

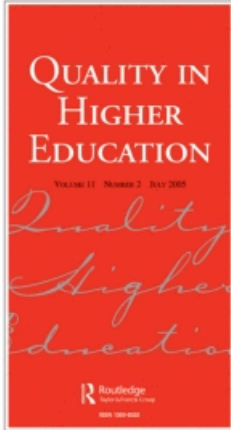
This article was downloaded by: [PERI Ethiopia]

On: 10 April 2011

Access details: Access Details: [subscription number 789104926]

Publisher Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Quality in Higher Education

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/title~content=t713443244>

When East Meets West: Decontextualizing the quality of East European higher education

Voldemar Tomusk^a

^a Open Society Institute, Budapest, Hungary

Online publication date: 18 August 2010

To cite this Article Tomusk, Voldemar(2000) 'When East Meets West: Decontextualizing the quality of East European higher education', *Quality in Higher Education*, 6: 3, 175 – 185

To link to this Article: DOI: 10.1080/13538320020005936

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13538320020005936>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Full terms and conditions of use: <http://www.informaworld.com/terms-and-conditions-of-access.pdf>

This article may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The accuracy of any instructions, formulae and drug doses should be independently verified with primary sources. The publisher shall not be liable for any loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.



When East Meets West: decontextualizing the quality of East European higher education

VOLDEMAR TOMUSK

Open Society Institute, Nador u. 11, 1051 Budapest, Hungary

ABSTRACT This paper discusses the new quality movement in East European higher education. Over the past decade quality assurance agencies have been established in most of the countries in the region. It has been argued that through quality assurance, East European states continue controlling higher education politically. However, a more complex interpretation of the situation may be appropriate. Analysing the post state-socialist quality assurance practices, it is proposed that the relationship between the political power and orthodox academe allows even in the current public policy vacuum using them primarily in one direction, fighting non-traditional institutions, programmes, and teaching methods. While post state-socialist countries present their quality assurance initiatives as a part of the Westernization programme, they stand in strong contrast to the 'fitness for the purpose' mantra applied in Western Europe. However, there have recently emerged signs, for example, the OECD performance indicators project, suggesting that the convergence of East and West may take place not through relating post state-socialist quality assurance processes more closely to local contexts, but by a radical decontextualization of the Western approaches.

Higher education systems in the former state-socialist countries of Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia have recently experienced a few remarkable changes. Rapid growth in the numbers of students, tripling or quadrupling the numbers of institutions, emerging short-cycle (vocational) higher education and the related change in the meaning of higher education belong among the most noticeable of recent developments. Particular trends have often been presented in the context of the transition from the centrally planned economy and totalitarian communism to market economy and liberal democracy. However, it should be noticed that in many of these economically and politically troubled countries market remains an option only to the minority who in addition to a regular job also have a regular income. It is not an option for most academics, for example, many in the Ukraine only receive cash compensation twice a year. Democracy is not exactly abundant even in the most democratic regions and many ideologies developed by the new and old nationalist technocrats have changed little. Democratically elected dictators is another feature of several countries. Considering all of that, one cannot find too much evidence to support the governments' claims on high priority for education, nor do the visible signs support the politically determined discourse on successful transition from communism to capitalism.

The East European Quality Movement

One of the most common characteristics among the higher education systems of many of the post state–socialist countries is high attention paid to quality assurance. Since 1989 higher education quality agencies have been established in Central Europe as well as in many of the former Soviet Union countries. Romania initiated the ‘quality assurance’ movement in the East in the early 1990s. More recently, Armenia’s 1999 Education Act introduces the concept of accreditation in this much-troubled Caucasian country, apparently as a part of its Westernization programme.

It is symptomatic for the post-totalitarian higher education that quality assurance is addressed uniquely through the process of non-voluntary accreditation. Quality assurance and accreditation are considered as synonyms. The latter has given to many of the East European quality experts a good reason to argue about the total lack of higher education quality assurance under the former political regime (Tomusk, 1996). This may, however, not reflect the situation. Although there were no accreditation procedures as such, there was actually no need for them as the quality of higher education was assured through more direct means like direct control over the content as well as administration of higher education. As Ratcliff (1998), puts it:

It should be noted that accreditation is not necessary if all institutions ascribe to identical standards for admission and graduation.

Accreditation became only meaningful when the state lost control over a noticeable part of higher education. It did not usually happen through the increase of the distance between the state and the traditional higher education sector but through the emergence of a significant number of new private higher education institutions.

The massive rise of private higher education institutions came to many of the East European governments as a great surprise and it took several years until the legislation to regulate the operations of private higher education institutions was adopted. Sterian (1996) presents the uncontrolled and unregulated growth in the number of higher education institutions as the main reason to launch the system of quality assurance in Romanian higher education. Within 5 years of the December 1989 revolution in Romania the number of universities had grown from 44 to 130. In all, 74 out of 86 new universities were private. In many Eastern European countries the proportions and speed of the growth of higher education has been similar. For example, Estonia had six higher education institutions in 1989 and 38 in 1999. Common reaction to this has been to introduce quality assurance measures. In a time of high interest in the quality of higher education in Europe it provides, among others, a convenient cover for almost any policy agenda a particular government may have.

Ratcliff (1998) summarizes the dominant quality assurance models:

... the French model of external reviews serves as an archetype for quality of the educational program or institution through implicit or explicit comparisons. The English model of quality assurance through peer review serves well the aim of enhancing program effectiveness and improving teaching and learning. The American model of voluntary accreditation, drawing on both traditions, ensures that the quality review process is conducted outside the context of government funding and control. Self-study criteria and peers conducting reviews are promulgated across state boundaries insuring that one system is examined within the context and experience of other but with the primary aim of program enhancement and improvement of student learning.

It is ironic that instead of following the largely external French model that seems to fit better for the East European thinking and policy discourse many of the countries have chosen the Dutch model. Jones and Ratcliff (1999) describe the origins of the latter as follows:

Beginning in the mid-1980s, the Netherlands developed new policies for program review and quality assurance adapted primarily from the United States model of self-study, peer review, and self-regulation, giving particular attention to the quality of teaching and instruction.

According to Frederiks *et al.* (1994, p. 181):

Quality management has been an issue in Dutch higher education since the 1980s. Quality Assessment of education was introduced on the political agenda as a part of the new policy of the government, with the policy paper *Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality* (1985). In exchange for a larger measure of administrative autonomy, the universities promised to retain and enhance their levels of quality in education. Quality assessment then appeared on a systematic level and nationwide scale in 1988, when the Association of Universities in the Netherlands (VSNU) implemented its new responsibility.

East European early democracies are not too shy presenting their success in Westernizing higher education. Launching of quality assurance mechanisms is often presented as one of the significant examples for catching up with the West. However, there is a significant gap between the Dutch steering from the distance and East European policy of direct administrative interference. Unique unanimity prevails among East European countries on the issue that higher education institutions that do not pass the state accreditation should be closed by administrative means. The experience of the countries where the new, so-called Western quality assurance methods have been applied for long enough to expect real outcomes, for example, Romania, demonstrates a high but selective productivity of the process: many, if not the majority, of private institutions are closed down while the public institutions remain intact.

Ten years earlier, many expected the opposite to happen, that the communist higher education establishment, fatally contaminated with narrow careerism and brainwashing, was to be closed and an alternative one based on free intellectual inquiry established. Following the critique of the late 1980s it would be difficult to define the kind of quality which is so much higher in the traditional higher education, and provide a good reason why the new private sector is performing so much worse. Both sectors use the same teachers, many of them working often part-time in three of four universities, public and private (Tomusk, 1997a). The argument about poor infrastructure of private universities also fails, because many of the governments have not been able, for almost a decade, to invest into public universities' infrastructure either. The blame private universities bear is that the majority of them, but not all, have not been able to offer better higher education than deteriorating public sector universities. In practice, instead of leading higher education towards improvement, the quality agencies seem to have taken the role of the quality police protecting the monopoly of traditional institutions. This appears to be comparable to what Broadfoot (1998, p. 157) says about the impact of the current quality measures on a changing university:

It is therefore peculiarly ironic, ... that at the very time when these same institutions are facing a challenge to change on what is arguably an unprecedented scale,

they are being caught up as never before in the trammels of formal assessment which are binding them ever more tightly to the *status quo*.

The reason for private institutions' unsuccessful accreditation may lay in the policy that they are sent to the accreditation fire first; state run universities follow later, if at all. Traditional, politically powerful universities have the channels to negotiate accreditation decisions even if the formal requirements are clearly not met. On the other hand, given the dependence of the state higher education institutions on the state the latter is to be blamed if things go awry. Universities, for example, in Russia, do not wait for too long to remind the state about the unmet funding commitments that may be as much as half of allocated budgets (Tomusk, 1998). When the state starts accrediting its universities under these circumstances it is actually accrediting itself.

Two Models of Accreditation in Eastern Europe

We can broadly distinguish between two models of accreditation in the region of Central East Europe and the former Soviet Union. More Western-oriented countries like Hungary, Romania but also the Baltic States of the former Soviet Union largely follow what is perceived as the Dutch model. The Council of Europe has done significant work importing this model to Eastern Europe. The process usually combines self-study and peer review. As a major difference from the Dutch approach the Ministry of Education has an ownership over the process either directly or through a pseudo-independent agency. They support the new initiatives with statements like: 'You are doing all the necessary things, and you are doing them in the right way' (Gilder, 1996).

Western experts ignore how an initially formative evaluation model aimed at the programme improvement has been turned into a summative one guiding rather significant administrative decisions concerning, among other things, institutions' further existence. Mentioning voluntary accreditation as the author of the above statement does in his presentation to the Romanian quality agency (NCEAA) looks particularly hypocritical, if not cynical, in the context where demonstrating insufficient volunteerism leads to a heavy punishment. However, there are experts, even in countries with longer democratic traditions, who see that the problem can be easily solved by threatening with even more severe punishments:

The thrust of the argument is that by heavily penalizing any visited departments which are found to be cheating in their self-assessment, honest revelation can be induced by reducing to below unity (indeed to close to zero) the probability of a visit. (Johnes, 1997)

The final decision concerning accreditation belongs usually to the executive branch of the government. In Estonia the Minister of Education approves the proposal made by the Higher Education Evaluation Council (Tomusk, 1997b). At least in one country, Romania, final decision concerning programme as well as institutional accreditation belongs to the parliament (Tomusk, 1996).

The Russian Federation has developed another quality assurance model that serves as a prototype for many of the former Soviet Union countries, particularly for the newly independent states in Central Asia and Trans-Caucasus. Its outcomes are, however, not too different from the Central European counterparts—limiting the role of private provision of higher education and dictating the content of studies. It is also important to notice that all concerned countries initiated quality assurance procedures at the point where expansion of

the system had been going on for several years. This implies that negative accreditation decision does not have a meaning of not establishing a new institution but closing an operating one.

In the Russian quality assurance process the accreditation constitutes the last step in a three-tier process (Tomusk, 1996, 1998). First, every higher education institution, in order to operate, should have a government licence. Again, before this regulation was passed hundreds of institutions had already been established. At one point all these institutions had to apply for the licence retrospectively. Prior to issuing the licence, teaching conditions in the to-be higher education institution and qualifications of its teaching staff are checked.

The second step is attestation, which means state examinations of graduates, administered by the state attestation services. Fifty percent of the students of three consecutive cohorts should pass these examinations for the institution to be positively evaluated. Attestation is to be renewed once in a 5-year period. Positive attestation seems to be a necessary but not sufficient condition for accreditation. Teaching conditions, administrative procedures and other aspects are studied as well. For example, in Belarus the final phase of the accreditation is a month-long site visit of the expert commission set up by the Ministry of Education. When this finds that an institution complies with all the requirements the institution will finally be accredited.

Accreditation confirms formal equality between a leading state higher education institution whose programme in a particular field of study has been accepted as the standard and an accredited institution. It is done, however, in an extremely narrow way: expecting a near-complete match between the contents of study, teaching methods as well as results of the two programmes. This may raise a question about the purpose of alternative higher education if all possible alternative elements are outlawed. The answer may well be that there is no such purpose. Whether this reveals a systematic policy to discriminate against private initiative in higher education or the leading academics' belief that they possess the ultimate truth needs to be studied further. Quality assurance has been introduced as a part of the politically driven Westernization project and applied in the only possible direction. As the process is controlled by senior academics it slows rather than accelerates the renewal of the content of higher education studies in Eastern Europe.

Defining the Quality Standards

The end of the Cold War has, in addition to showing the military and economic strength of some of the formerly dominant countries of Eastern Europe in a new light, had a rather similar impact on the renown of their educational systems. As the fictitious nature of their economic power and military strength has been revealed in a humiliating way, the education which was recently praised for launching its scientific and technological foundations has been, to some extent, reassessed among the international community. Some of the recent studies, for example, by Savchuk *et al.* (1997), clearly indicate the pain of reconciling the official discourse of unprecedented development and success under the communist rule since 1917 with the undeniable misery of higher education of the 1990s.

The political and economic conditions set insurmountable dilemmas for systems of quality assurance. A decade ago East European higher education was, not always without reason, blamed for serving the communist establishment. However, the new systems have not addressed many of the important reform issues and have channelled the reforms into cheap but cosmetic changes. What the post-Cold War East European higher education needs, to control the external forces which push it towards the changes many of these organizations may not be able to accommodate, is an abstract and distant quality standard.

Ratcliff (1998) notes that: 'Central to the process of quality assurance is how and who gets to decide what constitutes quality.' In another place Jones and Ratcliff (1999) complain that: 'Unfortunately, there is no absolute agreement to what constitutes quality, ...' Not everybody shares this view, there are people who know exactly what constitutes quality but also those who believe that there is no need to define it precisely.

The dominant thinking among the theoreticians of quality of higher education seems to be based on the premise that the quality is highly contextual. Brennan *et al.*, (1991) express this, defining the quality of higher education in terms of fitness for the purpose. For no wonder the new European quality movement has found this definition highly useful. It enables technocrats controlling the quality process to operate at an abstract level without having a direct need to deal with the substance of study. With this, quality is assured by a simple comparison between the expected and real outcomes. Possible difficulties arising from non-quantifiability of some of the factors may not be considered as too serious an issue. It is probably assumed that combining the process with peer review will resolve all outstanding concerns. Well, not necessarily. Peers may or may not have the margin of freedom and ability to reach beyond semiautomatic process of applying the quality formula.

The technocratic process, among other things, allows one to deal with the concerns of those always complaining intellectuals who believe that a statement on absolute relativism (just define the purpose!) is self-contradictory and who look for more stable reference points. Trying to reach universal applicability through emptying the concept of quality is problematic:

Quality ... you know what it is, yet you don't know what it is. But that's self-contradictory. But some things are better than others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There's nothing to talk about. But if you can't say what quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes it does not exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist. (Pirsig, 1974, p. 187)

Absolute relativism as an approach to quality assurance may have economic justifications in times when quality assurance has become just another global business and disappointing those who commission particular services may not fit for the purpose of generating income. Its philosophical and moral roots are, however, weak.

One can easily imagine a situation where a college of applied biology or a similar vocational higher education institution is established in a not particularly democratic country and accreditation is sought from a Western entrepreneurial university. Given that it does not contradict a UN embargo, and agreement is reached concerning the service fee, there seems to be nothing contradicting the current quality discourse to accredit the college. There seems to be no reason why the actual purpose of the college (even if the latter is defined in terms of preparing high quality specialists for the biological warfare programme) should constitute anything like a problem. While the desire to earn profit puts a strong pressure on universities to ignore other less tangible considerations, it seems to be difficult to separate quality from some fundamental values—for example, from the value of human life. This leads back to Pirsig's quality dilemma and Putnam's (1994) fact and value question often ignored within the current quality discourse as irrelevant. Bringing in entrepreneurial visiting peers may not suffice to maintain the eroding values of the academe for too long. One reason why Western liberal democracies have been ignoring

certain value issues may well be the assumption about the universality of those values. However, the rise of the entrepreneurial university has put a strong pressure on these values.

As fitness for the purpose is not a good solution for East European countries, because there is apparently no purpose, a solution to the dilemma is to be found at the other extreme. With this the quality target is to be defined on an infinite distance. Meeting international standards as the quality target for higher education occupies a significant place in the East European quality discourse. The former Eastern bloc countries in Central Europe as well as former Soviet Union present meeting the world standards as their main aim, and declare, on all possible occasions, that these have been actually met. For example, the State Committee of Higher Education of the Russian Federation has prepared a special comparative report (GOSKOMVUZ, 1995). The aim of the document is to show that the Standard of Higher Professional Education fully meets the world standards as established by Cambridge University, Princeton, Texas Austin, Bremen, Karlsruhe and some others (Tomusk, 1998). Even if there is anything true in these conclusions there is no discussion of whether providing this education within the Russian context is appropriate and compatible with the needs of the country. The East European quality discourse at large ignores the fact that if there is anything that can be called world or international standard of higher education it is closely related to training highly qualified labour force for the particular environment. It may well be the case that East Europeans do not want to have much to do with their own environment and circumstances (massive unemployment, unpredictability of the labour market demand for graduates, and overproduction of graduates), particularly in science and engineering-related fields. Some reasons for that are discussed below.

Inevitability of Absolute Standards in the Post-totalitarian Society

Discussing higher education within the East European context has its inherent dangers. First, if higher education in general is highly context specific, then it would be easy to conclude that higher education under communist regimes was also context specific. This raises issues about whether communist-era graduates are suitable for the changed conditions. This is a politically unacceptable point as it renders not only many of the current senior faculty but also much of the new state nobility (Tomusk, 2000) without appropriate academic training.

There are also strong reasons why the quality standards for East European higher education cannot be derived from the needs of the new economies and transformed societies. Studying the content of education East European universities offer, one can recognize that not too much has changed as compared with the programmes of 1989. Discontinuation of previously obligatory courses of orthodox Marxist–Leninist philosophy and communist/socialist party histories may be the only wide-scale changes. However, even with this it is often recognized that the units in charge of teaching those subjects have been renamed into units of political science, sociology or modern history and the same faculty continue teaching the new subject to the extent they can (Kovaleva, 1999).

However, it would not be fair to blame the universities for not changing. Universities face a particular difficulty trying to define their purpose at a time when, from a technical point of view, there is hardly any. Formerly the countries had at least formal mechanisms through which the developmental needs of the state–socialist economies were translated into university programmes and the expected quantity of graduates. For example, the

structure of central planning in the Soviet Union collected the information from the enterprises concerning their expected needs for graduates and, based on that, it prepared the student admission quota for higher education institutions. Highly centralized structures were also established to prepare programme and course prescriptions for each programme and course. The post state–socialist transition has broken only part of this process. The central level is still strong and often covers drafting or adopting detailed programme descriptions (so-called state standards) for the universities as well as setting the *numerus clausus*. The feedback loop, through which the system of higher education was fed with information, has been broken as the structures of central planning responsible for this have been dissolved. Somehow, one half of the former command system continues its rather independent life. While this can have some political justification, in the long term it erodes the credibility of higher education preventing the universities from defining their own mission and establishing direct links to society and its changing needs.

Universities continue teaching in a traditional way, retaining much of the old material, even though the relevance of the training may be questionable. However, it can be argued that the content of education in transition economies does not really matter. Universities still fulfil a very important social purpose, keeping a large share of young people and university staff busy in times when the situation in the labour market is particularly difficult. Moreover, it is accomplished at an extremely low cost. Recent discussions concerning, for example, lifelong learning indicate that expanding the social mission of higher education to accommodate growing numbers of unemployed people is relevant for post state–socialist economies. Various forms of higher education may soon fill the lives of many adult people also in developed economies without giving much hope of entering regular employment before retirement, constituting, therefore, a formula for ‘eternal youth’ (Baron *et al.*, 1999). One should not blame the politicians either in the East or in the West if they find a way to make political capital out of this situation, which may have other interpretations than continuing progress and democratization, presenting, among the other things, their respective higher education systems as meeting the universal standards. Ultimately, this is what they are paid for.

It seems to be the case that the post state–socialist countries in East Europe as well as the OECD are moving in the same direction: decontextualizing of quality (Henry *et al.*, 2000). While the drive behind the OECD performance indicators’ project is the commodification of knowledge on the increasingly global markets, East European quality discourse seems to be based on different premises: first, that there is a final body of relatively stable knowledge, and second, that this body of knowledge is already at the disposal of the leading universities of particular countries. Leaving aside the possible source of this knowledge, whether it is copied from Oxford or established by representatives of class-conscious proletariat, the framework itself implies the continuation of orthodox Leninist thinking. Looking for the possible reasons for the hidden continuation of many ideas from communist ideology in contemporary East Europe, one could possibly reach the conclusion that the changes of late 1980s were not much related to the crisis of ideology, but were manipulated by the second echelon of the functionaries themselves (Tomusk, 2000). Those are the people who translated their former networks and positions into economic wealth. The ideology itself has not been emptied.

Multiplicity of the Quality Contexts

The argument that state–socialist higher education meets international standards has been based on the achievements of the Soviet higher education and that of its former East

European allies in hard sciences and mathematics. Recent scholarship, for example, by Graham (1987), confirms that despite the inevitable need to use some Marxist–Leninist rhetoric even introducing works on physics, scholarship and training in these fields has been comparable with anything provided internationally. There is also little reason to make training in geometry context dependent. The scholarly standards in the fields of fundamental research are established by the respective research communities internationally. However, whether the research community finds it acceptable (at least hypothetically) to be involved, for example, in a peer review of fundamental science serving the aims of global revolution of the proletariat or a similar aim is an ethical issue the community itself should solve.

The problem much East European higher education has had is that success in a few fields of fundamental sciences was extended to philosophy and social sciences. The academic results of the latter and training in these fields stands little international comparison. While scholarship in the fields like sociology or political science can also be assessed against relatively stable views on good scholarship by particular international research communities the aim of the East European social sciences has been much narrower. The primary aim of the state–socialist philosophy and social sciences was to justify the existence of the particular ideology and political régime. It was largely unscientific by nature and as such lost its relevance with the collapse of respective political régimes. Based on the liberal quality discourse one may try to argue that it was of reasonable quality as it met the purpose attributed to it by former political régimes and that it lost its quality because of the rapidly changing external conditions. One may, however, wish to see the education carry more universal qualities than those defined by a particular political ideology, no less in the West than in the East.

While the quality of scholarship can be assessed within the relatively stable context of international research communities, higher education is more than purely academic training. Higher education has at least two more elements that are considerably more context dependent than basic scholarly knowledge and research skills: personality development functions and development of certain transferable skills.

It is often said that traditional British higher education has much to do with the development of a ‘gentleman’. The state–socialist higher education had its own personality-forming mission. This was to mould a ‘*tovarishch*’ or a comrade: a person brainwashed with a particular of ideology, hating capitalism and private gain, ready to sacrifice one’s life for the global revolution. It is not surprising that the East European régimes did much to use higher education for the development of the communist personality. While one can argue that the state–socialist higher education was ultimately oriented towards the development of heavy industry, political loyalty was considered as necessary, if not the most important, element of any professional qualification, for example, of an engineer.

The enthusiasm with which many trained within the old higher education were involved in overthrowing the régimes they had been trained for and restoring much contrary to their training says something about the success of the personality-forming programme. Its remnants are probably disappearing from universities. What these are replaced with is not fully clear. It may be an ideal of a rational profit-seeker that the new emerging market economies may expect higher education to produce. However, as nation building is considered as being an important task in many of the newly independent countries, one can also expect that the universities put a serious stress on the development of national consciousness. In the 1990s, the rector of a leading Estonian university published thoughts concerning the university’s role in nation building (Aaviksoo, 1992) quite suitable for the Central European context some 60 years earlier. The second half of the 1990s seems to

indicate that recovery of national pride is becoming an important task for Russian higher education (RF, 1999).

While the state–socialist higher education stresses memorizing large quantities of facts and soundness of the communist soul, transferable skills are gradually coming to the attention of higher education. Particularly, knowledge in foreign languages and computer skills are more attractive for private businesses than particular rigorous academic knowledge.

Availability of information technology is one of the issues looked at during the accreditation process in most of the countries. Still, few of the students have regular access to computers and foreign language teachers were the first to leave universities for better compensated positions in the business sphere. While there seems to be a tendency to form a list of general skills helping a graduate throughout one's life career, the required skills are also context dependent: even information technology develops so fast that computer skills need to be specified further to be useful. The fact that many East European graduates have built successful careers abroad indicates that the system had many unintended outcomes developing, for example, critical thinking—not only critical about the capitalism as it was supposed to be, but also itself. Reassessing the purpose of higher education in various contexts is emerging as a major issue not only for the bureaucracies and business administrators.

Conclusion

Higher education is a heterogeneous field, and attempts to assess it against a single universal standard cannot be successful. While in the East European countries a strong desire exists to confirm that the quality of its higher education meets the international standards or that it is catching up (Cerych, 1995), this is largely driven by particular political programmes. The reason why the countries are trying to find vaguely defined universal standards instead of more substantial local ones seems to be related to the threat of having a far-reaching public debate on the purpose of higher education for the previous state–socialist political régimes. Such a debate may too easily lead to a conclusion that a significant part of higher education lost its purpose as the old political and economic establishment collapsed.

There is also something that current quality research in the West can learn from the recent East European history. The state–socialist countries had tried to relate higher education to the perceived needs of the society to the extent unknown in the history of the university. Defining the quality of higher education as infinitely contextual, to an extent that any factual evidence that questioned particular ideology was declared to be mistaken, corrupted higher education and particularly all fields of social studies and philosophy. Profitability as a truth criterion may have similar impact on higher education.

Higher education is contextual to a significant extent, particularly on its aspects related to the development of particular skills and cultivating certain personal characteristics. With the diversification and the move from strictly academic to vocational training, higher education is becoming increasingly related to local needs rather than requirements of global research communities. This should be, however, constrained with principles of academic integrity and certain universal values. Newly established East European quality assurance mechanisms are driven by many concerns including internal and external politics, interests of particular universities and academic groups as well as by the need to secure social stability. However, its connection to education remains relatively weak. In the

long term this may become a serious problem. The Western world striving for higher homogeneity may at some point in the future face a similar situation.

References

- AAVIKSOO, J., 1992, 'Mõtteid ülikooli arengust' ['Thoughts on the evolution of the university'], *Tartu Ülikool*, 3(4), pp. 39–44.
- BARON, S., RIDDELL, S. & WILSON, A., 1999, 'The secret of eternal youth: identity, risk and learning difficulties', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 20(4), pp. 483–499.
- BRENNAN, J., GOEDEGEBUURE, L.C.J., WESTERHEIDJEN, D.F. & SHAH, T. (1991) Comparing quality in Europe, publication no. 101 in the series *Higher Education Policy Studies* (Enschede, CHEPS, University of Twente).
- BROADFOOT, P., 1998, 'Quality standards and control in higher education: what price life-long learning?', *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 8(2), pp. 155–180.
- CERYCH, L., 1995, 'Educational reforms in Central and Eastern Europe', *European Journal of Education*, 30(4), pp. 423–435.
- FREDERIKS, M.M.H., WESTERHEIDJEN, D.F. & WEUSTHOF, P.J.M., 1994, 'Effects of quality assessment in Dutch higher education', *European Journal of Education*, 29(2), pp. 181–199.
- GILDER, E., 1996, Report on the UNESCO/CEPES Seminar *Quality Management in Higher Education*, Bucharest, 23 May.
- GOSKOMVUZ, 1995, *Podgotovka specialistov v oblasti gumanitarnykh i social'no-ekonomicheskikh nauk* (Moskva, GOSKOMVUZ).
- GRAHAM, L.R., 1987, *Science, Philosophy, and Human Behavior in the Soviet Union* (New York, Columbia University Press).
- HENRY, M., LINGARD, B., RIZVIE, F. & TAYLOR, S., 2000, *The OECD, Globalization and Policy Making in Education* (Oxford, Elsevier Science).
- JOHNES, G., 1997, 'The funding of higher education in the United Kingdom', in HARE, P. (Ed.) *Structure and Financing of Higher Education in Russia, Ukraine and the EU* (London, Jessica Kingsley).
- JONES, E.A. & RATCLIFF, J.L., 1999, 'Global perspectives on program assessment and accreditation', in LATEGAN, L., FOURIE, A. & STRYDOM, A. (Eds.) *Programme Assessment in Higher Education in South Africa* (Blomfontein, RSA, Unit for Higher Education Research, University of the Orange Free State).
- KOVALEVA, E., 1999, 'Progress and issues in reforming social science teaching in Ukraine', paper presented at the *Second Annual CEP Eastern Scholars Roundtable*, Lviv State University, Lviv, Ukraine, May.
- PIRSIG, R.M., 1974, *Zen and the Art of the Motorcycle Maintenance: An inquiry into values* (London, Vintage).
- PUTNAM, H., 1994, *Words and Life* (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press).
- RATCLIFF, J.L., 1998, 'Institutional self-evaluation and quality assurance: a global view', in STRYDOM, A. & LATEGAN, L. (Eds.) *Institutional Self-Evaluation in Higher Education in South Africa* (Blomfontein, RSA, Unit for Higher Education Research, University of the Orange Free State).
- RF, 1999, 'Natsional'naya doktrina obrazovaniya v Rossijskoj Federatsii: proekt' ['National doctrine of education of the Russian Federation'], document drafted by the Science and Education Committee of the State Duma of the Russian Federation.
- SAVCHUK, V., LUZIK, P., GAL, I. & OPARIN, V., 1997, 'Higher education in Ukraine: structure and financing', in HARE, P. (Ed.) *Structure and Financing of Higher Education in Russia, Ukraine and the EU* (London, Jessica Kingsley).
- STERIAN, P., 1996, 'Quality assurance system in Romanian higher education', paper presented at the *Regional Training Seminar for Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Self Assessment and Peer Review*, Budapest, 10–16 November.
- TOMUSK, V., 1996, 'Quality in transition: attributing a meaning to quality in Central–East European higher education', in LAMBERT, J.L. & BANTA, T.W. (Compilers) *Proceedings of the Eighth International Conference on Assessing Quality in Higher Education*, Queensland, Australia, 14–16 July, pp. 291–301.
- TOMUSK, V., 1997a, 'Conflict and interaction in Central and East European higher education: the triangle of red giants, white dwarfs and black holes', *Tertiary Education and Management*, 3(3), pp. 247–255.
- TOMUSK, V., 1997b, 'External quality assurance in Estonian higher education: its glory, take-off and crash', *Quality in Higher Education*, 3(2), pp. 173–181.
- TOMUSK, V., 1998, 'Developments in Russian higher education: legislative and policy reform within Central and East European context', *Minerva*, 36(2), pp. 125–146.
- TOMUSK, V., 2000, 'Reproduction of the "State Nobility" in Eastern Europe: past patterns and new practices', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 21(2), pp. 269–282.