Research Paper

Intermediary Bodies in Higher Education in Central and Eastern Europe

by **Paul Temple**

Contextualisation

Many state-funded higher education systems make use of intermediary bodies, or "buffer" bodies, which stand between government and the higher education institutions. Examples from Britain are the funding councils, the Quality Assurance Agency, and the research councils. The use of such bodies is widespread in Western Europe and the United States; equally, many countries operate their higher education systems without such bodies, or use them for some purposes (quality assurance, say) but not others (funding, say).

The traditional justification for this extra organisational layer has been the perceived need to safeguard academic freedom and/or institutional autonomy. Recent developments in various countries now suggest that while this case may once have had some validity, it now appears less convincing. Mass higher education is now placed squarely in the political arena: the role of an intermediary body then becomes, inescapably, one of implementing government policy, just like any other government agency.

In the states of Central and Eastern Europe, intermediary bodies on Western lines have been created in all national higher education systems since the fall of communism in 1989. What are the factors which led to their creation? Has there been critical examination to ensure that they will work in the best interests of higher education?

Abstract: *This paper examines the establishment of intermediary, or "buffer", bodies in the higher education systems of the post-communist states of Central and Eastern Europe. It argues that this process was driven significantly by the major multilateral aid organisations, without detailed analysis of the way the proposed structures would operate, or of alternative ways of achieving the desired outcomes. Analogies drawn with Western models - a frequent approach by aid agencies - are unsatisfactory in different cultural settings: particularly, the transitional nature of societies in these countries (neither communist dictatorships nor Western democracies) was not sufficiently taken into account.*

The paper goes on to analyse the pattern of development of intermediary bodies in two countries, Hungary and Romania, with comparisons with Western Europe. It examines an attempt at explaining reasons for their rapid development in the quality assurance field, and finds that the empirical evidence does not support the argument. An alternative hypothesis is put forward, suggesting that the development of intermediary bodies can be at least partially explained by reference to the extent to which they allow central involvement in institutional decision-making: the opposite of stated intentions for them, but showing continuity from the structures of the communist regimes.

Introduction

A striking feature in the development of the higher education systems of the countries of Central and Eastern Europe since the collapse of communism in 1989 has been the growth of intermediary, or "buffer", bodies. This paper examines aspects of this development, and attempts to analyse the factors which have led countries to establish different patterns of these bodies.

I define intermediary bodies here as being structures formally established to carry out a regulatory or allocatory function in relation to all institutions of higher education, or a specified class of them, in the country concerned, on behalf of the government or legislature. National representative bodies, such as rectors' conferences, are therefore excluded by this definition, even though they may be established by legislation. Other writers, however, have included such consultative bodies within their definition of intermediary bodies, taking them to be any “formally established body set up to link governmental bodies with independent (or semi-independent) organisations to accomplish a specific public purpose” (Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maassen, van Vught and de Weert, 1993a). My more precise definition is helpful for the purposes of this paper.

This paper pays particular attention to developments in two countries in the region, Hungary and Romania. These countries currently offer sharp contrasts in terms of national wealth and economic effectiveness, as well (as I shall note later) as in more fundamental socio-political areas. But the essential structures of their higher education systems are not greatly different - all the Soviet bloc higher education systems exhibited a basic uniformity, although with often-hidden local variations (de Rudder, 1999, p 5). And, like higher education everywhere, the "bottom-heavy" nature of the institutions means that they are slow to change (Clark, 1983, p 234). So the systems and the institutions within them are palimpsests of (very feint) pre-communist, communist, and post-communist attitudes and processes. Appreciating this mix is important to my later argument in this paper.

Functions of intermediary bodies in the region

In the countries studied here, and more widely, the functions of intermediary bodies may be considered in three broad categories.

The first category is concerned with teaching and learning issues. This includes:

- accreditation of programmes of study and of institutions: such bodies would typically regard themselves as monitoring academic standards;
- approving institutions to award particular types of degree - which often overlaps with the accreditation issue but does not necessarily do so;
- quality issues - which, although conceptually distinct, are in most places considered together with accreditation issues.

Bodies working in these areas may deal with both public and private institutions, depending on national legislation and regulations.

The second category is concerned with the allocation of resources to public institutions. This may take the form of allocating student number quotas to institutions in systems where funding is calculated through a student number-driven formula ("normative funding"); or, more usually in the region, allocating funds as a result of some process of review and negotiation; and perhaps dealing with issues of staffing levels, capital funding, and use of state properties.

The third category is concerned with research. These bodies may advise on national research strategies; allocate funds for research to institutions or to research groups; and assess the quality of research outputs. There is therefore, potentially, a degree of overlap with aspects of the work of bodies in our first two groups. Normally, but not necessarily, such bodies deal with public institutions.

Typically, in the region and generally, all these functions are formally advisory to the appropriate government ministry - powers are not normally delegated to the intermediary body, although that may in effect be the result where recommendations are routinely accepted by the ministry. Also, functions in different categories may be carried out by the same organisation, although the accreditation/quality functions are usually carried out by a body specialising in those fields. Policy advice generally on higher education may be given to government from all of these bodies, and from bodies outside our definition, notably rectors' conferences.

Context: the communist inheritance

No examples of intermediary bodies, as I have defined them, are known to have existed in the region during the communist period. The issues now of concern to intermediary bodies were then dealt with (insofar as they were recognised as such) by the ministries of education, in conjunction with industry-specific ministries and state planning agencies, in the centralised, top-down fashion of communist states: transfer of power and influence away from the party and the bureaucracy it controlled would have been almost unthinkable (Simons, 1993, p 72; Turner and Loksa, 1999, p 144). All significant decisions on resources, academic programmes, student and staff numbers and the like were made centrally: in Hungary, typically, "institutions and programmes were specialised to serve the manpower needs of the planned economy" and directed to those ends (World Bank, 1998, Annex 1). In higher education in communist Czechoslovakia, "there was a complete centralisation of power" in the Ministry, and senior university officials "did not in practice possess any powers": loyalty to the Party was required, not independent thought (Devinsky, 2000).

Such instrumental approaches, viewing the universities as subservient factors in the production process, would not tend towards the creation of bodies whose objectives would necessarily be related to broader educational goals. But this centralist, directive approach has in places carried over from the communist period into current approaches by some intermediary bodies. Continuity, it has been noted, is as strong a feature as change in much of higher education in the post-communist states: "transitology" is one term used to sum up the complexities of this movement from one state of understanding about how education, and society at large, are organised, to another (Cowen, 1996).

But we should note here that there is evidence that, at least in some places and at certain times, the universities in communist states were not merely subservient agencies of an all-powerful central bureaucracy: the relationship was more complex. Co-option of the professoriate into the party/state machinery took place (Deletant, 1995, p 166), and professors as senior party members then exercised influential roles in higher education policy-making and planning (Turner and Loksa, 1999, p 143). As with the State Education Commission in contemporary China (Min, 1994), there may have been an element of academic take-over of the state machinery which had originally been designed to direct and monitor their activities.

This ambiguity needs to be kept in mind when we examine statements about universities in post-communist states being "freed from political control". It is not axiomatic that the creation of intermediary bodies under democratic political control must be less intrusive, so far as the universities are concerned, than bureaucratic, academic-dominated structures designed to ensure communist party control. Complaints from universities about the new, mundane

realities of democratic control are easy to come by (Constantinescu, 1995). Late 1990s Slovakia offers a more dramatic case of an elected government seeking political advantage in attacking academic freedom and university autonomy (Devinsky, 2000).

Development of intermediary bodies in the post-communist period

The details of the decisions and processes which led to the creation of intermediary bodies in the post-communist period are difficult to discern. It is reasonable to conclude, however, that multilateral aid agencies, notably the World Bank and the European Commission, had a large influence. These agencies, supported by further bilateral funding from EU countries, America and Japan, provided large amounts of financial support for higher education in Eastern Europe during the 1990s. To take one example: combined World Bank and European Commission support to Romanian higher education averaged some $20-30m a year in the mid-1990s. Because of hyper-inflation and fluctuating exchange rates, it is hard to compare this with the higher education budget from national sources in the same period, but a very approximate annual figure might be $50m (Dinca and Damien, 1997, p 21, 46). Given this degree of financial dependency, policies advocated by the international donors would have a high probability of being implemented.

In Romania, the European Commission supported the creation of "new buffer National Councils to serve as decentralising mechanisms between the Ministry of Education and the Higher Education System…[which will be] an essential first step in the recreation of an autonomous Romanian University system free of political control" (European Commission, 1994, s1 3). Unfortunately, the Commission did not go on to consider how decentralisation would operate in practice; nor how the existence of the National Councils, with advisory responsibilities to the Minister, would in fact remove political control from higher education. Even assuming that this last aim was somehow achieved, the Commission did not address what would then be the problematic aspects of this loss of control over important recipients of public money.

The World Bank similarly supported the establishment in Romania of the National Councils, seeing them as "a key means to decentralize and rationalize the system" (World Bank, 1996, p 16), but without offering supporting detail. Significantly, the Romanian Government, in seeking World Bank financial support for higher education, drew attention to the then recent establishment of intermediary bodies for finance (CNFIS) and accreditation (CNEAA) (World Bank, 1996, p 85).

In its general policy statements on higher education, the World Bank has associated the existence of intermediary bodies of all kinds with Neave and van Vught's (1994) "state supervising" model of higher education management (as opposed to their more directive "state control" model). The World Bank has gone on to link the existence of intermediary bodies with the enhanced institutional autonomy, effectiveness and propensity for innovation which Neave and van Vught associate with their state supervising model (World Bank, 1994, p 63).

The supposition that the benefits of the state supervising model, as described by Neave and van Vught, can only be, or are more likely to be, realised if intermediary bodies are in place is questionable. The creation of intermediary bodies seems to be viewed here superficially, as an end in itself - a structural change which will automatically deliver the desired benefits. Intermediary bodies are not presented as an expression of the deeper changes in the state/university relationship - an understanding of the costs of acquiring organisational knowledge, an appreciation of the dynamics of innovation - which are implied by the Neave and van Vught model.

In Hungary, the World Bank similarly supported the creation of intermediary bodies for accreditation (MAB) and for overall policy, funding allocations and research planning (FTT), and, again, the Government pointed to the creation of these bodies in seeking a World Bank loan for higher education reform (World Bank, 1998, Annexes 1 and 2). But in Hungary, the establishment of these bodies was planned from 1990, immediately after the collapse of the communist regime. This rapid development probably reflected the greater familiarity of Hungarian academics, compared with their Balkan counterparts, say, with Western models. Certainly, it appears to have been an academically-driven process: local observers have noted that "there was no official vision" for how the accreditation and the other functions of the new bodies, once established, should be carried out (Darvas-Nagy, Kozma and Thun, 1997, p 111). This supports the view that the creation of intermediary bodies did not form part of any broader re-thinking of state/university relations.

Western influence on accreditation matters was apparent in the focus from the outset in Hungary on institutional review, with programme evaluation playing a subsidiary role. (The distinction here is between an examination of an institution's own processes for maintaining academic standards or quality - "meta-evalution" - and detailed scrutiny of the content and teaching of each programme. Institutional review aims to test the various systems used by institutional managers, without becoming deeply involved in the academic issues concerning particular programmes. Programme evaluation, by contrast, in effect substitutes the judgement of the evaluators for those of the staff teaching the programme.) The Hungarian approach contrasts with the position in Romania (and also in Poland, Bulgaria and elsewhere in the region), where stronger centralist traditions have supported the continuation of the programme evaluation approach.

It seems, then, that in Hungary the initial thrust for intermediary bodies came from domestic sources, but was quickly reinforced by the support of the multilateral agencies. This "bottom-up" development may explain the regionally unusual focus by the accreditation body on an institutional, rather than programme, approach, thus limiting what we may see as the bureaucratic wish for detailed central control. I shall return to this point later.

Just beyond our geographical area of focus, but of interest here, Turkey in 1981 established its principal higher education intermediary body, YÖK, the Higher Education Council. This has been presented as a bold, modernising step, part of a move from "a diluted and degenerated version of the old traditional Continental model to a system which has many affinities with the Anglo-American model" (Saylam, 1995). Although YÖK was intended, according to this writer, to "function as a buffer between the universities and the Government", its main role appears in practice to have been closer to that of a control instrument on behalf of the Government, imposing what have been seen as unpopular policies on reluctant university leaderships (Jones, 1999; Jones, 2000).

Nevertheless, the view that the establishment of an intermediary body is part of a modernising process is significant. Cowen (1996) sees educational developments in the region as part of a delayed move from pre-modern to modern systems; and, given their popularity with the international agencies driving modernisation, it is not surprising that the establishment of intermediary bodies has figured in this process. One might also speculate that it is possible that the example of YÖK's convenience as a covert instrument of central control over the universities was not lost on neighbouring Balkan governments.

Intermediary bodies - the Western experience

I have questioned the basis of the enthusiasm on the part of international agencies for the establishment of intermediary bodies as part of higher education reform programmes. Their formal statements give only the briefest rationales, in the most general terms, as indicated

above. From these, we may conjecture that a wish to improve system effectiveness, allied with concerns about the capacities of both institutional and ministry managements to achieve change rapidly, led to the view that the creation of new organisational structures offered a way forward. We have seen that the notion of decentralisation figured prominently in official statements: yet the creation of a new tier of central bureaucracy is not the most obvious route to this goal - particularly when partly-devolved managements already exist in each higher education institution.

Comparative studies made in Western Europe have concluded that there is no clear relationship observable between the existence of intermediary bodies and institutional autonomy and effectiveness (Goedegebuure et al., 1993a; p 333). In The Netherlands, for example, rather than create a set of intermediary bodies, Government policy has aimed at directly encouraging strengthened institutional autonomy and management, including the removal of regulations affecting universities, and making it possible for universities to operate entirely outside the national university legislation (Goedegebuure, Kaiser, Maassen and de Weert, 1993b).

In sharp contrast, intermediary bodies in Britain have latterly been used by Government to affect detailed institutional policies, once effectively beyond its reach. The former University Grants Committee (UGC), the organisation which allocated public funds to universities from 1919 to 1988, was once authoritatively described as "interposing between Government and the institutions a committee of persons selected for their knowledge and standing and not for their political affiliations" (Lord Robbins, 1963, para 727). In contrast, its successors, the national Higher Education Funding Councils, are now considered as executive agencies, charged with implementing, through the universities and colleges, detailed Government policies for higher education. For example, the latest annual report of the Higher Education Funding Council for England details its work in changing the profile of admissions to universities, and in developing benchmarking to allow it better to assess, and then affect, a range of universities' functions (HEFCE, 2001).

So far as academic assessment in Britain is concerned, it is argued that the extent of detailed scrutiny undertaken up to 2001 by the relevant intermediary body, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), has undermined the aim of supporting autonomous institutions. The existence of intermediary bodies with particular policy goals and methods, such as the QAA, means that institutional managements come under pressure to pursue the agenda of the intermediary body, rather than developing their own strategies (Brown, 2000). This is of course the opposite of what is desired in Central and Eastern Europe by the World Bank and other international agencies.

Bridging the policy gap between Britain and The Netherlands, a study of academic assessment methods in the Nordic states could not detect significant differences in outcomes as between countries which had a specialist intermediary body for this purpose (as in Norway), and those where the ministry of education undertook the task directly (as in Finland). The authors of this study concluded that that whether or not separate intermediary bodies existed simply reflected “national political peculiarities” rather than differing objectives or indeed outcomes (Smeby and Stensaker, 1999).

Where intermediary bodies have been essentially constituted by the academic profession, as with the former UGC in Britain, they may be seen as a “collective extension of institutional management” (Goedegebuure et al., 1993a, p 333). While this may have been acceptable when the intermediary body dealt with a small, cohesive system, international experience suggests that such acceptance is unlikely to continue when a more costly, differentiated, mass system develops. Instead, the intermediary bodies are likely to be transformed to serve

governmental interests, as in Britain, or simply abolished, as happened to the Commonwealth Tertiary Education Commission in Australia (Meek, 1993).

The main conclusion to be drawn from these findings from a range of countries is that it is the intentions of governments towards issues of university autonomy and effectiveness which are central, rather than whether or not intermediary bodies are the means selected for intervention. Intermediary bodies, on their own, offer no certainties to institutions hoping to preserve or develop their autonomy. Evidence is also lacking to suggest that improved decision-making and enhanced institutional effectiveness are outcomes of the establishment of intermediary bodies: other, more direct, routes are available to achieve these goals. It might, then, be thought desirable for careful consideration to precede their creation in transitional countries, where effective central government organisations of any kind are rare.

Nevertheless, the pressure to introduce intermediary bodies in Central and Eastern Europe is consistent with findings from various transitional countries that international agencies tend to support the introduction of what they regard as "standard" Western higher educational structures and systems, as part of the modernising process. This is done even though the situation locally may derive from quite different educational and organisational traditions (Weidman, 1999; Tomusk, 2000).

The pattern and roles of intermediary bodies in the region

We have shown that international organisations have played an important role in the establishment of intermediary bodies in Central and Eastern Europe. But the patterns of establishment of these bodies show differences which reflect, I suggest, characteristics of the situation to be found in each country. I shall consider here some factors which may partly account for the variation between countries; although, inevitably, chance must play a part in deciding why structures used in one country are not applied in a neighbouring country's broadly similar system.

Considering intermediary bodies in the accreditation and quality areas in Eastern Europe, Tomusk asserts that these bodies have been used to apply criteria selectively in order to close down private institutions which might otherwise compete with public universities. These intermediary bodies have thus become "the quality police protecting the monopoly of traditional institutions" (Tomusk, 2000). He presents no empirical evidence to support this assertion: indeed, it seems to run counter to his comment that many university teachers from traditional universities benefit financially from this widened provision. This is because they often work concurrently in several universities or colleges, public and private, in order to earn a living wage. Such individuals would, one might suppose, be unlikely to serve as "quality police" aiming deliberately to remove their additional sources of income, or to encourage their colleagues to do so.

However, if for the moment we accept Tomusk's view on the reason for the creation of accreditation/quality intermediary bodies, it suggests the general hypothesis that these bodies, and perhaps other sorts of intermediary bodies, are created in order to protect existing institutions by raising entrance barriers to the higher education market. What evidence is there to support this hypothesis?

It is true that in the region the members of intermediary bodies are generally drawn from the elite institutions. To take the Romanian assessment body, CNEAA: its 19 members appointed in 1997 for four-year terms were overwhelmingly drawn from the elite universities in the capital and three other cities. The criteria for selection were "professional competence, exemplary morals, and impartiality" (Mihailescu, 1996, p 52), perhaps with the additional unstated criterion of political acceptability. Similar approaches apply in the other countries considered here.

It is also the case that in the accreditation/quality field, highly traditional models of academic standards are usually applied. The focus is on quantifiable input measures - the number of teachers with doctorates, the size of laboratory facilities, and so on - rather than with outputs in terms of student learning or research achievement. This reflects the traditional producer-driven culture of higher education in the region, strongly reinforced by communist instrumentalism.

Both these factors - the composition of the intermediary body and the focus of its interests - might be thought to be likely to count against private institutions. But in Romania private institutions continue to operate in large numbers - 54 of them enrolling 130,00 students in a recent estimate (The Economist, 2002). Poland, which also has a comprehensive accreditation structure, is reported to have an even larger private higher education sector, with 195 institutions enrolling 377,000 students. Hungary is said to have 32 private institutions enrolling 28,000 students. If Tomusk's argument is correct, then the intermediary bodies have been remarkably unsuccessful in these countries in achieving their covert "policing" objectives.

I put forward an alternative hypothesis to explain the pattern of development of intermediary bodies in the region. It is that the pattern in a particular country reflects the extent to which members of the intermediary bodies can exercise effective, direct authority over the academic staff in the institutions within their remit. This hypothesis draws on Schopflin's position that post-communist societies are political systems distinct both from their communist origins and Western democracies, with intermingled elements of democracy and authoritarianism. They are characterised by sharp conflicts over how power is legitimated, distributed, and used, and "there is only a very marginal sense of the public sphere and the public good" (Schopflin, 2000, p 174). This, I suggest, offers an underlying rationale for the operation of intermediary bodies in the region.

Thus, we see the widespread development of accreditation and similar bodies, as these offer their academic members the opportunity to exercise power over the staff in the institutions under review. Significantly, the focus, we have noted, is generally on detailed programme evaluation, in the centralist tradition, rather than on systems-focused, autonomy-enhancing, institutional review. But how does the Hungarian case, with an accreditation body not operating in the centralist mode, fit this argument? I suggest that the key factor here is Hungary's strong Western orientation, and the sophistication of its society generally, which Schopflin (2000) presents as reflecting various complexities of the country's recent past (ch 24). It therefore stands partly outside the characterisation of post-communist states which Schopflin gives above; and hence developments there may be expected along more Western lines.

The allocation of resources to institutions might be thought to offer even greater scope than accreditation for exercising authority over institutions and staff, and that we should therefore have seen the rapid creation of intermediary bodies responsible for funding. But closer examination reveals that other factors come into play. In most countries, the funding of universities is driven by staff numbers, and there is a shared assumption that it is a public responsibility to fund, albeit minimally, the salaries of all the staff. Given the poor state of public education budgets in most countries, little discretionary funding remains to be allocated once staffing costs have been met (Temple, 2001). A member of a funding intermediary body would therefore be involved in largely routine accounting tasks, with little scope for the exercise of personal judgements.

Romania, however, does have a funding intermediary body, CNFIS, composed entirely of academic members. Significantly, Romania has adopted a normative approach to funding its universities. This means that, rather than funding staff posts, allocations to institutions are calculated on the basis of a formula taking account of student numbers weighted by subject, level and mode of study (Dinca and Damien, 1997, p 49). While the overall higher education budget is set by Government, the weightings applied under this formula are set by CNFIS,

offering considerable scope for variation, with consequential effects on the incomes of individual institutions. This is particularly the case in a system with a large proportion (48%) of specialist institutions (Miroiu and Dinca, 1999), all or most of whose students will be in a single funding category: the decision made on the relevant subject weighting will thus be vital for those institutions. CNFIS is accordingly an important body in Romanian university life.

Intermediary bodies dealing with research priorities and the allocation of research grants might also be thought to offer attractive opportunities in this framework, and to have the prestige that such bodies have in many Western countries. There are such bodies in Hungary (FTT) and Romania (CNCIS), but they are not highly important. This is because the sums of money they have to allocate are small, and the number of institutions which might credibly obtain them are very limited. Much research funding comes, instead, from foreign sources, often involving partnerships with Western universities, thereby by-passing the national agencies. These intermediary bodies are therefore, under this hypothesis, less attractive.

I have argued that the pattern of creation of intermediary bodies in the region can be explained largely by reference to the power opportunities which a particular type of body offers to its members. This view can be seen as consistent with the culture of transitional societies, where questions about the allocation and use of power have not been settled. The Hungarian counter-case can be argued as being consistent with this view.

Conclusions

This paper suggests that the rapid creation of intermediary bodies for higher education in the transitional countries of Central and Eastern Europe has not been based upon a careful study of what they have achieved in the West, and what contribution they might make in the East. Instead, against a background of unreformed ministry structures and under-developed institutional managements, largely untested assumptions were made by international organisations about what new structures might be appropriate. The establishment of new central agencies with, in effect, powers to second-guess operational units fitted well into the centralist cultures inherited from the previous regimes, but also addressed modernising agendas of post-communist governments.

As a result, it is quite likely that the outcomes will be the opposite of what was intended: rather than encouraging effective, innovatory institutional managements, a centralised, conformist system might easily result. Further studies are needed to discover what is happening.

A better approach might have been to have worked with ministries - where ultimate decisions will, in any case, necessarily have to be made - and the institutions to develop improved managements in both places, able to work together to produce a shared commitment as to their respective tasks in a devolved higher education system.

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