Towards Guidelines on International Standards of Quality in Theological Education – A WCC/ETE-Project 2010-2011

Date: June 2010

In many different contexts there is a new debate on quality of theological education and criteria for quality assurance in theological education. Latin American circles of theological education have published a major document "Manifesto on Quality Theological Education" 2008 which tries to highlight some theological criteria for a proper understanding of quality in theological education. In several contexts secular and state related agencies for quality assurance in higher education have some implications for the understanding and assessment of quality in institutions of higher theological education, both church-related and university-related. In many contexts there is only a weak or no common understanding of quality in theological education. We are still far from a basic set of criteria which contributes to an integral concept of quality in theological education which to some extend can be shared by many denominations and church traditions represented in the fellowship of churches belonging to WCC.

In some contexts associations of theological schools have developed their own clear mechanisms for accreditation and apply regular and compulsory visits to theological schools to improve quality of theological education. Until now there are different sets of standards applied in different areas and also in different denominational contexts. While this will continue to be so 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 guiding principles on quality of theological education which might serve as an orientation frame, as a common platform and reference document for mutual dialogue and recognition of theological courses. While within certain regions (Europe or the States) there is a common framework for common recognition of schools and theological courses, other regions could not develop a system of mutual accountability and convertibility of theological courses or common standards in quality of theological education. The ETE programme of the World Council of Churches has been encouraged to stimulate a contribution into this direction and seeks partners and expert's advice to join in this endeavor.

It belongs to the ***key convictions*** of this project proposal for common guidelines on international standards of quality in theological education

a) That there is a *need in world Christianity* to have a solid understanding of some basic principles contributing to an integral concept of quality in theological education as the very future of church unity and the ecumenical movement to a large extent is dependent from proper quality theological education the lack of which immediately leads to distortions in church unity, integrity of its witness and deviations in its doctrine;
b) That churches of different denominational tradition and confession presented in the ecumenical movement do share so much in common in terms of basic

common Christian tradition and theological understanding that they can formulate some *common principles of quality in theological education*;

c) That due to developments going on in the area of *globalization and internationalization of quality standards in higher education* on UNESCO level (see: Higher Education Reports 2008 and 2009) there are processes at work internationally which move towards common standards of quality of higher education in general and that these processes have a certain relevance and impact also for systems of theological education in long perspective;

d) That 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 context or region.

e) That 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 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) 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 cannot be bypassed in any attempt to formulate some parameters for quality in theological education which claim to have some relevance across the existing economic, cultural and linguistic divides. The criteria need to reflect critically on the existing asymmetries in power and accessibility of theological education;

g) 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 some of the fragmentation and very divergent quality standards in the international and regional landscape of theological education;

It is the ***goal of this project proposal*** to present a first draft of a common and ecumenical framework of understanding of the essential elements contributing to quality of theological education worldwide. These Draft Guidelines on International Standards of Quality in Theological Education should 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. This draft reference

document will be fed into an international process in the years 2010 and 2011 to be further explored, amended and revised if needed. The Draft Guidelines will be shared with existing Associations of Theological Schools for comments and review.
As a draft reference document these guidelines can 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).

It belongs to the convictions of this draft, that Guidelines on International Standards of Quality in Theological Education can be formulated properly only if its elements are neither too general (because then they will not be relevant and pertinent) nor too specific (because then they will be not applicable for different cultural and national contexts).

It is ***not the goal of this project***

a) That the draft guidelines suggested below 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;
b) To outplace and to devalue well established national or regional processes and standards of quality assurance. It rather belongs to the goal to stimulate reflection on how existing mechanisms of quality assurance and accreditation can be improved in order to more fully reflect common concerns formulated by an international community of experienced theological educators out of the midst of the ecumenical movement;
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. However these guidelines could 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.

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:

a) The guidelines should relate to *graduate theological educatio*n, both theological institutions offering programmes as well as theological courses;
b) The guidelines should aim and enhance *quality and integrity of theological education* without requiring schools to follow only one particular theological tradition or denominational identity line but instead encouraging an interdenominational openness and commitment to church unity;

c) The guidelines 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) The draft guidelines have some implications both for *methodology of theological education and core content of theological education* – both are seen in inextricable relation with each other;
e) The draft guidelines 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.

Positional elements which should form part of the content of the draft guidelines should be the following:

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 moduls 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) *Interdisciplinarity:* 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 programmes 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.

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