



Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

PAQUALITY

**Public Administration Education Quality Enhancement,
Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership KA203, No – 2018-1-SK01-KA203-046330,
Slovakia, 09/2018-08/2021**

O3 - Methodological Framework for Quality Improvement of Project Partners

Organizational learning during the EAPAA self-evaluation process

**A case study of the bachelor programme Territorial Management and master programme
Territorial Studies of Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica**

Experiences of team of UMB

November 2019

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1. Introduction

The PAQUALITY projects aims to support changes in the area of public administration (PA) education in conformity with Bologna objectives, mainly:

- Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies, and
- Promotion of the necessary European dimensions in higher education, particularly with regards to curricular development, inter-institutional co-operation, mobility schemes and integrated programs of study, training and research, which haven't been fully applied in the area of the public administration high education in Hungary and the new EU states yet.

Higher education public administration programs vary a lot especially in the Central and Eastern European member countries of the EU - in the new EU member states (NMS). From this perspective it is highly relevant to facilitate quality assurance mechanism which would ensure not only comparable quality of education processes but also comparable outcomes of the education (e.g. quality of graduates, their knowledge, skills and experience) in these countries. In addition, the project aims at tackling skills gaps and mismatches in the area of public administration high education through designing and developing curricula that meet the learning needs of students that are relevant to the labour market and societal needs, including through better use of open and on-line, work based, multi - disciplinary learning and new quality assessment criteria. Simultaneously, with a view of this priority, promoting and rewarding excellence in teaching and skills development, training of academics in new and innovative pedagogical approaches, new curriculum design approaches and sharing of good practices through collaborative platforms will be in the centre of the project.

This text represents a brief case study summarizing experiences with EAPAA certification. It is built on experiences gained thanks to certification of two programmes – bachelor study programme Territorial Management and master study programme Teritorial Studies of the Faculty of Economics Matej Bel University in Banská Bystrica in Slovakia and preparation of accreditation self-evaluation reports on both programmes within the PAQUALITY project. The author of this case study was involved in both the processes as co-author. This case study's ambition is to identify whether and how strategic learning – a main intended outcome of accreditation – takes place as an immediate result of the self-assessment process. Experience shows that such learning may take many different forms and may be the most visible outcome of the accreditation (next to the findings and recommendations of the site visit team).

The case studies explore, on the basis of interviews with / insights from key program personnel,

- a) whether, how and to what extent the below mentioned or other effects actually appeared during the self-assessment process (RQ1)
- b) whether negative side effects appeared and if yes which ones and how (RQ2)
- c) what internal or external contextual factors seem to moderate the emergence of these effects (or the lack thereof) (RQ3)

2. The programmes prior to EAPAA certification

The bachelor study programme **Territorial Management** is a multidisciplinary oriented study programme. The study programme is delivered as full-time programme (3 years). It is aimed at acquisition of specialist knowledge, competencies and skills necessary for posts in the middle levels of management in the public sector, public administration and regional development bodies. The study programme Territorial Management enables the student to gain knowledge, skills and experience that create the prerequisites for his/her successful employment in the labour market. In addition to the knowledge, skills and competences contained in the core of the study programme, the graduate will acquire a high degree of skill to use computing, information systems and modern communication technologies. On top of that, the offer to study two foreign languages specialized in business (one of which is compulsory) is a guarantee of improvement of language skills.

Graduates of the Bachelor study programme Territorial Management find their jobs in organizations and institutions of local and regional self-government, as well as in organizations of central government and development agencies in the positions of executive staff as well in lower and middle-level management. He/she can work efficiently and flexibly in domestic and international working groups and project teams.

Master study programme **Territorial Studies** is a multidisciplinary oriented study programme aimed at management of the territory and processes of changes taking place in a particular space. The study programme Territorial Studies deepens and extends the knowledge, skills and experience gained in the first stage of study and ensures the continuity of the Bachelor study programme Territorial Management. The study programme is delivered as full-time programme (2 years). The interdisciplinary nature of the programme content opens opportunities for master study to graduates of related bachelor study programmes. It prepares a new generation of professionals, managers and leaders in central, local and regional public administration and regional development institutions in domestic and international environment. The graduate of this programme acquires knowledge and skills necessary to understand and make analyses of the local and regional economies, planning social, economic and environmental development of territorial units in accordance with the principles of ethics and legal standards. He/she gains the knowledge necessary to apply the managerial and marketing approaches in public administration institutions as well as in organizations participating in the development of the territory.

Both study programmes are the result of more than 30 years of continuous scientific research, publication and pedagogical activities, which has created a basis for the study specialisation Economics and Administration of Territories in the study field Public Economics and Administration in 1997. In 2005, the bachelor study program was accredited as a separate programme in the study field Public Administration and Regional Development, entitled Regional Development and Public Administration, which was continuously provided until 2014. Based on the needs of the practice and in cooperation with the international academic environment the study programmes have undergone several innovations to its current form and they were accredited with a new titles Territorial Management and Territorial studies in the study field Public Administration and Regional Development in 2014.

Regarding the content, the study programmes are founded on the general requirements for preparation of public administration, public sector and non-profit economists and managers. Simultaneously, they reflect the structure of subjects forming the so-called “core” in the study field Public Administration and Regional Development set for national accreditation. At the Master level, students have an opportunity to choose from four blocks of courses. Both study programmes are based on multidisciplinary with the opportunity to react dynamically to the needs and requirements of the practice, using experience gained at home and abroad.

The study programmes respect the basic standards for education of economists in public administration and regional development. The content of the programmes comes from the set of qualification prerequisites and conditions for performing activities in public institutions. Students acquire the skills and techniques needed to prepare and implement policies, projects and programmes, provide services and solve important social problems in the public sector and non-sectors at local, national and international levels. The structure of study programmes meets the requirements set in legislation for specific positions in public administration. The study programmes prepare specialists before admission into the state or public service and for employees already in the state or civil service but without the required qualification. At the same time, they react to the national trends and EU trends in public administration and other institutions of the public sector

3. Lessons learned and new challenges

Based on the request of the Department of Public Economics and Regional Development Faculty of Economics, Matej Bel University, EAPAA decided to include this programme in 2018-2019 group of European public administration programs to be certified. During the site visit the panel had the opportunity to meet members of the programme and the broader academic and public administration community in which the programme is implemented. Intensive and goal-oriented discussions were organised with key faculty members, representatives of students and university officials. The discussions followed the logic of the EAPAA Certification Criteria and provided a comprehensive overview of the programme. See the attached timetable of the site visit programme, which was followed in every detail, and the list of persons that were interviewed.

Organizational learning process focusing on the following areas:

1 Improved communication within the education unit providing the program;

The preparation of the self-evaluation report as well as site visit within the process of certification was time and information consuming. The section of department involved into the preparation met at regular basis to develop the self-evaluation report.

2 Improved communication between the program management and the faculty/university leadership.

There was no specific problems in communication of program management and the faculty leadership. The faculty management as well as all service employers were very helpful in the processing of self-evaluation report. The potential improvement could be in collection of data (publications, conferences, CVs, etc.) about teachers and researchers involved, common collected and structured data in some information system (e. g. AIS) could make it easier.

3 Improved communication with external stakeholders (employers, alumni, or others):

During the site visit in 2018 were realized meetings with employers and alumni. These meetings were repeated because of the PAQUALITY project activities. All participants from the alumni as well as employers appreciated these activities in order to improve the quality of study programs and were valuable source of inspirational ideas how to improve the curricula and to strength the relationship to practice. They are willing to participate at the formation of new version of study programmes in new accreditation period. They will be included into the special advisory body for development of study programs in the next accreditation process.

4 New structural or procedural solutions supporting the above improvements (for example permanent review and consultative bodies or forums):

Because of the great changes in the accreditation process in the Slovak Republic the new quality bodies are forming at the university and at the faculty level, but there are no more specific information yet.

5 Changes to the curriculum planning process and structures

Within the strict national and faculty regulations for the programmes, the department has a reasonable de-facto programme jurisdiction and the implementation of changes is quite difficult to realise. There opens a new space for changes within the new accreditation system that will be introduced in 2020.

Course evaluations are standardized and used each year. Program accomplishment is more or less informal and "continuous" and the national accreditation plays an important role, as does the university's review system. There could be improvements with regard to the involvement of students and the analysis and comparison of the annual course evaluations. There was identified a weakness of feedback given to the students about their proposals for changes in the courses as well as about evaluation of courses by the students.

6 Changes to curricula

The changes of the curriculum are limited by the national regulations and the policy of the Faculty of Economics. There were identified some possibilities to include more courses with a deeper focus on public administration in the programmes. The present bachelor and master programme is more economic/public economic oriented, also by the recommendation of site visit we should more support the public administration field embodied into the courses. By our experience, some courses can be seen as public administration oriented by the content, but the more suitable title is needed.

7 Other changes to program management

No changes to program management resulted from the process of self-evaluation. However, the changes will be done within the new accreditation process in 2020.

8 Changes to support services

The range of support services is evaluated at good level, so no changes are needed.

9 Changes to student assessment

A variety of assessment methods is used. There identified no problem areas.

10 Changes to administrative services

The range of administrative services is evaluated at good level, so no changes are needed.