Basic Principles of Public-Professional Accreditation of Educational Programs

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The article analyzes basic principle for organizing and carrying out public-professional accreditation of university degree program submitted by technical higher education institutions.

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Being in progress, national higher education systems naturally aim at meeting the so-called "world standards" developed by the international scientific and technical society. Public-professional accreditation of educational programs (EP) for higher professional education is one of the effective means to achieve these standards and to provide conformity evaluation [1].

EP public-professional accreditation is quite a complicated and crucial process. In different countries it is carried out by means of different accrediting organizations (bodies) in different ways, which is based on peculiar rules and principles [2,3,4]. Nevertheless, despite the differences and peculiarities, there is a system of basic principles of public-professional accreditation procedure or EP external independent assessment that was developed as a result of interaction between national systems and foundation of international united accreditation bodies that made a great input in standardizing EP accreditation criteria and procedures.

Let us specify in advance that the article deals mainly with accreditation of engineering educational programs that are university degree programs (UDP) in engineering.

Thus, in general, we can say that public-professional accreditation of university degree programs in engineering is based on the following principles:

1. Voluntary principle.
Universities participate in UDP accreditation of their own accord. There are no laws or regulations making them take part in this quite a labour-intensive and stressful process. The only thing that encourages universities to have their degree programs independently evaluated is a number of stimuli. These stimuli arise from the environment (often quite competitive one) where universities carry on their educational activity. The stimuli can be different in different countries. Thus, in Canada, only graduates of accredited degree programs can further apply for "Professional Engineer" status. That means that non-accredited degree programs are not in demand on the Canadian educational market [5]. There are not such stimuli in Russia yet. The basic reason for

domestic universities to participate in this process is the ambitious wish of leading universities to manifest their adherence to high quality engineering education and to have an independent confirmation of the right direction of their development.

2. Recurrence principle.

University degree programs (UDPs) are not accredited "forever and ever". As a rule, the programs are accredited for 4–5 years, after that the program is supposed to be accredited again. Some UDPs are accredited for a shorter time period, which is caused by a number of unsatisfactory features defined by the expert group. It is natural that the accredited program can progress according to the principle of "continuous improvement", as well as the accreditation criteria can be updated as time goes by.

3. Principle of experts' independence.

In all the countries where EP public-professional accreditation system exists it is based on independent evaluation conducted by independent experts. As a rule, these are industry and academic representatives, and the latter constitutes the majority of the examination team. Sometimes international monitors (representatives of international accreditation agencies) can be included in the examination team. In some countries, for example Lithuania, the examination teams consist only of foreign specialists [6]. The important point is that before the accreditation procedure each expert signs the statement for no-conflict of interests that states no personal interest in the program accreditation and no relations with the higher educational institution (HEI) or the UDP being accredited. During the accreditation procedure all the decisions on compliance or noncompliance of the program with the accreditation criteria are taken on a collegiate basis. Nevertheless, every expert has the right to attach his/her

special opinion to the evaluation report if he/she disagrees with the colleges' opinion on this or that UDP aspect.

4. Principle of accrediting agency's independence.

An accreditation body should be independent on state and municipal authorities and political structures, as well as sponsors. This condition is strictly controlled by international associations of accrediting agencies (and national accrediting bodies are interested in their international recognition through membership in such associations). A good example is European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) [7] that requires all agencies to comply substantially with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) to be admitted to the Register [8].

Accreditation criteria design and change, accreditation procedure and decision-making on accrediting /non-accrediting particular UDPs – all this is the right and responsibility of the accrediting body and shouldn't be coordinated or approved by any other organizations including sponsors.

All the decisions on accrediting procedure and criteria as well as on the results of particular program evaluation are taken by an elected board of accrediting agencies. Besides, an accrediting body, being a legal body, should manage its funds.

5. Principle of the declared accrediting subject area.

Accrediting bodies can carry out independent evaluation of the UDPs that belong to the declared subject area (for example, engineering education, that is the field of technologies and technique) and declared types of degree programs (for example, professional education programs awarding Bachelor's, Master's and Specialist's Degrees). Obviously the accrediting subject area can and should be enlarged, for example it is necessary to develop accrediting procedure and criteria for advanced educational programs. In any case the UDPs submitted by HEIs should

correspond to the declared accrediting subject area. It is not mere chance that the international accrediting associations are restricted by particular subject areas.

6. Transparency principle.

To comply with this principle means that all information about accrediting criteria, procedure, rules of decision-making and other methodical materials should be available for a wide interested public. But it doesn't mean that the self-study materials submitted to the Accrediting Board by the HEI, as well as evaluation report made by the examination team should be at the disposal. As a rule, such sort of information is confidential one and can be available for interested parties when approved by all parties involved (first of all, HEI and Accrediting body).

7. Principle of common goal of UDP accrediting procedure.

Any activity involving social interests (in our case, academic society) should set goals and be guided by them in practical activities. These goals should be common for all participants of the process; otherwise there might be a conflict of the parties involved.

The common goals of accrediting UDPs (or being accredited) are:

- to promote (in professional and academic society) the best educational technologies for professional training of UDP graduates by developing and implementing high quality educational standards;
- to inform all interested parties and the society as a whole about UDP public recognition that proves its compliance with standard quality requirements;
- to encourage HEI top managers to monitor UDP quality and to improve them constantly.

8. Principle of respect, partnership and mutual interests.

UDP accreditation procedure and criteria should recognize particular features and diversity of HEIs and the degree programs they implement as well as encourage academic creativity and innovation in educational process. After all, the term "accreditation" comes from Latin "credo" (trust). It is natural that HEIs differ in their possibilities, ambitions, aims and potential. High level of the accreditation requirements does not mean that one size should fit all universities interested in degree program accreditation.

Accreditation criteria should be mostly of qualitative character. They should evaluate the degree of program goal achievement taking into account particular features of HEIs, their missions, development strategies, strengths and weaknesses. Besides, the accreditation criteria should be quite flexible, they should not have restrictive and regulatory character. Moreover, they should take into account possible diversity in approaches, methodics and ideas used by HEIs while implementing educational programs and ensure possibilities of EP changes and continuous improvement.

The interaction between the accreditation body and HEI submitting DPs should be based on the principle of mutual interest in fair and objective evaluation of UDPs. Only such partner character of the stakeholders' interaction can result in effective work and mutual benefits, which contribute to the development of the educational system as a whole.

59

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