

# Conflicts of interests in QA – input and/or output based accreditation process?

Prof. Dr. László Dinya

## 1. Introduction

The Bologna-process gives a very high priority to the quality assurance of HE – but it stimulates also the debates about the content of the term “quality”, and about the standards, methods and procedures of “assurance” in each attached countries. Sometimes these debates are going around the classical terms – but more and more about what do they mean from the point of views of knowledge market, labour market, competition and consumers need. During the long and exciting debates of the Hungarian HE reform – and being the leader of the group of experts elaborating the reform concept I can summarise some consequences of these debates focusing on the changing concept of the quality assurance. I hope that will provoke opinions, new thoughts, even new ideas. and this is the real purpose of a workshop.

## 2. Changes – challenges

(“There is no medium term: either we look for the best, or we live with the worst” John Gardner)

The HE is facing a wide range of changes – which are already well-known for everybody who are involved more or less into the affairs of HE. That’s why I don’t want go into details speaking about changes – and as their consequences are: about their challenges. I will just deal with three elements being closer to the knowledge market, and competition: **changes in training needs, new forms of competition, new configurations and modes of operation for HEI-s.** All of them have a very meaningful influence to the future and development of quality assurance in the HE.

### • Radical changes in training needs:

- we live in knowledge-driven economies:
  - f.e. highly skilled white-collar employees account for 25-35% of the labour force (average of OECD-countries)
  - shortening the “shelf-life” of knowledge – growing importance of continuing education – “just-in-time teaching” (f.e. Finland: they have more adults engaged in continuing education programs – 200 000 – than young people enrolled in regular HE degree courses – 150 000!)
- target groups of HE are more and more diversifying: working students, mature students, stay-at-home students, travelling students, part-time students, day students, night students, weekend students, etc.
- very soon we will face an inverted pyramid of demographic shape in the HE: a minority of first-time students, more students for second/third degree, a majority of students enrolled in short term continuing education programs
- if we approach the HE from the student’s perspective: there is a strong incentive to mix study program options/qualifications - beyond traditional institutional boundaries, learners attend several institutions/programs in parallel or sequentially
- there is a growing importance of methodological knowledge/skills – the ability to learn: how to find, access, apply knowledge to problem solving
- there is also a growing needs for new competencies: working in teams, peer teaching, creativity, ability to adjust to changes – these are the highest priorities in the knowledge economy

- we face a growing attractiveness of degrees and credentials with international recognition:
  - online HEI-s have been formally accredited by the same agencies that accredit traditional HEI-s too
  - franchise institutions of well-known HEI-s operating in different countries offering "validated courses" – f.e. 16 000 of the 80 000 foreign students enrolled in Australian HEI-s are studying at offshore campuses – mainly in Malaysia, Singapore
  - f.e. in Germany (having a predominantly public HE) a number of private business schools have been recently established – either as independent institutions or subsidiaries of existing public HEI-s.

- **New forms of competition:**

- the decreased importance of physical distance means that the best HEI-s of any country can decide to open a branch anywhere in the world or to reach out across borders using the Internet – effectively competing with any national HEI-s on its territory (f.e. 33 states in the US have statewide virtual university, and 85% of the community colleges are offering distance education courses in 2002.)
- corporate HEI-s are another form of competition with traditional HE. (Estimation: about 1600 institutions in the world functioning today as corporate HEI – like IBM, or Motorola University). They operate in three modalities:
  - with their own network (Motorola: managing 99 learning sites in 21 countries, having a yearly budget of 120 million dollars)
  - as a virtual HEI (IBM: employing 3400 professionals in 55 countries and offering more than 10 000 courses online)
  - through an alliance with existing HEI-s (Bell Atlantic)

Experts are predicting that by the year 2010, there will be more corporate HEI-s than traditional campus-based universities in the world – and increasing proportion of them will be serving smaller companies rather than corporate giants.

- the third form of unconventional competition comes from the new "academic brokers": they are virtual entrepreneurs who specialize in bringing together suppliers and consumers of educational services. Examples:
  - companies build, lease and manage campuses, produce multimedia educational software – to serve the training needs of corporate clients worldwide
  - web sites act as clearing houses between schools and prospective students

**New forms of competition is likely to change the nature of QA bodies, mechanisms and criteria:**

- the philosophy, principles and standards routinely applied to evaluate or accredit campus-based programs can be used without significant changes – to assess the quality and effectiveness of online courses and other modalities of distance education
- appropriate and reliable accreditation and evaluation processes are needed to reassure the public that the courses, programs, degrees offered by non-traditional HEI-s meet acceptable academic and professional standards

- less emphasis is likely to be given to traditional input dimensions (such as qualifications of individual faculty and student selection criteria) and more on the capabilities of graduates
- such a shift would reflect the results of effective team-work among designers of pedagogical support materials, mentors of students, evaluators of learning outcomes
- at the national level HE authorities are increasingly challenged by the availability of foreign programs through distance education, franchise institutions and online courses. Today very few national agencies or bodies have access to the necessary information on these foreign programs or enjoy the institutional monitoring capacity to be able to detect fraud and protect their students from low quality offerings.

- **New configurations and modes of operation for HEI-s:**

- there is a drastic transformation in governance, organisational structure and modes of operation because of:
  - the new demand for ability to organise traditional disciplines differently (taking into account the emergence of new scientific and technological fields) – training and research for these fields require the integration of a number of disciplines which have not necessarily been in close contact previously: resulting multidisciplinary programs cutting across institutional barriers
  - the new pattern of knowledge creation do not imply only a reconfiguration of departments into different institutional map but more important the reorganisation of research and training around the search for solution to complex problems – having a view of synthesis instead of analytical approach
  - realigning HEI-s on this basis does not imply only changes in program and curriculum design, but also significant modification in the planning and organisation of the structure, infrastructure and quality assurance too.
  - the use of modern technology is revolutionize the way teaching and learning – frontal teaching can be replaced by or associated with asynchronous teaching in the form of online classes that can be either scheduled or self-paced. Teachers can move away from their traditional role as one-way instructor towards becoming facilitators of learning.
  - quality online education is best achieved with relatively small class-size not to exceed 30 students – but we have to combine online and regular classroom courses to give students more opportunity for human interaction, debate, discussions and consensus building – to learn to think critically and interact socially in preparation for professional life.
- the information and communication revolution also has far-reaching implications for how HEI-s are organised and deliver services:
  - already in the US new HEI-s are designed and constructed without a library building because all students are expected to use computers to access online digital libraries and data bases.
  - the mushrooming of online education programs and web-based courses raises challenging issues of intellectual property rights – with respect to ownership and control of education materials.

- several economic factors weigh heavily in widespread adoption of electronic modes of organisation and delivery of tertiary education services – to find more cost-effective alternatives to traditional models of HE (f.e. the cost of producing a graduate from the UK Open University is about one-third that at a regular university).
- to be able to adapt to this changing environment flexibility is very important:
  - increasingly, tertiary education institutions need the capacity to react swiftly by establishing new programs, reconfiguring existing ones, and eliminating outdated programs without being hampered by bureaucratic regulations and obstacles.
  - HEI-s are also changing their pattern of admission to respond in a more flexible way to growing student demand – f.e. students who fail the traditional June/July examination will no longer have to wait a full year anymore to get a second chance.
  - effective labour market feedback mechanisms are indispensable for the purpose of adjusting curricula to meet the changing need of industry.
  - the need for more flexibility calls into question traditional modes and patterns of academic appointments and careers – but today it has commonly been assumed that the presence of full-time professors is a key determinant of quality. The need for HEI-s to be able to respond rapidly to changing labour market signals and technological changes may require more flexible arrangements for deployment of academic staff and evaluation of its performance.

We are talking about the future of traditional HEI-s: many of them may die or may change radically. The situation is similar to the people who asked Thomas Edison about what his light bulb would mean for the candle industry? He replied: "We will make electricity so cheap that only the rich will burn candles!"

We are entering an era in which most HEI-s must decide: whether to change a little (and thus remain in the academic candle industry), or a lot (and launch themselves into the academic electrical business).

### **3. Problems with the quality assurance**

Taking into account just the above mentioned tendencies in the HE we could summarise some very important opened questions regarding the quality assurance and has to be answered:

- What evaluation and accreditation mechanisms and methods are appropriate for online and distance education programs?
- What evaluation methodology should be used to assess programs that involve a heavy use of IT?
- How can national authorities exercise quality control over foreign institutions established in their countries?
- How can students assess current information on the quality of online institutions and programs?
- How to organize and regulate credit transfer arrangements between campus-based and virtual HEI-s?
- How to maintain academic standards for part-time students?
- How to satisfy the demand for rapid program and course development and the need for careful quality review?

We don't want to answer to these questions – but we would be very glad to hear some good ideas about it.