

Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
Key note speech
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by
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I.

To speak about Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area makes it necessary first to describe roughly the outlines, the key objectives of the European Higher Education Area. We should not forget that the Bologna process started with the Sorbonne Declaration signed by the ministers responsible for Higher Education of France, Germany, Italy and UK on the occasion of the 800th anniversary of the Sorbonne May 1998. This already made clear that governments of states and higher education institutions had to be the key players realising the programme being launched by the “Joint Declaration on Harmonisation of the architecture of the European Higher Education system”.

The four ministers stressed that the “European process has very recently moved some extremely important steps ahead. Relevant as they are, they should not make one forget that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy: it must be a Europe of knowledge as well. We must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities, which continue to play a pivotal role for their development.”

It is emphasised in the Sorbonne Declaration that “universities were born in Europe, some three quarters of a millennium ago. In those times, students and academics would freely circulate and rapidly disseminate knowledge throughout the continent.” The Communiqué of the Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Bergen, 19-20 May 2005, Ministers “recognize that mobility of students and staff among all participating countries remains one of the key objectives of the Bologna Process.”

The Sorbonne Declaration stresses that an “open European area for higher learning [...] requires ... continuous efforts to remove barriers and to develop a framework for teaching and learning, which would enhance mobility and in the Bergen Communiqué of last week ministers declared that it is necessary to “intensify our efforts to lift obstacles to mobility by facilitating the delivery

of visa and work permits and by encouraging participation in mobility programmes”. You may ask what progress has been made in the last seven years.

The four ministers in Paris called on other Member States of the Union and other European Countries “to create a European area of higher education, where national identities and common interests can interact and strengthen each other for the benefit of Europe”.

II.

Taking up this initiative in June 1999 in Bologna 29 European Ministers responsible for Higher Education have committed their governments and their countries to create a “European Higher Education Area”... “in any case within the first decade of the third millennium”. In Prague on May 19th 2001 32 European Ministers “reaffirmed their commitment to the objective of establishing the European Higher Education Area by 2010. The Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin in September 2003 met to “review the progress achieved and to set priorities and new objectives for the coming years, with a view to speeding up the realisation of the European Higher Education Area”. And last week in Bergen Ministers confirmed their commitment to “coordinating our policies through the Bologna Process to establish the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010”.

The European Higher Education Area will be characterised by a structure of study programmes and degrees which is new for the institutions of higher education of continental Europe. A key objective defined already in the Sorbonne Declaration determined to contribute to the enhancement of mobility and thus to the realisation of a European Higher Education Area was to overcome the different structure and degrees of studies in Europe. The Sorbonne declaration is talking about a system, in which two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, should be recognized for international comparisons and equivalence ... Much of the originality and flexibility in this system will be achieved through the use of credits (such as in the ECTS scheme) and semesters.” “International recognition of the first cycle degree as an appropriate level of qualification is important for the success of this endeavour”. “In the graduate cycle, there would be a choice between a shorter master’s degree and a longer doctor’s degree, with possibilities to transfer from one to the other. In both graduate degrees, appropriate emphasis would be placed on research and autonomous work.”

The Bologna Declaration took up this pleading for the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate, the first too relevant to the European labour market as an appropriate level of qualification. Access to the second cycle shall require successful completion of a first cycle studies, lasting normally three years.” Ministers in Prague

(2001) emphasized that for greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions, is necessary.”

And in Berlin 2003 Ministers were pleased to note that, following their commitment in the Bologna Declaration to the two-cycle system a comprehensive restructuring of the European landscape of higher education is now under way. All ministers committed themselves to having started the implementation of the two cycle system by 2005.

In Bergen Ministers last week stated “with satisfaction that the two-cycle degree system is being implemented on a large scale, with more than half of the students being enrolled in it in most countries.”

III.

The signatories of the Sorbonne Declaration had committed themselves to “encouraging a common frame of reference aimed at improving external recognition and facilitating student mobility as well as employability”. This has not been taken up in the Bologna Declaration but in the Prague Communiqué it is said that “Programmes leading to a degree may, and indeed should, have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs [...]” In Berlin ministers encouraged “the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile.” They also undertook to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. Within such frameworks” first and second cycle degrees should have different orientations and various profiles in order to accommodate a diversity of individual, academic and labour market needs. First cycle degrees should give access, in the sense of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, to second cycle programmes. Second cycle degrees should give access to doctoral studies.”.

The final report of a working group preparing the Bergen meeting takes account of the “assumption that qualifications are primarily a matter of national concern and articulated in national qualifications frameworks and that such national frameworks can be inter-connected through linkage to the overarching framework of EHEA.” The ministers adopted in Bergen an “overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles. We commit ourselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010, and to having started work by this by 2007.”

IV.

Having until then focussed mainly on promoting students mobility by revising the curriculum and degree structure in Berlin ministers took note of the necessity of securing “closer links overall between the higher education and research systems in their respective countries”. They considered it necessary to go beyond the present focus on two main cycles in the Bologna Process and include the doctoral and postdoctoral levels. In Bergen Ministers underlined that “the efforts to introduce structural change and improve the quality of teaching should not detract from the effort to strengthen research and innovation. We therefore emphasise the importance of research and research training in maintaining and improving the quality of and enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA.”

V.

Other key issues of the Bologna Process are lifelong learning, the social dimension making quality higher education equally accessible to all “and stress the need for appropriate conditions for students so that they can complete their studies without obstacles related to their social and economic background.” Beyond that objectives of the Bologna Process are:

Promotion of the European dimension in higher education, the relations between higher education institutions and the students, especially the aspect at students participation in higher education governance.

VI.

The European Higher Education Area will be characterized by the following principles:

- Public responsibility for higher education;
- Autonomy of institutions of higher education;
- Participation of students in higher education governance;
- Within an overarching framework, all participating countries will have a national framework of qualifications based on three cycles in higher education, where the levels have a double function: to prepare the student for the labour market and for further competence building. Each level builds on the preceding level, and the qualification obtained will give access to higher levels.
- All higher education institutions in participating countries will recognize degrees and periods of studies according to the Lisbon Recognition Convention.
- Cooperation and trust between the participating countries, institutions of higher education and organizations.

VII.

In the Bologna Declaration the signatories had committed themselves to promote European cooperation in quality assurance with a view to develop comparable criteria and methodologies. In Prague ministers appreciated “how the work on quality assurance is moving forward. Ministers recognized the need to cooperate to address the challenges brought about by transnational education.” They stressed “the vital role that quality assurance systems play in ensuring high quality standards and in facilitating the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe.”

VIII.

Having in Prague “particularly stressed that the quality of higher education and research is and should be an important determinant of Europe’s international attractiveness and competitiveness” the Berlin Communiqué says: “The quality of higher education has proven to be the heart of the setting up a European Higher Education Area”.

And indeed this is obvious if you want to promote the competitiveness and attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area and make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world” – as the heads of state and government of the European Union have declared in Lisbon and Barcelona.

But quality of higher education in Europe as well as among the higher education institutions in every country participating in the Bologna-Process is rather different. So it is necessary to improve quality on one side and to guarantee quality on the other side in the participating countries and cross border.

In Berlin Ministers had stressed that “consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself”, and emphasised that “this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.”

Considering the individual responsibility of the institutions of higher education on the one hand, and the responsibility of the overall national quality assurance systems on the other hand, the Berlin Declaration of September 2003 lists both evaluation and accreditation as important tools for quality assurance. It has been agreed “that by 2005, national quality assurance systems should include ...

- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results,
- A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures (...)."

IX.

Referring to that evaluation can be described as dealing with programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results. Evaluation is aiming at optimising quality. It is measuring the quality referring to aims and goals which are normally defined by the unit being evaluated. Evaluation typically means a process which is totally, or at least partly, self-referential. Therefore evaluation is primarily a means by which an institution is steering itself in the process of self governance. Evaluation may also serve the accountability.

Evaluation as a means of steering itself is necessarily involved in the self-understanding of an autonomous institution of higher education. So evaluation is very much corresponding to the principle of autonomy and to the statement in the Berlin Communiqué that primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself.

X.

There is a broad consensus that - following the results of a pilot project initiated by the Commission of the European Union in the 1990s - the procedure of evaluation starts with a self-assessment, that means with a statement of the institution to be evaluated what are its aims and goals and whether and to what extent they have achieved them. These self-assessment is refereed by a experts, so called peer-review, who often do not restrict themselves to review referring to the purpose fixed by the unit being evaluated but extend their judgement to the fitness of purpose according to international standards.

The experts are normally appointed with the approval of the institution to be evaluated. The result of this evaluation is informing about the strengths and weaknesses of the institution or the programme evaluated. The results will be presented to the unit evaluated providing it with information for the process of developing and improving quality. If the institution or the programme is part of a system the results of evaluation can beyond that incen financial or other consequences of the system concerning the institution or the programme.

Trends IV, the stock taking of the EUA preparing the Bergen Conference reports that the focus of evaluation (“internal quality assurance processes”) in Europe is “largely restricted to teaching and learning processes...Yet only one third (of the institutions being asked) undertakes any internal quality activity related to research (external review of research being the more frequent quality tool). Internal quality reviews of administration and support services are even rarer.”

XI.

In the international debate on quality assurance, accreditation is increasingly defined as a formalised decision by an independent, appropriately recognised authority as to whether an institution of higher education or a programme meets certain standards. The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) defines accreditation as “a formal and independent decision, indicating that an institution of higher education and/or programmes offered meet certain standards.” This definition also covers some quality assessments that are described as external evaluation or “accreditation like procedures”.

Accreditation is achieved through a multi-step process (self-assessment/ documentation submitted by the unit undergoing accreditation; external assessment by independent experts; the accreditation decision). The final decision of the accreditation procedure itself is authoritative in nature, has been determined by an externally organised and steered process, and results in a “yes” or “no” judgement with a limited validity.

Accreditation in the area of higher education serves primarily to ensure and beyond that to develop quality in order to:

- ensure or facilitate recognition of credits and university degrees in an academic context, for example, when changing from one institution of higher education to another, in order to promote mobility,
- inform current and prospective students on the value of certain study programmes (consumer protection),
- allow employers to check the value and status of qualifications,
- give institutions of higher education the opportunity to demonstrate appropriate allocation and use of public funds
- open access to a profession.

Trends IV, the report of the EUA preparing the Bergen-Conference reads as follows: “Institutions were ... often critical of programme accreditation, in particular objecting to the controlling, prescriptive and limiting outcomes of accreditation practices. For example, complaints were voiced about the practice of prescribing a list of subjects in which programmes can be offered or preventing interdisciplinary programmes from being established because of accreditation committees’ disciplinary prejudices. Institutions see no difference whether such restrictions of their freedom to develop new programmes are set by the government or by an independent accreditation body. Often accreditation was demanded and defined by professional bodies, with no consideration to other internal quality processes at universities and thus no regard to possible synergies or overlap with institutional quality processes. This posed additional and unnecessary bureaucratic burdens to institutions.”

Another way of external evaluation is that of “quality audits”, a procedure examining the internal quality assessment mechanisms of an institution. In Trends IV it is reported that quality audits were “seen to be useful only if they considered the aims and strategic priorities set by the institution” that means if they are self-referential. But it was also mentioned that quality audits run the risk of being too focussed on procedures and instruments and to pay too little attention to the most important quality concerns of the institution.”

“Generally, while experiences with institutional audits were more positive than with accreditation, they also drew mixed reactions, from being seen as a welcome experience helping with the establishment and enhancement of internal quality development processes to being criticised to their narrow focus on procedures, stopping short of the real quality questions.”

In practice between these models of Evaluation and Accreditation there are mixed systems i.e. an accreditation like procedure without a final authoritative decision at the end.

Accreditation and evaluation are to a certain extent concurring or overlapping procedures. If you keep in mind that both procedures are dealing with quality, this is not really surprising. On the other hand there are some differences that one should have in mind working on the future development of the quality assurance systems. So addressees of an accreditation decision is not primarily the one who is applying for accreditation. Accreditation is aiming at informing the public or parts of it about the quality of an institution or programme or part of them. On the other hand the addressee of the evaluation report is the institution that has organised the evaluation opening options in the frame of self governance to act or not to act.

XII.

Ministers at the Conferences of the Bologna-Process have always stressed the richness of diversity in Europe. On the other hand there is a difference of quality of higher education and research in Europe as well as of the institutions of higher education in each country participating in the Bologna-Process. To promote cross-border mobility it is necessary to ensure comparable, not equal quality of courses, course units , credits and degrees and to make this transparent in order to encourage and promote the development of mutual trust. Following this concept in Prague the ministers “recognized the vital role that quality assurance systems play ... in facilitating the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe.”

So if you want to promote mobility - national or cross border - you have to make countries and higher education institutions in Europe strive for comparable quality. Evaluation is the way to optimise quality of the higher education institutions and their programmes. Accreditation is guaranteeing that the quality of institutions or programmes is meeting defined standards. So accreditation does not only meet national needs, is of concern for internal decisions on developing quality culture but can be rather effective in enhancing mutual and cross-border recognition of courses and degrees if accreditation decisions are taken following comparable quality standards.

To define standards related to the quality of contents in an abstract way is rather difficult if not impossible. This is the reason why quality assurance procedures are “peer centered”. But in order to make the process of coming to a certain decision on quality transparent, reliable and calculable and thus guarantee comparable results it is necessary to define procedural standards and guidelines to be observed in an evaluation or accreditation process. Therefore the Berlin Communiqué has called upon ENQA “to develop by 2005, “an agreed sets of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance (and) to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and for accreditation agencies or bodies.” This mandate has been fulfilled by ENQA and, as far as I can see, Christian Thune, the next speaker, is going to inform you about the results.

XIII.

As cross-border recognition of results of national accreditation systems is dependent on mutual trust and to create it - and following the recommendations of the Prague communiqué - multilateral and continuing information about accreditation systems and a constant exchange of views, concepts and ideas is necessary. To stimulate this, it will be necessary to establish a European platform that supports the process of multilateral information, the exchange of experiences and ideas and the development of principles of good practise and I appreciate very much that ENQA has recommended that to the Bergen Conference and that this has been accepted.

XIV.

Cross border recognition of national accreditation decisions does not mean that credits and degrees awarded by one university will be automatically recognized by another institution of higher education. The recognition for academic purposes is part of the autonomy of the admitting institution of higher education or its departments or faculties, where it often takes place on a case-by-case basis. On the other hand Ministers have several times confirmed that higher education is a public good and therefore in many European countries the state has at least an overall responsibility in the field of higher education. Therefore in addition to the Lisbon Convention and to the ENIC/NARIC networks it could be desirable to recognise the results of national accreditation procedures in a multilateral agreement. Signatories should be the Member States of the Bologna Process and this agreement should be open to join for all institutions of higher education in Europe concerned.

XV.

So what will be the main challenges for the future in the EHEA? After the number of states taking part in the Bologna process has now gone up to 45 the effectiveness of the Bologna process will be reduced . Looking at the Declarations that have been adopted since 1998 you may easily find out that preciseness and strictness of wording as well as of content of the Declaration depend on the number of participants.

Beyond that you must be aware of the fact that what is said in the Declarations is a political programme not legally binding. On the other hand as a matter of fact, national governments and national legislation have to a certain extent lost their power to define and shape their systems of higher education. But there is the question raised by the BFUG (B8 5 final/ 28 April 2005) whether the European Higher Education Area can be established as a sustainable structure without a formal/ formally binding commitment from participating countries.

XVI

What are the future challenges for Quality assurance? The different levels of quality in now 45 member states will initiate a discussion about the levels of accreditation. They are already different. Whilst for example in Austria you have to meet “international Standards” to be accredited, in Germany a study programme is accredited when corresponding to a “minimum standard” and equis, the European Quality Improvement System, an agency primarily focussing on accreditation of business administration programmes is requiring top standard to be accredited. Important in this context is what purpose you want to achieve by accreditation.

Looking at the different aims of evaluation and accreditation the discussion evaluation vs. accreditation should not be continued. It is necessary to use synergies of the two procedures in order to optimise the quality of an institution undergoing quality assurance procedures.

Another question is whether quality assurance should focus on programmes or institutions or whether a combined approach is desirable. In Germany for example up to now every programme has to be accredited. As there are for the time being about 12000 study programmes being offered by German higher education institutions, this concept raises heavy problems of number and costs. A possible solution being discussed is a combination of institutional approach and selected accreditation of programmes taking into account the quality assurance mechanisms of the institution undergoing the accreditation. Another way of coping with the overwhelming number of programmes is to bundle programmes of a certain field of different institutions for higher education - as it happens in Spain -or to bundle a number of programmes of one institution .

Furthermore the question has to be answered which information should be available and relevant for a quality assurance procedure, especially how to involve the quality of research into the procedure of quality assurance in teaching.

Being convinced that diversity of the national cultures of higher education is an asset of Europe, the question has to be answered to what extent this diversity may tolerate sets of standards and guidelines. Having in mind that the final report of a working group preparing the Bergen meeting takes account of the “assumption that qualifications are primarily a matter of national concern and articulated in national qualifications frameworks and that such national frameworks can be inter-connected through linkage to the overarching framework of EHEA”, the ministers adopted in Bergen an “overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA, comprising three cycles (including, within national contexts, the possibility of intermediate qualifications), generic descriptors for each cycle based on learning outcomes and competences, and credit ranges in the first and second cycles.” They commit themselves to elaborating national frameworks for qualifications compatible with the overarching framework for qualifications in the EHEA by 2010, and to having started work by this by 2007.” This makes quite clear that the governments of the states participating in the Bologna process do not give up their position that quality development in the field of teaching and the corresponding quality control are finally national responsibilities.

As is said in Trends III preparing the Berlin Conference (p. 12): “The ultimate challenge for quality assurance in Europe consists in creating transparency, exchange of good practice and enough common criteria to allow for mutual recognition of each others’ procedures, without mainstreaming the system and undermining its positive forces for diversity and competition”.

I did not mention further details concerning the role of the states in quality assurance. In continental Europe for a long time quality assurance was looked at as a final overarching responsibility of the state. The state exercised and still exercises its responsibility by licensing study programmes and institutions. Licensing and certification is now at least in many countries looked at as a shared responsibility of the state and the scientific community. So in Europe corresponding to the role of the states and the role higher education institutions have to play in the Bologna process there is a double responsibility and legitimation for quality assurance.

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