

**THE ROLE OF QUALITY ASSESSMENT
IN HIGHER EDUCATION (EXPERIENCE OF
THE CZECH UNIVERSITY OF AGRICULTURE PRAGUE)**

The primary task of every institution of higher education is to improve constantly and develop its activities, to use all its powers and resources for attaining the highest quality of its work. In the last years a lot of different models of quality assessment (evaluation of activities) of universities and other institutions of higher education in European countries (e.g. in the UK, the Netherlands, France) were developed and used. The advancing political, economic, social and cultural integration of the present Europe stressed the necessity of quality assessment of higher education. The growing internationalisation of higher education, supported namely by the administration of the European Union and its various programmes (TEMPUS, ERASMUS, SOCRATES etc) accelerated and strengthened the flow of students between universities and simultaneously with it also the necessity to compare and adapt to certain extent study programmes and curricula in the cooperating countries.

The restoring of democracy and academic freedom after 1989 in Czechoslovakia enabled the University of Agriculture in Prague (UAP) to establish normal relations with many western universities. The new situation evoked among other things, the need to compare, after tens of years of frozen contacts, the content, structure, methods and objectives of study of the University with those of similar European institutions. From the initiative of the former rector Prof. Dr. Petr, the first steps were undertaken towards this goal. A generous offer of Prof. Dr. H. van der Plas, rector of the Wageningen Agricultural University (WAU) in the Netherlands, who had already rich experience in the use of assessment methods at home and abroad (e.g. at the Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences) decided how and with whom could this complicated task be performed. The rector of WAU appointed a team of experts, who used the methods of evaluation officially approved by the Association of the Dutch Universities.

The evaluation of University of Agriculture Prague started in 1991 with a thorough analysis of departments, faculties and the whole university's activities in the form of standardized analytical reports. These reports were sent to the Netherlands and served as an information basis for the evaluation teams during their on the site visit in Prague and meetings with academic officials, staff members, students, members of different academic bodies, etc. The personal contacts enabled the Dutch experts to understand better the problems of the UAP and to be acquainted with the reality of social and economic transformation in the Czech Republic.

The results of the experts' work were discussed with the academic officials of UAP both on the university and faculties' level before they were prepared in the written form. The extensive evaluation work of the WAU expert teams was finished in 1993 by presenting a comprehensive Evaluation report (61 p.), comprising assessment of all parts of UAP and recommendations for the future development, of which most could have been accepted by the management of the UAP and included both the list of short-term tasks and long-term strategy. The important recommendations are cited below:

1) to prepare a long-term development strategy of UAP comprising all the main trends and changes in society, economy, education and agriculture;

2) to adjust the study programmes and courses to the expected demands of the society and the agri-food sector (especially in economics, management, marketing, business sciences, psychology, sociology, environmental sciences etc);

3) to extend the scope and diversity of economic and environmental subjects and courses, as well as social skills having in mind the philosophy of sustainable development;

4) to specify proportions between theoretical and applied disciplines (subjects);

5) to unify examinations methods within the faculties of UAP (proportions between written and oral exams, use of complex exams etc);

6) to build up system of lectures and lecturers evaluation with active participation of students;

7) to extend bachelor's type of study;

8) to increase the effectiveness of work of PhD students (by increasing their participation in teaching and research);

9) in research to stress the orientation on basic research and on acquiring grants;

10) to build an advisory system (labour seeking, psychological) for students;

11) to intensify teaching of foreign languages;

12) to establish an association of UAP graduates.

Views, results and recommendations resulting in the final evaluation report prepared by the Dutch experts were discussed extensively with the management of UAP and have shown in general that the activities of the Czech University of Agriculture in Prague do not differ substantially and are fully comparable with the programmes, methods and structures of west-European universities. The existing differences and shortages are mostly the heritage of the previous regime and are being continuously removed. The process of evaluation has brought new ideas and views and enabled the management and staff of the university:

- to get a clearer overview of the whole university work and its comparison with the international educational standards
- to better specify and formulate goals and tasks for future development
- to adapt study programmes and curricula to the changing needs of the transforming agri-food sector
- to improve methods of teaching
- to increase competitiveness among the university's units (faculties, departments)
- to accept necessary changes in organization, management and financing of the university units.

The evaluation of University's activities by an independent foreign body using objective criteria has shown full compatibility of education on the Czech University of Agriculture with western educational standards. The problems, which should be solved are not of fundamental character. The endeavour of the UAP is oriented (following also the Evaluations report recommendations) to innovations and improvements in all spheres of activity. Drawing conclusion from this valuable experience, it can be stated, that the quality assessment is the right way leading to fulfillment of high goals in education. The Czech University of Agriculture Prague was the first institution of higher education in the Czech Republic, which after 1989 dared to face international comparison.

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