

UNIVERSITY SELF-EVALUATION AS A PART OF INTERNATIONAL ACCREDITATION PROCESS : THE FIRST EXPERIENCE OF A MEDICAL UNIVERSITY IN BELARUS

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Abstract

International accreditation is an essential procedure in assuring high quality medical education globally. The paper presents the experience of the Grodno State Medical University in international accreditation participation. The role of international accreditation of higher medical educational institutions in the provision of global health is emphasized. Prerequisites and important aspects of the accreditation procedure are specified. Particular focus is given to the historical development of the University as an important factor in the University's present day reputation as a higher medical institution providing high-quality medical education.

Key words: international accreditation, global health, higher medical education institution, quality of medical education, institutional self-evaluation

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Introduction

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic has demonstrated the importance of high-quality medical education in today's context. Global health issues unite countries: populations, healthcare systems, as well as medical education systems in achieving one common goal: to protect people's health. A modern medical university is not only involved in training specialists for its own country, but ensuring the protection of global health, meeting social needs and meeting the expectations of communities, and it is also meant to develop continuously and harmoniously to ensure high quality performance as well [1-3].

The export of educational services is one of the development priorities of higher medical education in Belarus. Nevertheless, to date, there are no accredited World Federation for Medical Education (WFME) and Association of Medical Schools in Europe (AMSE) accreditation agencies in the Republic. In addition, up to the year 2021 there has not been any experience of Belarusian medical universities in international accreditation by international agencies. The Grodno State Medical University (GrSMU) has become the first medical university in the Republic of Belarus to enter the process of international accreditation.

The purpose of the present paper is to share the experience of the Grodno State Medical University as the first

higher medical educational institution to have entered the process of international accreditation.

Results and Discussion

Grodno State Medical University is a state-owned institution of higher education which provides undergraduate and postgraduate educational programs, including educational programs for top-quality academic researchers, programs for additional education of adults, pre-university programs (Preparatory Department) and programs of clinical residency.

Grodno Medical Institute was founded on August 9, 1958. The first enrolment of students included only 250 people. Initially, the Institute did not possess any proper facilities and was housed in several buildings customized for educational purposes. Within the first academic semester, only 7 associate professors and candidates of sciences provided educational courses at 9 newly opened departments, the total number of employees not exceeding 30 people. In 1964, the first graduation of 248 physicians took place, of which 22 were awarded diplomas with honours.

At present, GrSMU has 6 academic buildings, a Professorial Advisory Centre, and a University Clinic. The University ensures successful functioning of 15 academic research schools, 3 Doctoral and Post doctoral Dissertation Defence Boards.

The total number of employees as of 01.01.2021 is 1258. Educational and methodological work at 44 Departments of GrSMU employs 551 academic staff members, including 511 regular lecturers. The percentage of full-time faculty with academic degrees is 52.1%, of them 1 is a Corresponding Member of the National Academy of Sciences of the Republic of Belarus, 42 doctors and 224 candidates of sciences.

GrSMU has signed 86 international agreements of cooperation with universities and research organizations from 20 countries. Up to 9 agreements on international cooperation are concluded annually.

Brief historical preamble

The analysis of GrSMU's history shows that several factors contributed to the University's being the first among the Belarusian medical universities to have entered the process of international accreditation.

First, certain historical foundations are noteworthy: it was the Grodno State Medical University that became the historical follower of the first higher medical educational institution on the territory of modern Belarus. In 1776, Grodno Headman Antoni Tyzenhaus, powered by King Stanisław August Poniatowski, founded the Grodno Medical Academy, which had existed for 6 years. A purposefully invited French scientist, Jean-Emmanuel Gilibert, became the Head of the Academy which was the first higher educational institution on the territory of Belarus. For the first time in the history of medicine, the principles of state medical education were established in the area: it was envisaged that the training of medical professionals would be publicly-funded with further graduate placement. To provide medical education, professors from European universities were invited (for example, Professor of Anatomy I. I. Virion from the University of Strasbourg). The agreement with J.E. Gilibert provided that, in addition to teaching and research activities, he would contribute to the improvement of health services for the population, which was progressive for Europe in the eighteenth century, where higher medical educational institutions were engaged only in training medical personnel. The Bronifratrs' Hospital (Szpital Bonifratrów) (1728) which provided assistance to those in need was designed for 60 beds, at the same time it served as a "clinical base" for students of the Grodno Medical Academy. In contrast to similar hospitals in Europe, the patients were assured separate beds, and were treated in ventilated rooms.

In the same period, a Midwife Department for training midwives was opened and operated at the Grodno Medical Academy. The Academy was the first in the region to possess special buildings for accommodation and classes, an anatomical theatre and museum, a museum of natural history, a scientific library, and a botanical garden. In connection with the resignation of A. Tyzenhaus from all positions six years later, the Academy was transferred to

Vilnius and transformed into the Faculty of Medicine of Vilnius University [4].

Second, it was in the Grodno State Medical University where the first University Clinic was founded in Belarus [5].

Third, GrSMU is a member of the Association for Medical Education in Europe. It is a permanent member of the Euro regional Medical Research and Education Centre "Euro region Neman" and has the expert status in the field of education and science. GrSMU is an accredited member of the international program "Global World Communicator". In 2019, the University was admitted to the Association "Council of Rectors of Medical and Pharmaceutical Higher Educational Institutions". GrSMU is represented in world ranking systems: Webometrics Ranking of World Universities, UniRank, ARES, Times Higher Education, U-Multirank. In recent years, the University has three times become a prize winner of Belarus government in the field of quality assurance (2011, 2016 and 2019), a laureate of the Commonwealth of Independent States Prize (2017), a winner of the competition "Best Exporter of 2019" in the nomination "Education", a laureate of the international competition "Leader of the Year 2019" in the category "Educational services" and has been awarded the Grand Prix "Leader of the Year 2020" in the category "Services in the field of education".

And, finally, Grodno State Medical University was the first among the medical universities in Belarus whose project submission to "Erasmus + KA2 – Cooperation for innovation and the exchange of good practices. Capacity Building in the field of Higher Education" was approved by the European Commission. Aligned with this the University started the implementation of the project «SETTING PEER REVIEW INSTRUMENTS AND GOALS FOR MEDICAL (HEALTH) EDUCATION / SPRING» (Agreement No. 2019 – 1937/001–001, project No. 609528–EPP–1–2019–1–GE–EPPKA2–CBHE–JP). The project implementation period 2020–2023 includes applicant institutions being: BAU International University Batumi LTD (Batumi, Georgia), Project coordinator – Professor Levan Metreveli, MD, PhD, MPH, Professor of Public Health, Department of Basic Sciences, Faculty of Medicine BAU International University Batumi); co-beneficiary institutions: Tbilisi State Medical University (Tbilisi, Georgia), Petre Shotadze Tbilisi Medical Academy LLC (Tbilisi, Georgia), Georgian National University SEU (Tbilisi, Georgia), Nicolae Testeitanu State University of Medicine and Pharmacy of the Republic of Moldova (Chisinau, Moldova), Technical University of Moldova (Chisinau, Moldova), International Sakharov Environmental Institute of Belarusian State University (Minsk, Belarus), Grodno State Medical University (Grodno, Belarus), Project coordinator in the co-beneficiary institution – Surmach Marina Yurievna, Doctor of Medical Sciences, Asso-

ciate Professor, Head of the Department of Public Health and Health Service), Asfendiyarov Kazakh National Medical University non-commercial joint stock company (Almaty, Kazakhstan), Karaganda State Medical University (Karaganda, Kazakhstan), The State Higher Educational Institution Avicenna Tajik State Medical University (Dushanbe, Tajikistan), The State Higher Educational Institution Khatlon State Medical University (Danghara, Tajikistan), Medical University Sofia (Sofia, Bulgaria), and Lithuanian University of Health Sciences (Kaunas, Lithuania).

The project is directly related to training the University staff in international accreditation procedures. The aim of the project is to enhance the quality of medical education in the partner countries and contribute to the onset of changes of the same character in the rest of former Soviet countries. Through various activities on capacity building, peer reviewing, exchanging experience, creating the foundation for sustainable development and further dissemination of final results of the project, the consortium of 14 higher educational institutions from 7 countries intends to achieve the following results:

- raising awareness on peer review process as an effective instrument for substantiating ongoing improvements in academic and administrative domains of medical schools in targeted partner countries and beyond;
- establishing a multinational peer review board (MPRB);
- establishing and building consistency for a continuous peer-review process of academic programs and processes and administrative policies, procedures and actions across the targeted partner countries and beyond;
- capacity building of faculty members and administrative staff;
- establishing an annual scientific-practical journal of "Peer Review in Medical/Health Education for Eastern Europe and Central Asia (PRIMED-EECA)";
- enhancing internationalization of higher educational institutions in partner countries;
- disseminating information on project achievements and other final products to participating institutions in program and partner countries.

The project will ensure the sustainability of the achieved results and their application in the very near future through the establishment of the above mentioned journal and independent cross-national "Peer Review Association for Medical/Health Education of Eastern Europe and Central Asia – PRIMED-EECA)" aimed at providing the group of

highly qualified reviewers; assisting medical education institutions of the targeted regions in the effective preparation for international accreditation.

Institutional self-evaluation of the University performance as the first stage of the first in the history of Belarusian international accreditation of higher medical education: 2021

In February 2021 GrSMU entered the international accreditation procedure, the purpose of which is to establish the compliance of its activities with international standards.

The accreditation is performed by the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating abroad (based on WFME and AMSE standards) to ensure high quality University activities and educational programs it offers, as well as advanced training of its graduates. To prepare a self-evaluation report, a working group was created by the Rector's order dated 22.01.2021 No. 35 "On the composition of a working group for international accreditation." The institutional self-evaluation procedure was carried out from 28.01.2021 to 25.03.2021.

Within the period of self-evaluation report preparation, the working group collected and analysed relevant evidence characterizing overall activities of GrSMU over the past five years (2016–2020). Self-evaluation of educational programs, academic staff, educational resources, material and technical facilities, and the quality of student training made it possible to draw a conclusion on the demonstrable dynamics of GrSMU's development and positive achievements in all types of activities.

The members of the working group implementing ERASMUS + SPRING project were the members of the team involved in GrSMU's international accreditation procedure. Self-evaluation report of ERASMUS + SPRING project has been prepared based on the materials prepared during the institutional self-evaluation.

It should be noted that despite some differences in approaches to the preparation of a self-evaluation report between the requirements of Quality Assurance Standards for peer review of higher educational institutions, 2020 Erasmus+ SPRING, which were developed by Multinational Peer Review Board of the Project (fig. 1), and the Independent Agency for Accreditation and Rating abroad, both were based on WFME and AMSE standards.

STANDARD 1	• VISION, MISSION AND STRATEGIC OBJECTIVES
STANDARD 2	• GOVERNANCE AND MANAGEMENT
STANDARD 3	• HUMAN RESOURCES
STANDARD 4	• FINANCIAL RESOURCES MANAGEMENT
STANDARD 5	• INFRASTRUCTURE AND FACILITIES
STANDARD 6	• STUDENT RECRUITMENT, ADMISSION, CERTIFICATION, AND SUPPORT SERVICES
STANDARD 7	• EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMME
STANDARD 8	• RESEARCH AND INNOVATION
STANDARD 9	• COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT
STANDARD 10	• INFORMATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEM
STANDARD 11	• PUBLIC COMMUNICATION
STANDARD 12	• COLLABORATION, STAFF AND STUDENT MOBILITY

Fig. 1: Quality Assurance Standards for peer review of higher educational institutions, 2020 Erasmus+ SPRING

The volume of both documents was about 70 pages of text (typed in Times New Roman font 12.0, spacing 1.15).

The following information was analysed:

- Development of strategic documents (Vision, Mission and Strategic Objectives), enforcement and monitoring, institutional autonomy and academic freedom;
- Governance and Management: Leadership, Management culture and quality, Relevance of governance and management bodies, Quality assurance policy and structure, Communication system, Dissemination of activities, Delegation of authority, Student bodies, Interaction with public health sector and stakeholders, Ethical principles, How higher educational institution developed and implemented effective processes for deterring, detecting and dealing with misconduct by students or staff, and Complaints;
- Human Resources: Selection and recruitment policy, Staff numbers and qualifications, Contractual agreements, Staff development and support facilities, Periodic monitoring, evaluation and Appraisal of staff;
- Financial Resources Management: Financial sustainability of GrSMU, Diversified financial and sustainable resource base, Financial management system, as well as Financial monitoring, evaluation and benchmarking;
- Infrastructure and Facilities: Classrooms and academic buildings, University library, Information technologies, and Ensuring safety and health;
- Student Recruitment, Admission, Certification, and Support Services: Admission and selection policy, Enrolment of students, Consultation and support of students, Students' representation in University management, Assessment methods of students' learning out-

comes, Data documentation on learning outcomes assessment, as well as Provision for information to potential and real students;

- Educational Program: Educational program objectives, learning outcomes and their compliance with the program, Program structure, teaching methodology and organization, adequate evaluation of program mastering, Student achievements and individual work with them, Providing teaching resources, as well as Teaching quality enhancement opportunities;
- Research and Innovation: Understanding of the nature, role and goals of research, Standards, procedures and processes for the approval of research proposals, and theses, and the conduct and supervision of research studies, as well as Policies, research management systems and strategies, adequate infrastructure and resources that facilitate all staff to undertake innovative research, and publish research results. The research undertaken is relevant and responsive to the needs for academic advancement and community development expectations, The research undertaken is relevant and responsive to the needs for academic advancement and community development expectations, as well as Monitoring and evaluation of the research system;
- Community Engagement: The community engagement activities are conducted within institutional policies and strategies that facilitate collaboration between the institution and its larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity, and The institution incorporates community engagement in its activities;
- Information Management System: Key performance indicators, Profile of student population, Learning resources and available student services, Student progression, drop-out rates, and graduation rates, Satisfaction of students and alumni with programs and teaching provided, and Career paths for students;
- Public Communication: The University publishes information about its activities, including programs, in a clear, accurate and objective manner; and ensures that the information is up-to-date and accessible, The institution shall ensure that promotion of its programs is carried out in a fair and ethical manner, following acceptable best practices, and complying with all relevant legislation;
- Collaboration, Staff and Student Mobility: The institution has policies that promote the mobility of academic staff, researchers and students in the program, internationally; HEI ensures that students benefit from the same standard of resources as those for

the regular students of the awarding institution; HEI ensures that the collaborating institutions are approved by the relevant QAA/ professional body and are subject to periodic quality audits; HEI ensures that students are fully informed of the nature of the collaboration between the institutions concerned;

- Conclusion.

The process of self-evaluation took about two months of active and hard work on a comprehensive self-analysis of the University's activities, followed by the translation into English, the development of an appropriate glossary and a base of supporting evidence.

Results of the first experience of self-evaluation procedure under international accreditation

It was revealed that GrSMU performs its activities in accordance with the University Statute, which states the Mission, Vision, strategic orientation, and goals reflecting the place and role of the University in the socio-economic, strategic, scientific and cultural development of Belarus. The chosen policy and development priorities enabled GrSMU to take a leading place in the field of higher education in Belarus and successfully achieve the main goals, and implement training professionals for the healthcare system. The organizational, functional and staff structure complies with the Mission, Goals and Objectives of GrSMU. The organizational and management structure is built in accordance with modern guidelines and rules of effective management.

The content of educational programs of the compulsory component corresponds to modern medical education, and elective courses reflect the innovations and requirements of employers. The University controls educational programs mastering quality according to the established criteria and ensures constant monitoring and improvement of the educational services provided. Particular focus is given to the practical component in the educational process, the acquisition of clinical competencies by students. For this purpose, a University Clinic was founded in GrSMU, the work of which is aimed at strengthening the practice-oriented teaching of students, the development of simulation technologies and the employment of objective structured clinical examination.

The University creates the conditions necessary for students' effective mastering educational programs aligned with their interests and needs, providing this activity with appropriate resources (library, consulting, and information). The University has organized student support service and provides diverse opportunities for personal growth and development of the youth.

The high level of academic staff contributes to the development of sufficient knowledge of graduates and professional training skills required in the labour market.

Research shows dynamic development, in line with high scientific qualifications, experience of teachers and corresponds to the material and technical facilities at GrSMU. The University conducts purposeful work to develop international cooperation and academic mobility. Particular attention is given to academic exchange programs, and the development of full-fledged scientific collaboration. The University has developed an effective financial management. Over the past five years, there has been a stable level of employee income.

Thus, the main activity of GrSMU reflects the constant positive dynamics of growth in quantitative and qualitative indicators: the availability of qualified human resources, high-quality Educational Programs, and internationalization of education, which directly affects its reputation in the national and international markets. Constantly updating and improving all processes in accordance with the achievements of medical science and practice, the University effectively implements the adopted strategic objectives.

It should be noted that, in contrast to the standard procedures of state domestic accreditation, international accreditation revealed new areas of University activities to be included in the analysis during the institutional self-evaluation, such as Community Engagement; Information Management System; and Public Communication. Despite the fact that all these areas in one way or another were being developed at the University in accordance with the requirements of the time and globalization, the process of self-evaluation from the perspective of WFME and AMSE standards made it possible to outline them more clearly as independent and important priorities of medical university performance.

Self-evaluation revealed ***the strengths and weaknesses*** in the implementation of the goals and objectives defined by the Mission and Strategic Development Program, evolution and progress made, strategies and activities for improvement. For instance, it was highlighted, that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the possibility of a remote form of organizing the educational process was ensured and the system of advanced training of employees was implemented, GrSMU developed the new distance forms of learning and certification ensuring the quality of educational process in context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic, the professional development of the staff has been maintained.

Nevertheless, it was revealed that community engagement and sponsoring the financial sustainability of GrSMU are limited, additional sources of funding for scientific research are required. In addition, limited facilities for persons with disabilities have to be addressed as well.

GrSMU provides monitoring and continuous management improvement of Educational Programs objectives, learning outcomes and their compliance with the program,

new educational standards are constantly being developed and introduced, and integrated into the European educational space. Therefore, there is a need to proceed with the integration of Educational Programs into the European educational space. It is necessary to increase the coverage of students and teaching staff with international programs, to facilitate the mobility of students and staff, as well as to develop measurable and clear key performance indicators, unified approaches to the analysis of the profile of student population, and the career paths for students information system.

The self-evaluation procedure united the team, enabled the assessment of actual achievements, determined the focus of improvement activities, brought all initiatives together, supported internal and external exchange of positive experience, and increased responsibility for the results and outcomes of accreditation.

Conclusions

The history of the development of higher medical education in the territory of Belarus, the history of GrSMU, the present day status of the University show the prerequisites for the fact that this University became the first among the medical universities in Belarus to enter the process of international accreditation. An important stage in the accreditation procedure was the stage of institutional self-evaluation. This stage highlighted the strengths of the University's activities, identified positions that need to be strengthened and improved, and also gave unexpected results, allowing the identification of areas of University performance that did not have a significant status as independent until the moment of accreditation.

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