INTRODUCING NEW STUDY PROGRAMMES AT CROATIAN PUBLIC UNIVERSITIES:

CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK AND DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

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Abstract

In the global education environment, introducing new study programmes is a key strategic process and a potential source of competitive advantage. The number of implemented new programmes probably is one of the crucial indicators of a university's flexibility. University history and experience, organisation and administration, management and the degree of bureaucratization all affect the manner and speed of introducing new programs.

The first objective of this paper is to present and to explore institutional framework and decision processes in launching new study programmes at the largest Croatian universities. We collected data on all the newly introduced study programmes in Croatia during the past six years. Additionally, we interviewed key personnel responsible for the administrative management of the introduction of new programmes at all Croatian universities and obtained additional information and related explanations. Based on the comparative analysis we conducted, the main phases of the decision-making process, as well as the similarities and differences between the four largest Croatian universities are presented.

The second objective of this paper is to explore intra-university context and to identify crucial problems and obstacles in introducing new programmes. During May-July 2016, we conducted interviews with fourteen deans, former deans, and heads of departments, as well as nine heads of study programmes that have been successfully implemented. We thoroughly analysed the content of the interviews and took and grouped key findings by similarity.

Our study has shown the following results: (1) the lack of university autonomy in Croatia (too strong role of the government and state agencies), (2) the decision-making processes are too complex, take too long and have a lot of groups and task forces involved (The average duration of the process of introducing a new programme is more than one year), (3) the system of introduction of new programmes is highly bureaucratic and formalistic, with a lot of unnecessary administrative tasks and activities, (4) strong influence of the discontinuity of university governance on introducing new programmes, (5) it is particularly difficult to design and introduce new interdisciplinary programmes because of a strong identity crisis of the university constituents (faculties and departments), (6) the introduction of a new curriculum component is mostly the result of socio-political relations within the university, dynamics and structure of power and/or attempts to strengthen existing positions, (7) programmes are rarely an adequate response to the new market and societal needs.

The process of introducing new study programmes at Croatian universities strongly depends on too complicated institutional framework, multi-layered university procedures, complex socio-political relations and attributes of a university's social network. The introduction of study programmes is usually the result of a long negotiation and compromise between a number of "ruling elites" that exist in the university constituents (deans and powerful groups of professors) and reflects the power relations in universities.

Keywords: University, Study Programmes, Decision Process, European Higher Education Area; Quality Assurance

1 INTRODUCTION

Study programmes are the pillar of every university and, along with its research potential, constitute the most important attribute in its social and market recognition. The development and introduction of new study programmes is an essential decision process, something that can give the general picture of a university's capabilities, primarily of its ability to adapt to rapid and unpredictable changes in the environment and its ability to exploit internal capabilities and educational competences. Developing and introducing study programmes is very important because it shows the quality of strategic orientation of a university, especially its ability to attract new students and prepare them for new global responsibilities and job requirements. Besides, the number of implemented new study programmes might be one of the crucial indicators of a university's adaptableness and educational offer adjustment to the market and other societal needs.

In the dozen research papers we have examined, the design and implementation of new programmes were analysed for different purposes, i.e. to explore the abilities of a university or a college to adapt to new global circumstances and strengthen the internationalization of its activities (Dolan, 2011; Womble et al, 2014; Rasi et al, 2015); to uncover some of the key factors and practices that contribute to program success (Blanton & Breuning, 2016); to identify and apply the best practices in university education to the creation of new study programmes (Games Vargas, 2013, Gedeon, 2014); to identify early adopters among universities in academic fields (Brint et al., 2011); to address the relevance of designing specific kind of study programmes and the way of attracting students to those programmes (Scheneider, 2002; Escámez et al., 2008); to investigate cooperation potential between business and university in launching new company-integrating study programmes based on e-learning (Parlow & Röchter, 2015) or to explore the potential of inter-university cooperation in designing joint programmes by using e-learning facilities and platforms (Semradova, 2011). Most of the mentioned studies are focused on internationalisation of higher education with a specific emphasis on designing new international programmes.

Our intention is to explore some of the issues related to the context and the decision-making processes affecting new study programs in Croatian universities. More specifically, our research is directed towards those universities that have a strong position of its constituents (faculties, schools, departments) with insufficiently powerful position of the university apex (rector). These are the four largest public universities, while all other Croatian public and private universities are tightly integrated and under strong leadership of their rector's team.

It is necessary to understand the specificity of the organization and structure of universities in Croatia. Similar to some other countries of the new Europe, there is a myriad of different university organizational forms depending on the political, economic and sociocultural heritage and historical experience. It is important to emphasize, there are, depending on the degree of centralization, (1) integrated universities with a strong central-role leading management structure in which the processes of strategic planning and leadership are concentrated at the top of the organizational pyramid and (2) universities with exceptionally strong role of their constituents (faculties, schools or departments) that take the organizational form of the so-called "federal decentralization" with poor interconnectedness and vague ways and forms of coordination at the top of the hierarchy.

Our aim is to present and to investigate existing decision processes regarding launching new study programmes at universities within the strongholds of constituents and where real power lies in coalitions of powerful constituents and groups. The focus of our paper is on undergraduate, graduate and vocational levels of university education. We shall indicate key issues, problems and obstacles in these processes, and we shall also address the role of government in introducing new programmes at public universities in Croatia.

2 INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR INTRODUCING NEW STUDY PROGRAMMES IN CROATIA

University history and experience, organization and administration, management, degree of bureaucratization affect the manner and speed of introduction of new study programs. Besides, there are some institutional requirements that are important in the process of introducing new programs.

Both EU and Croatian laws, acts and rulebooks define the institutional framework for the process of introducing new study programmes at Croatian national universities. Croatia signed the *Bologna Declaration* in 2005 and it is also a member of the European Higher Education Area and the European Union.

Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005 following a proposal prepared by the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA) in co-operation with the *European Students' Union* (ESU), *the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education* (EURASHE) and the *European University Association* (EUA).

Croatian legislation in this area includes several important acts: *The Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act and Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education*. According to *The Scientific Activity and Higher Education Act*, the accreditation shall be issued to a higher education institution for the commencement of a new study, as well as for the establishment or implementation of a study outside its seat. Also, a certain number of teaching and other staff with appropriate scientific and professional qualifications is required, according to the standard teaching load determined by the collective agreement for higher education. In the case of a university, at least half of the required number of teachers should have a full-time employment contract.

Along with the *Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education*, the Agency for Science and Higher Education is responsible for quality assurance in Croatia and for respecting the ESG. Within its jurisdiction the Agency shall: carry out the procedure of initial accreditation, carry out the procedure of re-accreditation, carry out the procedure of thematic evaluation, carry out the procedure of audit, collect and process information about the systems of science, higher education and other systems interdependent with science and higher education. License is an administrative deed passed by the Ministry on the basis of finished evaluation procedure which confirms that an evaluation object fulfils the conditions to start its activity and/or carry out the study programme.

Another essential regulation is the *Croatian Qualifications Framework,* which is a reform instrument for regulating the system of qualifications at all levels in the Republic of Croatia through qualifications standards based on learning outcomes and following the needs of the labour market, individuals and society. The CROQF is a framework which sets every qualification acquired in Croatia at its place.

3 DECISION-MAKING PROCESS FOR INTRODUCING NEW STUDY PROGRAMMES AT LARGEST CROATIAN UNIVERSITIES

There are 8 public universities in Croatia and they share the same supranational and national framework for introducing new study programmes. The four largest universities (University of Zagreb, University of Split, University of Rijeka, University of Osijek) are institutions of higher education with a remarkably strong role of faculties and schools, while the other four (University of Zadar, University of Dubrovnik, University of Pula and University North) are integrated universities with a strong rector's role in which the processes of strategic planning and leadership are concentrated at the top of the organizational pyramid.

University of Zagreb is the largest Croatian university and has the highest international rank. It currently has more than 76.000 students who attend one of the more than 600 study programmes offered. University of Zagreb employs more than 8.000 professors. University of Split has more than 2.500 professors and more than 25.000 students in 150 study programmes. University of Rijeka and University of Osijek are similar in size; have 1.000 professors, between 17 and 18 thousands students, and around 150 study programmes each.

It is interesting to look at the data on the number of new programmes introduced by the four largest Croatian universities since the implementation of the Act on Quality Assurance in Science and Higher Education in 2009 (Table 1). The information was not easy to collect because of two reasons. First, the data are not publicly available, so we had to request information from the university administration; second, the "new programs" at the universities are considered to be all programmes that have undergone the procedure, even if the existing study programs were only slightly changed. This is the imprecise university policy of classifying programmes in which both programme adaptations to other languages (i.e. Croatian language-based toward English language-based programmes) and those programmes that just replace existing programmes with some slight changes are listed as completely "new" programmes. We have conducted a thorough analysis of all programmes, and we have identified those study programmes that are novel from the perspective of the university at which they were introduced. There were 90 such new study programmes at the four largest Croatian universities in the last 6 years.

Table 1. New study programmes at four largest Croatian universities (2010-2016)

Academic year	New programme proposals (total)	Areas	Programmes approved by the University Senate	Programmes approved by the Ministry
University of Zagreb				
2010-2011	11	9 in Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Biomedicine and Public Health 1 in Technological Sciences	11	11
2011-2012	10	6 in Humanities and Social Sciences 2 in Technological Sciences 2 in Arts	10	10
2012-2013	5	3 in Technological Sciences 2 in Humanities and Social Sciences	4	3
2013-2014	5	3 in Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Technological Sciences 1 in Interdisciplinary Sciences	4	4
2014-2015	4	4 in Humanities and Social Sciences	4	3
2015-2016	3	2 in Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Biotechnical Sciences	3	0 (pending approval)
2010-2016	**38**	26 in Humanities and Social Sciences 7 in Technological Sciences 2 in Arts 1 in Biomedicine and Public Health 1 in Biotechnical Sciences 1 in Interdisciplinary Sciences		
University of Split				
2010-2011	7	5 in Biomedicine and Public Health 1 in Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Arts	7	7
2011-2012	4	2 in Technical Sciences 2 in Arts	4	4
2012-2013	1	1 in Biomedicine and Public Health	1	1
2013-2014	2	2 in Technical Sciences	2	2
2014-2015	0	0	0	0
2015-2016	2	1 in Biomedicine and Public Health 1 in Humanities and Social Sciences	2	0 (pending approval)
2010-2016	**16**	7 in Biomedicine and Public Health 4 in Technological Sciences 2 in Humanities and Social Sciences 3 in Art Sciences		
University of Rijeka				
2010-2011	1	1 in Technological Sciences	1	1
2011-2012	7	5 in Natural Sciences 2 in Humanities and Social Sciences	7	7
2012-2013	2	2 in Biomedicine and Public Health	2	2
2013-2014	5	2 in Arts 1 In Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Natural Sciences 1 in Biomedicine and Public Health	5	5
2014-2015	6	5 in Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Biomedicine and Public Health	6	6
2015-2016	1	1 in Biomedicine and Public Health	1	0 (pending approval)
2010-2016	**22**	8 in Humanities and Social Sciences 5 in Biomedicine and Public Health 5 in Natural Sciences 2 in Arts 1 in Technological Sciences 1 in Biotechnical Sciences		
University of Osijek				
2010-2011	1	1 in Humanities and Social Sciences	1	1
2011-2012	0	0	0	0
2012-2013	1	1 in Biomedicine and Public Health	1	1
2013-2014	3	1 in Humanities and Social Sciences 1 in Arts 1 in Natural Sciences	3	3
2014-2015	6	2 in Biomedicine and Public Health 3 in Technological Sciences 1 in Natural Sciences	6	5
2015-2016	3	1 in Biomedicine and Public Health 2 in Humanities and Social Sciences	3	1 (2 pending approval)
2010-2016	**14**	4 in Humanities and Social Sciences 4 in Biomedicine and Public Health 3 in Technological Sciences 2 in Natural Sciences 1 in Arts		

In relation to the total number of programmes (undergraduate, graduate and vocational levels) at the University of Zagreb (337), the number of proposals for new programmes in the period 2010-2016 is considerably small (38 or 11.2% of total number of programmes). Moreover, there appears to be insufficient innovation flexibility of this university to new market demands and changing environmental conditions. Most of the new programmes (25 out of 38) were founded in the Humanities and Social Sciences despite global drifts and national educational policy. Specifically, missions of the best global universities and strategic documents and guidelines set by the Croatian government rely heavily on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) areas. It is obvious that the launching of 21 programmes began in 2010 and 2011, immediately after the implementation of the *Quality assurance in science and higher education Act* in Croatia, which stimulated faculties to propose new programmes (programmes that are in the process of introducing are mentioned only in the year of their first application and processes almost always take more than a year to complete). During the last four years, only 17 new programmes were designed and prepared for the process of introducing in curricula.

Somewhat different patterns of reasoning can be applied to the situation in other large Croatian universities. Most new programmes (11 of 16, or 68.7%) were in Biomedicine and Public Health and Technological Sciences at the University of Split. The situation is similar at the University of Rijeka, where the majority of new programmes were from these two areas, as well as from the Natural and Biotechnical Sciences (12 of 22, or 54.5%), and at the University of Osijek where the majority of new programmes were from the mentioned STEM areas (9 of 14, or 64.3%). Just like at University of Zagreb, most of those programmes were introduced in 2010 and 2011.

Our goal is to describe and examine formal aspects of the decision-making process at the four largest public universities and to identify the most important problems and obstacles. First, we will carefully analyze all aspects of this process at the largest Croatian public university and the one with the best international ranking (University of Zagreb), and then we will compare the practices in this area to three other large universities (University of Split, University of Rijeka and University of Osijek).

Introducing new study programmes at the University of Zagreb is regulated by the *Regulations on the Procedure of reviewing study programmes at undergraduate, graduate, integrated undergraduate and graduate, and vocational studies at the University of Zagreb*. The Regulations regulate: review of new study programmes and issuance of accreditation; changes and additions to study programmes with accreditation and periodic internal review of study programmes. Proposals of study programmes can be made by one or several Faculty Councils of research-and-teaching constituent parts or by Academician Councils of art-and-teaching constituent parts of the University of Zagreb. A request for a review of a new study programme is to be made by research-and-teaching and art-and-teaching constituent parts of the University of Zagreb no later than 12 months prior to the start of the academic year in which the new study programme is to be introduced. A preliminary assessment and review of the study programme is conducted by the Committee for Quality Management of the University of Zagreb. Along with a request for study programme review, the proposer is obliged to submit the following documents: decision of the Faculty Councils of research-and-teaching constituent parts or Academy Councils of art-and-teaching constituent parts or other competent bodies on the proposed study programme; detailed proposal of the study programme in Croatian and English; description of spatial and staff conditions of the constituent part for conducting the study programme; the required number of work contracts with research-and-teaching, art-and-teaching and teaching staff; proposer's financial analysis of projected costs and funding resources of the proposed study programme; description of procedures of quality assurance for the study programme.

The procedure goes as follows: (1) Notification on the initiation of the procedure of evaluation of a new study programme is dispatched to the Field Councils to which the proposed programme belongs. The Field Councils dispatch possible recommendations to the proposers and the Committee for Quality Management; (2) The request for evaluation, along with the appropriate documentation, is submitted in triplicate and in electronic form as well; (3) Along with the request for evaluation of a study programme, the proposer is required to submit all the documentation mentioned above.

After that, the Committee will check the submitted request in order to determine whether the proposer has provided all the necessary documentation, and if it determines that the documentation is incomplete it will ask the proposer to complete it within 14 days. (2) When the request with all its accompanying documentation is complete, the Committee must appoint a programme rapporteur for the proposed study programme within 30 days. (3) The appointed programme rapporteur must send the documentation on staff and spatial capacities to the University Office for development, investment and spatial planning, and the documentation on the financial analysis of the proposer of the new study

programme to the University budget office for a review and ask them to provide their assessment on whether the requirements for setting up and implementing the new study programme have been met. (4) If these assessments are not positive, the proposer must at the request of the Committee revise the submitted proposal in accordance with the assessment within 14 days.

Furthermore, three independent reviewers will be appointed for each new programme proposed, of whom none can be from the constituent unit of the proposer, and at least one must be from outside the University of Zagreb. (2) The reviewers are required to submit their review within 45 days. (3) Regarding study programmes in the areas of regulated professions, the reviewers will check the harmonization of the study programme with the Directive 2005/36/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council on the recognition of professional qualifications and the Croatian Law on regulated professions and recognition of foreign professional qualifications.

Upon receiving the reviews and assessments, the programme rapporteur submits a report to the Committee. Should the Committee determine, based on the report of the programme rapporteur, that a revision of the study programme is needed, it will ask the proposer of the study programme to revise the study programme in accordance with the reviews within 30 days. Based on the report, the Committee will make one of the following recommendations: (1) the programme can be implemented in the form proposed, (2) the programme is rejected if at least two reviews are negative, (3) the request cannot be processed because the documentation has not been completed even though a request for the completion of the proposal had been made (4) the request cannot be processed because the proposer has not revised the proposal even though a revision of the proposal had been requested.

Based on the Committee's recommendation, the relevant Field Council(s) present(s) an opinion on the need for the study programme and on its purposefulness. If the programme is interdisciplinary, the opinion is asked from two or more relevant Field Councils. The Field Council sends its assessment, along with the Committee's recommendation, to the University Senate. Based on the opinion issued by the Field Council and the recommendation of the Committee, the Senate passes one of the following decisions: (1) the request for setting up and implementation of the proposed new study programme is accepted; (2) the request for setting up and implementation of the proposed new study programme is rejected; (3) the request for setting up and implementation of the proposed new study programme is rejected because it is not complete or it has not been revised within the deadline set.

The Senate decision is delivered to the submitter of the request within 8 days. If the request is accepted, one copy of the Senate decision is sent to the Agency for Science and Higher Education and one to the Ministry, which, on the basis of the decision, enters the study programme into the appropriate registry of study programmes. Issuance of a certificate of entry into the registry creates the conditions for the beginning of implementation of the study programme. (4) If the request is turned down or rejected, the proposer has the right to repeat the request for the setting up and implementation of a new study programme after the expiration of one year following the date of the Senate's decision (see Fig. 1).

Next we compared the procedures for the introduction of new programs at three other major Croatian universities and University of Zagreb. We noticed that all four universities follow similar paths in introducing their new study programmes. The crucial reason for that is the decision of the Croatian Rectors Conference where a recommendation was given to all Croatian universities to harmonize the procedures in this area. In addition, the four large Croatian universities take the same organizational form of so-called "federal decentralization" with poor interconnectedness and vague ways and forms of coordination at the top of the hierarchy and have similar organization platforms for introducing new programmes.

On the other hand, we detected certain dissimilarities that exist in decision making processes at the four largest universities in Croatia. Universities have their own rules and bylaws and different experiences in implementation. We focused on the examples of good practice that are present at the three smaller universities, but are not conducted at the University of Zagreb.

First, at the University of Rijeka, the practices of quality assurance after the approval of a new study programme are more advanced than at the other universities. The University of Rijeka has made a special plan of procedures according to the student evaluations of the study programmes. They have also built in more international relations acts to their quality assurance plans. As it is said in the University of Rijeka's strategy - "the goal of the Quality Management System is development of institutional mechanisms for systematic evaluation and coordination of initiatives and developmental

programmes with a permanent purpose of promoting high standards of professional and expert development of partners in all fields of activities."

Second, the University of Split conducts all the same steps in establishing new study programmes as the University of Zagreb. The only substantial difference is that the University of Split sends all relevant documentation to the Agency for science and higher education *prior* to enrolling into the process of introducing new programme. Thus, the University of Split avoids the possibility of running all long and expensive processes without knowing if the Agency will approve the study programme. Also, the University of Split has the most advanced analysis of the employment possibilities for the students who graduate from the proposed study programmes which is a very important factor, especially in Croatia where the youth unemployment is over 50% and presents one of the society's largest problems.

Third, the University of Osijek regulates this field by the Regulation on establishment and function of quality assurance system. The procedures for introducing new programmes are very similar to those of the other universities, apart from the fact that the University of Osijek has made their own forms in some steps of the process that seem to be more simple than those of the other three universities. Also, due to the smaller number of new programmes, the processes seem to be a little faster.
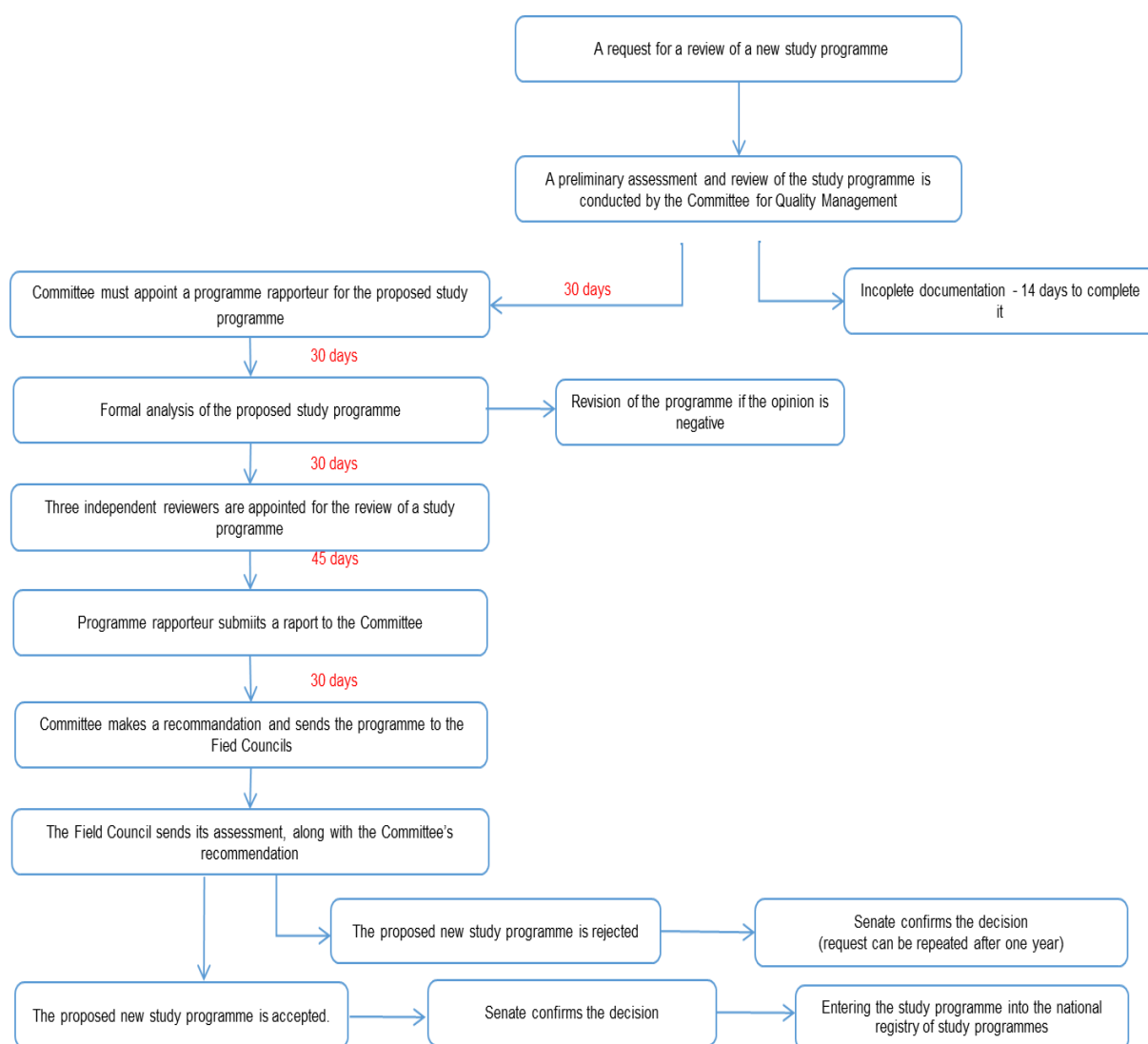

Figure 1. The decision and assessment procedure for launching new study programmes at University of Zagreb

4 PROBLEMS AND OBSTACLES IN INTRODUCING NEW STUDY PROGRAMMES AT CROATIAN UNIVERSITIES

Our main goal is to explore intra-university context and to identify crucial problems in introducing new programmes at four large Croatian universities. Research questions are: what are the main obstacles and difficulties in launching completely new curricula and who has prevailing positions and strong influence in decision processes.

We have used qualitative research methods because our aim was to discover and describe relevant issues related to launching new study programmes; in other words the goal of our study was to understand a phenomenon rather than measure some impact and/or relationships among variables. The method used in our study was interview. In the qualitative research methodology, with using the interview method, the research instrument is the researcher alone who asks respondents the questions and later interprets the collected narratives (Maxwell, 2012).

During May-July 2016, we conducted interviews with fourteen deans, former deans, and heads of departments (7 from University of Zagreb, 3 from University of Split, 2 from University of Rijeka and 2 from University of Osijek), as well as nine heads of study programmes that have been successfully implemented in past six years (6 from University of Zagreb, 2 from University of Split and 1 from University of Rijeka). These 23 interviews were the basis for interpreting the phenomenon and answering our research questions.

Since we conducted interviews with respondents in four Croatian universities with diverse experiences, rich information data will allow for examining how state politics and institutional framework affects launching new curricula in Croatia. We thoroughly analysed the content of the interviews and analysed the key findings. In the light of the research questions examining relevant issues in introducing new study programmes, we aimed to discover the main problems and obstacles, as well as similarities between Croatian largest universities.

We grouped results depending on the content and the recognized codes. Based on our findings, we can highlight the most relevant issues that can help us answer the research questions.

The first problem is the lack of university autonomy in Croatia. According to the document called *University autonomy in Europe: The scorecard* that was made by the European University Association, universities in different countries have different levels of autonomy. The scorecard showed that most of the best ranked universities (according to the Shanghai rankings) have full autonomy in proposing and establishing new programmes. In Croatia, on the other hand, the Government has the control of the process of introducing new programmes through the Agency for science and higher education and the Ministry of Science, Education and Sports. This lack of autonomy presents a serious obstacle and there is a significant threat of delaying the introduction of study programmes for non-academic reasons.

Second, the decision-making processes are too complex, take too long and have a lot of groups and task forces involved. The average duration of a process of introducing a new programme on the 4 universities we analysed is more than one year. While some of the steps in the processes are important and do require long duration, there are some steps that could, and probably should, be considerably shorter. For example, University of Zagreb gives the proposed reviewers of the study programme 45 days only to decide if they would actually review the programme. Besides, there is no adequate time management during the process, something that would ensure timely action in cases of delay and exceeding the expected time limits in every step in process. We noticed that postponements often happen in all four universities.

Third, we noticed that the system of introduction of new programmes is highly bureaucratic and formalistic, with a lot of unnecessary administrative tasks and activities. The best indicator of the excessive bureaucracy of these processes is the list of forms and documents that need to be prepared by Schools and Faculties and other relevant University units. Namely, every document needs to be submitted in triplicate and in electronic form, as well. The necessary documentation consists of thousands of pages. For example, Faculty Councils need to send all the employees' contracts in triplicate regardless of the fact that those documents are already stored in the database of the Ministry. Apart from the fact that the gathering of the required documentation is extremely time consuming, it is also a very costly process.

Fourth, we noticed that the discontinuity of governance on Croatian universities is a significant problem in the analysed area. Since the university managements change every four years, some strategic plans change with them. It is a very rare practice that the former and the new university management share the same strategic objectives and policies. In the absence of a strong monitoring

body that would align strategies and enable multi-year strategic continuity, immense problems can and do occur when new programs are about to be introduced. In other words, some study programmes have been abandoned just because of the fact that new university management did not follow the same strategic thinking as the former one.

Fifth, we found that it is particularly difficult to design and introduce new interdisciplinary programs because there is a strong identity crisis of the university constituents (faculties and departments) who are not ready to overcome long standing traditional disciplines' borders and entrenched positions of academic staff.

Sixth, we must note that the introduction of new programs at universities with "federal decentralization" depends primarily on the relationship of strong constituents and establishing their collusion and coalitions. The introduction of a new curriculum component is not a clearly established strategy, but the result of socio-political relations within the university, dynamics and structure of power and / or attempts to strengthen the existing positions. Programmes are rarely an adequate response to the new market and societal needs. Furthermore, they are a reflection of one vicious, often self-sufficient educational system, in which coherent strategic thinking does not exist, but only adjustment necessary for its own survival irrespective of the quality of educational output that is delivered in the community.

In conclusion, in this study we have found that there are numerous socio-political and economic reasons for the introduction of new study programs at those universities that have federal decentralization as their fundamental organizational feature. These are, among others: (1) imitation of other universities (mimetic behaviour), (2) strengthening the position of a faculty or department in relation to other constituents of the university, (3) strengthening the position of a group of academics that its successful research activities "made right "to have the program under its control, (4) the requirements and pressures of political elites, (5) providing better access to more generous funding for constituents or groups of academics. The introduction of study programmes is usually the result of a long negotiation and compromise between a number of "ruling elites" that exist in the university constituents (deans and powerful groups of professors) and reflects the power relations in universities.

Decision-making on programmes is complex and often long lasting, usually tightly structured and often too bureaucratic to slow the initiatives and proposals that do not have agreed support. The lack of support from the "ruling elite" means the absence of any chance to launch new programs regardless of possible quality and social need for them. New programmes are rarely an adequate response to new market and societal needs.

In addition, we strongly believe that it is necessary to explore this phenomenon by analysing social networks, how they are structured and what the consequences of social networks in academic communities are. Social networks facilitate access to information, resources and opportunities (Granovetter, 1973; Burt, 2000) and members of the social network at a university are connected through different types of relations and exchanges. Besides, behaviour of academics is mostly led by socially shared interpretations of events and activities and ties between members of the informal network provide access to information in the process of discovering the meaning and interpretation of reality, particularly in uncertain circumstances in universities. This is a reason for our opinion that social network theory can provide an alternative explanation of how to introduce study programmes and how decisions are made about new programmes at universities.

5 CONCLUSION

Introducing new study programmes is a key strategic process and a potential source of competitive advantage. It demonstrates the ability of universities to adapt to rapid changes and to the needs expressed by labour markets, but also to adapt to the changed conditions that exist in the competitive relationship between all universities that aspire to reputation, adequate recognition and quality.

The process of introduction of new study programmes in Croatian universities strongly depends on too complicated institutional framework, multi-layered university procedures, complex socio-political relations and attributes of university social network. Launching new curricula is strictly regulated both by national and international legislative acts. All Croatian universities are obligated to follow the steps proscribed by European acts and Croatian laws and to adapt to European quality assurance standards and learning frameworks.

Our comparative examination of four largest Croatian universities showed that they have similar complex, lengthy and bureaucratic procedures and practices in introducing programmes. A substantial number of groups, such as faculty and university workgroups, committees and councils, government

bodies, expert reviewers and administrative staff, are involved in decision-making processes that tend to take more than a year and they are often delayed for non-academic reasons.

Furthermore, we used qualitative approach to detect key problems, difficulties and obstacles that Croatian universities face in launching new curricula. The most significant problems are the lack of university autonomy due to obstruction from government institutions; high bureaucratization and unnecessary expenses; the decision-making processes are too complex, take too long and have a lot of groups and task forces involved; and discontinuity of strategic governance at Croatian public universities. We have also found difficulties in designing and introducing new interdisciplinary programmes because of a strong identity crisis of the university constituents.

The introduction of new programmes in Croatian universities is mostly result of socio-political relations within the university, dynamics and structure of power and/or attempts to strengthen the existing positions. Launching programmes is usually the result of a long negotiation and compromise between "ruling elites" that exist in the university constituents and reflects the power relations in the universities.

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