

Self-analysis Document by Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC)

Executive summary

1. **National responsibility** for the quality of higher education provisions in Hungary lies with the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC), while quality assurance on the **institutional level** is the responsibility of HEIs themselves.
2. National level quality assurance is performed through **accreditation**, which is compulsory for each new and operating institution, faculty, and programme. **Internal institutional** QA procedures are limited for the time being though there are institutions and faculties where complete systems (e.g. ISO or EFQM model) operate.
3. As to the **methodology** of accreditation the internationally well-known self-evaluation based peer-review is applied with expert report and accreditation decision at the end of the process. Quality requirements have been focussed on input characteristics.
4. As to current developments, accreditation centred evaluation is intended to be accompanied by direct quality management advice, which means a **shift in the emphasis** from accountability to quality enhancement. The input focus is intended to be weakened, more attention will be paid to the quality of the teaching and learning process, and the outcomes of it. The internal institutional quality assurance systems will come to the fore.
5. Accreditation is a prerequisite of the **permission (licence) of operation** for new institutions, faculties, and programmes, given by the Parliament, the government, and the Minister of Education, respectively. However, the Minister has the right of giving (or suggesting to give) permission for operation against the HAC's accreditation decision. In the case of doctoral schools the HAC has the right of licensing, too.
6. The **autonomy of institutions** concerning the selection and implementation of their internal quality assurance systems is complete. However, institutional autonomy is limited in the sense that the permission for establishing and launching of new programmes, and the appointment of professors is tied to the meeting of predefined quality requirements.
7. **Bologna processes**, including the degree system, will have an impact on the development of HE, both with regard to increased autonomy for HEIs and with regard to QA.
8. **Students'** influence on the governance of institutions is guaranteed by law, their participation in the processes of quality assurance is increasing.
9. As to the **teaching staff** there is a risk that the ageing professoriate and the working conditions of instructors may lead to deteriorating quality in HE.
10. **International patterns** have influenced the forming and operation of the Hungarian QA system. International involvement of the HAC and of the country hopefully remains strong in the future, too. That means that in spite of country specific "cornerstones", the system is open to constructive initiations promoting convergence in this field.

I. Introduction: Overview of QA of HE in Hungary

1. Higher education in Hungary

Hungary (10 million inhabitants) has a dual higher education system comprising of **universities** (theoretical and research emphasis, 5-6 years of study) and **colleges** (practical-professional orientation, 3-4 years of study). Out of the altogether 68 institutions 18 universities and 13 colleges are owned by the state, 5 universities and 21 colleges are maintained by various churches (with partial state financing), while there is one university and 10 colleges in private (foundation) property. The total number of students in 2003/04 is about 410,000 out of which 217,000 are full time. (Overall distribution: 7,000 students in post-secondary higher vocational training; 368,000 in undergraduate, 27,000 in specialised postgraduate programmes; and 8,000 in PhD/DLA schools.) About 30 % of the respective age cohort takes part in higher education.

The last considerable change in the system was a consequence of the political change of the country in 1989. Among other things, the foundation of church-run and private institutions was allowed, institutions gained more autonomy, and universities regained the right of awarding PhD degrees. The Higher Education Act (HEA) appeared in 1993. The next major change is expected for 2004/05 with the general introduction of the Bologna-type national qualification frameworks, cycles, and degrees.¹

2. Who is in charge of QA?

National responsibility for quality policy lies with the **Ministry of Education**, for quality attestation (accreditation) with the **Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC)**, while quality assurance on the institutional level is the responsibility of **HEIs** themselves. The HAC was established by the Parliament in 1993 (HEA).²

3. What is being evaluated and accredited?

Accreditation of institutions, faculties, and programmes, **both new and operating**, are compulsory in Hungary. New **institutions, faculties, and programmes** must be accredited as a prerequisite of the licence of operation given by the Parliament, the Government, and the Minister of Education, respectively. Operating institutions, faculties, and programmes are accredited in an 8 year cycle within the framework of institutional accreditation. The first cycle was completed in 2000, off-site and distance education programmes were accredited by the summer of 2002, and, after the revision of the first cycle *Handbook*, the second cycle is to be launched in the Spring of 2004. Moreover, the HAC accredits **national qualification**

¹ See more on the Hungarian higher education system on the website of the Ministry of Education (<http://www.om.hu/education>) and in O. Csepes – F. Kaiser – Zs. Varga, "Hungary". In: J. File – L. Goedegebuure (eds), *Real-Time Systems. Reflections on Higher Education in the Czech Republic, Hungary, Poland and Slovenia*. CHEPS – Bureau CROSS – Vutium, Brno University of Technology, 2003. pp. 60-76. <http://www.utwente.nl/cheps/documenten/engbook03realtimesystems-pdf>

² See more on the HAC and the Hungarian accreditation system in *The External Evaluation of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee* (ed. T.R. Szanto). Budapest, 2000. 174.p. Also accessible at: www.mab.hu/english/doc/extevalh.doc

requirements (frameworks) and, since 2000/01 it evaluates **applications for professorial appointments** too.

4. How is evaluation and accreditation done?

Accreditation always involves evaluation of the given provision. The HAC employs the internationally well-known method comprising of

- self-evaluation (or description in the case of new provisions),
- peer-review (visiting committees and/or desk exercise),
- expert report,
- accreditation decision.

Up till now only the accreditation decisions have been published. From the second cycle on full reports are planned to be made public. The HAC's approach has been rather input focussed, this is to be complemented by more detailed evaluation of the teaching and learning process and the outcomes of it (competencies) in the next cycle.³

II. The self-analysis

1. The level of institutional autonomy with regard to QA

a) Legal regulation

In relation to quality assurance the *Higher Education Act* (1993, and amendments) prescribes the following:

- The **national accreditation** (external quality evaluation and attestation) is **compulsory** for institutions, faculties, and programmes, both new and operating. (1993) Experience arising from the first 8 year cycle shows that institutions accepted this form of external check of quality, they do not generally consider it as an external constraint on autonomy (exception below). However, by most it is regarded something like a “**mixed blessing**”. On the one hand external QA helped to improve the quality of education, and “to put things in order” in this respect, and it initiated the development of quality consciousness, something like a quality culture in higher education. On the other hand, it required from the institutions a lot of work and, in cases, some extra resources too (though they do not pay for accreditation). Moreover, it is held to be rather bureaucratic in nature (strong input focus) and too close to the licensing decision.⁴
- Operating institutions have to make a **yearly quality report** which must be sent to HAC (amendment, 1996). Since 2000/01 the HAC expects the reports to give information (mostly input in character) on each and every degree programme taught at the given institution.

³ More on methods can be found in: T.R. Szanto, “Higher Education – Hungary”. In: *Educational Evaluation around the World*. The Danish Evaluation Institute, Copenhagen, 2003. pp. 103-118, 163-165. (Also accessible at www.eva.dk)

⁴ The HAC advises the minister, on the basis of assessing quality, as to granting, suggesting to grant, or maintaining a licence of operation. The minister licences new programmes, while new faculties and institutions are licensed – upon the suggestion of the minister – by the government and the Parliament, respectively. The only exception is the launching and operation of doctoral schools where the HAC has the right of licensing too.

- Institutions had to implement their **internal institutional QA systems** by the end of 2001 (amendment, 2000).
- **Applications for professorial appointments** must be evaluated by HAC (amendment, 2000). This is a delicate point, which is regarded by most institutions as a constraint on their autonomy. Making this amendment was driven by the fact that in the late 90'ies – in reaction to growing student numbers – institutions proposed more and more professors to be appointed whose qualifications and professional experiences were not always up to standards. (See more on this below.)

b) Autonomy

- Institutions are completely free to choose the **actual type and way of implementation** of their **internal QA systems**.
- In 2000/01 and 2001/02, evaluations of individuals applying for **professorial appointments** were initiated by the Minister of Education. Each institution sent its proposals for appointment to the Minister who, in turn, asked for the opinion of the HAC. This procedure was, however, successfully appealed against by some individuals in the Constitutional Court. Thus, since 2002/03, institutions themselves ask for the opinion of the HAC on applicants for professorial appointments and then decide on the applications, and send their proposals together with the HAC opinions to the Minister.

c) Current debates – subjects

- In connection with the **Bologna reforms** there are some ongoing debates on autonomy vs. state control in the following areas:
 - The **length and structure of cycles** (number of study fields and programmes). Here the need for national regulation is obvious. Though the need for change is accepted, institutions nevertheless try to preserve their current positions on the HE market, they struggle for survival.
 - **Institutional governance**. The most important issue here is the separation of the academic leadership (Senate) and the management (rector) of HEIs. The top governing and strategic decision making body would be the Board whose members would be delegated by the state and the institutional Senate in the same proportion.
 - **State guidance**. According to plans the state – though still bearing the basic responsibility for higher education in general – would step back and appear as a contracting party with institutions and owners (maintainers). Currently the government yearly determines the exact numbers of state financed students to be enrolled by institutions and programmes. In the future this would be made only according to the major branches of disciplines. Exact distributions among institutions and individual programmes would be shaped by the HEIs with regard to the actual market factors.
 - **Financing**. In accordance with the above intentions the role of the state in financing higher education would be less decisive. Institutions should rely more on other financing sources and actors such as foundations, and organisations and

individuals from the private sector. (Currently, state owned HEIs raise about 30-40% of their budget from non governmental sources.)

All the above means that institutions would gain **more autonomy** not only academically but organisationally and financially too. Compared to the current situation that, of course, would involve a considerably **greater responsibility** for HEIs and a much greater amount of uncertainty for their operation too.

- As to **quality assurance**, this has been only slightly touched as yet, in connection with the current reform debates. Here the most important issues are the following:
 - How, by what process should **new, Bologna-type programmes be established**: would that basically be in the sphere of institutional autonomy or there should be compulsory, detailed preliminary accreditation for each degree programme similarly to the current situation?
 - According to the reform plans, beside accreditation, the **HAC** would emphatically take up the new task of **direct quality management advice**.

Actors in the debates

The actors of the current debates are

- the state: Ministry of Education, the reform project Working Group (appointed by the Minister),
- the *National Bologna Committee* as a special ad hoc intermediary body chaired by the chairman of the reform project Working Group but having the most prominent experts from the sector (see next bullet) among its members,
- HEIs: rectors' conferences with various expert groups ("Bologna working groups" initiated and established mainly by the conferences),
- stakeholder organisations: students, the trade union in higher education,
- other national organisations: HERC (*Higher Education and Research Council*, which is a standing advisory council of the Minister), HAC (as yet only slight involvement).

Directions of the debates

As it seems now, the main directions and outcomes of the debates are the following:

- Bologna-type linear cycles: yes, probably from 2005/06 or 2005/06 on, though exact features as to length and structure are still not crystal clear. (Two "pilot" bachelor programmes will be launched in 2004/05, one is 7, and the other is 6 semester long.)
- 3 other subjects debated (institutional governance, state guidance, and financing, see above): hard to foresee the "final" outcome of the debates. There is a strong resistance to the proposed reforms from the part of HEIs and stakeholder organisations.
- QA: growing role of internal institutional quality systems, dual role for the national organisation (HAC), accreditation and support of institutional quality management.

Reforms are initiated by the Minister of Education. In spite of extensive discussions with and by the sector (and among experts of the two governing parties) there is still no consensus on some important issues. The sector (including the above named stakeholders) even questions

the necessity of so far reaching reforms on the pretext of Bologna. On the other side, reformers argue that strictly concentrating on a narrow interpretation of Bologna (introduction of linear bachelor and master cycles as the only issue on the agenda) would be false and a great historical mistake at the same time. This type of reforms are a must for Hungary in the current situation, they say.

Summary of section 1

- Accreditation is compulsory for each new and operating institutions, faculties, and programmes.
- The autonomy of institutions concerning the selection and implementation of their internal quality assurance systems is complete. However, institutional autonomy concerning the appointment of professors is limited in the sense that it is tied to the meeting of predefined quality requirements.
- There are ongoing debates in connection with the Bologna reforms concerning the length and structure of the study cycles, institutional governance, state guidance, and financing.
- The HAC is to be taken up the task of direct quality management advice to the HEIs.

2. The place of students in the institutions with regard to QA

- a) Students' participation in institutional governance is rather extensive. According to the HEA their **representation in institutional councils** must be at least one quarter (not exceeding one third), and each representative has a vote in institutional decisions. Students usually live with that opportunity, they take their representation seriously. (For example in the election of the rector students can have the decisive votes in cases.)
- b) As to their formal participation in internal **institutional QA**, students have the right to express their opinion on the teaching work of instructors (HEA, Sections 32 and 67), and institutions are responsible for working out the actual procedures for this exercise (HEA, Section 51). Students are usually asked for to **evaluate** (in writing) **the instructors** (and/or courses or subjects). However, institutions differ in this respect, since the introduction of internal quality assurance is only a recent phenomenon. There are some institutions, where the expertise for such an enterprise is not available. (Ex. small, church-run institutions.) They have to learn how to do it, and some need to hire specialists too.
- c) As to student participation in the **external quality assurance** processes:
 - Students' opinion on teaching and learning, institutional services, operational strengths and weaknesses, is asked for during **institutional accreditation** visits in a closed discussion meeting with the Visiting Committee. Beyond this, VC members have the opportunity to attend classes and informally interview students.
 - In the spring of 2004 the HAC will perform the first (pilot) **parallel accreditation** visits and evaluations concerning all the history and psychology programmes in the country, respectively. In this process students (a random sample of them) will not only be interviewed but be asked for to fill in a brief questionnaire about their respective degree programs.

- In accordance with the intentions and recommendations of the *Berlin Communiqué*, from 2004 on **each Visiting Committee** appointed by the HAC **will include at least one student member** too. That means that students will directly take part in evaluations and the writing of the evaluation reports on institutions and programmes.
- Finally, on the **national decision making level** of external quality assurance students also participate. One representative of the *National Union of Students in Hungary* is a non-voting participant with voice at the plenary meetings of HAC, while a representative of the *Association of Hungarian PhD Students* also takes part in the plenary meetings of HAC as an invited person with voice.

Summary of section 2

- Students' influence on the governance of institutions is guaranteed by law and can be regarded as appropriate.
- Students' participation in the processes of quality assurance is increasing.

3. Teaching staff

- a) In the **recruitment** of teaching staff Hungarian institutions have had some **difficulties** in the last couple of years, basically from a quality point of view. The explanation lies in the fact that due to the changes in the economy in the 90'ies, industry and the business sector offers more lucrative positions and income for young, talented professionals than higher education. The social prestige of academics also weakened in Hungary in the last decade.
- b) That caused some undesirable changes in the **age structure** of instructors: the average age of professors is constantly growing in the last years.
- c) Another effect of the growing number of students and the relative shortage of highly qualified instructors is the "**self-multiplication of professors**". That means that professors in a growing number teach at more than one institution, in many cases not only on a part time basis. (Current Hungarian legal regulation does not prohibit having more than one full time job for an employee.) This practice led to the appearance of the so-called **inter-city professors** who, having jobs in various parts of the country spend considerable time in cases with travelling from one institution to another. Another, perhaps even worse case of the self-multiplication phenomenon is the one when professors "lend" their names for programmes to be (preliminary) accredited and licensed, but then do not take part in the actual teaching process of the given programmes (**virtual professors**). (This has nothing to do with distance education, where instructors are in contact "legally" only virtually with their students.) These phenomena appeared especially in the currently "fashionable" disciplines such as law, for example.
- d) In the light of the above it is perhaps understandable why the government wanted to include a national level quality checkpoint in the professorial appointment process. As I mentioned earlier, from 2000/01 on, for the **appointment of professors** an evaluation of the candidates by the HAC is needed too. As a consequence, the number of professorial appointments decreased considerably in the last three years. Between 1998 and 2000 there were about 240 appointments yearly, while this number was reduced to 123 in 2001, to 157 in 2002, and to 153 in 2003.

All that means that Hungarian higher education faces some real quality problems in connection with the teaching staff.

Summary of section 3

- There is a risk that the ageing professoriate and the working conditions of instructors may lead to deteriorating quality in HE.
- A special problem is that many professors take jobs at more than one institution at the same time.

4. Programmes

- a) The **proposal for new programmes and programme design** (initiation) in Hungary is within the sphere of institutional autonomy. HEIs are free to develop any new programme proposal. It is prescribed, however, that each programme must have a so-called ***national qualification requirement*** (NQR). A new kind of degree programme can be established only after approval and publication of its NQR by the government (undergraduate programmes) or by the minister of education (specialised postgraduate programmes). NQRs are worked out by HEIs (or the minister in some cases). They contain the description of training goals, the duration and main fields and subjects of studies, examinations to be accomplished. The HAC gives an opinion to the minister on drafts of NQRs i.e., they must be evaluated (accredited) before approval.

NQRs are **generally not regarded as constraints** on institutional autonomy or as unnecessary means of standardisation. It is accepted that a programme (and degree!) in, say, civil engineering should mean roughly the same across the country, irrespective of the institution that offers it. Moreover, NQRs define only the general framework and the “core” of the programmes, they do not prescribe definite curricula. Institutions are free to design curricula, the details of their programmes, within a 40 % difference range of the NQRs. This means that a proposed programme is to be regarded and handled as “new” only if it differs from the closest existing one in more than 40 % of its content. The actual difference is to be judged in the accreditation (HAC) and licensing (Ministry of Education [government]) process.

Currently there are about 470 undergraduate programme NQRs. A given programme is taught at 2-4 institutions at the same time on the average, which means that altogether there are about 1300 running undergraduate degree programmes in Hungary. This number is regarded a bit high. A serious problem with programmes is that mobility of students among them is rather limited. One reason for this is the overspecialised character of the programmes in many cases, which means that they operate like “tunnels”: you can come out with a degree only from the one you entered. The other reason is that the credit system on a national scale in Hungary was introduced only in 2003, and HEIs have been a bit reluctant to recognise credits earned at other institutions. The introduction of the Bologna-type cycles and programmes will, hopefully, ease this problem by way of decreasing the number of (bachelor) programmes (entrance points) on the one hand, and fostering mobility on the other.

- b) A **new programme can be launched** on the basis of an existing NQR. However, it must have **approval** (licence) from the minister who, before approving it, asks for the opinion

of the HAC. The HAC's opinion (accreditation or not) is not binding for the minister, (s)he can decide against it but in this case (s)he must give reasons for his/her decision. In the last three years, out of about 350 programme applications there were 15 such decisions, where the minister approved the given programme in spite of a negative accreditation resolution by the HAC. (The HAC turned down about half of the programme proposals.)

As it was mentioned above (see II.1.c.) there is currently a debate in connection with the Bologna reforms in Hungary concerning the approval of **Bologna-type new programmes**. As it seems now, there will probably be a somewhat "lightened" preliminary accreditation process for those bachelor programmes that build on previously accredited college or university level undergraduate programmes.

- c) **Internal institutional evaluation of programmes** is only a recent phenomenon in Hungary. Though since its 1996 amendment the HEA prescribes for the institutions the making of a yearly quality report in which they have to evaluate their programmes as to the meeting of the NQRs, their personnel and infrastructure, and the quality of teaching, learning, and research, only a few institutions took this task seriously. Since 2000/01, however, upon the HAC's initiation, the quality reports are annually compiled and sent to the HAC. That means that these reports are made in most cases only for the purpose of meeting the HAC's expectations and requirements, and thus can be considered basically externally driven. Their real internal use for quality improvement is, unfortunately, questionable or limited in many, though not in all, cases.
- d) **External evaluation (accreditation)** is compulsory both for new and operating programmes. The latter are evaluated and accredited by the HAC within the framework of institutional accreditation in an 8 year cycle. (See I.3. above.)

Summary of section 4

- The establishment and launching of new programmes is tied to accreditation, i.e. the meeting of predefined quality requirements. Each new programme must have a National Qualification Requirement.
- The current number of the degree programmes in Hungary is regarded a bit high while mobility of students is rather low.
- Internal institutional evaluation of programmes is only a recent phenomenon and it is still not very well developed.

5. The whys – Country specific issues

The following country specific issues can perhaps help to understand the background of the characteristics of the Hungarian QA system, answer the "Why?" questions to some extent and be thus, relevant for this study.

- a) **Licence (compliance) culture.** Higher education and the quality assurance of it in Hungary are characterised by **detailed legal regulations**. Of course, there are laws and decrees regulating the sector in other countries too, but their extent in Hungary, similarly to other post Communist countries, is perhaps wider, than in other parts of Europe. Besides the *Higher Education Act* there are various government decrees, for example on the establishment of new institutions, on the admission of students, on the credit system,

etc. Moreover, national qualification requirements are published as government decrees and, beyond relevant paragraphs in the HEA, there is a separate government decree on the operation of the *Hungarian Accreditation Committee* as well, prescribing in detail even the procedure for electing its president. One could almost say that against the usual interpretation of law and order, namely, that everything is allowed that is not prohibited by law, here the opposite approach seems to be prevailing: everything is allowed that is prescribed by law.

- b) **Accreditation vs. audit.** This approach or way of thinking can – together with other factors – explain why accreditation and not audit-type evaluation was chosen as the cornerstone of the Hungarian QA system and, moreover, why so meticulously worked out and detailed are the assessment procedures and requirements of the HAC. The conscious, explicitly stated explanation for the latter is that otherwise it would be very difficult to say “no” to sub-standard programmes, faculties, and institutions. Turned down actors would always appeal against the decisions, so the argument runs. It must be acknowledged, however, that accreditation and detailed requirements yielded some benefits at the same time, e.g. there are no so called “garage universities” in Hungary.

In relation to this issue the question of autonomy and state control, the relationship of the ministry, the sector, and – in between – the HAC should also be regarded. To summarise a recent analysis published elsewhere it can be said that though accreditation can be regarded as an effective tool partly contributing to indirect state control over the sector, the relative independence of the assessment process and the accrediting body itself makes the system balanced enough and acceptable to all parties involved. Interestingly enough, moreover, the system was initiated and organised by the sector in a bottom-up process.⁵

- c) **Standards with input focus.** Similarly, the above features, the prescriptive character and the accountability intentions help to understand why input elements dominate the accreditation requirements and assessment standards of the HAC. It is easier to be precise about, count, and agree on, the actual number of instructors with PhD or higher degree, and to prescribe the minimum qualification expected from a person in charge of a degree programme in the institution, than to assess the quality of the teaching process in an unambiguous way.
- d) **Personal elements in national QA.** It may seem a little bit strange at first sight but a close look on the genesis and development of the Hungarian accreditation system definitely shows that personal elements cannot be excluded when accounting for national characteristics of quality assurance of higher education in Hungary. Contributions, the values, thoughts, and arguments of the “founding fathers” influenced or even formed both the framework and the actual elements of the system. Moreover, since – as it is frequently said – the devil is in the detail, the intellectual approach and the way of thinking of the persons initially working out the details of procedures and guidebooks were also determining in this respect. This is also part of the explanation why the system is so meticulous and complex (or sometimes even complicated at places).

6. Conclusion – convergence in the future?

⁵ See more on this and related issues concerning the genesis and the value background – the “whys” – of the Hungarian accreditation system in: T.R. Szanto, “Higher Education – Hungary”, op.cit.

Finally, some words about the future. It must be noted, as it was mentioned earlier, that the Hungarian system (approach) is changing. Accreditation centred evaluation will be accompanied by direct quality management advice, which means a shift in the emphasis from accountability to quality enhancement. The input focus is intended to be weakened, more attention will be paid to the quality of the teaching and learning process, and the outcomes of it. Generally, the internal institutional quality assurance systems will come to the fore. All this is reflected in the *Strategic Plan* (2002) of the HAC.⁶ Following these intentions, the first actual steps of implementation have been taken by the recent launching of the pilot parallel (comparative) accreditation of all degree programmes in psychology and history, respectively.⁷

International patterns have also been taken into consideration in forming the Hungarian QA system. International involvement of the HAC and the country (Bologna!) hopefully remains strong in the future too. There are, of course, some “cornerstones” in the Hungarian QA system such as accreditation, the four-step methodology, or the relative independence of the national agency. Nevertheless, the system is a dynamic one with shifts and changes in time, and international involvement and participation in the forming European Higher Education Area mean that the system is open to constructive initiations promoting convergence in this field.

⁶ See <http://www.mab.hu/english/index.htm>, *Regulations* section.

⁷ See more on this in T.R. Szanto, „Programme accreditation in Hungary: Lessons from the past, plans for the future”. Paper presented at the INQAAHE conference in Dublin, Ireland, April 16, 2003. (Forthcoming in *Quality in Higher Education*)