresses the composition of study programmes: should 'pedagogy' competencies be added on top of 'subject knowledge' or be integrated? What are their shares? Based on the Eurydice study (Eurydice, 2006), both models exist in most European countries, which is not surprising keeping lifelong learning and the need for flexibility of the system in mind. However, the central question here is how to organize the 'core' study programme for initial teacher education to ensure future teachers acquire the appropriate competencies. Faculties of Education can importantly contribute to a cross-discipline offer in teacher education and play an active role in designing these programmes on the larger university scale.

The relationship between 'subject' and 'pedagogy' is not the only issue in the ongoing discussion of quality in initial teacher education. It seems that most contemporary concerns with the quality of teachers are linked with the *general* academic discussion on quality in higher education, while the *specific* quality dimensions of teacher preparation remain more on the margins. This approach is not particularly constructive with regard to internationalization processes and the role of teachers in educating 'future Europeans'. Area-specific approaches within the broader (university-wide) QA frames need to be better considered.

It was noted that self-evaluation reports are a tool of inter-institutional as well as intra-institutional competition. As regards teacher education, the latter seems to be more important. All faculties compete on the same scale: more students, a better student/teacher ratio, a higher graduation ratio, greater mobility and international co-operation, more research projects and publications etc. Today, this race appears to be relatively positive for teacher education in Slovenia. At least at the largest university, teacher education has made substantial progress over the last decade. In addition to the data presented in Tables 1 – 5, it should be noted that in student questionnaires teacher education students usually assess the academic staff better than students at university generally. The gradually rising number of full professors proves that teacher education can compete with the tough university *habilitation* criteria. With regard to mobile students, teacher education is ranked in the top one-quarter of faculties.

Yet the strengthening of a quality culture within institutions is still at the beginning. Internal self-evaluation reports at both faculty and university levels are relatively administrative but offer lots of data and statistics. Typically, the process ends at this point. Not many follow-up procedures and measures are taken that originate from internal QA; the process is not

connected in a loop. Since the SQAA recognizes internal QA among the key accreditation requirements one can expect gradual changes in the future.

Conclusion

Globalization and internationalization also have important impacts on teacher education. The following characteristics are especially important within the focus of this paper:

1. the universal character of human knowledge;
2. the increasing internationalization of education, growth of transnational providers and fast development of ICT;
3. globalized economies in a clash with the need for intercultural dialogue and understanding; and
4. the free movement of citizens, growing European mobility, and employment abroad.

All of these trends also importantly denote teacher education. It has a pivotal role to play if future generations are to be prepared to constructively live and work in a new, more complex environment. This fact has been emphasized in European policies as well as in many national ones. It seems crucial from today's point of view to repeat a sentence – created over a decade ago – that the European processes 'should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well' (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998) and to reconsider the role of knowledge (not reduced to 'productive knowledge' alone) and education in our societies.

Today, Europeans are confronted with huge challenges. Like in other areas of public discussion here we should also ask: should we again close ourselves off behind our national fences or should we strive for 'more Europe'? Is the predominantly national character of teacher education and, respectively, teacher employment appropriate to reach the goals Europe has set for itself? European processes of 'voluntary harmonization' have progressed far but they have not affected national systems of teacher education much. Quality issues represent a particular challenge in this context.

In this light and as noted in the Slovenian case, new national and European quality instruments should promote diversity rather than standardization for the sake of effectiveness of the system as well as nurturing diversity as an asset. It is not only about diverse institutions but also about *diverse disciplines and study areas*. There have been strong developments in some of them, e.g. in business, engineering, veterinary sciences or the arts where common minimum standards have already been set with the aim of facilitating trans-national recognition by label marking. No such attempt has been seen in teacher education so far (Zgaga, 2010). Should teacher education develop its own particular procedures within the national external QA systems and, equally importantly, a 'European quality label'? This task should not only be understood as a European target; it is the national interest.

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