

The Sixth *QHE* Seminar

The End of Quality?

Birmingham, 25–26 May, 2001

The quality issue: challenges and responses in Hungary

Christina Rozsnyai

Hungarian Accreditation Committee

Abstract

Hungary opted to use accreditation as its tool for quality assurance in higher education. The author explores the implications of this approach and argues that, while almost all countries in Central and Eastern Europe conduct accreditation rather than quality evaluation alone, the regional and even country-by-country differences behind the term are considerable. After a brief history of, and foreseen future developments in, quality assurance in Hungary, the author concludes that quality, both as pertaining to that of higher education and the profession of quality assurance, will continue to exist, but is not a static concept.

Introduction

... the quality of the university is similarly to love: intangible, but existent; perceptible, but not quantifiable, ephemeral, so that one has to endeavour to it. (Müller-Böling, D., quoted in Kappler *et al.*, 2000, p. 180)

And another take on quality that is more relevant in our particular framework:

In universities this context [i.e. which defines quality] is even more complicated, because it is coupled to diverse environments (society, political system, culture, education system), and these environments do not have criteria that can be fixed

and measured as well because they themselves are complex systems. It is therefore a 'natural' phenomenon that in university practice, quality is continuously new, continuously different and continuously rediscovered with continuously changing goals. (Hungarian Government, 2000).

I like the two quotes because, while quality defies definition, as the participants to this conference know all too well, the two approaches together express that quality is a given and not contingent on the quality assurance profession. 'The End of Quality?', the question that sets the theme of the conference, carries the double meaning of quality as pertaining to the object of our profession, the higher education institution, and its subject, quality assurance.

I realise that the statement 'quality is a given' is open to debate, and will in fact be debated in Birmingham and beyond. In my view, the statement holds, however, and it is only its various aspects that can be questioned or qualified. The subject of my paper focuses on quality assurance, however (which presupposes that there is something that is to be assured), mostly in relation to the Hungarian experience.

Background

The Hungarian Accreditation Committee was established with Hungary's first Higher Education Act in 1993. The several-times amended act (Hungarian Government, 2000) establishes the fundamental charge of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) to be the assessment and accreditation of the quality of higher education in Hungary. Among its specific tasks is to: 'accredit regularly, at least every eight years, ... the quality of education and scientific activity in higher education'. After reviewing the quality assurance practices in Europe and the United States the Hungarian Accreditation Committee, at the outset, opted for an uncommon approach: to conduct institutional accreditation via programme evaluation.

Policymakers, in consultation with many higher education experts and practitioners, had already determined that at this point in the country's history, accreditation (the approval of an institution or programme based on quality criteria, the lack of which could result in the institution's or programme's termination) was to be the best approach. With accreditation as its designated output, however, HAC believed that the evaluation of the quality of teaching and research was an indispensable tool. Moreover, HAC believed that the quality of the degree issued would reflect the quality of teaching and research and thus the entire institution.

It must be noted that institutional management was not what it is in Western Europe or North America. University leaders on all levels were chosen primarily for their acknowledged academic standing and there was very little room for financial maneuvers. Government support for higher education was 1.3% of GDP in 1994,

while by 1997 it had decreased to 0.96%, (Bazsa *et al.*, 1998, p. 39) and remained there in 1998 (HCSO, 1999).

After an initial pilot year, HAC considerably revised its original *Accreditation Guidebook*. The guides outlined the processes and procedures for institutional accreditation, the standards and guidelines for evaluation, and, in separate chapters, the aspects of teaching, learning and research that an institution's self-evaluation should include, and which would be evaluated by a visiting team.

Every degree programme offered by the institution was evaluated, and a positive evaluation of a sufficient number of programmes resulted in the accreditation of the institution. The institution's mission statement, governance and management, infrastructure and student facilities and services were also checked but the main criterion was the quality of the degree programmes. The published accreditation report thus dealt with a general overview of the institution's strengths and weaknesses, followed by an evaluation of all programmes. Here the options were to evaluate a programme positively, to withdraw its right to issue degrees (imposed very rarely), or to prescribe a monitoring evaluation with specific conditions to be met by a given date (quite often). Legally, HAC has the right to make recommendations regarding quality in higher education institutions, and the Minister of Education makes the final decision. However, s/he must, by law, publish the reasons for a dissenting decision. (Hungarian Government, 2000, p. 3977).

By June 2000, all higher education institutions in Hungary completed their first accreditation procedure.

Accreditation

To opt for accreditation versus the mere assessment of quality was the decision of policymakers in all Central and Eastern European countries that implemented higher education quality assurance schemes in the 1990s (with the exception of Lithuania, and the very recent systems in Poland and Slovenia) (RSCEE, 2000). The choice may be explained by several factors. Before 1990, higher education was still an 'elite' sector with rigid entrance requirements and in many places semi-autonomous faculties. Everyone knew the 'rank' of a college or university and external judgement of quality was unknown. In the early 1990s, however, these countries opened their windows to the 'West'. Student numbers increased, ever stricter and in real terms sharply decreasing financing, new rules of survival in the institutional hierarchy, a brain-drain, and new private institutions appeared. All these factors posed a threat to the quality of teaching, which, until then, had been an internationally acknowledged asset for many of these countries.

It has been argued (Tomusk, 2000) that in Central and Eastern Europe accreditation was simply an extension of government control in societies that were traditionally dictatorial. The argument fails to take into consideration that these countries' history is in no way identical, some having existed under Soviet dominance for only half a

human life-time; and in fact the concept of ‘accreditation’ is not at all homogeneous with respect to Central and Eastern Europe either. Conversely, more to the west, Austria and Germany are implementing the accreditation of new institutions (*Fachhochschulen*) and new bachelor’s and master’s programmes, and the Netherlands is working out its own system. To my mind, the focus on accreditation in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1990s has a different explanation. Higher education had to be reassessed as a whole, and in one short span within these countries’ histories. Choices had to be made about its future structure, without letting go of the values attained, and time was a factor, since the gate to unlimited possibilities was open but would remain so only for a brief time. Organic development was not an option.

In Hungary, accreditation was to determine whether a higher education institution was indeed ‘fit for the purpose’ of providing good education and, in case of universities, research. While the licensing function was there, HAC focused almost entirely on a college’s or university’s quality improvement, and on retaining the positive values in the Hungarian higher education system as much as possible. The Committee gave less than full-cycle accreditation with required measures to be met by a stated deadline where an institution or programme fell short of the quality threshold the Committee required. (All but one of the 89 universities and colleges were accredited, as were roughly 70% of all degree programmes.) Therefore, I would argue that accreditation and quality improvement are not mutually exclusive, as is often alleged. To evaluate a country’s quality assurance system requires it to be analysed within the given and broadest possible context, including the historical and cultural setting in which it functions and which it serves.

Conclusion

Has external quality review had its day in Hungary? In a few years, in its present form, possibly. With the introduction of internal quality assurance systems at higher education institutions beginning in 2000, the Hungarian Accreditation Committee will lean more and more on the universities’ and colleges’ own quality assurance. The idea is, to quote Mantz Yorke (1999, p. 19), that ‘Once the threshold is surpassed, then the institution concerned could be subjected to a ‘lighter’ form of scrutiny’. The intention in Hungary is to shift to a ‘meta-evaluation’ of quality assurance mechanisms at higher education institutions gradually over the next eight-year cycle.

Major challenges facing higher education in Hungary include the introduction of the credit system in 2002; the introduction of a two-tier system of study called for in the ‘Bologna Declaration’ (EME, 1999) to replace (or accompany?) the present dual university/college system; the expansion to include 50% of the age cohort in higher education by 2010; the growing number of distance education programmes and multidisciplinary programmes. These are challenges to be met, but also opportunities for improvement.

The fact that the quality of higher education is called into question is not saying that quality in higher education has reached its end. Quality is self-propelling, driven by market demands, ‘consumer’ demands (in this case students who, of course, are also ‘stakeholders’ and ‘actors’ in higher education), and all the players in the input, process and output of higher education institutions. The face of higher education changes to suit its times. If it is not ‘fit for its purpose’ it will peter out and something else will take its place.

Quality assurance has made its way into the centuries-old history of the university. It can be sustained only if it changes with the times, if it is open to changes going on in higher education and holds out an added value for higher education institutions. Accreditation in the sense that it is no more than a tool for control is not viable. It is an option as a tool for quality assurance to serve the widest range of actors and stakeholders and ultimately society at large.

References

- Bazsa, G., Frenyó, L.V., Róna-Tas, A. and Roóz, J., 1998, *A magyar felsőoktatás 2010. Jövőkép, kihívások és válaszok* (Hungarian Higher Education 2010. A Vision of the Future, Challenges and Answers) (Budapest, The Hungarian Accreditation Committee).
- Regional Subnetwork for Central and Eastern Europe (RSCEE), 2000, Questionnaires supplied by members of the Regional Subnetwork for Central and Eastern Europe of the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education, founded in Budapest in November 2000, www.mab.hu/cee.
- European Ministers of Education (EME), 1999, *The European Higher Education Area*. Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on the 19th of June 1999.
- Hungarian Central Statistics Office (HCSO), 1999, *Statistical Yearbook of Hungary* (Budapest, HCSO).
- Hungarian Government (2000), Act LXXX of 1993 on Higher Education (as amended in Act XCVII/2000). In Hungarian: 2000. évi XCVII. törvény a felsőoktatásról szóló 1993. évi LXXX. törvény és a közoktatásról szóló 1993. évi LXXIX. törvény módosításáról (Act XCVII/2000, Amendment to the Higher Education Act LXXX/1993 and Public Education Act LXXIX/1993). In: *Magyar Közlöny* No. 2000/65. p. 3978.
- Kappler, E., Laske, S. & Meister-Scheytt, C., 2000, ‘Qualities of quality in universities’, in: *Quality Management, Quality Evaluation, Quality Assurance*. The First QUEST TEMPUS Conference, Patras, 9–11 March 2000.
- Tomusk, V., 2000, ‘When East meets West: decontextualizing the quality of East European higher education’, *Quality in Higher Education*, 6(3), pp. 176–85.
- Yorke, M., ‘Assuring quality and standards in globalised higher education’ 1999, *Quality Assurance in Education*. 7(1), pp. 19.