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# The Importance of Accreditation Process on the Quality of the Albanian Higher Education Institutions

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**Abstract**: Accreditation, as an external evaluation, is an important element of quality assurance for Higher Education Institutions, both in developed and developing countries. Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania have undergone major transformations as a result of the implementation of the Albanian law 'On higher education and scientific research in Higher Education Institutions'. The accreditation process of Albanian public and non-public Higher Education Institutions is a fundamental step in achieving quality assurance and conformance regarding national and European Union standards and is carried out by the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education.

The focus of this research paper is to show the progress of the institutional and study programs' accreditation of Albanian public and non-public higher education institutions and its role in continuous quality improvement. Data and figures from national government bodies and agencies, as well as interviews directed at the Heads of HEIs, Faculties and Departments of public and non-public higher education institutions have been used to analyze and develop critical thinking regarding this important and sensitive issue/topic.

**Keywords:** higher education institutions; accreditation; quality assessment; quality evaluation; service quality

**JEL Classification:** I23; I28; M38

## 1. Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) in today's dynamic and changing environment must focus on quality and continuous improvement in order to be competitive and successful. In addition to the improvements made by public and non-public higher education institutions, an important element for achieving and maintaining high quality is institutional and study programs' accreditation. Accreditation is an external evaluation and aims to a formal recognition of meeting the minimum standards regarding the quality of study programs or institutional accreditation (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002). Accreditation as a formal recognition of study programs or institutional one by external bodies/agencies, sometimes serves as a license in order to operate based on quality evaluation and predetermined standards (Van Damme, 2000).

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Accreditation by promoting continuous quality improvement in HEIs aims to institutionalize their quality assurance systems, the way how they operate, by carrying out periodic self-assessments, which are important measures to achieve Total Quality Managemet (TQM), so accreditation process has a major impact on quality assurance and conformance for public and non-public HEIs in developed and developing countries (Qefalia & Rrumbullaku, 2010).

Albania, a developing country in Western Balkans, is making continuous changes and reforms regarding improving quality in higher education institutions. Considering the fact that European Union (EU) has opened negotiations for Albania to join EU in the near future, one of the chapters is regarding higher education, so quality assurance in HEIs is considered as one of the main element of reform undertaken by Ministry of Education of Sport and other state body/agencies, public and non public higher education institutions towards adapting to the requirements and European standards.

State bodies in Albania such as Ministry of Education and Sport (MES), Accreditation Board (AB), Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAAHE), and public and non-public HEIs, have a strong desire and are making efforts to develop a quality culture and procedures relating to quality evaluation in HEIs environments. Quality assessment performed through internal evaluation (often considered as self-evaluation) by HEIs and study programs or institutional accreditation (external evaluation) are two components of quality assurance in HEIs. MES by involving all stakeholders has made changes and improvements on the Law on Higher Education, and HEIs have undergone major transformations as a result of the implementation of the law "On higher education and scientific research in Higher Education Institutions in the Republic of Albania no.80/2015". The accreditation process of HEIs is a major step in ensuring quality conformance regarding national and EU standards and this process is carried out by the Albanian QAAHE, and the final decision for study programs and institutional accreditation is taken by Albanian AB.

Table no.1 below based in International Standard Classification of Education (ISCED) shows students' enrollments in Albanian tertiary education (short cycle tertiary … two years, Bachelor, Master, Doctorate/PhD) for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 (INSTAT, 2024). By comparing students' enrollments for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, there is a decrease in numbers, respectively: from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023, a decrease by 2.28% for Bachelor studies and a decrease by 1.6% for Master studies, and from 2022-2023 to 2023-2024, a decrease by 5.49% for Bachelor studies and a decrease by 1.22% for Master studies. Considered for comparison Bachelor and Master studies because of their large numbers from the total.

**Table 1. Students' enrollments in tertiary education**

| ISCED-2011 | Level of education | 2021-22 | | | 2022-23 | | | 2023-24 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total |
| 5 | Short cycle tertiary (2 years) | 2,561 | 4,223 | 6,784 | 2,615 | 4,343 | 6,958 | 2,558 | 4,190 | 6,748 |
| 6 | Bachelor | 41,492 | 31,360 | 72,852 | 39,735 | 31,457 | 71,192 | 37,110 | 30,173 | 67,283 |
| 7 | Master | 29,159 | 14,525 | 43,684 | 28,775 | 14,208 | 42,983 | 28,322 | 14,136 | 42,458 |
| 8 | Doctorate | 281 | 279 | 560 | 123 | 96 | 219 | 315 | 190 | 505 |
| | **Total** | **73,493** | **50,387** | **123,880** | **71,248** | **50,104** | **121,352** | **68,305** | **48,689** | **116,994** |

*Source: INSTAT, 2024*

Table no. 2 below based in ISCED shows students' graduations in tertiary education (short cycle tertiary … two years, Bachelor, Master, Doctorate/PhD) for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-

2024 (Ministry of Education and Sport, 2024). By comparing students who graduated in tertiary education for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the results are respectively: from 2021-2022 to 2022-2023, a decrease by 13.79% for Bachelor studies and a decrease by 3.69% for Master studies, and from 2022-2023 to 2023-2024, an increase by 4.83% for Bachelor studies and a decrease by 2.66% for Master studies. Considered for comparison Bachelor and Master studies because of their large numbers from the total.

**Table 2. Students' graduations in tertiary education**

| ISCED-2011 | Education level | 2021-22 | | | 2022-23 | | | 2023-24 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total |
| 5 | Short cycle tertiary | 816 | 846 | **1,662** | 743 | 841 | **1,584** | 710 | 826 | **1,536** |
| 6 | Bachelor | 10,455 | 5,562 | **16,017** | 8,731 | 5,077 | **13,808** | 9,395 | 5,080 | **14,475** |
| 7 | Master | 9,046 | 3,916 | **12,962** | 8,708 | 3,775 | **12,483** | 8,433 | 3,718 | **12,151** |
| 8 | Doctoral | 172 | 97 | **269** | 59 | 57 | **116** | 17 | 14 | **31** |
| | **Total** | **20,489** | **10,421** | **30,910** | **18,241** | **9,750** | **27,991** | **18,555** | **9,638** | **28,193** |

*Source: Ministry of Education and Sport & INSTAT, 2024*

Table no.3 below shows students' enrollments in tertiary education by fields of study for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 (INSTAT, 2024). By looking at the numbers in the table related to students' enrollment by fields of study for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the majority part of enrollments belongs to the fields of: Business, administration and law, Medicine/health and welfare, and Engineering, manufacturing and construction.

**Table 3. Students' enrollments in tertiary education by fields of study**

| Fields of study | 2021-22 | 2022-23 | 2023-24 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Education | 8,085 | 7,317 | 6,840 |
| Arts and humanities | 9,536 | 7,926 | 7,302 |
| Social sciences, journalism and information | 9,204 | 9,222 | 8,260 |
| Business, administration and law | 32,227 | 30,713 | 28,510 |
| Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics | 4,553 | 4,056 | 2,297 |
| Information and communication technologies | 8,458 | 9,297 | 8,964 |
| Engineering, manufacturing and construction | 22,555 | 22,834 | 23,053 |
| Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary | 2,770 | 3,108 | 3,001 |
| Health and welfare | 22,130 | 22,433 | 24,410 |
| Services | 4,362 | 4,446 | 4,357 |
| **Total** | **123,880** | **121,352** | **116,994** |

*Source: INSTAT, 2024*

Table no.4 below shows students' graduations in tertiary education by fields of study for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023, and 2023-2024 (INSTAT, 2024). By looking at the numbers in the table related to students graduated by fields of study for academic years 2021-2022, 2022-2023 and 2023-2024, the majority part of enrollments belongs to the fields of: Business, administration and law, Medicine/health and welfare, and Engineering, manufacturing and construction.

**Table 4. Students' graduations in tertiary education by fields of study**

| Field of study | 2021-22 | | | 2022-23 | | | 2023-24 | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total | Female | Male | Total |
| Education | 2,580 | 630 | **3,210** | 2,047 | 430 | **2,477** | 1,867 | 418 | **2,285** |
| Arts and humanities | 2,183 | 541 | **2,724** | 1,602 | 441 | **2,043** | 1,488 | 442 | **1,930** |
| Social sciences, journalism and information | 2,344 | 629 | **2,973** | 2,075 | 528 | **2,603** | 2,211 | 454 | **2,665** |
| Business, administration and law | 5,639 | 2,779 | **8,418** | 4,734 | 2,367 | **7,101** | 4,808 | 2,080 | **6,888** |
| Natural sciences, mathematics and statistics | 791 | 243 | **1,034** | 658 | 159 | **817** | 518 | 152 | **670** |
| Information and communication technologies | 785 | 1,093 | **1,878** | 822 | 1,160 | **1,982** | 991 | 1,271 | **2,262** |
| Engineering, manufacturing and construction | 1,305 | 2,216 | **3,521** | 1,315 | 2,192 | **3,507** | 1,421 | 2,431 | **3,852** |
| Agriculture, forestry, fisheries and veterinary | 536 | 553 | **1,089** | 442 | 474 | **916** | 383 | 362 | **745** |
| Health and welfare | 3,927 | 1,002 | **4,929** | 4,169 | 1,167 | **5,336** | 4,462 | 1,191 | **5,653** |
| Services | 399 | 735 | **1,134** | 377 | 832 | **1,209** | 406 | 837 | **1,243** |
| **Total** | **20,489** | **10,421** | **30,910** | **18,241** | **9,750** | **27,991** | **18,555** | **9,638** | **28,193** |

*Source: Ministry of Education and Sport & INSTAT, 2024*

The above tables provide a general picture of the students enrolled in Albanian tertiary education, students graduated in tertiary education, students enrolled in tertiary education by fields of study, students graduated in tertiary education by fields of study, which will be combined later in this paper with the data and numbers of study programs and institutional accreditations of Albanian public and non-public HEIs in order to analyze and discuss in a constructive and critical way this complex process.

The focus of this research paper is to show the progress of the institutional and study programs' accreditation of Albanian public and non-public HEIs and its role in continuous quality improvement. Data and figures from national government bodies and agencies, as well as interviews directed at the Heads of HEIs, Faculties and Departments of public and non-public HEIs have been used to analyze and develop critical thinking regarding this issue/topic.

## 2. Literature Review

Nowadays, HEIs around the world should satisfy the greater need and demand for access and quality, which affects positively both individual opportunities and economic development and competitiveness for the respective HEIs and coutries (Blanco-Ramirez & Berger, 2013). The dynamic environment in which higher education institutions operate is pushing them to adapt and incorporate quality concepts in order to remain relevant and to be competitive (Prakash, 2018). In order to assess the quality of HEIs and their study programs, accreditation is an important element for assuring quality through specialized bodies/agencies (Schomaker, 2015; Hegji, 2020). For the accreditation process to achieve the desired results it should be combined with other elements such as the motivation of HEIs' members to implement in an effective way the accreditation standards (Iqbal et al., 2023). The heads of HEIs should define properly the quality with its dimensions and quality assurance in the context of higher education because it poses significant challenges for them (Schindler et al., 2015). Three and a half decades ago not so many European HEIs used formal quality assurance instruments, but today most HEIs has established systems for quality assurance (Sarrico & Pinheiro, 2014). The focus of HEIs should be on continuous quality improvement by exploring the needs and expectations of all stakeholders and participants such as the students, the academic staff, the accreditation agencies, community members, etc, aiming for effectiveness of study programs and total quality in general (Temponi, 2005).

Quality assurance of HEIs requires monitoring and managing the quality of study programmes and at institutional level, process which is carried out by external accreditation bodies (Paor, 2016). Quality assurance at HEIs is the fulfilment of set of dimensions and criteria, and how HEIs run and their focus in development (Espinoza & Gonzalez, 2019). Accreditation of HEIs as external evaluation aims their quality assurance and combined with Bologna process which seeks standardization of the rules for higher education institutions on the transfer of credits, free mobility of students and academic staff, etc., with the main focus the quality improvements of HEIs, in terms of teaching and on scientific research, in order to make the public and non public HEIs in developed and developing countries known in the European arena and broader. Study program and institutional accreditation's focus is on the development of quality assurance system at HEIs, and it is a very important component of the Bologna Process (Ryskulova, 2019). Study program and institutional accreditation process have an impact on management, in institutional analysis and on strategic and operational planning, and for internal quality assurance models run by universities, faculties or departments (Lopez et al., 2022). Several tools impact positively the quality assurance in HEIs such as self assessment, the use of Benchmarking method, getting students' feedback, and using both accreditation and ranking process (Kumar et al., 2024). Accreditation has resulted in an important step for quality assurance in higher education institutions (Hughes & Diaz-Granados, 2018). Accreditation as external evaluation process carried out for HEIs, plays an important role in their improvement regarding quality assurance and meeting the quality standards, achieving continuous quality improvement and accountability, improving the HEIs credibility and reputation domestically and broader, in promoting good practices and innovation which is very important nowadays to be competitive, and also regarding recognition across borders and students and academic staff mobility.

Besides accreditation, HEIs' ranking is very important and is often perceived as an indicator of the quality of HEIs, which continuously emphasise the importance of these two processes for improving theirselves broader (Komotar, 2019). Ranking of HEIs is a phenomenon that has attracted the attention of many stakeholders inside HEIs and outside them (Kauppi, 2018). Ranking and accreditation of HEIs are both important because they can communicate the quality of HEIs to various stakeholders, such as students as main stakeholders, etc. (Rybinski, 2020).

## 3. Research Methodology

The research methodology used in this paper consists mainly in qualitative methods, combined with quantitative research methods.

As secondary sources used literature and papers and information regarding accreditation of HEIs and their focus on quality, data and figures from national government bodies and agencies such as Albanian Ministry of Education and Sport, Institute of Statistics, Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education, Accreditation Board, etc.

As primary source used interviews by using open questions directed at the Heads of HEIs, Faculties and Departments of public and non-public HEIs (chosen the main HEIs), to analyze and develop and organize critical thinking regarding this complex and important topic/issue.

## 4. Accreditation Process in Albanian Public and Non-Public HEIs

The population of Albania is 2,402,113 inhabitants (INSTAT, 2023). Currently in Albania operates 40 HEIs (according to MES & QAAHE 2025): 15 public HEIs, and 25 non-public HEIs. Accreditation

procedures and evaluation at Albanian HEIs regarding study programs and institutional accreditation are carried out by Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAAHE), and based mainly in Albanian quality standards for the evaluation and accreditation of study programs approved by Order of the Minister of Education and Sport, guidelines and standards for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area, Quality Code approved by Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM). The final decision on the accreditation of HEIs and the study programs they offer is taken by Accreditation Board (AB), a collegial decision-making body (which functions at QAAHE) and independent in its activity, which operates under the Albanian Law on Higher Education and its DCM, Law on the functioning of collegial bodies, and its regulation (QAAHE, 2025). AB (supported also by a Technical Secretariat) is composed of 11 members (of whom minimum 3 and maximum 5 must be foreign members based in the Albanian law), who all members are personalities of the academic world within and outside Republic of Albania. Involvement of foreign members at AB was part of reform in order to improve the accreditation process in general.

Below there are some data and figures regarding institutional and study programs' accreditation:

- Accredited 37 active HEIs (according to QAAHE, 2025).
- Accredited 592 active Study Programs during 2017-2025 (QAAHE, 2025).
- Currently in the accreditation process there are 92 study programs (QAAHE, May 2025).
- A few (3-5) HEIs that didn't meet the standards were closed.

Figure no. 1 below shows accredited HEIs by category, where the majority of them belong to University (HEIs that issue all types of diplomas) category (24 from 40).

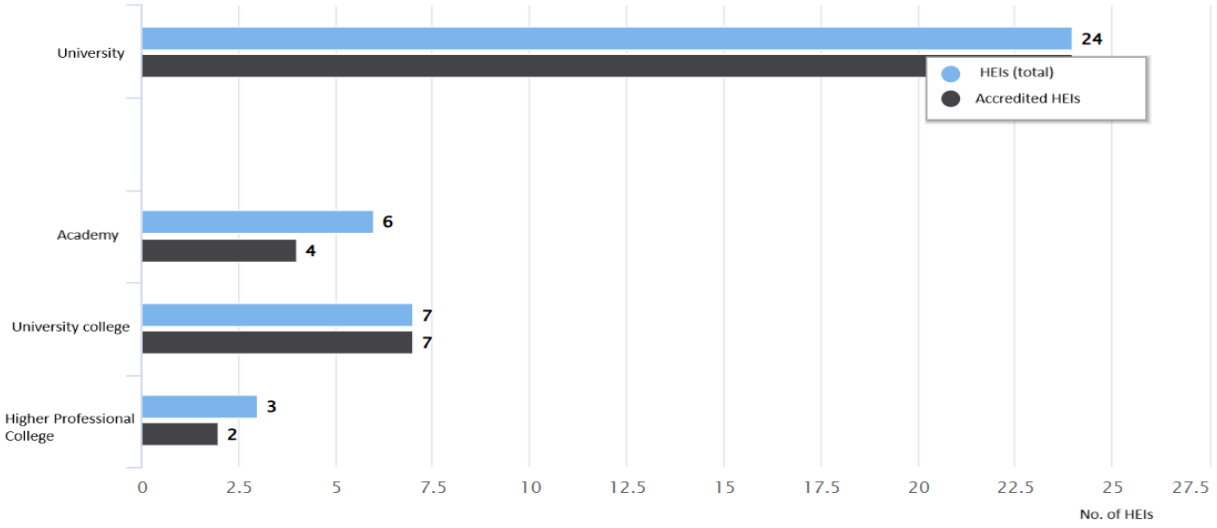



**Figure 1. Accredited HEIs by category**

*Source: QAAHE, 2025*

Figure no. 2 shows the distribution of active programs by degree type, where the majority of them belong to Bachelor degree and Master of Science degree, followed by Professional master degree, and so on.

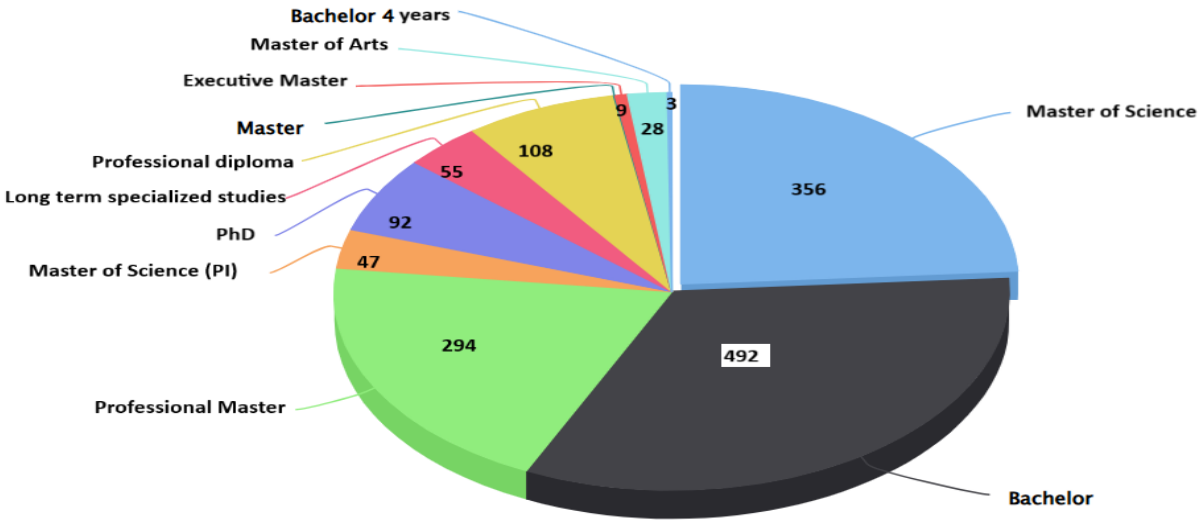



**Figure 2. Distribution of active programs by degree type**

*Source: QAAHE, 2025*

And the last figure below no.3 shows accredited programs by field, where the majority belong to Human and social sciences and Medical sciences, followed by Physical and educational sciences, and so on.

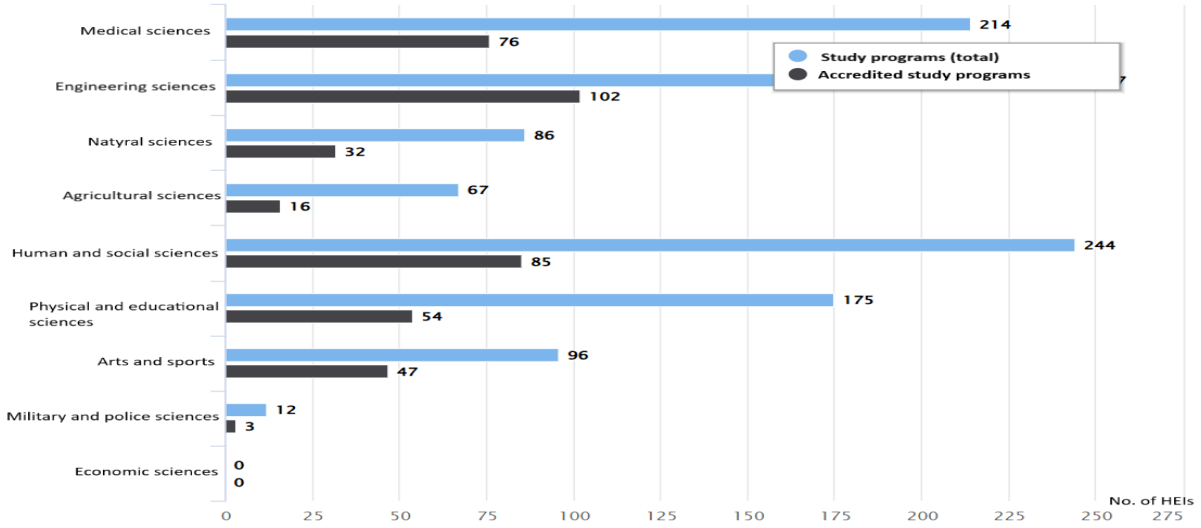



**Figure 3. Accredited programs by field**

*Source: QAAHE, 2025*

## 5. Analysis and Discussion and Some Suggestions

Based in the data and figures from Albanian government bodies and agencies such as Ministry of Education and Sport, Institute of Statistics, Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education, Accreditation Board, etc. and interviews directed at the Heads of HEI$_s$, Faculties and Departments of public and non-public HEI$_s$, regarding this complex and important topic/issue, below there is some analysis and discussion.

By comparing students' enrollment for the last three academic years there is a decrease in numbers for Bachelor studies and Master studies. Considering the structure of Albanian population and based in the last Census related to the inhabitants in Albania, and based in the prediction for the future regarding the

students' enrollments, especially for the Bachelor and Master systems (which represent the largest numbers), the numbers will continue to decline, so $HEI_s$ are obligated to develop policies to attract students from the region by considering this as the first step.

$HEI_s$ could have a lot of fields related to Bachelor and Master studies, and accredited study programs, but if they face low and low number of students' enrollments in these study programs for some consecutive years, then the accreditation of these study programs would be insufficient for the survival and success of these study programs. $HEI_s$ must continuously develop policies for continuous quality improvement, study programs, curricula, etc., in order to be competitive in today's changing and highly dynamic higher education environment.

Also, the Albanian Ministry of Education and Sport and QAAHE, in the meetings they hold with university leaders, should encourage them to be visionary, not just fulfil formal requirements, but always to seek more and more in order to be competitive. Accreditation of $HEI_s$ is not everything, but it is a very important element of quality assurance for $HEI_s$ to make them more known to European arena, to increase their competitiveness in this dynamic and competitive environment.

Institutional and study programs' accreditation numbers carried out by QAAHE are good in general, and it is an undergoing process, which for $HEI_s$ is essential for increasing the quality of their study programs in the future. Changes and reforms undertaken in Albanian higher education sector are good and an important step for the quality of Albanian public and non-public $HEI_s$. Changes in Law on Higher Education and DCM in general, and changes at the Accreditation Board by including three to five foreign members is a good step in general.

*Some suggestions:*

- Related to $HEI_s$ is suggested to apply and get also ISO certification for Education and Training, which will result a core step for total quality. By doing this, the $HEI_s$ can learn from each other by using Benchmarking method.
- Despite the debates, in addition to accreditation from QAAHE, it is suggested that foreign accreditation agencies should be called to make a super independent assessment and to be accepted by all stakeholders.
- To judge in a more complete context, it would be ranking of these $HEI_s$. Regarding ranking it's suggested to be done by foreign institutions, to avoid any bias related to the process.
- Considering the fact that EU has opened negotiations for Albania to join EU in the near future, the above suggestions are critical in order to make huge improvements and to move forward.

## Future directions of research

An area for further study would be by focusing on internal quality assurance units at $HEI_s$ and the faculties by studying their role in quality improvement as internal evaluation process. Another area for further research would be by creating a regression equation with the factors/categories of accreditation as external evaluation and finding their impact in quality improvement. Also, another area for further research would be by raising hypotheses of study programs' accreditation data and figures with the success of these study programs (i.e. higher numbers of enrollments, higher employments rates of students, more projects won, etc).

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