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HIGHER EDUCATION FOR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND FOSTERING GLOBAL COMPETENCIES

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Abstract: Responding to the impact of globalization on delivering education and the increasing need to adapt to the needs of economic and social life, higher education institutions (HEI) effectiveness is depending on the use of technology and contribution to national development. While increasing access to higher education remains to be an important objective of national development, this paper shows how conscious use of education standards and technology as learning resources can have a significant role in building globally competent human resources. The focus of this paper is on such positive practices implemented at Zagreb School of Economics and Management (ZSEM). Since its foundation in 2002, the school is promoting the use of technology and demostrating its quest for excellence through internalization and application of international education standards. Today ZSEM has around 1400 students and about 150 courses with integrated e-learning system while currently 7% of students take part in various types of international exchange.

Key words: education standards, e-learning, globalization, quality, international exchange

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INTRODUCTION

It is often quoted that higher education is the backbone of any society [1]. There are various roles higher education institutions (HEI) play in a society [2]. One of the most important ones is contributing to national development.

By developing internationally and interculturally competent human resources and providing nationally comparable and internationally acceptable standards of quality, Zagreb School of Economics and Managment (ZSEM) is contributing to both development of students as well as the country's future workforce. Fostering global competencies among students is clearly expressed in the insitutional mission: „The mission of ZSEM is to transfer values, knowledge, and skills that students need for long-term success in a globalized business world undergoing constant technological and market transformations." Implementation of internationally established standards combined with a broad scope of international activities which include mobility of programs, faculty and students, offering courses in languages other than Croatian and accepting more international students, very well respond to the needs of current economic and social life in Croatia. This primarily means creating an atmosphere and quest for excellence and preparing students with global competences to successfuly face the changing global scenario.

PROMOTING EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AND MOBILITY

According to van der Wende [3], the adoption of any quality international standards, represents a form of institutional and system internationalization. Resulting in certification and equivalence in programs and degrees, it is an important step towards building global competencies and internalization and institutionalization of quality.

Promoting lifelong learning which allows people to upgrade their skills and knowledge based on societal needs, application of international standards can contribute to national development. This refers not only to ensuring quality of curricula built in accordance to European and global standards, but also increasing access to higher education and stimulatingy mobility of both students and faculty.

AACSB ACCREDITATION

One of ZSEM strategic goals is the implementation of internationally established programs. For that reason ZSEM follows the accreditation standards such as AACSB (The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business) [4] and EQUIS (the European Quality Improvement System [5].

AACSB is an international nonprofit association founded in 1916 with the goal of accrediting educational programs of schools and universities in business education. AACSB certificate represents the highest standards achievable by business schools worldwide. Institutions accredited by AACSB confirm their commitment to quality and continuous improvement through a rigorous and comprehensive peer review [6]. International accred-

itation assures quality and promotes excellence and continuous improvement in under-graduate and graduate education for business administration. ZSEM entered the demanding process of AACSB International accreditation after the second generation of ZSEM students graduated in 2008. It is expected that ZSEM will get the AACSB accreditation by the end of 2012 or beginning of 2013. EQUIS accreditation can be launched only after 10 years from school's foundation [7]. Promoting standards and interaction among business schools worldwide, AACSB encourages schools to develop mutual cooperation and maintain a long-standing academic partnerships.

INTERNATIONAL ACADEMIC COOPERATION

By being commited to international academic cooperation, schools not only improve their own academic capacity and provide greater research opportunities, but also stimulate mobility of both students and faculty. For this reason, international accreditation represents not only a hallmark of excellence in business education, but by attracting higher quality students, allows global recognition. Continuous growth of the partner base shown in Table 1 clearly reflects institutional internationalization strategy focused around global recognition and enriching the learning experience the institution provides to its students.

Academic. year	02/03	03/04	04/05	05/06	06/07	07/08	08/09	09/10	10/11	11/12
Number of HEI	0	4	9	13	27	45	55	78	86	90

Table 1. The growing number of higher education institutions with whom ZSEM has signed an international academic cooperation contract

Established in 2004. the ZSEM International Office activities have brought a more significant growth of the partner base [8]. Currently, the school cooperates with 90 partner institutions from 39 countries across the globe.

Although student mobility is a very important part of Bologna Process as well as AACSB accreditation, as a transition country, it was not until the Bologna Process implementation a couple years ago when Croatian universities started actively encouraging student mobility. Currently, only 0.3% students in Croatia take part in an international student exchange. [9]

Student mobility includes attending summer schools/semesters, but also visits to partner universities for a semester or more. Since student mobility in Croatia is a more recent phenomenon, it was necessary to place a lot of effort in order to stimulate students to take part in an international exchange. Table 2 shows student mobility across all four undergraduate academic levels, combined with summer school exchange and student exchange during the regular semesters. Compared to Croatian average percentage of 0.3%, ZSEM's student mobility is currently 7%. However, ZSEM is continuously taking needed steps to stimulate even larger numbers of students to participate in various forms of student exchange.

School year	Exchange program %	Summer school %	Total %
2002/2003		10.4	10.4
2003/2004		4.1	4.1
2004/2005		12.6	12.6
2005/2006		3.3	3.3
2006/2007	1	3.49	4.49
2007/2008	1.4	3.82	5.22
2008/2009	2.1	1.29	3.39
2009/2010	2.03	1.63	3.66
2010/2011	4.46	3	7.46

Table 2. Distribution of international exchange students at ZSEM

In order to ensure that foreign students have a wider choice of course selection, an increasing number of ZSEM courses are offered in English language. During the academic year 2010/11, 22.7% of mandatory courses and 42.9% of elective courses in ZSEM's undergraduate program had a student group in English language. Starting in 2012/2013 all the first year courses will be offered in English as well as Croatian. Such effort in serving a growing body of international students at ZSEM in turn develops and raises school's institutional capabilities by thus contributing to overall education quality. In terms of quality assurance being a conscious and planned process, the following text describes quality assurance system at ZSEM.

E-LEARNING QUALITY STANDARDS AND SOLUTIONS

ZSEM uses so-called hybrid model of education which combines classroom teaching with systematic e-learning. To use e-elarning systematically means the following:

Each student and professor has to use e-learning. Professors have to develop e-learning course, regularly update it and build its content and has to maintain constant communication with students. For students, e-elarning systems means the source for all the lectures, labs, cases, discussions, e-mails, quizzes and test and so on.

All the courses use a unique LMS (Learning Management System). This is very important because this enables 2002 to 2010 ZSEM was using LMS WebCT [10]. Since in the meantime the Blackboard company has bought WebCT, in the academic year all the data from WebCT was transferred to Blackboard [11].

In order to manage quality assurance at ZSEM, e-learning team has developed 11 standards that measure the quality of all the e-learning courses [12]. Those standards may be subdivided into 3 groups: static, dynamic and administrative (Figure 1) [13]:

Static standars include Syllabus, lectures, lab and other elements that are typically developed in each course while dinamic standards involve constant communication between students and professors including calendar, e-mail, forum and online tests. Discussion is a very important part of each e-learning system and in some courses such as Sociology and ICT discussions are very well developed and used. [14]

Administrator standards are connected to regular updating of the student base.
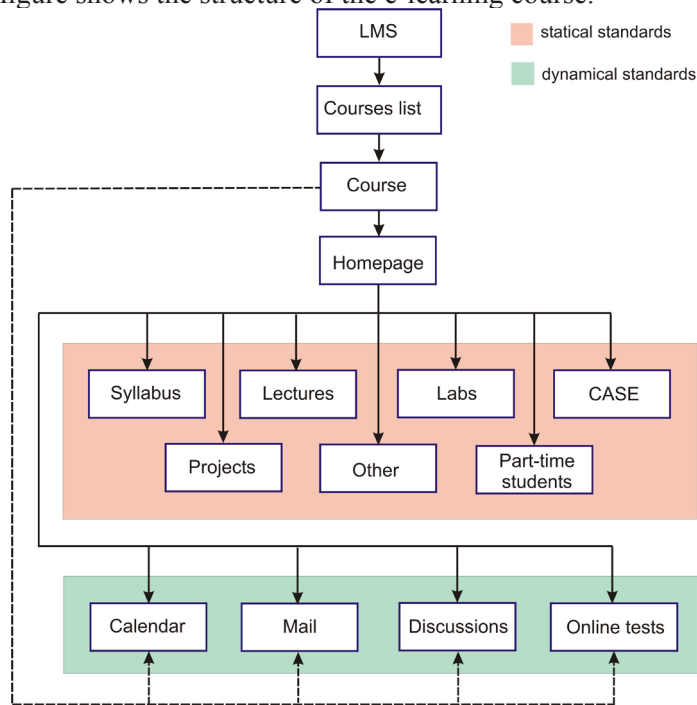The following figure shows the structure of the e-learning course.

Figure 1. The structure of an e-learning course

Evaluation of all e-elarning courses is done anually. In order to manage quality assurance in their own course, each lecturer gets a detailed feedback on each standard. Complete evaluation results are presented at the Faculty Committe at the end of the academic year. They are also available to professors on school's web portal. In the academic year 2010/11 134 courses were evaluated. Since the first evaluation in 2006/07 until most recent evaluation in 2010, the arithmetical mean of e-learning course quality has grown for 14.4%. Figure 2 shows continuous growth of e-learning course quality while figure 3 shows e-learning standard distribution in the overall annual evaluation. Both figures display continuos growth.
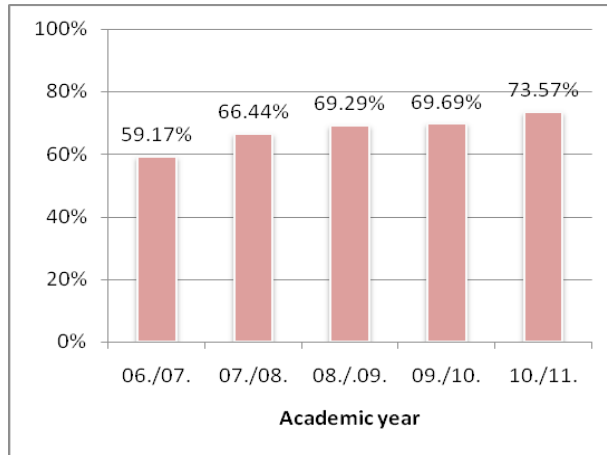
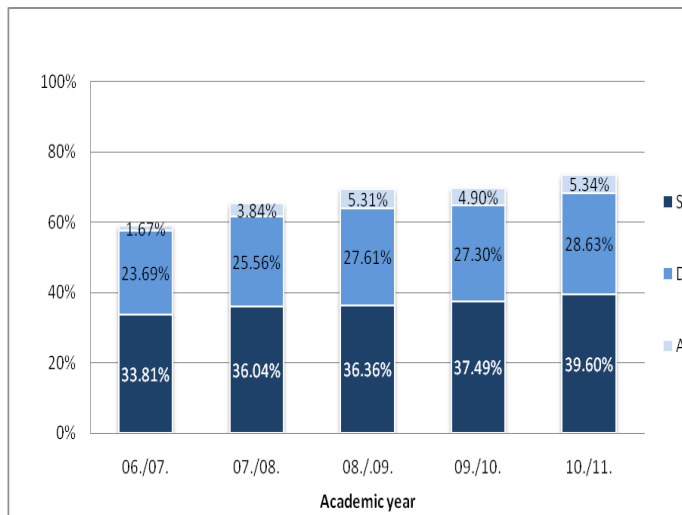*Figure 2. Annual evaluation results for e-learning courses since 2006.*

Figure 3. E-learning standards distribution in annual evaluation

The case of domestic students in the international exchange programs is a good example of e-learning solution for global academic cooperation. If the host HEI does not offer possibility of participation in mandatory courses required by ZSEM curricula, students can take the courses through distance learning. In the academic year 2010/11 27 7th semester students were taking part of international exchange in 8 different countries in 14 different HEI. Although the course Management Information System (MIS) is intense in terms of interaction and teamwork, DL model of this course enabled ZSEM students to take and pass this course in their domestic institution while studying abroad. [7] Another example of e-learning implementation at ZSEM is school's conscious effort to support national sport success. Currently, there are 25 sportsmen attending ZSEM according to Croatian Olympic Committee categorization, around 15 state winners and several medal carriers from world and European championships and World University Games. Through developed e-learning system ZSEM enables all these top sportsmen to follow regularly the lectures and fulfill course assignments despite their busy schedule and absence from the country.

CONCLUSION

According to R. Barnet [2], one of the four predominant concepts of higher education is the production of qualified human resources. Including in its scope of assesment the development of skills of students in Croatia comparable with those of their counterparts abroad, ZSEM is developing internationally and interculturally competent human resources. This process of preparing students to successfuly face the changing global scenario is providing input in building skilled and competent national workforce. On the other hand, the use of technology and the examples of e-learning solutions play an important role in increasing access to higher education which remains to be an important objective of any national development. In wider context, implementation of internationally established programs and following guidelines of good practice is in line with the importance of quality assurance in higher education which is within European Union considered to be an issue of top prioroty. [1] Finally, by extending the scope of its international academic collaboration and stimulating mobility of both students and professors, the school is building its own capabilities and global recognition by thus contributing both to national development and development of students.

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