Chapter 4

DEALING WITH DILEMMAS IN CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION

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1. DILEMMAS IN CONTEMPORARY HIGHER EDUCATION

Contemporary Higher Education Institutions (HEI) are confronted with several dilemmas. In this chapter we will discuss two of these dilemmas.

1.1 First Dilemma: Preservation of Cultural Heritage versus Constructivist Learning

One of these dilemmas is the tension between being a professional organization, which protects academic values according to disciplinary rules, and being a modern, constructivist organization with a focus on learning in which the relationship with the student is central.

One side of the dilemma implies a professor-centered view and a focus on research. Teaching often comes in second place. In traditional education, the teacher is the central agent or even the “authority.” He controls both the content of the subject and the way it is taught. Teaching often means “lecturing.” The student plays a passive role and is expected to absorb and reproduce what has been taught.

The other side of the dilemma refers to the growing importance of the student and becomes evident when looking at four important trends affecting the academic world: the concept of the student as a customer, the increasing
focus on learning, the changing role of the professor, and the changing concept of the student.

Traditional universities are struggling with the “customer” concept. Is the student a customer or a client for learning services? Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2003) observe that education is no longer a welfare provision, or a meeting of social needs. Education has to be seen as a road to wealth production. This can be interpreted in two ways. Education can be seen as a commodity to be sold by the provider (courses for sale). Education can also lead to economic wealth for the consumer (a way to the job market). It has become a matter of market provision.

According to Naudé (2004) the student is often a “consumer” and companies and larger networks are the real “customer.” Armstrong (2003) suggests a student-as-client model where the university is like a professional firm and the student as a client paying a fee to receive the service. Following Webster’s *Third New International Dictionary* (1986), he distinguishes between a customer “purchasing a commodity or a service” and a client “engaging the professional advice or services of another.”

While this discussion is still going on and partly as a result of it, many HEI are changing their approach from being faculty centered to being learning centered. This focus on the learning process of the student is not only a consequence of a more market-oriented approach, but also based on new insights about learning processes. It challenges the traditional professor-student relationships. The classic paradigm of teaching as lecturing is being questioned. Traditional professors are not trained in the modern visions on student learning processes. De Wolf (2001) points out that respected experts in a particular field are not always good teachers. Those involved in teaching will have to learn new techniques and tools.

One of these techniques is the use of learning contracts. Jarvis, Holford, and Griffin (2003, p. 105) point out that contracts could be seen as a mechanism “for introducing a measure of order and predictability” in a fast changing world, which is unpredictable and risky because it is organized on a market basis. They are the basis of the relationship between two parties.

The use of “contracts” in learning processes originated in self-directed learning. Knowles (1986), an influential North-American writer on adult education, introduced the concept of a learning plan as a basis for self-directed learning. It has become common practice in many types of education (adult education, higher education, professional education, training, etc.).

What will be the role of the expert if the learner will play a more active role? The new focus requires familiarity with the goals of the students and assessment of their needs (or “wants” if one only sees the pressures from the market). Processes for student coaching become necessary, curricula and