Abstract

The Hungarian higher educational system has a very strict and special quality assurance. It's based on international documents and experiences but it has been combined with local traditions. One of these traditions is the strong student participation which can clarify special parts of the higher educational life.

The aim of the article is to show a small part of the Hungarian educational history and to show those practices which has been collected during the last 20 years.

Keywords: higher education, quality assurance, accreditation, student, Hungary

Nowadays the quality policy not only means a governmental control on the higher education in Hungary, as earlier the accreditation used to be, but it means that the Hungarian higher educational system is controlled by independent international quality agencies too.¹ But how did Hungary and the Hungarian higher educational system reached this status?

First of all we have to declare a few things about the quality of the education and the higher education. The quality will always stay a subjective notion and its subjectivity doesn't depends on its quantifiability. It will never become subjectively ponderable however it has been totally or partly meted quantifically. The evaluation system of the educational quality will become more homogenous if we are creating measurable standards but it won't be more objective this way.² But we can define the quality assurance as a good benchmark which is probably not objective but equal for all members or partners.

The relevance of the higher educational systems’ Quality Assurance increased in the last few years worldwide. The Quality Assurance can strengthen the value of the feedbacks produced by the actors of the higher educational system. And all of these feedbacks are valuable for the actors of the higher educational system. Maybe we can say that these feedbacks are necessary for the leaders of the higher educational institutions because they can only know the strengths and weaknesses of their institutions this way. It’s really important to clarify these strengths and weaknesses because only these known attributions can help the higher educational institution leaders’ to make their universities or colleges better.

The importance of the higher educational quality assurance in Hungary has drawn up only after 1989.³ When the democratically elected Hungarian Parliament started to

³ In 1989 the Hungarian political a constitutional system totally changed. The socialist era ended and the new democratic political system started to operate in 1989-1990.
create the new act on higher education – finally voted in 1993 – academic leaders of
the country tried to create a totally new system of higher education. One of their main
aim was to create the right of the universities to start PhD- and DLA-programmes and
to give them the right to award PhD- and DLA-degrees⁴ – but no one supported to
give this right without an objective accreditation procedure.⁵ After creating the
Hungarian Accreditation Committee every barrier ceased and the universities started
to functionate more or less that way as we know them nowadays.
We can separate the actors of the higher educational system to clarify their roles. We
can separate the members of the academic staff, the members of the administrative
staff, the students, the members of the alumni groups, the funding organization and
the employers where the students who completed the different degrees will work after
the university years. Of course we can find several overlaps between the different
groups: for example the rector is a member of the academic staff and the head of the
administrative staff at the same time or a student can get a job at the university – in
this situation she or he will be a member of the administrative staff and the student
union at the same time. But we can define the functions of the different groups
clearly.
The members of the academic staff are the creators of the higher educational
institutions’ scientific potential. They have the right and the degree to start and to
complete research programmes and they have the right to teach, supervise and
examine students. The quality of a higher educational institution mainly depends on
the quality of the academic staff.
The students – in Hungary all the students are members of the student union by law⁶
– of the higher educational institution are the largest group of the whole higher
educational system. They are completing some kind of degree at the higher
educational institution which can be post-secondary, BA or BSc, MA or MSc, post-
master and PhD or DLA level. They have the right to study all the subjects which are
needed to complete their degree and they have the right to select and study other
optional credits too. They have to complete – at least – 180 credits to have a BA or
BSc level degree, 120 credits to have a MA or MSc degree and 180 credits to
complete a PhD or DLA level degree. In the post-secondary or post-master
programmes they have to complete 30 credits per semester and the programmes last
2-4 semesters.
The members of the administrative staff are aimed to help the operation of the higher
educational institutions. They are working in different offices together with the
members of the academic staff and partly with students. A special part of the
administrative staff is working together with the academic staff as a research
assistant but without scientific (PhD or DLA) degree and without the right of teaching.

⁵ György BAZSA: Így kezdtük építeni közös értékeinket. 20 éves az Országos Doktori (és Habilitációs) Tanács.
Reference: http://www.doktori.hu/cikk_file/BazsaGy.pdf (Date of the last download: 20. 08. 2015.) p. 3.
⁶ Act CCIV. of 2011. 60. § (1)
None of the modern universities or other higher educational institutions can exist without professional academic staff.

The members of the alumni groups are very important for the higher educational institution. The universities are surveying the alumni students and the results of these surveys can help the members of the academic staff to make the higher educational institutions’ programmes more attractive and more useful for the students, the future students and for the labour market. In other counties alumni students can take part of the higher educational institutions’ financing but it’s still not typical in Hungary.

The funding organisation of each higher educational institution is a very important member of the whole system. In Hungary only the state, different foundations or different churches have the right to found a higher educational institution. These founders have to create the financial background of each higher educational institution. This role can result interesting situations in national universities (higher educational institutions founded by the state itself) when the leaders of these institutions’ who are state employees too, negotiate with the state (or the ministry responsible for higher educational issues) itself.

And at last but not at least the employers are very important actors of the higher educational system because the higher educational institutions can only develop their curriculums based on the opinion of the employers. That’s why the higher educational institutions and the state itself very often surveys the employers experiences about the graduated students.

The most important part of the Quality Assurance system in a higher educational institution for students is the survey of the academic staff-members achievement. This system is co-operated by the students union and by the professional administrative staff. The survey can show the impressions of the students about a member of the academic staff and about her or his course. This survey can give a sharp feedback of the students’ satisfaction about the educational organisation and mainly about the freshness of the curriculum.

When we are talking of the higher educational quality assurance in Eastern-Central Europe we are necessarily talking about accreditation too. The accreditation and the quality assurance are not separated in this region. In some of the countries of this region the specialists call those processes quality assurance which are named as accreditation in other countries. Besides this interesting fact the accreditation processes are very often based on different quality assurance resources. In the 1990-es the accreditation spread in this region and after it, in the 2000-es – according to the Bologna Process – the quality assurance became more important. Those higher educational systems which started the higher educational reforms delayed or lately met these two trends at the same time.7

This way we can define a special, Eastern-Central European kind of the higher educational systems’ development. But in some countries we can find other impressions which are important during the evolution processes. “A modern

metropolitan state whose system of higher education may itself be an influential model nevertheless admits foreign influences, but these are usually imported piecemeal and rapidly modified and absorbed, more or less successfully, into the native system. Foreign models are often cited (sometimes by both sides) in efforts at reform, as the nineteenth century German model was used in the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and elsewhere.

Colonies of settlement, where a numerically substantial fragment of a European society is established abroad, are likely recipients of a large part, if not the whole, of the mother country's model of higher education, especially if indigenous people and their cultures are largely ignored in the creation of the new society.\textsuperscript{8}

Is this kind of “export” typical? “As it’s seen national models of higher education are trying to adjust to other higher educational systems. That’s how some countries became exporter of higher educational models and other states became importer of these systems.”\textsuperscript{9} So we can declare that this process can be typical in some parts of the world but not in Hungary. Hungary has never become a colony however it used to be the part of the Habsburg Empire and later the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. During this period a very strong Austro-German impression reached the whole country (including the Hungarian scientific and higher educational life) but the Hungarian system always kept its national characteristics. After the Second World War Hungary became a part of the Soviet-Socialist block, where the Soviet-styled scientific governance was the precedent for all the other countries. After 1989 Hungary opened its gates to the Western-European scientific life and tried to approximate the national system to the international best practices as soon as it was possible. During this period Hungary started to cooperate with the global scientific life.

But how important is the topic of the quality assurance in higher education? We can say it is one of the hottest topics nowadays. “When asked about designing a quality assurance framework in teaching and learning in particular, a majority of HEIs [\textit{higher educational institutions}] (64.9\%) indicated that it is institution-specific but follows national QA [\textit{quality assurance}] frameworks and guidelines. One quarter (25.7\%) considered it to be tailor-made to the institution’s needs and does not apply any ready-made model, whereas less than 9.5\% mentioned that it applies a ready-made model such as ISO, EFQM, and CAF.

Hence, quality assurance in teaching and learning does have its specificities and few HEIs have chosen to adopt external QA system models as such. The fact that the number of HEIs following their national QA frameworks is not higher is an interesting phenomenon, and it may reflect the fact that guidelines for institutional level QA framework do not exist in every country. In countries with an external QA system based on institutional level, a majority, if not all of HEIs tend to answer that they follow national guidelines. This is, for example, the case for Finland, France, Ireland and the UK, where national guidelines targeting specifically institutional level QA


arrangement do exist. However, national guidelines on institutional QA provisions exist in some countries where accreditation is programme-based: for example, in Germany, Spain, Poland and Sweden, where a majority of respondents answered that they follow national guidelines in this regard.

Students can take part of the Hungarian (Higher Education) Accreditation Committees work too. Student members of the HACs visiting committees have the right to investigate the local Quality Assurance systems operated in each higher educational institution.

But why the student participation is so important? Why do the higher educational institutions have to operate a special system which is aimed to survey the students’ opinion of the members of the academic staff? One of the potential answers in Hungary is the former reform of the higher educational system.

As Ildikó Hrubos mentioned the number of the students in the whole Hungarian higher educational system grown quadrupled since 1990. During this period the number of the academic staff has only grown with 30%, which suggests that the diversity of the whole academic staff didn’t change that much. But we have to mention three different factors about this 30% growth. First we can declare that the growth has appeared mainly in context with the part-time lecturers. On other hand unfortunately we don’t have any data about the fluctuation of the whole academic staff, so this 30% growth can hide much larger fluctuation too. And finally all the statistics ignore the subsidiary lecturers – for example PhD students or other lecturers coming from the “practice”, from the employers role.

Because of these processes in Hungary we can say it is necessary for the students to take part in the institutional quality assurance. They take part as members of the special committees created to supervise the process, which’s aim is to survey the teaching attitude of the lecturers (members of the academic staff). The output of these surveys can have more and more important role which depends on the filling rate. That’s how the higher educational institution tries to motivate its’ students to fill the surveys.

On other hand students can become members of the Hungarian Accreditation Committees Visiting Committees. During the accreditation processes (both during institutional accreditation and programme accreditation) the Hungarian Accreditation Committee sends Visiting Committees to each higher educational institution which is under the accreditation process. (They send Visiting Committees to higher educational institutions and universities or colleges operated by different churches too.) None of the higher educational institutions have the right to operate or to award degrees to their students if they didn’t complete a successful accreditation procedure. The Visiting Committee is always led by a full professor and all the members have the same right during the investigation or during the voting process.

As it could be seen Hungarian students have the right to take part in the quality assurance and accreditation system of the wholly higher education is the country. This can be useful for all the members of the higher educational system because the students have special point of view which is useful to be known for all the other members.

References

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