EN

EN

EN

Brussels, 21.9.2009
COM(2009) 487 final

REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Report on progress in quality assurance in higher education

REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS

Report on progress in quality assurance in higher education

(Text with EEA relevance)

1. INTRODUCTION

Quality assurance in higher education is at the heart of efforts to build a coherent, compatible and attractive European Higher Education Area (EHEA), in line with the objectives of the pan-European Bologna Process. Over the past decade, there has been growing interest, in Europe and worldwide, in quality assurance in higher education. With globalisation, economic integration and increased academic and professional mobility, there is a growing need for the recognition of qualifications outside the country which awards them. The "borderless" delivery of higher education has made cross-border quality assurance increasingly important. The emergence of so-called "degree mills" (fake universities selling fake "degrees" on the internet) makes it vital to distinguish legitimate education undertaken abroad from spurious qualifications. Quality assurance helps to make higher education transparent and trustworthy for European citizens and employers as well as for students and scholars from other continents.

Within the framework of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Commission has called for modernised curricula and more effective funding and governance of higher education. It acknowledged the importance of the Bologna reforms, including quality assurance[1]. There have been two Recommendations from the European Parliament and Council to promote a quality assurance culture in higher education. The first, in 1998[2], called for the support and where necessary, the creation of, transparent quality assurance systems. The second, in February 2006, dealt with further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education[3].

The purpose of the 2006 Recommendation was to encourage higher education institutions (HEIs) to introduce or develop internal quality assurance systems and for quality assurance or accreditation agencies to apply the European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance[4], in this area. Representatives of national authorities, the higher education sector, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with social partners, were also invited to set up a 'European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies' which would allow HEIs to choose, from amongst the agencies in the register, an agency which meets their needs and profile. The Recommendation also called for Member States to enable HEIs to seek accreditation from registered agencies outside their own country; for cooperation between

---

[1] COM(2005) 152 final of 20.4.2005
[2] Recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998 (OJ L 270 of 7.10.1998)
[3] Recommendation 2006/143/EC of 15 February 2006 (OJ L 64 of 4.3.2006)
[4] Adopted at the Bologna Ministerial Conference in Bergen in 2005, see
     http://www.enqa.eu/pubs_esg.lasso

quality assurance agencies in order to build mutual trust; and for public access to the assessments made by the agencies.

The 2006 Recommendation invited the Commission to:

(1)   *Continue, in close cooperation with the Member States, its support for cooperation between HEIs, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, competent authorities and other bodies in the field;*

 (2)   *Present triennial reports on progress in the development of quality assurance systems in the various Member States and on cooperation activities at European level.*

This is the first triennial report on progress achieved. It analyses the situation at national, European and international level and suggests areas for further development.

2.   MAIN DEVELOPMENTS AT NATIONAL LEVEL

This section of the report outlines the role of external quality assurance, the current situation and experience with quality assurance standards.

2.1.   Role of external quality assurance

The 2006 Recommendation acknowledges that the main responsibility for quality in higher education rests with HEIs themselves. HEIs internal quality assurance systems aim to monitor and enhance quality and to develop a real "quality culture". However, they often lack the independence and public accessibility required to inform stakeholders in a transparent and accountable way. Providing such information is the role of external quality assurance, which is the main thrust of the Recommendation and is carried out by independent quality assurance agencies.

External quality assurance may consist of:

–   Evaluating ("auditing") the quality of a given higher education institution, its programmes or units;

–   Comparing quality at different HEIs in a given area/discipline ("benchmarking");

–   Guaranteeing that certain pre-defined "standards" of quality are met ("accreditation");

–   Awarding various quality seals usually designed to signal high quality or "excellence".

2.2.   The diverse landscape of quality assurance across Europe

Many HEIs in Europe have been building up their "quality culture" and internal quality assurance systems, mainly through inter-institutional cooperation, mutual assistance and benchmarking[5]. This positive development should be further encouraged.

---

[5]   Trends V, Universities shaping the EHEA, EUA, 2007.

The emergence of new quality assurance agencies and networks is the most significant development in the European landscape. This trend began after the 1998 Recommendation but has spread and accelerated in recent years. There are now quality assurance agencies in almost all countries of the EHEA, although they are quite heterogeneous in terms of size, scope, statute, focus and international capacity. Many are small, newly created with only limited experience and European/international exposure. With a few exceptions, their remit is limited to their country (and sometimes their region): only a very small number are active outside their own territory. Most agencies focus on programme evaluation, but a growing number are becoming involved in institutional accreditations or audits[6].

The Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009[7], confirms that HEIs in most countries are actively working to establish coherent internal quality assurance systems and align them with external assessment procedures. The main challenge for most countries is to design assessment procedures to measure learning outcomes. The Stocktaking Report uses three indicators to measure progress in quality assurance:

- *Stage of development of external quality assurance:* countries score best if they have an external system applying to all institutions working in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance.

- *Level of student participation:* countries score best if students participate in the governance of national quality assurance bodies, in external reviews of HEIs and/or programmes, in internal quality assurance processes and in preparation of self-assessment reports.

- *Level of international participation:* countries score best if there is international participation within external reviews of institutions and/or programmes, in the governance of national quality assurance bodies and in external evaluations of national quality assurance agencies.

Examples of Member States that score well on these three indicators are Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom.

The ENQA Survey 2008[8] indicates that whilst most agencies have a national 'remit', this is not always the case. In some countries different parts of the higher education sector have different agencies, e.g. in Germany a real market has been established with a number of 'competing' agencies under an accreditation council. Most quality assurance agencies are in a period of change, driven by the Bologna Process and the international context. Another major development is the increasing involvement of stakeholders in quality assurance issues.

2.3. Experience with quality assurance standards and guidelines

The European Standards and Guidelines on quality assurance were adopted in 2005. They consist of three parts: principles for HEIs' own internal quality assurance system; standards for the external evaluation of HEIs and their programmes by agencies; standards applying to quality assurance agencies themselves. They are meant as a "generic" common reference with

---

6   Quality Procedures in the EHEA and Beyond, 2nd ENQA Survey, ENQA, 2008.
7   http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/
     Stocktaking_report_2009_FINAL.pdf
8   Quality Procedures in the EHEA and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey (2008)

a certain margin for interpretation in the context of different countries, disciplines and institutions.

Awareness of the quality standards varies between countries and constituencies, but considerable experience with their application has been gained: thousands of people (university staff, experts, students, representatives of business and society) have participated in self-evaluation procedures, served on evaluation panels or been interviewed during evaluation visits. The participation of students in quality assurance as a basic requirement in the EHEA has gained ground in recent years, although this involvement often remains confined to certain aspects or procedures[9]. The involvement of business representatives and of non-nationals varies significantly in internal and external quality assurance and is generally stronger in agencies' evaluation panels than in their decision making bodies.

The definition of quality assurance standards is under continuous development. An example is the organisation of seminars by the E4 Group[10] on issues such as: the use of learning outcomes; the link to qualifications frameworks; the publication of quality assurance reports; the recognition of prior learning; transnational education; the internationalisation of procedures; and the cooperation and compatibility with other world regions.

The standards provide useful generic references, but are still interpreted in different ways in various countries, agencies and HEIs. They are seen either as a check-list of formal requirements, as a code of good professional practice, or as soft guidelines. The notion that agencies should have overall compliance rather than meet each of the standards seems reasonable, but it leaves the door open to a wide range of interpretations.

The experience of European HEIs and quality assurance agencies with the quality standards is still largely restricted to "traditional" initial higher education, although, some special attention has been paid to distance education within certain national contexts. Overall, however, transnational education in all its forms, continuing education and lifelong learning qualifications in general, short-cycle higher education, and distance and online education have remained largely outside the scope of quality assurance.

It is also worth noting that despite that fact that the 'European Standards and Guidelines' were developed in context of the Bologna Process, they do not refer to the importance of complying with the EHEA's basic requirements (e.g. concerning the Qualifications Framework or the use of ECTS[11]) and main priorities (such as employability and mobility).

3.   MAIN DEVELOPMENTS AT EUROPEAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVEL

This section of the report examines European developments in quality assurance and looks at international trends that are shaping work in this area.

3.1.   Strong growth in Europe's quality assurance infrastructure

The growth of quality agencies has nurtured a strong development of quality assurance networks. The Commission is supporting the European Association for Quality Assurance

---

[9]   Bologna with Student eyes, ESU, 2009.
[10]   Comprised by ENQA, the European University Association (EUA, www.eua.be), the European Student Unions (ESU, www.esib.org) and the European Association of Institutions of Higher Education (EURASHE, www.eurashe.eu).
[11]   European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System

(ENQA)[12], created in 2000. It has increased membership quickly to 48 full members from 23 different countries. The "E4 Group" proposed the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance, adopted in 2005. This group has also organised seminars examining various key quality assurance issues. Various regional clusters of agencies are active e.g. in Central/Eastern Europe or the Nordic countries. The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA)[13], which has 15 member organisations from 10 countries, has actively pursued the mutual recognition of accreditation decisions between its members.

---

[12]   www.enqa.eu
[13]   www.ecaconsortium.net

> *Good practice*
>
> *Within the ECA consortium of accreditation agencies, trust-building based on intense cooperation has led to a first series of bilateral agreements for the recognition of accreditation decisions and to the first experiment of making these decisions publicly accessible on Internet through the European Commission funded database called Qrossroads.[14]*

The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR)[15] is the major new body in the European quality assurance architecture. It was set up by the E4 Group as a new legal body in 2008, with the support of the Commission, in response to the 2007 meeting of Bologna Ministers in London and in line with the principles set out in the 2006 Recommendation. The Register is open to agencies operating in the EHEA on condition that they demonstrate their compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines. There is a simplified procedure for the admission of full members of ENQA, who already satisfy this condition, but candidate agencies may also apply directly to EQAR. Decisions about admissions are taken by the Register Committee whose members are nominated by the E4 Group and other stakeholders. Governments may become EQAR members but only with observer status in the Committee. The first two rounds of registrations of December 2008 and April 2009 resulted in the admission of nine ENQA members into EQAR. More are planned to follow soon.

The considerable development of the quality assurance infrastructure in Europe over the past few years is in line with the 2006 Recommendation and with the Bologna Process. However, the variety of actors in quality assurance is large and some aspects may need to be reviewed to improve the transparency of the system as a whole. In particular, agencies in small higher education communities face an additional challenge to achieve real credibility beyond their boundaries. There is some concern that agencies' membership in ENQA or even their registration in the EQAR might not generate the necessary level of mutual trust. Such trust however is the basis for the transparency and credibility within the EHEA as a whole.

With multiple layers of agencies and networks, the system can be difficult to read and use. The basic requirement for membership in both ENQA and EQAR is compliance with the European Standards and Guidelines and the two bodies have a number of members in common, but not all. Hence, much more effort will be needed before the EHEA has a readable and user-friendly quality assurance system. It is in many cases still unclear what being accredited in one country, even by a registered agency, means in another. It is also unclear how the misuse of such an accreditation could be prevented, e.g. in the case of a higher education institution which operates in several countries without offering in all locations the guarantees that led to the initial accreditation. Stronger warranties would help, since the credibility of the European quality assurance system may hinge on the least trustworthy agency accepted or maintained in the Register and the weakest HEIs with accreditation from a registered agency.

---

[14]   www.qrossroads.eu
[15]   www.eqar.eu

> ***Good Practice***
>
> *Joining forces: NVAO is the joint quality assurance agency of the Netherlands and Flanders (Belgium). These territories share a common language but have significantly different higher education systems and degrees. The single agency helps to increase the evaluation resources and enhance the credibility of NVAO's quality seals.[16]*
>
> *Increasing objectivity: the Austrian Accreditation Council uses almost exclusively foreign evaluators and Austrians are not in a majority in the decision-making Board. This adds to international credibility by preventing suspicions that vested interests may distort accreditation decisions.[17]*

3.2. Quality assurance still has a limited European dimension

The 2006 Recommendation encourages Member States to enable HEIs to seek accreditation (or other quality seals) from registered agencies outside their own country. This can only become a reality if several conditions co-exist:

- − HEIs need sufficient autonomy to apply for a foreign quality seal;

- − Agencies need to be able, allowed and willing to operate beyond their national borders;

- − National governments and quality assurance agencies must acknowledge registered agencies from other countries and recognise their conclusions.

There are still only a few examples of HEIs seeking evaluations or accreditation from foreign agencies, apart from cases of subject-specific agencies and of some joint-degree courses. Only few governments have opened quality assurance in their country to other registered agencies (an example though can be found in the Netherlands). Universities of the EHEA seeking a quality seal in a given discipline still tend to turn to US agencies like ABET[18] or AACSB[19]. There seems, however, to be a growing number of agencies that are preparing for quality assurance activities outside their national context.

> ***Good practice***
>
> *Engineering schools and technical universities from several countries have received the accreditation of the French Commission du Titre d'Ingénieur (CTI). CTI has also carried out joint evaluations/accreditations with other agencies. Business schools/faculties in various countries have been "accredited" by the German ACQUIN agency. German HEIs have shown an interest in the quality audit provided by the Swiss agency (OAQ).*

Two successful European quality seals exist since before 1998: the EQUIS in management studies[20] and the European University Association's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP)[21]. Both offer an institutional rather than programme-based approach, draw on genuinely international evaluation panels and are now attracting interest from outside Europe. A few

---

[16]   www.nvao.net
[17]   www.akkreditierungsrat.at
[18]   http://www.abet.org/the_basics.shtml
[19]   http://www.aacsb.edu/
[20]   http://www.efmd.org
[21]   http://www.eua.be/events/institutional-evaluation-programme/home

newer subject-based initiatives have developed more recently from thematic networks in chemistry and engineering (both with financial support from the Commission) or are still in the planning phase (e.g. in musical education).

Good practice

The Eurochemistry seal started at the bachelor level but now also exists for master and doctorate degrees. It is awarded directly by the Eurochemistry network to programmes meeting the agreed standards[22].

The EUR-ACE label in engineering exists at the bachelor and master level. Standards were defined at European level, but are applied through national quality assurance agencies that are authorised to issue EUR-ACE "labels" together with their national accreditation. Several hundred labels have already been awarded, but they are still available from only seven national agencies[23].

However, overall cross-border quality assurance is still limited. As a result there is little comparable information for the stakeholders, in particular students, to make informed choices about where and what to study.

3.3. International Trends: growing commitment to transparency

Several new quality assurance networks have emerged in various world regions – sometimes using Europe as a reference model. The worldwide dialogue on quality assurance has intensified within the framework of the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE)[24].

Another major development at both European and global level is the growing number of international university rankings. These are often criticised in the higher education community for their methodological shortfalls and their mono-dimensional approach (i.e. their focus on research achievements in 'hard sciences' and their disregard of performances of universities in areas like humanities and social sciences, teaching and community outreach). Notwithstanding these shortcomings, rankings can be a useful tool for comparison and contrast between HEIs and their programmes. The European Commission has recently launched a feasibility study to develop a new multi-dimensional and customised approach to the global ranking of universities[25]. The development of transparency tools in close consultation with stakeholders was supported in the 2009 Bologna Ministerial Conference[26].

The main developments in quality assurance in Europe should be seen in the light of these trends.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FURTHER DEVELOPMENT OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EUROPE

Over the past few years, Europe's quality assurance system has developed enormously, both with respect to internal quality assurance in European HEIs and to external evaluation and

---

[22] http://ectn-assoc.cpe.fr/chemistry-eurolabels/default.htm
[23] http://www.enaee.eu
[24] http://www.inqaahe.org
[25] http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc62_en.htm
[26] Leuven-Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué, April 2009, http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/

accreditation of institutions and programmes[27]. Many new quality assurance agencies and networks have been created, there is an increased awareness of the European Standards and Guidelines on quality assurance and there are a growing number of agencies which prepare for quality assurance outside their national context. Notwithstanding this overall positive development, the full implementation of the 2006 Recommendation appears to require further efforts in a number of areas.

4.1. Looking at the quality assurance infrastructure

Some features of Europe's quality assurance infrastructure appear to require further discussion in order to allow for a higher level of trust between agencies and hence a sufficient level of transparency for users and society. Quality assurance agencies are still a relatively new feature in the EHEA. They will need to demonstrate their independence and professionalism to build trust among stakeholders. They will further need to convince their European peers that they offer a sufficient level of comparability, which is important as a precondition for the cross-recognition of degrees and the promotion of student mobility.

The Commission is aware of the risk that agencies may have become too numerous while their size remains rather small. Therefore, the possibility of agency mergers might merit some consideration via the existing European quality assurance networks (ENQA, ECA), e.g. by regrouping agencies on the basis of regional or linguistic proximity. Agencies could also consider broadening the scope of their activities in order to deal more adequately with lifelong learning, distance, online, vocational, transnational and private higher education.

Creating a clearer distinction of roles between ENQA, EQAR and the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), with a stronger focus on the benefit of quality assurance users, might increase the efficiency of the European quality assurance infrastructure. Providing an easy, online access to the European-wide list of evaluated institutions and programmes could be discussed as a priority of EQAR. The Qrossroads experiment, started by ECA with support from the European Commission, may provide a useful point of departure for a much larger scale database. Close cooperation with the NARIC-ENIC[28] network is likely to enhance the database's potential to contribute to the recognition of qualifications and to foster mobility.

4.2. Revisiting the European Standards and Guidelines

The European Standards and Guidelines could be further developed, to make quality assurance more coherent with the development of the EHEA, as was envisaged in the 2006 Recommendation. This exercise would need to involve agencies and other quality assurance stakeholders within the Bologna Process framework. Such a development could consider the following three aspects:

(1) Complying with the main structure (three cycles) as a basic quality requirement in the EHEA. This would be in accordance with the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and the Qualifications Framework of the EHEA adopted in 2005[29]. A clearer reference in the guidelines should be given to the Diploma Supplement and the ECTS, since these are not fully implemented in most countries.

---

27   Trends V, op.cit.
28   http://www.enic-naric.net
29   http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/qf/overarching.asp

(2)   In the EHEA, the quality standards would encompass priorities such as employability and mobility (in line with the target set for mobility in the 2009 Communiqué of Bologna Ministers).

(3)   The standards for internal quality assurance systems of HEIs might also factor in other key dimensions such as the quality of student services in general[30], career/employment guidance for students and alumni[31], the development of financial management capacity and the implementation of the European Charter for Researches and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers[32].

4.3.   A stronger European dimension in quality assurance

The possibility for HEIs' to choose from among registered agencies, as highlighted in the 2006 Recommendation, hinges on the development of a larger number of European quality seals. They could be based on broad disciplinary fields (rather than on narrow areas of professional specialisation) and awarded either by separate specialised agencies or in conjunction with national evaluations in the corresponding field. The Commission is supporting the development of initiatives of this type[33].

National quality assurance agencies should be encouraged to develop activities beyond their borders and to seek the recognition of their decisions in other countries, e.g. through conventions of mutual recognition. HEIs could be encouraged to use the services of registered agencies outside their country. There may be a need to clarify the portability of national accreditation within the EHEA and also the issue of quality assurance for cross-border higher education within the EHEA. Given the growing importance of joint and double degree courses in Europe, clear principles might be useful to avoid the need for multiple accreditations.

The Commission supports the development of transparency tools complementing quality assurance, in particular those providing a comparative view on the quality of HEIs and their programmes. This includes the aforementioned feasibility study on a multi-dimensional, customised university ranking[34].

The international outreach and credibility of the EHEA may be further promoted through cooperation in quality assurance with other world regions. This point has been underlined in the statement of the first Bologna Policy Forum in Louvain-la-Neuve, which specifically mentioned quality assurance as an area for concrete cooperation between the 46 Bologna countries and countries from across the world. [35]

In the present report the Commission has highlighted the positive developments in quality assurance in higher education but has also made some suggestions for further discussion and development. The Commission would like to invite all stakeholders to reflect on this report and to ensure the appropriate follow-up to the 2006 Recommendation. The Commission looks forward to being able to report on further progress in 2012.

---

[30]   Bologna with Student eyes, ESU, 2009.
[31]   Leuven-LLN Communiqué, op.cit.
[32]   http://ec.europa.eu/eracareers/pdf/am509774CEE_EN_E4.pdf
[33]   http://ec.europa.eu/education/erasmus/doc910_en.htm
[34]   http://ec.europa.eu/education/lifelong-learning-policy/doc62_en.htm
[35]   http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/forum/
        Bologna_Policy_Forum_Statement_29April2009.pdf