QUALITY IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION -

Theological Reflections on possible Guidelines for International Standards

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OUR CONTEXT TODAY – DIFFERENT WAYS OF ACCREDITATION AND SETTING OF QUALITY STANDARDS FOR THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

- ◉ *secular and state related national agencies for quality assurance* in higher education have been established which have to provide accreditation for all higher education institutions, including theological schools and theological faculties;

- ◉ *secular and regional accreditation agencies* which combine several states and provide accreditation and quality assurance also for institutions of theological education;

- ◉ *Christian associations of theological schools* are serving themselves as accrediting and quality assurance instruments for their constituency of Christian schools and theological colleges only;

- ◉ *church-related associations of theological schools which provide quality assurance of theological education, but no legal accreditation of the institutions* but continuous visits and evaluations to schools which are affiliated to the associations, but receive accreditation from secular bodies;

- ◉ *denominational associations of theological schools* or Bible colleges which provide accreditation and quality assurance only to member institutions coming from the same denominational background;

- ◉ Accreditation for theological schools and Bible colleges which see themselves as *international branches or local extensions of 'mother institutions in some countries of usually the US or South Korea* provided via the relation to 'mother' schools outside the local context and in no relation to regional bodies for accreditation and quality assurance within the country (one of the realities of rapid spread of cross border education);

- ◉ in several contexts only a *weak or no common understanding of quality in theological education at all*.

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POLITICAL TRENDS TOWARDS COMMON STANDARDS OF QUALITY ASSURANCES IN HEIS

- 1) European Higher Education Area with common standards of quality assurance and the ECTS system; European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
- 2) Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) to develop a Students' Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) System at the East African Regional level
- 3) Asian University network developed a quality assurance system as an instrument for maintaining, improving and enhancing teaching, research and the overall institutional academic standards of higher education institutions of Member Universities

DIFFERENT WAYS OF ASSESSING QUALITY IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

- 1) Three factors to play a crucial role:

- a) the expectations and understanding of theological education held by the churches; b) the general academic standards of higher education,

- c) the specific needs and socio-cultural conditions of a concrete local social context and denominational tradition.

- 2) shift from resources-based assessment (what does an institution make available in terms of educational resources to students?) to an outcome-based system of quality assessment (what are the results of higher education in terms of competences, abilities and qualifications in the students and candidates after their graduation?)

NEED FOR MORE THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON CRITERIA FOR QUALITY IN THEOLOGICAL EDUCATION

- What are the underlining theological presuppositions for sets of quality criteria for theological education in a given social and denominational context?

- What is the relation between general or secular sets of criteria for assessment in higher theological education and specific sets of criteria which emerge out of specifically theological concerns?

- To what extend is there a common ground between different sets of criteria for theological education programs between different social and denominational contexts?

NEED FOR COMMON GUIDELINES – SOME SHARED CONVICTIONS

- Christians from all different denominations have a call to serve the unity of the body of Christ in the area of theological education;

- we need to develop a system of more mutual accountability, comparability and convertibility of theological courses through common standards in quality of theological education between the different regions and denominational traditions;

- an integral concept of quality in theological education is vital for the very future of church unity and the ecumenical movement . Churches of different denominational tradition and confession do share enough in common to make it possible to formulate some *common principles of quality in theological education*;

NEED FOR COMMON GUIDELINES – SOME SHARED CONVICTIONS

- government accrediting agencies increasingly demand for common standards across any denominational line of affiliation (see UNESCO Higher Education Reports 2007 and 2008 http://www.guni-rmies.net/info/default.php?id=89;

- considerations for a *proper Christian understanding of quality of theological education* - while certainly being related and responsive to some general requirements of higher education – should never be left only to secular or governmental authorities but should be defined in a frame of reference which reflects genuine *theological* perspectives,

- the internalization of theological degrees and particularly of online-courses of theological schools in the US and other western countries (which can threaten the role of local institutions and programs for theological education in the South) demands for clearer regulations on standards and models of proper partnership between theological schools in the North and in the South.

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GOALS OF THE PROPOSAL FOR COMMON GUIDELINES

- to present a first draft of a common and ecumenical framework of understanding of the essential elements contributing to quality of theological education worldwide;

- to stimulate an international debate on common basic elements for a theological understanding of quality in theological education;

- to serve as a reference document for regional associations of theological schools and for inter-regional dialogue between institutions of theological education in different regional and ecclesial contexts.

- to inform processes of formulating concrete assessment criteria and evaluation procedures in regional or national contexts which serve as a basis for concrete institutional processes of quality assurance and accreditation (while not replacing them);

- to also reflect on the asymmetries in today's world between the rich and the poor, the asymmetries in terms of availability of higher education and the imbalance in terms of who has the power to define quality in theological education. The criteria should reflect critically on the existing asymmetries in power and accessibility of theological education and try to formulate shared principles;

CONTENT OF DRAFT GUIDELINES

1) *Comprehensiveness:* theological education should be offered and maintained in all crucial fields and disciplines of theology such as Biblical Theology in OT and NT, Church History, Systematic Theology, Practical or Pastoral Theology while the way the theological contents are organized in certain modules and courses (traditional disciplines; integrated courses; new clusters or thematic areas) remains flexible;

2) *Inclusiveness:* Theological Education should allow gender issues to play a vital role in theological reflection and women should have equal representation and roles in theological teaching and research;

3) *Catholicity:* Theological Education should allow for a substantial introduction to World Christianity and to a diverse spectrum of Christian denominations while at the same time also allowing for a proper introduction into one or several denominational traditions and identities to which the respective theological schools is related to;

4) *Ecumenicity:* Theological Education should be concerned about the unity and common witness of all Christian denominations, capacity building for church unity and bridging the historical divides between evangelicalism, ecumenism, Pentecostalism and Independent churches;

CONTENT OF DRAFT GUIDELINES

5) *Public Theology*: Theological Education should be engaged in strengthening Public Theology, commitment to issues of justice, peace and integrity of creation and has a vital concern for ethics in church and society;

6) *Inter-disciplinarity:* interdisciplinary learning and cooperation between theological disciplines is encouraged as well as dialogue between theological reflection and social sciences, methods of field research and social analysis have a regular presence within theological education;

7) *Hermeneutic sensitivity in Bible studies*: Theological education while always related to a solid understanding of the foundational sources of Christian faith in biblical tradition enables for hermeneutical sensitivity in terms of openness and knowledge on different Biblical hermeneutics and their validity and mutual correctiveness;

8) *Interactive and empowering educational methods*: Theological education is encouraging interactive learning styles of learning between teachers and students and tends to avoid styles of teaching from above and merely repetitive teaching;

CONTENT OF DRAFT GUIDELINES

9) *Interdenominational cooperation:* Theological Education deliberately invites for interdenominational and ecumenical cooperation between different institutions of theological education and avoids closing up in mono-denominational or mono-cultural social milieus;

10) *Contextuality:* Theological Education visibly aims at strengthening the development of contextual theologies related to the burning issues of today's people struggle for justice, peace and human dignity;

11) *Anti-discriminatory stand:* Theological education has a clear commitment to unveil and counter all forms of overt or hidden racism, social or cultural prejudice and discrimination of social, sexual or cultural or ethnic minorities;

12) *Mission-Mindedness:* Theological Education enhances the development of a missionary spirit and a mission-minded theology with cultural sensitivity, a passion for mission according to Christ's way and a commitment to common mission with others ;

CONTENT OF DRAFT GUIDELINES

13) *Interfaith commitment:* Theological Education has a firm commitment to encourage and include interfaith learning and inter-religious encounter;

14) *Listening to voices of the marginalized:* Theological Education has certain ways which make sure that the voices of the marginalized and the concerns of the poor are heard and reflected upon within the theological reflection process;

15) *Holistic and liberating educational method:* Theological Education is marked by constant attempts to develop a holistic and multi-dimensional method of education which involves body, mind and spirit;

16) *Integrative Spirituality:* Theological Education tries to integrate academic, social and spiritual formation so that Christian identities and spiritual life can be deepened and strengthened throughout the whole process of theological education;

CONTENT OF DRAFT GUIDELINES

17) *Stability and Viability:* Theological Education institutions and course programs provide a basic stability and continuity so that students as well as teachers can rely on its continuation;

18) *Ownership:* While enjoying a certain degree of autonomy there is a clear and broad sense of positive ownership for institutions of theological education by the respective churches in a given region;

19) *International partnership:* Theological schools are open to innovative forms of international partnerships in theological schools with theological institutions in other parts of the word which respect, support and enhance local programs of theological education and do not impose dominant models from external contexts.

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