Theological Perspectives for Guidelines on International Standards of Quality in Theological Education

A discussion starter from ETE-WCC for WOCATI Conference in Johannesburg, 4-8th July 2011

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Introduction
It is the interest and purpose of this short paper from WCC-ETE to raise the question whether it would make sense to have some common global guidelines on quality in theological education and a proper theological reflection on this as part of the global network of regional associations of theological schools related to the WCC and other Christian World Communions.
Although in some contexts there has been a new debate on quality of theological education and criteria for quality assurance (like with the Latin American document "Manifesto on Quality Theological Education" from 2008 which highlights some theological criteria for a proper understanding of quality in theological education and was presented during the last WOCATI congress in Greece) we are far from having any common or generally accepted framework on understanding on what constitutes and contributes to quality of theological education today.

1) **Our context today**: **Differentiation of standards of higher education institutions and denominational fragmentation of global and regional landscapes of theological education**

This has to do with the complex challenges which mark the contemporary global context of both higher education institutions and the fragmented landscapes of theological education today.
Accreditation and quality assessment of higher education institutions in theological education is taking place in at least seven different ways:
1) In several contexts *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;
2) In other contexts *secular and regional accreditation agencies* are operative which combine several states and provide accreditation and quality assurance also for institutions of theological education; secular some implications for the understanding and assessment of quality in institutions of higher theological education;
3) In other contexts there are *Christian associations of theological schools* are serving themselves as accrediting and quality assurance instruments for their constituency of Christian schools and theological colleges only;
4) In other contexts there are *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;

5) In other contexts there are *denominational associations of theological schools* or Bible colleges which provide accreditation and quality assurance only to member institutions coming from the same denominational background;

6) Again in some contexts accreditation of local 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* is provided only 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);

7) Finally in several contexts there is only a *weak or no common understanding of quality in theological education at all* and Bible schools and theological colleges are mushrooming as private commercial projects of limited groups with no coherent relationship with each other.

Already this short typology underlines the complex nature of the landscape of accreditation and quality assurance in theological education today which is aggravated by the fact that we have a growing denominational fragmentation of the landscape of theological education today.[1] In recent years, new degree-granting institutions have emerged and new degree programs have multiplied. There are new public universities, private universities, for-profit degree-granting institutions, public colleges offering bachelor and master's degree programs, institutions offering degrees through distance delivery, and degree-completion partnerships between colleges and universities. We are still far from a basic and common set of criteria which contributes to an integral concept of quality in theological education which to some extend could be shared by many denominations and church traditions represented in the fellowship of churches belonging to WCC.

2) Political changes towards common standards of regional and global systems of quality assurance and accreditation

On the political level though with the beginning of the Bologna process and the Bologna declaration from 1999 we have a massive political development towards a common European space for higher education institutions, the so-called European Higher Education Area with common standards of quality assurance and the ECTS system.[2] The Bologna process has also produced Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.[3] A European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was founded (ENQA) which developed substantial papers for developing a common framework of quality assurance. Similar developments for university related HEI networks have taken place in several other geographic areas: As the World Trade Organization (WTO) through the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) has asked countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America to open up their boarders to cross-border providers of higher education there are increased needs for

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[1] See Global List of regional associations of theological schools, June 2011, prepared by WCC-ETE
[2] http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/; http://www.ehea.info/
[3] http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/Standards-and-Guidelines-for-QA.pdf

common standards and requirements. As higher education today is a commodity which has enormous economic interests behind it there have also been initial developments for global or regional dialogue on common criteria for academic courses and developing a framework for describing and quantifying the content of study programs in universities and diploma-awarding institutions in order to harmonize for benchmarking, equating and recognizing qualifications. East African countries have been assisted and stimulated by a re-vitalized Inter-University Council for East Africa (IUCEA) to develop a Students' Credit Accumulation and Transfer (CAT) System at the East African Regional level.[45] Several states have developed national protocols for higher education approval processes.[6] The Asian University network has 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.[7]

3) Different ways of assessing quality in theological education and the need for more theological reflection

The *basic understanding of quality of theological education* always is influenced by three equally important dimensions: 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.

In secular processes a common understanding is held that accreditation include both internal and external evaluative processes on quality assurance. Criteria normally combine factors like the periodic review of academic programs offered, the ratio between teachers and students, the assessment of students learning achievements, quality assessment of teaching staff, learning and library resources within the school, information systems available and information policy of the school or college represented.[8]

A common trend both in some African as well as in US-based processes of quality assurance is 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?).

There has not been yet any attempt to compare and reflect theologically the different sets of criteria by which associations of theological schools asses the quality of theological

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[4]http://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:k12jVHOSHCkJ:www.tcu.go.tz/uploads/file/OVERVIEW%2520OF%2520THE%2520PROJECT%2520ON%2520ESTABLISHMENT%2520OF%2520A%2520CREDIT%2520ACCUMULATION%2520AND%2520TRANSFER%2520SYSTEM.pdf+common+criteria+for+quality+in+higher+education+institutions&hl=en&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESgp8fmZSgcT3fu_DcQ4reOfqiM1SNxf2zEYgUWVuZ6xQZz9Vgmo8PmaC3Qq6yPDktPS04ukfNToPIHPWT4taM4XMmzZkp98baERY2PCD7dF9L2si6zYTHjIxgf0C30qCcYi9Bm4&sig=AHIEtbTrE5m51RQxVIhuu1-dHvrK2zwWSQ

[6] http://www.curriculum.edu.au/verve/_resources/protocols_file.pdf

[7] http://www.cu-qa.chula.ac.th/en/qa_alliance/bangkok.htm

[8] http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/Standards-and-Guidelines-for-QA.pdf

education within their own area of responsibility. A major international and ecumenical research project would be advisable and deserve funding on

a) What are the underlining theological presuppositions for sets of quality criteria for theological education in a given social and denominational context?
b) 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?
c) To what extend there is a common ground between different sets of criteria for theological education programs between different social and denominational contexts?

There are a few examples of sets of guidelines for quality assurance which are specifically formulated for theological schools, but we are far from having a complete survey of these documents, not to speak of the ways there are operated. The European Evangelical Accreditation Agency (EEAA) has formulated a catalogue of essential criteria (EEAA Manual) according to which accreditation is done.[9] The Accrediting Council for Evangelical Theological Education in Africa has worked extensively on revisions and updates to the ACTEA Standards and the ACTEA Guide to Self-Evaluation. [10] ATESEA has worked on Guidelines for Doing Theology in Asia which is a revised version of CAPs (Critical Asian Principle) which are meant to be integrated into the mechanisms of accreditation and quality assurance.[11]
But more theological reflection is needed on the relevance, scope and significance of the possibility of common ecumenical guidelines for theological criteria for quality assessment in theological education.

4) Needs for common guidelines on quality in theological education – some shared convictions

While some associations of theological schools have developed their own clear sets of criteria for accreditation and quality assurance and apply them in regular and compulsory visits to theological schools the overall picture is that there is no unity but fragmentation in the different sets of standards applied for theological education in different areas and denominational contexts. While this to a certain extend will continue as it portrays a legitimate and important expression of the diversity of approaches to theological education in different denominational settings, there also is an increasing need to formulate some common basis and common ground for guiding principles on quality of theological education in World Christianity in order to serve as an orientation frame, as a common platform and reference document for mutual dialogue and recognition of theological courses. This need for common guidelines is founded in the convictions
a) that Christians from all different denominations have a call to serve the unity of the body of Christ in the area of theological education;

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[9] http://www.eeaa.eu/accreditationstandards.htm
[10] http://www.theoledafrica.org/actea/Standards/Default.asp
[11] http://www.atesea.net/2011/02/guidelines-for-doing-theologies-in-asia/

b) that 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;

c) that an integral concept of quality in theological education is vital for the very future of church unity and the ecumenical movement and 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*; any long-term lack of common standards on the other side will lead to disintegration, isolation or unnecessary unhealthy competition between different providers of theological education, distortions in church unity, integrity of the churches' witness and deviations in its doctrine;

d) that government accrediting agencies increasingly demand for common standards across any denominational lie of affiliation and that developments in the area of *globalization and internationalization of quality standards in higher education* on UNESCO level (see: Higher Education Reports 2007 and 2008)[12] press to move towards common standards of quality of higher education in general which will have a certain relevance and impact also for systems of theological education in long perspective;

e) that 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, i.e.: The concerns and interests of Christian churches, their witness, service and unity for which theological education and ministerial formation are meant to serve, have a vital relevance for the understanding of quality in theological education.

f) that 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.

5) Goals of the proposal for common guidelines for quality in theological education

It belongs to the *goals of this project proposal*

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

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

c) 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.

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[12] http://www.guni-rmies.net/info/default.php?id=89

d) 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);

e) 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;

This draft reference document will be presented to the International WOCATI conference in Johannesburg, July 2011 on Quality in Theological Education to be further explored, amended and revised if needed. It should be discussed and tested whether an advanced document in this direction can be worked out for a later stage.

The draft guidelines do not follow the goal

a) to replace existing accreditation, affiliation or quality assurance mechanisms in existing organizations as the concrete assessment of quality of schools, curricula or courses in theological education remains the prerogative of national bodies, regional associations or accreditation authorities. There is no international accreditation agency for theological education yet and it is not likely that there will be some in the near future. However some common orientation framework and international platform for the understanding of quality in theological education can help for stimulating dialogue and mutual tuning in the development of theological education in and between different regions and prepare the way for more international recognition of theological curricula, courses and theological schools in order to overcome fragmentation and divergence in quality standards in theological education;

b) that the draft guidelines can be used as such – still un-translated into concrete social, political and educational contexts - as a basis for concrete institutional processes of assessment of quality in theological education or accreditation;

c) to create an internationally recognized system of accreditation of theological schools and quality assessment for theological courses as this would be unrealistic and also potentially imperialistic. Instead these guidelines should contribute to a search process around the question on how responsible international standardization of quality in theological education and mutual recognition of accreditation can be explored and prepared for the future of theological education in the 21t century.

6) Content of Draft Guidelines on quality of theological education

For the proposed ***content of the draft guidelines on quality of theological education*** it is suggested to consider the following essential points and positional elements: The guidelines

a) should relate to graduate theological education, both theological institutions offering programs as well as theological courses;
b) should aim and enhance quality and integrity of theological education without requiring schools to follow only one particular theological tradition or denominational identity line;
c) should not demand or recommend uniformity of content or structures in theological education while at the same time upholding some particular and biblically founded common values and principles;
d) should have some implications both for methodology of theological education and core content of theological education – both are seen in inseparable relation with each other;
e) can refer and even borrow from existing promising and convincing concrete examples of good "quality assurance" in theological education (referring to individual schools or some regional associations) while remaining careful not to 'universalize' a model which has proved successful in one context to serve as a model applicable for the whole world.

As positional elements which should form part of the content of the draft guidelines the following key criteria for the content and program quality of theological education are suggested:

a) *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;
b) *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;
c) *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;
d) *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;

e) *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;

f) *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;

g) *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;

h) *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;

i) *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;

j) *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;

k) *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;

l) *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 ;

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

n) *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;

o) *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;

p) *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;

q) *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;

r) *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;

s) *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.