ABSTRACT

The chapter explores the role of the accreditation process in introducing innovations into higher education. The chapter starts with the assumption that the accreditation process can have a positive role in introducing innovations into higher education. This is if the standards bring novelties into the structure and function of higher education and if these organizations accept and implement the said standards in the long-run. The research was conducted through the case study of the first accreditation in higher education in Serbia. The institutional theory was used as theoretical framework of the analysis since the accreditation is observed as the process of institutionalization of a specific higher education model. The research has shown that accreditation had a limited impact on innovations in higher education in Serbia. The most common reaction of higher education institutions in Serbia to accreditation standards was their modified and partial implementation.

INTRODUCTION

Higher education has a deep social impact and importance. Consequently, it is often a subject of interest not only for the public policy creators, but also for the academic researchers. Innovations in the field of higher education are especially important since they revitalize this sector of society and enable it to constantly give a great contribution to social and economic development (Getz, Siegfried, & Anderson, 1997; Curry, 1992; Van Vught, 1989). However, initiating, directing, and realization of innovations in the higher education sector are very challenging because the higher education organizations – the ones that should be the realizers of innovations – are very often conservative and show difficulties in accepting
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and implementing the changes (Schneckenberg, 2009; Elton, 2003; Berg & Ostergren, 1977). Hence, it is not surprising that a large amount of research is dedicated precisely to the subject of inciting innovations in higher education. One of the processes that could have a positive catalyzing effect on initiating, accepting, and spreading of innovations in higher education is accreditation (Casile & Davis-Blake, 2002). Through accreditation, certain standards of structure and functioning are imposed on higher education organizations which could be used to introduce innovations into higher education. This role of the accreditation process is precisely the object of research in this paper.

In this paper, the innovations are treated as a separate type of changes, since every innovation is change, but not every change is innovation. Innovation is, indeed, the change that brings an important novelty into the processes or products of an organization. Any type of changes in an organization, even the innovative ones, may come from two sources: the external environment and the organization itself. For a long time, there has been a consensus in the literature that, observed by their cause or source, there are two main types of changes: external and internal (Porras & Robertson, 1987). Internal changes, or organizational development, occur due to the changes within the organization itself. The source of changes in this case is the development of competencies of the organization itself, in particular through the use of knowledge, ideas, or potential of the employees. In such changes, the management has a high degree of discretion, since they can use, but also ignore the internal causes of changes. On the other hand, external changes, or organizational adaptation, occur due to changes in the environment to which the organization must adapt. External changes may be initiated by the changes in market, economic, legal-institutional, or demographic environment. In such changes, the organization management does not have much room for discretion, and must change the organization and introduce novelties in it in order to adapt to and survive in the environment.

One of the important and common external sources of changes, and even innovations, in organization is the legal-institutional environment. The alterations of laws, standards, norms, and other regulations that govern organizations’ functioning almost inevitably cause changes in organizations themselves, and they must adapt to these changes that are supported by some authority (executive government, professional associations, and the like). If changes originating from the legal-institutional environment bring a certain degree of novelties and discontinuity into the structure or functioning of organization, then they may initiate innovations within the organizations. The accreditation process in higher education is precisely the process in which the legal-institutional environment of higher education institutions is being changed. If these changes are innovative and if the higher education institutions accept and implement them, the accreditation process will be the source of innovations in higher education.

The aim of this paper is to determine the potential that the accreditation process in higher education has for introducing innovations into it. The paper aims at answering one main question: Under what circumstances and in which way can the accreditation process initiate and lead to innovations in higher education? While answering this question, the author started from the assumption that it is possible to achieve innovations, but under two conditions. The first condition is that standards of accreditation have to be such to impose a model of higher education that is innovative and substantially different from the existing one. If accreditation is carried out according to the standards that do not essentially differ from the existing practices found at universities, they will meet those standards without having to introduce innovations in those practices. The second condition is that universities must apply accreditation standards, and continue to do so over a sufficiently long period. The initial question of this research is therefore transformed into the following: Does accreditation bring a new model of higher education and do universities implement the accreditation standards?