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ACCREDITATION OF LANGUAGE/LITERATURE/CULTURE CURRICULA AT THE FACULTY OF PHILOLOGY IN SERBIA

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Abstract

Although the Faculty of Philology – as one of 31 faculties at the University of Belgrade – is the oldest and the largest faculty of philology in Serbia (it was founded in 1908, and currently has some 350 teachers and 8,500 students), as well as one of the oldest and largest in the Balkans, its lengthy and successful tradition did not prevent the complete transformation of curricula in order to adapt them to the demands of the 21st century. The new, reformed programme of academic study has been implemented in line with the principles of the Bologna Declaration and contains elements of an integrated and transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages in higher education, together with the relevant literature and culture courses at bachelor, master

and doctorate levels in over thirty departments of Belgrade Faculty of Philology. The purpose of this paper is to analyze the process of accreditation of the new programme and the outcomes of introducing the revised curricula at our academic institution, in order to highlight the success and benefits of the transformed academic courses, primarily for students but also for the staff.

Keywords

Belgrade Faculty of Philology, Language/Literature/Culture Teaching, Curricula, Accreditation

1. Introduction

The 21st century brought a renewed understanding of the importance of reforming and achieving greater cooperation in the field of education, which contributes to strengthening and stabilizing democratic, diplomatic and market relations between different societies and prevents “higher education institutions (from being) inefficient, bureaucratic, and economically unproductive” (Välismaa & Ylijoki, 2008, p. 10). On its part, digital era has introduced novel ways of transferring knowledge, whereby “educational technology has determined how the learning environment in the formal schools developed into a more competent and highly interactive and analytical educational setting” (Balajadia, 2015, p. 12). Digital technologies have produced new professions that require complex competencies becoming an indispensable part of universities’ curricula, which also results from the fact that “over a period of several decades, market logic became more influential in academic science.” (Berman, 2011, p. 12) One of the consequences of such educational trends relates to “an increase in the demand for academic qualifications in occupations previously intended for those with primarily vocational qualifications.” (Houston et al. 2016, p. 687). Moreover, higher education institutions have taken upon themselves to prepare students for lifelong learning, which became an absolute necessity in the 21st century. Professors have an important role in the process of preparing the future graduates for lifelong learning, especially at the higher education level. Namely, “our role as tertiary educators has been changing from teachers to facilitators of learning. (...) Key features include knowledge of course and curriculum design, teaching skills, development activities about learning and teaching, self-reflection, mentoring and peer review.” (Kitching, 2015, p.3) Most recently, Gina Chianese also emphasized the tight relationship that exists between universities and labor market, indicating that they, to some extent, share common values and vision, while also introducing the figure of “the tutor as “link” between university and labor market”

(Chianese, 2017, p. 784) Accordingly, “faculties have recently made significant progress on preparing today’s students and tomorrow’s leaders for future market realities by equipping them with sustainability perspectives required for socially responsible business.” (Adomssent et al, 2014, p. 9, 10)

Eager of becoming a part of the *Europe of Knowledge* project, “in the 2000s, in all of the WB (Western Balkan) countries, Bologna related reforms of higher education took place, including changes in legislation (...), as well as changes in curricula.” (Vukasović, 2012, p. 12) In 2002, the *Strategy of Higher Education* was adopted by the then Serbian *Ministry of Education and Sport* emphasizing the importance of “harmonizing the Serbian higher education system with European tendencies, with a special reference to quality assurance, development of educational programs relevant to national needs and labor market demands, and the promotion of student and teacher mobility.” (Despotovic, 2011, p. 45) Accordingly, since 2003, Serbian higher education area has undergone substantial changes in order to align its study programs with the most prominent EU universities.

In Article 2 of the Serbian *Law on Higher Education* (adopted in 2005) it is stated that “higher education activities are of special significance for the Republic of Serbia and are part of the international, European in particular, area of education, science and/or art.” (Serbian Law on Higher Education, n.d., p. 1) However, the most relevant process of reforming higher education in Serbia began with the first accreditation cycle, whereby as many as 1,553 study programs were accredited. The University of Belgrade, as the oldest and the largest university in Serbia, has assumed an important place in the accreditation process of Serbian higher education institutions. Our research will focus on positive outcomes and benefits from introducing and accrediting the revised curricula of the Faculty of Philology – *Language/Literature/Culture* as an example of good practice in terms of diversifying curricula, while putting a student at the centre of didactic triangle and offering more versatile and applicable knowledge, as well as enabling an increased level of involvement, participation and cooperation of the faculty’s teaching staff in designing and implementing the new academic program.

1.1 The Process of Accrediting Serbian Higher Education Institutions

European Union has recognized the essential role of higher education in the development of EU cultural and economic common space. The establishment of the European Union Higher Education Area implied creating comparable national higher education systems, with the

generally accepted standards of quality systems that allow comparability of degrees, mobility of students and graduates as EU citizens and their easier employment throughout the European Union territory. This was achieved by signing a joint Bologna Declaration on June 19, 1999. The signatories of the Bologna Declaration pledged themselves to achieve their objectives in the framework of their institutions, all the while fully respecting the diversity of cultures, languages and national education systems.

Serbia became one of the signatories of the Bologna Declaration in 2003, whereby it accepted the obligation to reform its higher education by introducing:

- a system of easily recognizable and comparable degrees;
- European Credit Transfer System (ECTS);
- integrated forms of studies, training and research;
- increased mobility of students and teaching staff;

In 2005, the Assembly of the Republic of Serbia adopted the new *Law on Higher Education*, which initiated the Bologna process and overall reform of Serbian higher education system. The Law stipulated the obligation of establishing the *National Council of Higher Education* with the aim to ensure and improve the quality of higher education in Serbia. The Council's responsibilities are mainly focused on monitoring the development of Serbian higher education and its compliance with the EU and international standards, proposing higher education policy, defining and adopting standards for the accreditation of Serbian higher education institutions and their study programs, drafting and establishing the list of professional, academic and scientific titles and degrees, as well as recommending national qualifications framework to the Ministry in charge of Higher Education.

In order to carry out the reform of Serbian higher education system, through introducing quality standards harmonized with the EU and international standards, the pioneering work of accreditation began, i.e. the process of evaluating the quality of higher education institutions and their study programs. For this purpose, the *National Council of Higher Education* formed in 2006 a special working body – the *Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance* (CAQA), which established the standards for accreditation and conducted the first cycle of an initial accreditation of higher education institutions in Serbia and their study programs. Positive assessment of the Commission's quality of work by the European Agency ENQA and EQAR, their affirmative Evaluation Report, as well as the admission of the Commission into their full

membership, are, above all, testifying to the fact that CAQA has successfully applied standards that are fully in line with the EU standards. Consequently, this also confirms that Serbia has developed a quality control system in higher education.

The accreditation of Serbian higher education institutions is carried out every five years. The first accreditation cycle began in 2007 and was completed in 2011. A number of 78 Polytechnics (higher schools of professional studies) and 515 study programs were accredited in the first year of the cycle; followed by 81 faculties, higher schools of academic studies, universities and 928 study programs in 2008; 60 faculties, higher schools of academic studies, universities and 308 study programs in 2009; 13 faculties, higher schools of academic studies, universities and 51 study programs in 2010; as well as 145 study programs in the last year of this cycle (CAQA – Report of the Panel, 2012, p. 14). Within the latest annual report for the period from May 13, 2016 to April 21, 2017, it is stated, “The Commission for Accreditation and Quality Assurance has accredited (...) 9 higher education institutions (1 university) and 282 study programs” (Yearly report of CAQA’s activity 2016-2017, 2017, p. 2). The fact that the extent of accreditation is diminishing each year clearly testifies in favor of the dedication and a high quality of CAQA’s work.

By implementing the accreditation process within Serbian higher education area, the Commission adhered to the *Accreditation Standards for Higher Education Institutions* and *Accreditation Standards for Study Programs of the First and Second Level of Higher Education*, as well as to the *Accreditation Standards for Study Programs of Doctoral Studies*. In order to achieve accreditation as higher education institutions, both the University of Belgrade and the Faculty of Philology have successfully responded to the following thirteen standards: basic goals and objectives of a higher education institution; planning and control; organization and administration; studies; science research and artistic work; teaching staff; non-teaching staff; students; premises and equipment; library, textbooks and IT support; sources of finance; internal mechanism for quality assurance; and transparency.

1.1.1 The Importance of Accrediting Programs of the University of Belgrade and the Faculty of Philology for the Serbian Higher Education Area

The University of Belgrade is the oldest state university in Serbia, whose origins date back to the beginning of the 19th century. Furthermore, it is the largest university in Serbia as it consists of 31 faculties with around 90,000 students, as well as 11 research institutes, university

library, and 7 university centers. Faculties of the University are divided in four groups: social sciences and humanities; medical sciences; natural sciences and mathematics; and technology and engineering sciences. Demonstrating a high level of scientific excellence, the University of Belgrade has been ranked among the best 400 universities in the world according to the Shanghai Ranking List. For all the above mentioned reasons, the accreditation of its faculties and their study programs was of the paramount importance for the entire Serbian higher education area, but, at the same time, it was the most challenging one bearing in mind its complex and multi-layered structure. The University of Belgrade was accredited on January 31, 2009, and re-accredited on October 24, 2014, while its Faculty of Philology was accredited on February 26, 2010, and re-accredited on April 17, 2015.

The Faculty of Philology is one of the first constituent parts of the University of Belgrade, as it has been nurturing the tradition of higher education stemming from the Lyceum since 1873 and has been developing philological disciplines and growing as an individual faculty since 1960. With 1,375 students enrolled in the first year of undergraduate studies in 2016, it represents the biggest academic institution of its kind in Serbia and one of the largest in South-Eastern Europe. In addition to general linguistics and library and information science studies, this unique higher education institution offers the study of 34 languages, literatures and cultures, such as Arabic, Albanian, Bulgarian, Belarus, Chinese, Czech, Danish, English, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Korean, Latin, Hungarian, Macedonian, Norwegian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Romanian, Slovak, Slovenian, Old Slavic, Turkish, Ukrainian, Swedish, Spanish, etc. With the introduction of the Bologna-like organization of teaching, the Faculty of Philology has invested great efforts in designing the new *Language/Literature/Culture* (LLC) curriculum, which allows interweaving of all the above mentioned languages, and their literatures and cultures.

While revising its old study programs, the Faculty of Philology made “efforts to move from sector based approaches in teaching and learning to integrated holistic approaches in knowledge generation and knowledge circulation, (...which included) the movement from disciplinary to trans-disciplinary science.” (Milutinović and Nikolić, 2014, p. 112) The Faculty’s intention was to create a complex platform that would enable permeation of different LLC study profiles and offer students the possibility of combining obligatory courses of the main study profile with the elective ones. Furthermore, the Faculty of Philology offers these optional courses

to students of other faculties pertaining to the University of Belgrade. Most recently, the elective course in *Japanese as a Foreign Language* has become extremely popular amongst university's students. Due to its complexity, the accreditation of the *Language/Literature/Culture* BA, MA and PhD study program was a real challenge, which was successfully completed as a result of wholehearted efforts and hard work of the faculty's staff.

2. The Accreditation of *Language/Literature/Culture* Teaching Curricula

The new, reformed program of academic study *Language/Literature/Culture* has been implemented in line with the principles of the Bologna Declaration and contains elements of an integrated and transcultural approach to teaching foreign languages in higher education, together with the relevant literature and culture courses at bachelor, master and doctorate levels in over thirty departments of Belgrade Faculty of Philology. In addition to the study programs Serbian Language and Serbian Literature, Serbian Literature and Language with Comparative Literature, Serbian as a Foreign Language, Cultures in Dialogue, *Language/Literature/Culture* BA study program was accredited in 2009 and re-accredited in 2015, while the LLC MA and doctoral study programs were accredited in 2010 and re-accredited in 2016. Upon accreditation, the number of students allowed per year within the *Language/Literature/Culture* study program was/is as follows: 1,100 (in 2009) and 1,200 (in 2015) of BA students, 700 of MA students and 150 of PhD students.

The complexity of the LLC study program results from its comprehensiveness, as it belongs to the vast field of humanities, including philology and related research fields, e.g. linguistics, literary theory and literary history, comparative literature, applied linguistics and language teaching methodology, literature teaching methodology, translation studies, cultural and communication studies, library information and archival science, etc. Upon choosing the main field of studies, students are allowed to opt for a set of elective courses, which results in a unique and highly personalized self-made curriculum. The idea was to offer the program which is flexible and adaptable to the particular interests of each candidate and to her/his academic and professional needs. This particularly refers to the LLC PhD study program, which enables doctoral students to gain versatile knowledge by attending general theoretical courses, as well as a number of subject-specific courses they are able to choose from and which help them define the research area of their doctoral dissertations. Upon graduation, *Language/Literature/Culture*

PhD students develop the following competencies: the ability to engage in scientific research, the capacity for post-doctoral training in Serbia and abroad, as well as employability in public and private sectors, particularly in sectors dedicated to culture and education, foreign affairs, and the mass media. Consequently, by designing the LLC PhD studies, we have successfully responded to one of the essential Accreditation Standards for Study Program of Doctoral Studies – *Competencies of Graduated Students*. Furthermore, the second Accreditation Standard entitled *Purpose of Study Program*, which, inter alia, implies the need for educating “the students for recognizable and clear professions and occupations” (National Council of Higher Education, Rules and regulations of accreditation standards and procedures for higher education institutions and their study programs, 2006, p. 17), fully corresponds with the objective of the LLC study program to create the future workforce that can, above all, work in different scientific and educational institutions, as well as cultural institutions, libraries, archives and museums; art academies; theatre and film research institutions, language and literature institutes, national and local governments. Considering that this new study program is fully in line with the principles of the Bologna Declaration, international students are also free to apply for the admission, which, therefore, promotes the process of internationalization of the University of Belgrade.

2.1 The Positive Outcomes and Benefits from Introducing the Revised Curricula at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade

The positive outcomes of introducing the revised curricula of *Language/Literature/Culture Academic Program* are numerous and include increased flexibility of acquired knowledge, personalized approach to studies, greater versatility of professional competencies and, therefore, improved employment opportunities upon graduation, as well as many others. However, our research on positive outcomes and benefits of introducing this new study program at the Faculty of Philology and its subsequent accreditation, can be summed up in two conclusions: 1) a higher degree of curricula’s modularity while putting a student at the centre of didactic triangle, resulting in an improved versatility of knowledge and skills acquired during the course of studies; 2) an increased level of involvement, participation and cooperation of the faculty’s teaching staff in primarily designing and then implementing the revised curricula.

Prior to revising curricula, the Faculty of Philology had a more rigid and strict structure as it was divided into entirely separate departments. As a result, the specialization of graduate students was narrower than today, i.e. since the introduction of the Academic Program

Language/Literature/Culture. Somewhat isolated departments became flexible study profiles that enable permeation of different scientific fields within the realm of philological sciences and culture studies. Hence, the LLC undergraduate study program is nowadays very complex, as it offers a platform that enables more than 1,000 students to choose from more than 30 different languages, literatures and cultures. It is based on the mandatory choice of a main field of study, while offering multiple and flexible modularity through a wide range of diverse electives. This type of curriculum organization enables students to independently create a solid curricular framework. On the other hand, the LLC curriculum fosters the recognition of philology as a homogenous discipline within the humanities.

The unique process of permeation within the LLC Academic Program occurs not only between two or more study profiles, but also within one particular study profile. For example, in addition to offering courses in Japanese (contemporary) language and literature, the Study Profile *Japanese Language, Literature, Culture* includes a number of courses that foster inter-, multi- and trans disciplinary nature of Japanese Studies, such as the courses *Japanese Culture and Society*, *The Studies on Japanese Civilization*, *The Economy of Japan*, *Japan and the World*, *Japan and Modernization*, *The West and Japanese Literature*, *The History of Asia-Pacific Region*, *Artistic Heritage of Asia*, *Buddhist Sculpture in Nara Era*, etc. As a result of this diversification of curricula and improved modularity, we deem that the graduate students of the Study Profile *Japanese Language, Literature, Culture* have more profound understanding of Japan in general than was the case before.

In this regard, *The History of Asia-Pacific Region* course is particularly interesting as it introduces students to the historical dimension of notions “civilization” and “culture” and offers clarification of the term “parent civilization”. This being said, the course is clearly not limited to the field of Japanese studies. Furthermore, it describes basic characteristics of the first civilizations of Asia-Pacific region, origins of the major achievements of Chinese civilization, as well as a profound impact of the Chinese civilization and tradition on the development of other civilizations in the region. By learning about customs, beliefs and symbols of Asia-Pacific countries, e.g. different traditions and decorative objects related to the burial of the dead, the birth of gods and goddesses, beliefs and practices of traditional Japan, symbols of the Nara and Heian period, and the like, students acquire cultural awareness and knowledge of “values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in

modernized societies” (Banks & McGee Banks, 2010, p. 8), which is the essential segment of becoming an expert in the broad field of philology. Upon successful completion of this course students are also able to comprehend the essence of successful modernization of the region. The History of Asia-Pacific Region course merges different scientific fields, such as language and culture studies, history, economics, ethnology and anthropology. This course is just one of many examples of numerous benefits arising from introducing the revised curricula at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. The successful accreditation of the *Language/Literature/Culture* study program supports the efforts of Serbian higher education area to achieve modernization, internationalization, as well as inter/multi/transdisciplinary of higher education studies.

In addition to external quality assurance, which is conducted by the national accreditation bodies, the internal quality assurance is constantly (or at least it should be) performed by the teaching staff. In fact, “the relationship between external and internal is so close that it is impossible to discuss the external element without some reference to internal quality assurance.” (Lewis, 2009, p. 325) Namely, the benefits of the transformed Language/Literature/Culture Academic Program are not only limited to students, but also involve the teaching staff of the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. In fact, the Faculty’s teaching staff is now given the opportunity of holding several subject-specific courses, which were only a part of one particular course prior to adopting the principles of the Bologna Declaration. This leads towards enriched curricula and multidimensional knowledge, which is essential for gaining competitive advantage at the ever-changing labour market of the 21st century. Furthermore, the collaboration between teaching staff pertaining to different departments of the Faculty has gained novel impetus with this new organization of curricula. Our research indicates an increased level of involvement, participation and cooperation of the faculty’s teaching staff in primarily designing and then implementing the revised curricula Language/Literature/Culture, whereby teachers of the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade gained the opportunity for internal quality assessment and freedom to create new courses in line with the European tendencies and their fields of expertise.

3. Conclusion

In the process of designing new study programs, universities should always bear in mind that the “higher education can play a crucial role in reshaping and restructuring the social, economic and political institutions of a country.” (Hussain, 2007, p. 163) Through introducing

the new Language/Literature/Culture teaching curricula, the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade has successfully fulfilled the requirement of diversifying and enriching the study programs offered within the Serbian higher education area, while educating the workforce of the future fully capable of responding to the ever-growing needs of the 21st century's labour market. In this regard, the successful accreditation of this academic program is of paramount importance not only for the University of Belgrade and the Faculty of Philology, but for the entire Serbian Higher Education Area, as well.

3.1 Scope of Future Research

The future research in the field of accrediting study programs of the Faculty of Philology may focus on the new accreditation cycle, which will soon be conducted, particularly to the possible changes that could be introduced to the Academic Program Language/Literature/Culture. One of the ways of assessing the academic program that was accredited in previous cycles may involve the students' survey on the quality and their overall satisfaction with the Language/Literature/Culture revised teaching curricula.

3.2 Research Limitations

The research limitations include somewhat narrow internal quality assessment of the study program Language/Literature/Culture, which can be supported in the future through the internal quality assessment involving a broader network of the faculty's teaching staff, as well as students having completed this academic program.

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