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**SPECIFIC QUESTIONS AND CHALLENGES FACED BY QUALITY
ASSURANCE IN FORMER EASTERN BLOC COUNTRIES**

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ABSTRACT

Similarities between the tasks of Quality Assurance Agencies in different countries cover many aspects, to begin with their general missions. Endorsement of the same QA fundamental concepts, based on the ESGs, as a fundamental pillar of the European Higher Education Area, might lead to the conclusion that the agencies could and should operate in similar manners.

Current practice shows, however, a number of significant differences which should be taken into account when assessing the activity and results of the QA agencies. The main differences identified come from: the social and economic climate in the former Eastern block countries; legislation; structure of HE with state and private universities; students' involvement; resources allocated to HE and research; internationalisation; distance learning becoming more and more popular; public pressure on education – which is sometimes seen as one of the main sources of poor economic performance.

1. Introduction

The idea of this paper emerged after the presentation of ARACIS at the General Assembly of the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEEN), held in Sofia in May 2010, raised interest among the participants. CEEN is a network which is Affiliate of ENQA and includes member

agencies from countries belonging to the so called “Old Europe” (Austria, Germany) and countries from the “New Europe” – EU Members (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia) and Non-EU Members (Albania, Croatia, Macedonia, The Russian Federation). As the reader might remember, “Old Europe” and “New Europe” are expressions introduced by the American media, in a different context, and Europeans might not like them! However, as some of the CEE agencies belong of the “Old Europe” and some of the “New Europe” we did not find the expressions hurting since, in reality, all European countries are old!

The CEEN agencies are ENQA full members (Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia - one agency and Austria and Germany - more agencies) and one agency (from Lithuania) is candidate member. Seven agencies are listed in the EQAR (Germany – 3, Austria, Bulgaria, Poland, Romania – one agency each).

Among our findings in comparing the tasks and procedures of QA agencies, the first element to look at is the university *mission* or *missions*. As situation stands today, the mission of universities is quite uniform. Missions’ statements mention, almost without exception, *education* and *research*. Indeed, the Recommendation Rec (2007) 6 by the Committee of Ministers to member states of the Council of Europe, on the public responsibility for higher education and research, prepared by the Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR), points to four main purposes of higher education:

- Preparation for sustainable employment;
- Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- Personal development;
- The development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

These are the overall purposes of higher education and research. In the European Higher Education Area, characterized by the diversity and the autonomy of its institutions, each institution may fulfill one or more of a wide range of missions and it may do so at varying levels and degrees.

Similarities between the tasks and procedures of Quality Assurance Agencies are obvious, to begin with their general mission and goals. General endorsement of the same QA fundamental standards, based on the European Standards and Guidelines for QA in HE – the ESGs, which are a fundamental pillar of the European Higher Education Area, might lead to the hasty conclusion that the agencies could and should operate in similar manners.

However, current practice shows a number of significant differences, which should be taken into account when assessing the activity and results of the Quality Assurance agencies. In the opinion of the authors, the main differences identified come from the social and economic climate, especially in the former Eastern block countries; legislation;

structure of HE (systems) including public (state) and private universities (accredited or with provisional license to operate); students' involvement in university governance and quality assurance; resources allocated to HE and research; internationalization; distance learning becoming more and more popular; pressure of the public on education, which is identified with the main source of poor economic performance.

In what follows a brief analysis is presented, as basis for further challenge and discussion, of the specificities in Quality Assurance in Higher Education which were identified by the authors in some of the CEE countries, termed sometimes also as “new democratic countries”.

2. Influence of the social and economic conditions on QA agencies activity

In the former Eastern block countries 20 years of transition is a quite short period of time in terms of the evolution of society. While democracy is taken for granted, in practice it is not fully always understood, as human rights and the rule of law are not profoundly correlated and applied as conditions for it. In some cases, radicals blame democracy for economic and social problems of the country, since population is asking for „order” and „stronger leadership”. These developments make some analysts raise the issue of the danger of „reversibility”, namely of return to centralized leadership. *Mistrust* in current leadership, at many levels, aggravated by the recent global economic crisis, influences society more than in countries with longstanding tradition of democracy. *Accusations* of failing to educate and train work power to meet the challenges of the so much needed economic performance, might make education become a very convenient scape - goat at hand! In spite of the fact that in these countries HE has changed much faster than other parts of the society and even cultural environment, a sort of on-going „reform”, manifestations of *impatience*, is asked for and promoted by mass-media and politicians, disturbing consolidation of many achievements and the continuation of a normal evolution based on sound data. Implementation of measures understood and accepted by students and academics, such as external evaluation of quality assurance, takes longer time than expected not to be identified with additional bureaucracy. In some cases, *unstable or unpredictable legislative framework* influences mostly regulations related to quality assurance, university autonomy and governance of institutions. *Lack of resources* has also a strong influence on quality of education and research. Comparative data show a factor of the order of four to ten times higher in the average yearly allocation per student in state universities in developed countries than the one in most of the „new Europe” ones, in spite of the efforts of governments to provide a fair percentage from the GDP (but what GDP?) for education in general (from 3 to 7%) and for public tertiary education institutions (from 0.5 to 1.73 %) [1].

Then, what quality must universities assure and how QA agencies are required to judge upon their performance? On the other hand, the *dynamics* of society induce change in HE, new requirements and expectations, need for adaptation to fluid realities in much over shorter time intervals as one might think.

As a result of newly recovered freedom and rapid transition to free market, in the early '90s the structure of HE in the „new democratic countries” has dramatically changed. The

emergence of private higher education, in most cases without any previous experience in quality assurance of education, leading to the coexistence of traditional, or even newly established public (state) universities and completely new private ones has completely changed the HE landscape. Comparative data show the current situation in some European countries. While in the „Old Europe“ the number of students in private universities represent a small percentage (2.16% in Austria and 4,5% in Germany), in countries of the „New Europe“ data show an considerable increase in the number of students enrolled in private universities (34.21% in Poland, 53.90 % in Estonia, 41.94% in Romania etc.) The much larger number of students enrolled in private universities raise additional problems for QA agencies, such as lack of sound data on student enrollment in private institutions (in full honestly one can face incomplete data also in public institutions!), different governance rules of private institutions vs. state ones, the effects of rapid growth - „horizontal development“ (too many study programs running in parallel) to attract students (and their tuition! as condition for the existence of the education provider) etc. This contribution does not intend to oppose public to private institutions but only evidence the additional problems QA agencies might face in a much more complex context.

Summarizing, the dilemma for any QA agency operating in such environment would be firstly related to the procedures it should apply: overall evaluation (institutional only), study program evaluation only or both. Also, the missions of agencies could be diverse: evaluation only, accreditation only or both, subject specific etc. The meaning of terminology used in the EHEA is sometimes different and could be confusing, so we would simply say that in this paper accreditation means for an education provider „green light to operate“ with full recognition of diplomas by the national authorities. On the contrary, by „evaluation“ we mean the procedure to asses, review etc. and than judge upon quality. Evaluation could be followed (or not!) by accreditation (or re-accreditation, following periodic evaluation, if accreditation is legally required in the country).

In many countries lack of data on output/outcome indicators is reported, since surveys about graduates' career are incomplete or simply missing. Hence, many of QA criteria are input or process ones. Output/outcome data on which quality criteria are built are not only difficult to obtain (however, some universities already did a good job) but more difficult to interpret in economies struggling with difficulties. Most agencies apply such criteria but the problem they face is relevance. We believe that they will become more a more common practice, as it is required but also more and more relevant for the quality of university studies. As we have indicated, as a result of rapid growth in student numbers and study programs, quality is unevenly distributed over national HE systems as a whole but also at the level of the institutions, such that rapid introduction and use of output/outcome criteria should become a priority.

3. Influence of internationalization and rankings

Statistical data from the ERASMUS/SOCRATES European program show that traditional „internationalization“, namely mobility, is more of the „one-way“ type, namely East-West, for both students and staff flows. Other statistics, such those under the

frame of EUROSTUDENT, although some are unofficial, indicate the same trend. The reasons are multiple, starting with the fact that many teaching „local languages” are not attractive for foreign students speaking one of the international modern languages as a mother tongue or for other candidates wishing to be taught in an international language. Comparative data show that English, French and German are the three most frequently spoken languages [4]. Universities from CEE countries are „fighting back” by offering, sometimes successfully, study programs taught in modern languages in those study fields which they consider as being of interest to foreign students, such as medicine or engineering, at lower or no tuition fees. In such cases the agencies must check in detail the quality of the academic offer, even in terms of how well teaching staff master the foreign language they teach in and the quality of courseware!

The external evaluations of HE institutions become thus more and more international. Some European countries have opened the procedure for periodic institutional evaluations to QA agencies listed in the EQAR but, according to our knowledge, only one European country accepts this procedure for accreditation of new programs (Lithuania). Another possibility is to sign *Mutual recognition agreements* between agencies, for instance NVAO(B – FI)–NOKUT(N)-QAQ(A)-PKA(PL) -FH Council(A) etc.

In the same time, internationalization becomes more and more related to the activity of branches of foreign universities or franchising to study programs to local universities, regularly private ones, under the Service Directive applying GATTs to education. In this respect, CEE QA agencies from EU countries should keep into account that private education services not essentially financed by public funds do fall under the scope of the Services Directive. The existence of prior authorization for programs by education institutions established in another Member State to perform education services to open a branch or a subsidiary of their activity in another Member State or to franchise their program studies to another entity established in that Member State is justifiable only in order to ensure the quality of education services provided. The authorization system (in this paper equivalent to accreditation) must respect Articles 10-13 of the Services Directive. QA agencies should thus comply with both national and EU regulations and carefully distinguish between quality education and diploma mills.

Distance learning and branches of universities organized in different other cities are also becoming more and more popular in some CEE countries, since the subsistence costs for students living in another place than the one where the university is functioning are smaller. Obviously, special procedures for QA are required.

In some CEE countries rankings are seen by some as a convenient solution to many problems of HE regarding quality and for raising the visibility of the country. In a number of countries there are even suggested targets. Having one (or several!) „world class” universities is seen as obligatory, an idea which is subliminally or directly transmitted to the public. Public statements such as „we do not have any university in the top 20 or even in the top 50!” is a quite common slogan. Asking high school graduates in front of TV cameras at peak audience hours questions such as „in which foreign university do you plan to study?” indicates certain mistrust in the university studies offered in the own country. Under such circumstances the activity of local QA agencies

tends to become less credible, since any favorable judgment on a particular university which has proven to fulfill its mission in the best way possible under the given economic and social conditions is compared to the results of some “world ranking” where this particular university does not appear.

Failing to understand that emerging (fragile!?) economies cannot usually support world class research universities, unless special, adequate and sustainable measures are taken, the general concept of Quality Assurance becomes an exercise and effort shadowed by the glamour which rankings given to those universities operating under much favorable conditions. Salmi [7] found that „the superior results of world-class universities ... can essentially be attributed to three complementary sets of factors: a) high concentration of talent (faculty and students); b) abundant resources to offer a rich learning environment and to conduct advanced research; c) favorable governance features that encourage strategic vision, innovation and flexibility and that enable institutions to make decisions and to manage resources without being encumbered by bureaucracy”. Lack of information in this respect leads to dangerous frustration because the public expectations are high, but it thinks and judges in the short run, an element which could induce hasty measures.

However, the efforts and actions to „raise the status” of any university are commendable and must be strongly encouraged and supported. The role of the QA agency is also to explain to the public the meaning of its findings in terms of present performance and quality enhancement. This is a quite difficult task and we hope the two feasibility studies supported by the EC – „Classification” and „Rankings” will bring more clarity in the EHEA and open new ways for improved procedures of the QA agencies.

An element which we think is of utmost importance for the CEE countries is *effective student participation in QA*. Students must be involved on a regular basis in both internal and external evaluations of study programs and universities. Participation of students as equal partners is not only required by the ESGs but also a democratic exercise for both universities and students. The QA exercise offers a platform to directly promote shared values and competences for democracy needed in modern societies [3].

Training of students as evaluators should remain a permanent activity for the QA agencies since graduates have to be replaced with other trained students. Our findings show that, unfortunately, students from private universities are not so well (if at all) organized, which makes it difficult to involve them in a more consistent manner as part of the QA exercise.

3. Conclusions and questions regarding the activity of QA agencies in CEE countries

The authors are aware that the paper is far of covering the topic, because in the different countries there are many other specific points they missed or failed to understand. Hence, the tentative conclusions following should be looked at with due care: the authors tried only to open new fields for discussion from a somewhat different perspective than usual.

Conclusions on procedures

- In societies in which lack of confidence/mistrust is dominant (due to unhappy historical background) there is a need for a more normative approach in examining quality of education and research;
- Program external evaluations remain still more important in CEE countries than in those where confidence prevails - institutional evaluations lead to results supported by reality; for new programs, accreditation is a procedure which must preferably be assigned to national agencies and the decision to the competent authorities (in general the ministry);
- Cooperation between QA agencies should be encouraged to foster international dimension; participation in international evaluations of representatives of local agency may contribute to the understanding of the national context.

Conclusions regarding the results of activities of QA agencies

- The climate of competition is much more present than in the „Old Europe” countries, due to the coexistence of the binomial state/private institutions tending in some countries towards parity in the student numbers; in EU countries the Services Directive brings in an additional international dimension of HE to be considered by QA agencies;
- Emergence of private QA agencies creates another type of competition; hence, fairness is a must – use of the same standards and criteria, keeping balanced and convergent attitudes to assess quality and to make judgments etc.
- Unfavorable decisions taken by the agencies are almost generally challenged by institutions, before even trying to correct the own deviations from quality performance indicators!
- International evaluation of agencies is of crucial importance, to enhance the quality of the agency and its status at national and international level.

Questions

- Since in many countries demographic data indicate a future drop in the number of candidates to HE how will this evolution affect quality assurance since universities are in competition for students? What measures could be envisaged?
- What would happen to student mobility if in the “European Ranking” exercise universities from some CEE countries would not be placed among the leading European universities?

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