Research Paper

Convergence or Diversity in Quality Assurance Systems? The Case of Slovenia and the Netherlands[1]

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Abstract

This contribution places the issue of quality assurance in higher education into comparative perspective. The development of Slovenian and Dutch quality assurance policies is analysed within two time periods, "pre-Bologna" (1980s-1999) and "Bologna" phase (1999-2016), aiming to answer the main question if they are converging or diverging. In addition to national policies also supranational trends, to which European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries are exposed, are taken into consideration. Furthermore, theoretical reflections call into question convergent or isomorphic development of quality assurance systems due to diverse glonacal influences of formal and human agency (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002). The final part suggests that by acknowledging variety and ongoing change, a solution to this convergence – diversity dichotomy question can be found.

Keywords: higher education, quality assurance, convergence, diversity, Slovenia, the Netherlands

Introduction

Quality assurance of higher education continues to be the field of dynamic development, challenged by ongoing pressures from Europeanisation and globalisation on higher education. Therefore, the need to contextualise and comparatively analyse this development in different countries arises. In 2014, we celebrated the 25th anniversary of the fall of the Communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe (CEE) and thus it is particularly appropriate to compare how are Slovenia, one of the 'post-transition' countries, and the Netherlands, one of the Western-European ones, responding to international trends, which have emerged in this domain.

But this is not the only reason behind the selection of these two countries. The introduction of Bologna Process has called for comparatively based research in all European countries, which have signed the Bologna Declaration (1999). Slovenia and the Netherlands have rarely been in the centre of such comparisons, since they are (still) too often focused on advanced, industrialised Western (European) countries. Moreover, they often do not consider that after the fall of the Iron Curtain, borders of Europe have become much broader (Hantrais, 1999). To overcome these limits, the paper will consider them as a sample of two of the 48 countries of European Higher Education Area (EHEA): the Netherlands as one of the oldest, Slovenia as one of the recently joined EU Member States. The former as a pioneer country in the development of quality assurance policies, the latter as a country, which encountered some challenges in implementing Bologna objectives in the appropriate way. Their selection was also influenced by other factors, such as size: Slovenian higher education system is among the smallest, the Netherlands among the medium-sized ones, so it is perhaps easier to compare their quality assurance systems than to compare smaller and larger ones (e.g., Germany, the United Kingdom). Another important factor is related to the accessibility of data and literature on the Dutch case in English language. Of course, the selected cases share also some historical, geopolitical, economic, socio-cultural differences, which will be considered. Also Sartori (1970) argues that subjects of comparison should share both similar and incomparable characteristics, since it is not reasonable to compare cases that are so different that only few similarities between them can be found, nor to compare cases that are so similar that only few differences can be noted (p. 246; see also Hantrais, 1999).

All these claims suggest that the question of convergence – diversity dichotomy should receive more attention (Zgaga, Teichler and Brennan 2013) and to use thematic comparisons of two or more countries (Kogan, 1996). With this in mind, the present contribution aims answer the main question, if quality assurance systems from the two selected countries are converging or diverging. First, their development within two distinctive time periods – the 'pre-Bologna' (1980s-1999) and the Bologna Process phase (1999-2016) is analysed and arguments in favour of convergence and diversity in both time phases are evaluated. Specific attention is given to the development of national quality assurance agencies and purposes of accreditation as the prevailing

quality assurance approach in the EHEA. In addition, also wider European context is considered, since it allows the exposure of past, current and future trends, with which EHEA countries are confronted.

The dichotomy question is also theoretically approached; convergent patterns that have emerged within different quality assurance systems are discussed as a source of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). This concept claims that "nation-states [...] are more isomorphic than most theories would predict and change more uniformly than is commonly recognized." (Meyer et al., 1997, p. 173). However, Dale and Robertson (2009) emphasise that in the era of globalisation, comparative researchers must be aware of the limits of such methodological nationalism, which considers the nation-state as a dominant unit of analysis. One methodological solution is to adopt alternative, multi-level approaches, which focus on the interdependence of different levels of analysis. That's why 'glonacal agency' heuristic (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002) is used for the analysis of differentiated influences of global, national and local agencies and agency on the development of quality assurance systems in higher education.

Research is based on the findings from PhD research project on internationalisation and quality assurance in Slovenian and Dutch higher education. It uses comparative approach, whose aim is not only to discover existing similarities and differences, but also to clarify the context in which they actually appear (see Kogan, 1996; Hantrais, 1999). The method of content analysis is employed as a research technique for the analysis of texts and their meaning (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2007). Works from prominent scholars, who have influenced international discourses on quality assurance in higher education from 1980s onwards (e.g., Neave, 1988; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993), are analysed as a valuable written source of information, next to national and supranational policy documents (e.g., legislation, documents produced from quality assurance agencies, Bologna Process documentation – declarations, communiques, guidelines etc.) and recent international studies (e.g., European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015; Sursock, 2015).

The article's findings are addressed to various stakeholders in the field of higher education and aim to contribute to the ongoing debate on the direction of changes in contemporary transformations of higher education. The illustration of (side) effects of the Bologna Process and beyond (e.g., globalisation) provides an updated picture of quality assurance reforms and as such, it fits into discussions on national and supra-/sub-national development of this field not only in the two selected countries, but also in wider international context.

Patterns of convergent and divergent quality assurance development prior to the Bologna Process (1980s-1999)

In Slovenia and in other CEE countries, procedures of quality control were introduced only after the fall of the Iron Curtain (1989 onwards). Until then, systemic mechanisms for assuring quality did not exist, since bureaucratic state control was emphasising efficiency, not quality of higher education (e.g., Scott, 2007; Kohoutek, 2009). Moreover, the Law on Career-Oriented Education from 1980 introduced a uniform system, in which education after primary school was declared as education for work and profession, which means that as a consequence, higher education legislation was abolished for more than a decade (Zgaga and Miklavic, 2011).

Only in 1993, two years after Slovenian independence from Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia, a new Law on Higher Education (Zakon o visokem solstvu, hereinafter Zakon) was adopted by parliament. The law was a major novelty in itself; it introduced a binary degree system (university and higher professional education), diversification of higher education institutions (HEIs) (free-standing professional colleges, private institutions), it granted autonomy to HEIs for the first time, and – last but not least – introduced a new quality assurance system (Zakon, 1993; see also Zgaga and Miklavic, 2011).

On its basis, the government established the Council for Higher Education, a national coordination and advisory authority, composed of experts in the field of higher education, which were responsible for procedures of accreditation (from 1994 to 2010) and for monitoring and assessing the quality and efficiency of higher education system (Zakon, 1993, Article 49). Also the Quality Assessment Commission was introduced with the law, representing members of all scientific and artistic disciplines and professional fields. Monitoring and evaluating the quality and effectiveness of work of HEIs, i. e., (self-) evaluation, was one of its main responsibilities (ibid., Articles 49, 80). For the development of internal and external quality assurance system, also the National Commission for Quality of Higher Education was established in 1996. It was composed of members of universities and free-standing HEIs, the quality assessment commission and the student council. All these novelties indicate that *"previously unknown accreditation and evaluation structures"* (Zgaga and Miklavic, 2011, p. 17) were introduced after Slovenian independence from socialist regime.

On the contrary, the Netherlands was next to UK and France one of the first European countries that already in the early 1980s introduced new mechanisms of quality control (Neave, 1988; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993). These have emerged in the context of massification of higher education – one of the outcomes of policies for equity and equality of participation of diverse student population in higher education. Financial constraints were another important aspect, which led to the introduction of new procedures of quality control. In 1983, the Dutch government launched the so-called 'Conditional Funding' policy, whose aim was to assess, how universities were using governmental funds for research (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004; for discussion on

funding policies in Western European context see also Neave, 1988; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993).

Two years later, the idea of assessing quality of research was extended also to the quality of teaching. In 1985, when policy document Higher Education: Autonomy and Quality (HOAK) was released, the traditional quality assessment, characterised by direct state control of input factors, was replaced with more self-regulation and greater autonomy of HEIs, which had to demonstrate that they offer quality education (Neave, 1988; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993; Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004). Such strategic evaluation through the product control influenced the rise of the evaluative state (Neave, 1988). The government gave the responsibility for external evaluations to the associations of Dutch universities (VSNU) and universities of applied sciences (HBO Council), which have developed quality assessment procedures for university and higher professional education. Peer-review and self-evaluation were complemented with government's 'steering from a distance' through the Inspectorate for Education, whose task was to evaluate the assessment results (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004; see also van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993).

We can claim that in the 'pre-Bologna' phase (1980s-1999), Slovenia was challenged with broader political, economic, social and cultural changes of its transition to democracy and its overall transformation of higher education after many years of Communist rule (Scott, 2007). As Zgaga and Miklavic (2011) point out:

> This modernisation of education was understood in the context of a country open to the West, [...] and in the framework of specific – today almost incomprehensible – political terminology that made Yugoslavia so different from the countries of the Eastern bloc: 'socialist self-government', 'associated labour', 'socialist market economy', 'pluralism of interests', and so on. *(p. 15)*

These distinctive historical influences have challenged Slovenian higher education development in a specific way and have confirmed that "the unity of Central and Eastern Europe is an artifice" (Scott, 2007, p. 423). CEE countries had different experiences with Communism and the Titoist regime sometimes even (openly) opposed to the Soviet one (Zgaga and Miklavic, 2011).

But as in other Eastern bloc countries, the abandonment of ideologically oriented model of education was indispensable not only for further systemic development of Slovenian higher education, but also for the establishment of new modes of quality control, which could not evolve during the 1980s and early 1990s due to stagnation of higher education.

Unlike in Slovenia, the question of autonomy and quality was already in the mid-1980s announced in the Netherlands as the main driver of strategically oriented model of quality assurance in higher education (Neave, 1988; van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993; Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004). The supervisory role of the state enabled that

procedures of quality control were largely coordinated by academics themselves and the elements of the so-called general model of quality assessment (i.e., managing authority at the system level, self-evaluation, peer review, visits, reports and their public release) (van Vught and Westerheijden, 1993) were in the focus of evaluation, not accreditation. In Slovenia, it was state-controlled accreditation, which was focusing predominantly on compliance with (minimum) quality standards, while evaluation was just an element of accreditation. This means that the general model was extended with yes/no decision, whether HEIs have the permission to operate (Kohoutek, 2009). Moreover, there was an obvious lack of knowledge among Slovenian policy makers, which often received assistance from foreign, also Dutch experts from the field.

Hence, considerably divergent development between the two countries did not leave almost any room for convergence, since context specific circumstances influenced when, why, what practices were introduced and who had responsibility over them. On a more general level, the question of insufficient visibility of Dutch higher education model entered into national policy discourses of the late 1990s. It called for a more internationally open, strategic, comparable and attractive higher education system, which would be able to respond to the growing effects of globalisation and internationalisation on higher education (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004). Next to entrepreneurially oriented government strategies, also HEIs began to recognise the importance of operating in accordance with market developments. In Slovenia, it was mainly Europeanisation (not globalisation) that in the mid-1990s started to influence national higher education policy discourses. Due to the country's participation in various international projects (e.g., PHARE, TEMPUS, CEEPUS) and membership in different international organisations, Slovenia gradually strengthened its cooperation with other (Western) European countries. The Western European model of higher education was certainly admired as an "idealised model" (Scott 2007, p. 435) and a source of imitation, but this model was highly pluralistic; it created certain difficulties in the process of identification with the West (ibid., p. 434), "and, as a result, […] the potential to create new models of higher education in the 21st century" (ibid., p. 424) has increased.

Europeanisation of quality assurance in higher education

Speaking of Europeanisation in higher education – let us here briefly clarify this concept, also known as "a 'European way' to manage unity and diversity in higher education" (Zgaga, Teichler and Brennan, 2013, p. 13). But how did this concept develop within the context of the topic of research? In early 1990s, Europe's need to strengthen its 'European' dimension in higher education emerged due to its substantially changed political, social, economic and cultural development. In the Treaty of Maastricht, "the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States […] while fully respecting (their) responsibility […] for the content of teaching and the organization of education systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity" was emphasised as crucial for further progress in higher education in all EU Member States (Treaty on the European Union, 1992, Article 126). Based on the policies of pioneer

Western European countries, EU launched pilot projects in 1994/45 in 17 Member States. Their aim was to evaluate, if common features in quality assurance procedures between different countries exist. In 1998, also European Council published a recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (European Commission, 1998).

However, important implications for further European development of this field were brought by the Bologna Process, *"a motor of quality assurance reforms across Europe"* (Enders and Westerheijden, 2014, p. 174). On 19 June 1999, twenty-nine European countries, among them also Slovenia and the Netherlands, committed themselves to promote European cooperation in the field of quality assurance by developing comparable methodologies as one of the six main objectives to establish the EHEA until 2010 (Bologna Declaration, 1999). In 2003, the ministers responsible for higher education made an agreement at their Berlin summit that "a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures" (Berlin Communique, 2003) will be developed at national level by 2005 in all countries of the EHEA.

But the turning point in strengthening common European cooperation was the adoption of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) for internal and external quality assurance and external quality assurance agencies (ENQA, 2005). To improve their clarity and applicability, their revised version was adopted at the Yerevan ministerial meeting in May 2015. But even if adopting the ESG is not mandatory for quality assurance agencies, they risk exclusion from European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which represents quality assurance organisations from EHEA member states, and European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which was established in 2008 for 'trustworthy' agencies.

At the moment, major trends are associated also with opening possibilities for HEIs to be evaluated by foreign quality assurance agencies, which work in full compliance with the ESG and consider ENQA membership and EQAR registration to guide HEIs in their choice of non-national agency. But this is not a widely spread trend, since only 12 out of 48 EHEA countries see this criterion as obligatory for evaluation of their institutions and/or programmes (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). Also the latest Trends 2015 report indicates that internationalisation of quality assurance agencies and HEIs is progressing at high speed, while national authorities are responding slowly and with some resistance to this trend (Sursock, 2015). Such development undoubtedly raises some concerns. These were also recognised by Neave and Maassen (2007), who see a fundamental problem in the fact that the Bologna process advances at various speeds. [...] There is a 'high speed track,' represented by the statements of intent and the continuous adding of new items by each succeeding Ministerial Conference. However, one gets a less complacent vision of progress achieved when attention turns to implementation, which moves at a very different pace, as most of the progress reports admit, albeit reluctantly. (p. 137)

Patterns of convergent and divergent development of quality assurance in the context of the Bologna Process (1999-2016)

Different speeds of implementation and diverse interpretations of Bologna within the two national contexts led to specific development of national quality assurance agencies and influenced implementation of one particular practice – accreditation.

In July 2004, only two months after the official joining of Slovenia to the EU, major novelties in accordance with main Bologna objectives were amended into legislation, e.g., the three-cycle degree structure, European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) and a combination of program and institutional accreditation (Zakon, 2004). National quality assurance agency, independent from the government apparatus was also predicted to be established until the end of 2005 (ibid., Article 51). But the center-right government coalition, which was elected shortly after the adoption of the amended legislation, made a quite radical legislative turn. In 2006, neoliberal and market-driven policies were introduced into legislation, which established conditions for expansion of private HEIs. Another important adjustment was the possibility to equate university degree from the previous system with the new master degree (Zakon, 2006). Most importantly, the reform agenda abolished the establishment of quality assurance agency and returned its role to the governmental body, the Council for Higher Education (ibid., Articles 48–50). This decision was completely in contrast with the ESG stipulation on independency of authority from HEIs, ministries or other stakeholders (ENQA, 2005). Only after the decision of the Constitutional Court that agency's independence was not legally assured (and during the mandate of the center-left coalition), the Slovenian Quality Assurance agency for Higher Education (SQAA) began to operate in March 2010, while the council remained in the system as a consultative body (see also Zgaga and Miklavic, 2011). Since 2013, SQAA is listed in EQAR and in March 2015, it (finally) joined ENQA as one of its full members.

In 2016, a gradual transition to institutional accreditation was approved with the latest changes of the law on higher education (Zakon o spremembah in dopolnitvah Zakona o visokem solstvu, 2016). Institutional accreditation focuses on the question, whether individual HEIs have developed a system, which ensures that study programmes are of adequate quality. This means that its emphasis shifted from identification of minimum (quality) standards to institutional accountability for continuous quality improvement.

Also the period of institutional accreditation is shortened from seven to five years. Moreover, a new type of accreditation (the so-called accreditation of changes of HEI) and external evaluation (the so-called evaluation of sample of study programmes) is also introduced in the new quality assurance system (ibid., Articles 16, 22).

In the Netherlands, the minister responsible for education, culture and science already in 1998 appointed a group, whose task was to design procedures for introducing accreditation, which would partly preserve advantages of (self-) evaluation and peer

review from the previous system (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004). In 2002, legislation was amended to include programme accreditation, new bachelor-master degree system, ECTS etc. The introduction of the new degree structure was completed in 2003, when first accreditations of study programmes were conducted. To increase international recognition of higher professional education, the reform agenda also gave permission to universities of applied sciences to offer master study programmes for the first time.

In 2002, when the law on accreditation was published, also Dutch organisation for accreditation was established. In 2005, it began to operate as a unique bi-national quality assurance agency named NVAO (the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders), which operates also in the Flemish part of the Belgium. This can be seen as another example of strong international orientation of Dutch higher education. The new accreditation system opened the market for legal for-profit organisations to become the so-called Validating and Judging Agencies (VBIs). These quality assessment agencies can conduct external assessments of existing programmes and based on their input, NVAO makes decisions about granting accreditation to HEIs. But HEIs could freely decide, which VBI from public list to choose, and the independence of these organisations soon became questionable. That's why in the current system, HEIs can submit a proposal for the composition of the visitation panel to NVAO, which draws up a list of quality assessment agencies for carrying out credible assessments. In 2016, six of them are placed on the list (see NVAO, n.d.)

However, the accreditation framework was not sufficiently effective and was creating administrative burden. To overcome these shortcomings, a combination of programme accreditation and institutional audit was introduced in January 2011 (NVAO, 2012). Institutional audit assesses periodically institutional quality assurance system. Its results are based on three possible outcomes (satisfactory, conditionally satisfactory and unsatisfactory), on which decisions on accreditation term are based (in case of positive decision up to six years, in case of positive decision 'with conditions' up to two years). If audit results are positive or conditionally positive, study programmes are assessed within the limited framework of assessment, in other cases (e.g., in case of negative decision), the extensive assessment framework is used (NVAO, 2012; NVAO, 2016b). To further reduce the assessment burden, the latest assessment framework from 2014 was replaced with new assessment framework, which was introduced in January 2017. This modification gives possibility to institutions and programmes to adapt assessments to their own aims and objectives and expands the involvement of students and staff in assessments. The new framework also pays more attention to student-centred learning, changes in the assessment rules, additional in-depth visits after positive decision of institutional audit etc. (for more details about the differences between the 2014 and 2016 assessment frameworks, see NVAO, 2016a).

We may argue that both Slovenia and the Netherlands established their quality assurance models according to the Bologna Process objectives. Currently, quality

assurance agencies from both countries are operating in substantial compliance with the ESG and are members of various international organisations that operate in this domain, e.g., ENQA, EQAR, European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA), International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) etc. In both cases, some form of accreditation was introduced, which strengthened the accountability side of the quality assurance model (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004; NVAO, 2012). Nevertheless, recent legal adjustments demonstrate that both countries decided to give (again) more responsibility for quality control to institutions themselves – in the form of institutional accreditation (in Slovenia) or in the framework of institutional audit and programme assessments (in the Netherlands).

But in the development of certain quality assurance policies, considerable differences can also be detected. One of them relates to the possibility of HEIs and/or programmes to be reviewed by non-national quality assurance agencies. In Slovenia, as in other 22 EHEA countries, quality assurance agencies cannot be evaluated by foreign quality assurance agency, while in the Netherlands, their ENQA membership is considered as a sufficient condition for such evaluation, accreditation or audit (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). Furthermore, the delayed establishment of SQAA clearly confirms that certain ESG requirements were not translated effectively into national quality assurance policies, while on the other side, NVAO's innovative practices often exceed regular quality assurance procedures and confirm agency's leading role internationally. For instance, NVAO's framework for assessing quality of internationalisation was adopted at European level by ECA in the form of instrument called CeQuInt (Certificate for Quality of Internationalisation; see ECA, n.d.).

Such development was enabled by specific historical conditions (e.g., massification, decentralisation, deregulation etc.), next to the full support given from all major stakeholders, which allowed that Dutch higher education is nowadays known for its high quality, strong international position in the global knowledge economy and reputation all around the world. On the contrary, sometimes turbulent development of Slovenian higher education, expressed in contradictory governmental misinterpretations of supranational quality assurance policies, received substantial opposition from various Slovenian interest groups and can be seen as one of the causes, why the country was struggling to implement Bologna in a right way.

Theoretical considerations

In the following discussion, the question of convergence – diversity dichotomy in quality assurance systems is approached theoretically. First, convergent tendencies of both quality assurance systems are explained as a source of institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) – a distinctive approach, developed within the sociological version of neo-institutional theory (see Hall and Taylor, 1996). Afterwards, such argumentation is extended with the glonacal perspective (Marginson and Rhoades,

2002), as it allows to explain divergent development of quality assurance systems from global, national and local contexts.

Institutional isomorphism and its tendencies for convergence

Several studies demonstrated the usefulness of neo-institutional approaches in studies of higher education (e.g., Dobbins, 2008). One of them is the concept of institutional isomorphism, which is particularly useful in the analysis of institutional settings, such as educational organisations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). It focuses on processes of homogenisation and examines how organisations are changing when they confront the same pressures from external environment (e.g., harmonisation of higher education policies due to the Bologna Process). Adaptation to internationally accepted principles and regulations is crucial for the survival of organisations, such as quality assurance agencies or HEIs, which try to legitimise their existence by reducing their differences in practices, procedures, structures or rules. As such, they become more similar or isomorphic due to coercive, mimetic and normative pressures for homogenisation, which DiMaggio and Powell (1983) call mechanisms of institutional isomorphic change.

Coercive isomorphism arises from pressures of dominant authority to which these organisations subordinate (ibid., p. 150–151). For example, if quality assurance agencies want to be recognised as members of ENQA and EQAR, they must adjust their activities in accordance with international policies, which are institutionalised in this field (e.g., the ESG; see ENQA, 2015). Mimetic isomorphism occurs in cases of uncertainty or insecurity and encourages imitation of more effective models or best practices from other organisations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 151–152). In the Netherlands, the German example was used for the establishment of quality assurance agency and implementation of accreditation (Jeliazkova and Westerheijden, 2004, p. 311), while in Slovenia, certain elements of foreign, also Dutch quality assurance model (e.g., evaluation) were mimicked already in the 1990s, when quality assurance system was introduced for the first time. Within the context of normative isomorphism, which is associated with professionalisation (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 152–153), specific understanding of the meaning of quality (assurance) in higher education is spread by the members of international networks (such as foreign reviewers of quality assurance agencies) and this can visibly influence the daily routines of these agencies (e.g., writing reports for international audience).

Pressures of coercive nature are more visible in the Slovenian case. They can be seen as a consequence of strong position of the State against other relevant stakeholders in the field of higher education and the following example clearly confirms this claim. In 2014, two public universities awarded degrees and enrolled students in some of their study programmes without having accreditation granted. The ministry of education, science and sport immediately amended the legislation and extended the validity of programme accreditation of these study programmes until the end of September 2018. In such way, it legally permitted that degrees, which were already obtained, become valid also in the

period when accreditation was not granted. Such solution provoked protests from the Slovenian Student Union, which claimed that when the ministry was searching for solution to this particular problem, the question of achieving minimum standards of quality of these programmes was not considered. On the other hand, Dutch innovative quality assurance practices are often mimicked by others; as already mentioned, ECA adopted the instrument CeQuInt on the basis of NVAO's framework for assuring the quality of internationalisation. Dobbins (2008) also claims that in CEE countries, the Bologna Process created favourable conditions for institutionalisation of coercive and mimetic isomorphism, while in Western European countries, normative and mimetic isomorphism are more visible.

But isomorphism is "a constraining process that forces one unit in a population to resemble other units that face the same set of environmental conditions" (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983, p. 149). Hence, it overlooks local responses and potential variations and thus denies the existence of different, possibly conflicting interests of various actors and organisations.

Glonacal influences on quality assurance systems in higher education

To overcome such limits of institutional isomorphism, 'glonacal agency' heuristic (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002) can be employed, since it suggests that isomorphic pressures can become quite questionable due to the unpredictable effects of globalisation on higher education.

The term 'glonacal' takes the interdependencies among global, national and local dynamics into consideration. This means that it refers to relationships beyond the level of the nation state and as such, it seems appropriate for discussing quality assurance development in the globalised environment of higher education (see Hou et al., 2015 for Asian context). Although quality assurance systems exist in most countries all around the world (national level), international accreditation (global level) is becoming increasingly attractive for HEIs (local level), since it offers them global recognition, freedom in choosing different accreditation organisations etc. (ibid.). But at the same time, many HEIs remain strongly determined by national and/or local conditions: they contribute to country's economic development; they receive governmental funds and

address the needs of their local communities. 'Agency', the second term of the heuristic, applies to formal agency or agencies as organisations, and to human agency – their members or groups that have agency and operate from the three domains (Marginson and Rhoades, 2002, p. 288–289). In the context of this paper, INQAAHE is a global organisational agency, SQAA or NVAO are national-level ones, while quality assurance commission is a local-level formal agency. At the same time, their members exercise agency at each of these three spheres of influence.

Authors of the glonacal concept argue that differentiated course of impact of both organisational and human agency arises due to different strength, layers and conditions and spheres of activity. Strength can refer to available financial resources for the operation of national quality assurance agency or for institutions or programmes to afford international accreditation. It creates stronger or weaker, more direct or indirect connections and variable reciprocity, which causes "a reverse flow of influence from the local to the global." (ibid., p. 296). Layers and conditions are historically embedded structures and norms of each individual higher education system and its HEIs; e.g., tradition, international orientation or level of university autonomy. Spheres refer to geographical scope of impact and activities, such as global, regional, national or local orientation of universities, faculties or programmes (ibid., p. 290–294). Hence, different internal dynamics and reciprocity of influences and flows between the local and the global can lead to "varying patterns of national and local adaptation and resistance" (ibid., p. 296) to global tendencies (e.g., globalisation). And as a consequence, national and institutional complexities of quality assurance systems can arise, as the present article highlighted on the example of Slovenian and Dutch development of this field.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be argued that only by combining both theoretical perspectives, convergent and divergent dynamics of quality assurance development in two selected countries can be captured. This suggests that convergence and diversity are not two mutually exclusive trends, but simultaneously complementing each other. The role of accreditation is a clear example of this claim; even if it promotes comparability and compatibility and is as such a prerequisite for the overall success of the Bologna Process, at the same time, it is one of those mechanisms that "contribute to shaping the hierarchies that constitute the vertical diversity of a higher education system" (Bleiklie, 2011, p. 24).

The presence of convergence within diversity is therefore not to be questioned and rather than supporting "international norm-setting and standardization" (Enders and Westerheijden, 2014, p. 172), it has to be acknowledged that variety and ongoing change are typical characteristics of quality assurance systems in all Bologna signatory countries, not only in Slovenia and the Netherlands.

This can be attributed to diverse influences of competent national (political) authorities (or in the glonacal context: formal and human agency), their interests, priorities and intentions and consequently, their specific perception on assuring the quality of higher education. As it was illustrated on the case of Slovenia and the Netherlands, they create (stronger or weaker) responses to supranational development of this field, and these particular responses contributed to the adoption of specific solutions for improving the quality of HEIs and their study programmes. This means that even if both countries use similar methods of quality assessment (i.e. self-evaluation, peer-review, site visits, reporting), the choice (and combination) of approaches largely depends on decisions of

the dominant political authorities. Therefore, it would be too simplistic to claim that at the moment, we are witnessing increasing convergence between Central and Eastern European and Western European quality assurance development.

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