



**Information Project on Higher Education Reform
Bologna Promoters' Training Seminar on
Quality Assurance in Europe**

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DRAFT BROCHURE

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1. Introduction

20 years ago, in Europe as in other parts of the world, quality assurance was rarely associated with teaching, learning, and research in higher education. Quality in higher education was perceived only in its academic dimension, demonstrated through the research reputation of individual professors of the universities, and departments.

From the 1980's on, however, a debate on the need and methods for assuring quality emerged. While nowadays hardly anyone contests the general need for establishing quality assurance in higher education, the discussions on procedures and methods vary a great deal. A mutual understanding is difficult to establish as the same technical notions used in different environments take on rather different meanings, and this is not merely a terminological problem. Based on very similar basic principles, national higher education systems and individual universities have generated a wide range of QA approaches, which makes it rather difficult to compare among countries and institutions.

While in the past this would not have given much reason for concerns, but recent internationalisation trends with enhanced student mobility and cross-border cooperation of institutions call for transparency, consistency and also for enhanced commonality. In the case of Europe, this is formulated through the Bologna Process reforms and the vision of a European Higher Education Area, which require convergence not only regarding study cycles and study credits, but also regarding ways and means to enhance quality at 5600 higher education institutions in Europe.

This brochure aims at describing the key principles and methods of QA, as they are currently in use in European countries and institutions, and also to identify developing trends in Europe. It deliberately overlooks a host of details and backgrounds that could be claimed essential for a deeper understanding of the process.

2. Quality Assurance – from industry to the knowledge society

Traditionally, quality in higher education has been assured by the community of scholars, and in many countries, through a system of control by the national authorities.

The need for addressing the quality of academic education beyond the instruments of academic excellence and government inspection came up with the development of mass education. The growing number of institutions, study courses and students called for formalised processes and means for assessing and improving the quality of higher education, in the first instance that of teaching and learning.

First concepts for quality assurance in higher education were borrowed from industry, where they had been developed to ensure the quality of manufactured products. This is important to keep in mind for a better understanding of today's debates: Although QA methodologies in higher education have been adapted to the academic sector's specific needs, they have nevertheless remained somewhat anchored in the industrial age, e.g. in their tendency to be based on established QA standards, or in their approach to examine educational or research as products, which somehow neglects the transactional nature of education and research. Any attempt to assess the "products" or outcomes of higher education such as research achievements, or learning outcomes of individual

students, via standardised “productivity rates” is doomed to fail as it ignores the very nature of creative knowledge production: **higher education teaching, learning and research is a complex interactive process, facilitated jointly by researchers, teachers and students and administrative staff, in the framework of the conditions set by an institutional environment, in direct or indirect response to, and interaction with state, society and economy.** Therefore any approach to assess the quality and efficiency of knowledge creation and dissemination should also consider these **relationships**.

3. Why do we need QA in higher education?

The two main functions of QA are:

- **quality enhancement:** The institution maintains and enhances the quality of teaching, learning and research, and of the entire institutional framework, which facilitates these activities.
- **accountability:** The institution demonstrates its quality to its external stakeholders (Governments, parents, employers, society as such), for different reasons (prescribed by law, promotion of the institution).

Whether the purpose of QA is done for quality enhancement or accountability, the institution must play a role in ensuring its quality and its claims would generally be validated formally by an external independent body. These two aspects are considered below.

Quality Culture

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness that quality in higher education could not be ensured if not based on a dynamic **quality culture**¹ at institutional level, driven by the dedicated and proactive commitment of all the university’s constituencies (academic and non-academic staff, students).

Quality culture aims at enhancing the overall performance of the institution and all its parts and elements and to promote creativity and innovation. This strongly differs from mechanical or managerial processes to improve quality. Rather, it aims at promoting **shared values and attitudes** and at **building a university community** by strengthening the **staff’s identification with the institution** and introducing staff development schemes in order to ensure that internal quality processes are an opportunity to improve rather than punish.

It also acknowledges that there is **no single way of developing institutional quality processes**: the mission goals, profile and specific activities of each individual institution and its external environments must be taken into account. Each institution should organise its internal review to fit its own objectives and be coherent with its own academic and organisational values. At the same time, it

¹ Quality Culture was the title of a project of the European University Association, implemented with the support of the European Commission in the period from 2002-2006. Since, the notion of quality culture, as developed in the cause of the project, has found its entrance in the QA debate. *For further reference pls. refer to p8 below and to http://www.eua.be/eua/en/projects_quality.aspx*

must link these procedures in a pragmatic and cost-effective way to the external evaluation cycles. This of course requires that universities are empowered to make decision, and shape structures.

Quality culture can not be installed by distant political and administrative power centres but requires autonomous higher education institutions committed to building strong academic communities and engaged in learning through inter-institutional co-operation and peer-to-peer exchange.

The rationale of external QA: accountability and validation

Interest in the quality of higher education teaching and learning goes far beyond the walls of a higher education institution, and therefore quality assurance has an outer dimension.

First of all, there is a public interest in the quality of research and education. Students want to ensure that they receive good education, and employers have to rely on higher education institutions for the quality of their future employees. There is a whole range of public and private services, which rely on the quality of higher education learning and research. Secondly, this interest is even stronger, when the institution receives public funding.

External QA processes may be directed towards the general public or, more specifically, governmental authorities, funding agencies etc. In principle, external QA may be either undertaken voluntarily by the institution or be required by laws or regulations.

4. Methods

How to define quality?

The starting point for developing a quality assurance methodology is to define quality. There have been a host of definitions of quality. Quality can be understood as

- fitness for purpose
- compliance (zero error or deviation)
- customer satisfaction
- excellence
- value for money
- transformation (process of changing the customer)
- enhancement (process of changing the institution)
- control (punitive/rewarding process of quality assurance)

Which definition to select depends ultimately on the purpose of quality assurance. An approach based on standards usually underpins formal accountability approaches. A fitness for purpose approach implies generally an improvement orientation: quality assurance must take as its point of departure the mission and objectives of a specific institution and recommend improvement in order to achieve the set goals.

Quality perspectives: input, output, process

In the **outputs** perspective, institutions examine the outcomes of university activity, such as teaching and research, and the extent to which set goals are achieved. Thus quality as outputs is associated with definitions of quality as excellence, fitness for purpose, “customer” satisfaction or effectiveness. An exclusive focus on **input** factors such as equipment, staffing, funding etc. would, of course, not result in reliable quality indicators. Input always needs to be related to outputs.

In addition, one may argue, that it is also important to consider the **process**, the activities that lead to the desired outcomes, such as governance structures, decision-making processes or administrative procedures. A QA process would therefore have to consider all three aspects.

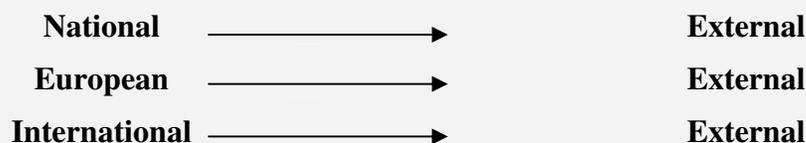
Internal and external quality assurance

It is important to clearly distinguish internal and external QA processes:



Institutional QA has an **internal** and an **external** aspect. . Internal QA refers to the processes that are determined and organised by the institution itself. These include, for instance, student course assessments or the analysis and follow-up of key data indicators.

The external dimension of institutional QA encompasses those processes which are initiated by the institution but are undertaken by external bodies such as QA agencies for the purpose of balancing the institution's internal processes with external elements



The **national** (or regional) level encompasses QA processes such as evaluation or accreditation that are undertaken by national QA agencies, usually on the basis of national legislation. The **European level** refers to the agreements reached on a common framework for QA in the course of the Bologna Process and within the EU. Its most important elements are the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (see chapter 6). Similarly, there have been agreements on the international level, for instance in the context of transnational education.

Ideally, these levels should be linked. Internal and external processes should constitute two sides of the same token, i.e. similar indicators and processes should be viewed from different perspectives.

Accreditation and Evaluation

Accreditation and evaluation are the most commonly used methods used for external QA at the level of institutions and programmes. Other terms that may be used in this context are audit, review or assessment.

Accreditation in higher education is a quality review process on a periodic basis, which comprises a self-study by an institution or program and an external review. Accreditation implies by definition a **decision** relating to **pre-defined consequences of a formal nature**, such as the authorization to run a programme, the closure of the institution or programme, withdrawal of state-funding etc. It results either in a **yes or no decision**; in some contexts a “conditional yes” (accreditation with additional requirements) is also possible. Accreditation is based on **defined minimum standards** that a programme or an institution has to fulfil, in order to achieve the positive accreditation decision.

The outcome of an **evaluation** of an institution or programme is generally a **set of recommendations**, developed on the basis of a **fitness for purpose** rationale. This may have – and that is a common understanding of evaluation - an informal character insofar as the institution is relatively free to choose if it wants to follow them or not. However, the institution could also be obliged to follow up the recommendations, and otherwise be threatened with the same consequences as mentioned for accreditation. However, this is not connected to a formalized process, and a yes – no decision.

Thus, in their pure form, accreditation and evaluation are different in process and purpose. While the former intends to ensure an agreed standard level of quality to the benefit of the students and the public general, the evaluation intends to assess the quality and to ensure that the institution improves it, if deemed necessary.

Implicitly, evaluation intends of course to improve quality in the general public interest and to ensure appropriate education for students. And likewise, the aim of accreditation is not the closure or abolishment of institutions and programmes, but to maintain and develop the quality, so that a negative decision would not occur. Therefore it could be claimed that both processes follow the same objective – good quality and protection of students and accountability of institutions, but in different ways.

Until recently, both procedures appeared as exclusive principles: at country level, either one or the other was selected. However, it has been remarked that both accreditation and evaluation do not signify clear-cut and easy distinguishable processes, but are umbrella terms for a host of varying procedures. Therefore, what is practiced nowadays in many places can be perceived as **mixed procedures** (see below).

A blue print for External QA

The general features of external QA processes have been described in the *European Standards and Guidelines* (see below chapter 6) as follows:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available.

These processes will normally be expected to include:

- *a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;*
- *an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;*
- *publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;*
- *a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report*

<http://www.enqa.eu/files/ENQA%20Bergen%20Report.pdf>

Institution or programme

External QA processes focus either on **institutions** or **programmes**.

It is also possible to assess the quality of **research**, of **services**, or a **faculty** or a **unit**, or of the institutional **QA system** itself.

An accreditation or evaluation of an **institution** considers the overall performance of the institution, including teaching, research, services, administration, leadership and in particular the internal QA provision, and assesses them in the context of the institution's mission and profile.

Critics claim therefore that an institutional assessment does not deliver an accurate picture. While the quality of the physics department may be excellent, the department of history may achieve a less positive result. In case only one of them is included in the overall assessment, it would influence the overall result, and could mislead students and employers regarding the quality of the programmes offered.

Programme accreditation or **evaluation** can have different features and different purposes:

- it can assess an individual course or discipline (political science) or a range of disciplines (social sciences) at one institution
- for the purpose of professional accreditation (engineering, medicine, midwifery – UK)
- or for the purpose of academic accreditation (e.g. Hungary, Czech Republic and Slovakia)
- it is used for validating the new Bologna Bachelor and Master courses (e.g. Germany)

Programme accreditation or evaluation may appear as the more thorough approach, as it delivers a judgment or recommendations only on the quality of the one specific programme.

However, in practice, it implies considerable costs and workload, in particular for the staff to prepare the self-assessment report. One has only to imagine the case that an institution has 50 programmes, and each of them has to be validated once in 5 years, or in the case of a country, which has 200 higher education institutions with altogether 10000 programmes.

Another aspect is that programme validation does not consider the institutions as such, its mission and profile. The quality of a programme in an unattended institutional environment may be rather difficult to maintain. Similarly, the program may be held responsible for and required to improve aspects that are the responsibility of the institutional level, and are beyond control of the

Accreditation - the American way

The US-model of accreditation has been in use for ensuring quality of professions, in particular of medical doctors, for more than a century. From the early 1960's on it has been a means to demonstrate the quality of institutions and programmes and ensure their eligibility to state funding. It is important that this process is not conducted by 6 regional agencies, and about 60 disciplinary or specialized associations, which assess institutions and study programmes. Accrediting bodies are either recognized by the US Department of Education, by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), or both.

There is no legal pressure from the federal government on higher education institutions to undergo accreditation. However, institutions which are not accredited are excluded from public funding. In some states licenses are only granted to accredited institutions. Equally importantly in an environment with strong private higher education institutions, and considerable private investments in tertiary education: institutions need accreditation to demonstrate their quality towards stakeholders – students, parents, employers, and the general public. In particular, students would run the risk of not being able to transfer to another institution, and not to get their diplomas recognized by other institutions and employers.

There are two databases, one run by CHEA, and another by the US Department of Education, containing all institutions and programmes that have been accredited, and also refer to the accrediting agency.

www.chea.org; www.ope.ed.gov/accreditation/

programme's teaching and administrative staff. In a certain way, a focus on programmes does not take into account the considerations which were proposed above regarding institutional quality culture.

Trends in external evaluation - new mixed models

A report from 1998 on quality assurance in Europe found that accreditations were mostly conducted in Central and Eastern Europe on programmes and for accountability purposes, whereas evaluations were mainly in use in Western Europe, applying at programmes or institutions a fitness for purpose approach geared towards improvement.

An ENQA study from 2003 observed an increasing mix of these two basic methods of external quality assurance, and a general move from programmes to institutional approaches included a fitness for purpose approach in their processes.²

The observation that a mix of methods was being created was confirmed by the findings of the Trends III³ and Trends IV reports, with the latter stating that “from the point of view of institutions, the debate on evaluation vs. accreditation and programme vs. institutional focus is continuing and evolving into a more complex discussion on the best desirable mix. At national level, mixed models are gaining popularity, with quality assurance or accreditation agencies conducting reviews of institutions as well as programmes.”⁴

The growing number of these mixed models has contributed to the blurring between accreditation and evaluation systems in terms of their foci (institutions or programmes) and whether they base their outcomes on externally-defined criteria or not. The “mixed models” approach has rendered the distinction between accreditation and evaluation obsolete in some cases, in particular when accreditation agencies incorporate fitness for purpose elements in their processes.

This does not mean that the issue is solved. Because evaluation lacks formal elements in its outcomes, it is sometimes viewed as the “less serious” method. Accreditation frequently holds considerable appeal for the general public as well as some members of the higher education community, as for instance when European universities undergo voluntary accreditation by prestigious foreign accreditation agencies.

While from time to time there have been attempts on the European level to present accreditation as the superior model, usually by referring to its perceived greater legitimacy, currently, there appears to be a consensus that both approaches to external quality assurance have their rightful place on the European QA landscape.

Who is undertaking external QA?

A classical external validation is a collegial review by peers (peer review), which also may involve experts, e.g. representatives of industry. Their judgment might only be recommendations, resulting of an evaluation, or could be included as part of a formalized external procedure that would feed into

² Quality procedures in European higher education. An ENQA survey. *ENQA Occasional Papers 5* (2003) pp.21: <http://www.enqa.eu/files/procedures.pdf>

³ Trends III (EUA 2003) 75-82: <http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/Trends2003final.1065011164859.pdf>

⁴ Trends IV (EUA 2005) 32 : http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/TrendsIV_FINAL.1117012084971.pdf

a validation decision, which would be met by a public or private accreditation or evaluation agency or a government body.

Most countries in Europe have at least one QA or accreditation agency. The scope of these agencies vary: many are focused on programmes; some are focused on the institution as a whole. Some agencies emphasise public accountability while others emphasise an improvement orientation. Most procedures, however, include the essential steps described above: a self-evaluation, a peer-review (most conducted as part of a site visit), a report and follow-up.

It is very important that the external QA agency be impartial and independent: it should represent the public interest, and not those of individual stakeholders or stakeholder groups, or of the Ministry. It should also be efficient, professional and transparent. Regardless of its legal status, the external QA body has to ensure that the evaluation team makes its judgment independently and free from any external pressure, by Government or stakeholders.

5. The policy context: Bologna 1998/9 and Lisbon 2000

The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Agenda clearly demonstrate the interest of national and regional Governments in convergence and enhancement of higher education, which includes also improved concepts for quality enhancement and assessment. The key principles of Bologna and also of Lisbon underscore the need to avoid any rigid approach prescribing fixed standards and procedures: this would appear problematic with regard to the European unification and convergence process(es) and endanger the underlying principles of diversity and subsidiarity. It would also ignore the specific QA demands at institutional levels. This raises the question, however, of how to establish a European community without shared standards and procedures?

This may explain to some extent, why quality – though of essential importance - emerged slowly as an important factor for the success of the Bologna process. It received only cursory mention in the original Bologna Declaration. However, as Ministers met every two years to take stock of progress and define mid-term objectives (Prague in 2001, Berlin in 2003 and Bergen in 2005), the issue of quality kept growing in importance. It should also be

Berlin Communiqué of European Ministers of Education, 2003

The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. Ministers commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level. They stress the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance. They also stress that consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework. Therefore, they agree that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include:

- A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.
- 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.
- International participation, co-operation and networking.

At the European level, Ministers call upon ENQA through its members, in co-operation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005. Due account will be taken of the expertise of other quality assurance associations and networks.

http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf

mentioned that simultaneously an international discussion took place on how government agencies and universities could jointly safeguard the quality of higher education, which has been spearheaded by UNESCO, OECD and the International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (INQAAHE). This clearly underlines that information exchange, cooperation and convergence in QA was not only a requirement of the EHEA, but also a response to global trends.

The discussions about the development of a European dimension for quality assurance started in September 2001 and the first official acknowledgement in the context of the Bologna was made in the Berlin Communiqué. It recognised the role of higher education institutions in promoting quality and invited the QA and higher education communities to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance and to explore the possibility of a “peer-review” of QA agencies.

This work was carried out by the “**E4 group**” comprising representatives from the **European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)**, representing European QA agencies; **ESIB**, the European umbrella organisation of student unions in Europe, the **European University Association (EUA)** and **EURASHE**, representing the European higher education institutions. Since then, the E4 have been in charge of further developing the European dimension of quality assurance.

The Bergen Communiqué in 2005 did not only acknowledge the existence of national QA provisions and encourage the further development of internal QA systems and their correlation with external processes; It also adopted the **European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area**”, developed by the E4, and endorsed the idea of a **European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies**.

The **European Union** recognized in a Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 “*the diversity of national evaluation cultures as well as the importance of quality assurance in general*” and recommended to member states, QA bodies and universities that they exchange and cooperate beyond the national borders in order to develop transparent and efficient QA systems “*as a means for improving the quality of teaching and learning and also training for research*”. http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/pri/en/oj/dat/1998/l_270/l_27019981007en00560059.pdf

Bergen Communiqué of European Ministers of Education, 2005

Almost all countries have made provision for a quality assurance system based on the criteria set out in the Berlin Communiqué and with a high degree of cooperation and networking.

However, there is still progress to be made, in particular as regards student involvement and international cooperation. Furthermore, we urge higher education institutions to continue their efforts to enhance the quality of their activities through the systematic introduction of internal mechanisms and their direct correlation to external quality assurance.

We adopt the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA. We commit ourselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria. We welcome the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review. We ask that the practicalities of implementation be further developed by ENQA in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB with a report back to us through the Follow-up Group. We underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions.

http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf

The **Lisbon Strategy**, or **Lisbon Agenda** of the European Union is an action and development plan set out by the European Union in March 2000, aimed at developing Europe as *the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy in the world* by the 2010. It aims to promote innovation, the establishment of knowledge based economy and society, and investments in research and

development. Therefore, better education and the development of a European Research and Higher Education Area play an important role within this strategy and the quality of European education becomes an important element for achieving it.

To note, both the Bologna Process and also the Copenhagen Process⁵ on Vocational Education and Training are supported by the EU. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/et_2010_en.html. This is clearly expressed in the recommendations of European Parliament and Council of February 2006, which accepts the progress that has been made since the first resolution 8 years ago, and confirm with reference to the Lisbon Agenda the strong support of the European Union to the newly developed QA dimension approved by ministers in Bergen (Recommendation 2006/143/EC, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/l_064/l_06420060304en00600062.pdf).

The E4 – European stakeholder organisations

ENQA: the association of QA agencies

The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education was established in 2000 to promote European co-operation in the field of quality assurance. In November 2004 the General Assembly transformed the Network into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

The idea for the association originates from the European Pilot Projects for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education (1994-95) which demonstrated the value of sharing and developing experience in the area of quality assurance. Subsequently, the idea was given momentum by the Recommendation of the Council (98/561/EC of 24 September 1998, http://europa.eu.int/eur-lex/pri/en/oj/dat/1998/l_270/l_27019981007en00560059.pdf) on European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education and by the Bologna Declaration of 1999.

Membership of the association is open to quality assurance agencies in the signatory states of the Bologna Declaration. A total of 42 quality assurance agencies and associations of higher education have so far joined the association. As part of the membership requirements, there is an obligation that each ENQA member undertakes an external review of its operation.

ENQA disseminates information, experiences and good practices in the field of quality assurance (QA) in higher education to European QA agencies, public authorities and higher education institutions. As one of the E4 and a member of the BFUG working group on QA, it has been a key participant of the QA discussions under Bologna, and involved in the development of the recommendations for the biannual Ministerial meetings. In particular, it is taking a leading role in the development of the Standards and Guidelines and the QA Register.

<http://www.enqa.eu/>

⁵ The Copenhagen Process has been launched in 2002, when 31 European Ministers of Education and the European Commission adopted the Copenhagen Declaration. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policies/2010/vocational_en.html

European University Association (EUA)

The European University Association (EUA) represents the European universities.

Its members are 34 European Rectors' Associations and 700 individual universities in 46 countries. As one of the E4, it is involved as a consultative member in the Bologna Process and the Bologna Follow-up Groups. Together with ENQA, EURASHE and ESIB, it has been tasked by the Ministers to draft the *Standards and Guidelines*, and also to develop a concept for the *QA Register*. Its **Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP)** is listed as an ENQA member.

Complementary to its engagement under Bologna and in the higher education policy discussions on QA, EUA undertakes a range of projects and initiatives that aim at strengthening universities in Europe. The institutional perspective on QA has been developed in detail in its Quality Culture Project. On this, and a number of other projects undertaken by EUA in the field of QA, see below.

www.eua.be

EURASHE

EURASHE (European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) is the association of European Higher Education Institutions – Polytechnics, Colleges, University Colleges, etc. – devoted to defending the interests of the professionally oriented higher education institutions, and to continuously enhance the importance and the quality of higher professional education in Europe. A consultative member in the Bologna Follow-up Group, EURASHE aims at contributing to the progressive development of the European Higher Education Area, especially through its active involvement in the Bologna Follow-up.

Among the main policy goals in QA, EURASHE lists institutional autonomy and the development of the European dimension as priorities.

<http://www.eurashe.be>

ESIB – the National Student Unions

ESIB - The National Unions of Students in Europe is the umbrella organisation of 50 national unions of students from 36 countries. The National Union of Students, ESIB's members, have to be open to all students in the respective country regardless of their political conviction, religion, ethnic or cultural origin, sexual orientation, or social standing. They are run and controlled by students who hold democratic elections and are run on democratic lines, and are autonomous and independent in their decision-making.

The aim of ESIB is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at a European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Council of Europe and UNESCO. Through its members, the 50 National Unions of Students from 36 European countries, ESIB represents 10 million students in Europe.

ESIB strongly supports maintaining and improving the quality of provision of higher education, to “be based upon each institution developing a quality culture and taking a proactive approach to quality assurance at the programme and institutional level.” It underlines the importance of “an independent and transparent system of quality assurance which is usually fulfilled by national quality assurance agencies”, and the need to build trust between national quality assurance systems for the building of the EHEA. www.esib.org

6. The European Quality Assurance Process after Bergen

The Bergen Meeting in 2005 was a milestone in the development of a European dimension for quality assurance, as the Ministers agreed on the establishment of joint European institutions and tools in order to enhance transparency and convergence of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area:

- Joint **European Standards and Guidelines** to apply to the institutional, national and European level
- acknowledgement of a **Peer-Review Process** for the legitimating QA agencies
- the establishment of a **Register of QA agencies** operating in Europe

Another initiative that has been brought forward after the Bergen Conference in order to articulate discussions and further innovative QA development is the European Forum for Quality Assurance.

European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance

The document details three sets of European standards and guidelines for quality assurance: one that applies to the **internal QA procedures of higher education institutions**, one for **external QA, which addresses both institutions and QA agencies** (as both are partners in their implementation), and one to **QA agencies**.

These standards and guidelines should not be taken as a checklist but as principles for the internal and external quality processes at institutions, and external quality processes to be ensured by QA Agencies. Rather, they should be understood as joint principles, which would have to be considered for the development of national and institutional QA procedures.

For institutions, the *Standards and Guidelines* stipulate e.g. that they should develop a quality policy and culture, which also include student representatives and other stakeholders, and establish a formal mechanism of approval, monitoring and periodic review. Their quality has to be made visible and transparent through an information system and publication of the assessment results.

The **external quality assurance** by QA agencies would have to consider the effectiveness of the above outlined internal QA procedures. The aims and objectives for external QA, and its procedures and criteria for decisions etc. would have to be determined and published before an evaluation starts. The procedures clearly have to comply with the aims to be achieved.

A third part is dealing with the **mission and organization of the quality assurance agencies**. Some of the demands raised for the higher education education

Joint European Standards & Guidelines

The **European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance** consist of standards which have to be met by the institution or agency, and explanatory guidelines which suggest how this can be done, e.g.

Standard:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

Guidelines:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

For the full text, pls. refer to

<http://www.enqa.eu/files/ENQA%20Bergen%20Report.pdf>

institutions such as mission statement, clear criteria, etc. can be found here addressed also to the agencies. It mentions also in more detail the standard procedure for external QA:

Peer Review of QA Agencies

One of the key issues in external QA is the impartiality and quality of the assessing agency. Therefore the *Standards and Guidelines* also consider how to ensure the legitimacy and effectiveness of the Agencies.

Regarding its **legal and official status** it says that the agency has to be officially recognized by a competent public authority in the European Higher Education Area. It must also, however, be independent in operation and decision from any third parties, such as e.g. Ministries, higher education institutions, and other stakeholders.

Beyond this, for ensuring the professionalism and effectiveness of QA and accreditation agencies and bodies, a system of peer review has been established in 2006.

A European Register of QA agencies

The Bergen Communiqué also proposes the further exploration of the possibility of setting up a European Register for QA agencies. The ministers have charged ENQA, ESIB, EUA and EURASHE with the task of exploring the notion of the European register for QA agencies. Considerable progress has been made on many features of the register and a report is expected to be finalised by March 2007 in time for consideration by the ministers assembled in London.

The main purpose of the Register is to serve as an instrument to assure and constantly improve the quality of QA agencies and to promote mutual trust between them. It would provide a list of reliable QA agencies from which governments and institutions could choose from. The Recommendation by the European Parliament and Council of February 2006 further supports this idea by recommending to member states that they should enable higher education institutions to choose from any agency in the Register, provided this is compatible with national legislation.

There are still some open questions as to the precise structure for the Register, but whatever the final concept will be, the establishment of the Register can be expected to contribute a further milestone to the QA development in Europe. It would also send a strong signal to international stakeholders, and respond to the question: how QA is ensured in the EHEA, thus contribute to enhancing transparency and accountability of European higher education worldwide. It would also enhance dialogue on QA in Europe, and stimulate its innovative development.

European Forum for Quality Assurance: A shared understanding of quality

Commonly, discussions about QA procedures mainly take place within the confines of some countries but not at European level. At European level, discussions involve either agencies benchmarking their procedures or higher education institutions discussing amongst themselves trends in higher education at the European or international level and their implications for national

and institutional quality assurance. As the European QA dimension progressed in Berlin and Bergen, it became apparent that a European QA discussion forum involving all constituencies and stakeholders was needed.

A first European Forum for Quality Assurance has been launched in November 2006 by EUA in close cooperation with the other 3 members of the E4 and supported by the Socrates Programme. It focuses upon internal quality processes based on case studies of good examples of developments in this area⁶.

Its starting point is the acknowledgment in the Berlin and Bergen communiqués of the fundamental role that institutions play in quality and that this acknowledgement should not be interpreted narrowly as leading to a division of labour: with the QA community in charge of external accountability and higher education institutions of internal quality. On the contrary, it should be based on a partnership between the higher education and QA communities – both at national and European level – based on a commitment to promote vibrant academic community.

It is anticipated that this event will become an annual one and will follow closely the European policy developments.

http://www.eua.be/eua/en/qa_forum.aspx

7. Projects and initiatives in European Quality Assurance

The following not exhaustive list presents major European QA initiatives. It gives an overview of the efforts undertaken by stakeholder organisations supported by Governments to advance cooperation and convergence in European QA, of key challenges, but also of exciting new prospects resulting for QA development and cooperation in Europe.

For further reading, the links lead to a more detailed description and to the detailed reports on the organisations' websites.

The Institutional Evaluation Programme

The EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme was launched twelve years ago and has evaluated about 150 institutions in 36 countries, mostly across Europe but also in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Peru and South Africa.

The evaluations focus upon the capacity for change of institutions by examining their decision-making processes and organisational structures, and assess the extent to which these support academic vitality, innovation and a strategic vision. It explores if the institution has developed an effective internal quality culture.

http://www.eua.be/eua/en/membership_evaluation.aspx

⁶ on 23 -25 November 2006 hosted by Technische Universität München, Munich, Germany and co-organised by ENQA, ESIB, EUA and EURASHE with support from the EC Socrates Programme.

Quality Culture Project

The Quality Culture Project is part of the response that EUA devised to increase the capacity of universities to meet the accountability needs and the heightened demands that higher education delivers more with greater levels of quality and fewer resources.

It is frequently the case that when speaking of quality, it is easy to revert back to such managerial concepts as quality control, quality mechanisms, quality management, etc. These concepts, however, are not neutral. They convey a technocratic and top-down approach that may backfire in academic settings. The challenge for higher education institutions is to take the lead in order to ensure that academic rather than bureaucratic principles and values are respected and the processes correctly implemented. Therefore, the term “culture” was chosen to convey a connotation of quality as a shared value and a collective responsibility for all members of an institution, including students and administrative staff, and external stakeholders, rather than on managerial processes. It has to be based on a fitness-for-purpose approach, and would minimise bureaucratic and administrative structures of the QA processes. An important aspect for the self-reflection and -assessment, and for the external accountability, is central data collection and analysis to measure institutional performance. Quality culture requires a continuous process of reconsideration and adjustment, in dialogue with the all members of the institutions, in order to ensure that the institutional processes remain **innovative** and **creative**.

There is a strong interrelation between institutional autonomy, institutional QA culture, and institutional credibility and accountability. Institutions have to enjoy **institutional autonomy**, which allows them to design their institutional mission and actions, improve strategic leadership and management and a QA system, which complies with the institutional requirements. As a result, they become more responsible and responsive.

Proper external QA processes have to take into account each institution’s profile (i.e., fitness for purpose rather than a single set of standards), and, similarly to the internal processes, promote innovative and creative higher education institutions rather than a compliance culture.

Since the completion of the project, the notion “Quality Culture” has been accepted in QA debates and methodologies, recognising the need of inter-actional, context-sensitive approach.

www.eua.be/eua/en/projects_quality.jsp

Creativity Project

EUA has launched in January 2006 a new project – Creativity in Higher Education – with support from the EC’s Socrates Programme. The Project addresses the question of how creativity and innovation can be enhanced in higher education and seeks to contribute to our understanding of the ways in which European society can regain its creativity edge. With the participation of thirty-three higher education institutions grouped into four networks on issues such as *university and stakeholders*, and *innovation in teaching and learning*, the project aims at fostering the development of creativity in European higher education institutions through identification of good practices. In particular, it will address the implications for QA procedures – both external and internal.

<http://www.eua.be/eua/en/Creativity.jsp>

Transnational European Evaluation Project I and II (TEEP)

The Transnational European Evaluation Project (TEEP) was a pilot project conducted by ENQA and its member agencies between June 2002 and October 2003. It explored the operational implications of a European transnational quality evaluation of study programmes in three subject areas: History, Physics and Veterinary Science. In a second project phase (TEEP II) a European-wide transnational quality evaluation scheme was piloted, which aimed to identify means and common elements for quality education in the Joint Masters Programmes in three subject areas: water management; cultural and communication studies; and law and economics.

<http://www.enqa.eu/projectitem.lasso?id=34835&cont=pastprojDetail>

Quality Procedures in European Higher Education

The main objective of the survey, which was conducted in cooperation with member agencies and partners, was to describe the methodological state-of-the-art of the quality assurance in ENQA member and associated member countries. Each European agency was asked to fill in a questionnaire specifying the evaluation practices used by the agency. Consequently, the survey was able to determine which evaluation models were used in various countries and to analyse basic similarities and dissimilarities. The results of the project demonstrated that European quality assurance had extended both in scope and type of evaluation methods since late 1990's. Especially, they also revealed that the concepts of accreditation and benchmarking were gaining new ground fast by 2002.

<http://www.enqa.eu/projectitem.lasso?id=34834&cont=pastprojDetail>

Quality Convergence Study Project

The project (September 2003 to October 2004) was a follow-up to an ENQA Survey on Quality Procedures in European Higher Education. It aimed to find out why national quality assurance systems operate in particular, yet commonly identifiable ways in different national contexts. The starting point for the project was formed by the existing descriptions of how these quality assurance processes work. The overall objectives of the project were in clear accordance with the aims of the Bologna Process, encouraging European co-operation in quality assurance, and assessing the potential of a certain level of convergence in the European quality assurance systems.

<http://www.enqa.eu/projectitem.lasso?id=34836&cont=pastprojDetail>

European Masters New Evaluation Methodology (EMNEM)

As joint master programmes have gained increased importance in the European Higher Education Area, EUA undertook a project with funding from the Erasmus Mundus programme. The aim was to generate a detailed European quality assurance methodology for joint Master programmes while taking into account the specific translational nature of these programmes and the shared responsibilities for matters such as course development, delivery and student services.

The guidelines provide different stakeholders involved in joint masters with a clear set of questions and issues, which they could usefully address in their daily work.

The EMNEM built on a survey and a project on Joint Masters which EUA conducted in 2002-2004.

<http://www.eua.be/eua/en/EMNEM.jspx>

http://www.eua.be/eua/en/projects_joint.jspx

Tuning European Higher Education

The Tuning project, which brings together more than 100 members from European universities, has drawn attention to the importance of competences as the basis for the design, implementation and delivery of study programmes. The concept of competences implies the use of learning outcomes as well as credits, preferably ECTS credits, as guiding principles.

Tuning members believe that in final analysis the responsibility for developing, maintaining and increasing quality in higher education lies with Universities and their staff, with the contribution of students and other stakeholders. Other actors and levels have important roles in stimulating and in checking achievement, but if academic staff and students are not deeply, sincerely and intelligently involved in developing and enhancing quality. External stakeholders would be able to identify the problems, and to contribute to solutions, but they would not be able to create and implement institutional quality programmes. The Tuning project has provided a foundation for quality enhancement by developing appropriate transparency tools and a dialogue with stakeholders. In the Tuning view, to develop true quality, 'fitness for purpose' has meaning only when the fitness of purpose itself is thoroughly established and demonstrated. As a consequence Tuning holds that quality in programme design and delivery means guaranteeing both "fitness **for** purpose" (i.e. suitability for achieving the declared aims of each programme), and "fitness **of** purpose" (i.e. suitability of the aims of each programme: these should meet the expectations of students, academic staff, employers and the broader ones foreseen in the Bologna Process). Guaranteeing "fitness **of** purpose' requires a strong connection with research and academic standards as well as a consideration of employability which is only implicit in the "fitness **for** purpose" definition.

<http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/>

European Quality Labels

Quality Labels are another type of external accreditation that has been developed during recent years with the financial support of the European Commission. The idea was to establish, in addition to QA at institutional level and external, QA through institution and programme assessment an approach which throughout Europe would accredit programmes of the same discipline with a label.

As the first labels in disciplines such as chemistry, engineering, music, have been established very recently or are still under preparation, it is not easy to assess their potential role and impact on European QA.

Their benefit would clearly lie in their capacity for benchmarking, and to enhance disciplinary dialogue and cooperation in QA in the European Higher Education Area; however, as they consider the subject matter, they do not address institutional quality culture and the enhancement of quality in with the context of the institutional mission and needs.

Further – as for programme accreditation in general – they raise questions about the workload they will engender and the financial implications.

http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Part_org/EU/050511_European_Commission.pdf

E-xcellence

E-xcellence is a two-year project promoting quality in e-learning in European higher education. Co-funded by the European Commission (DG Education and Culture), it is coordinated by the European Association of Distance Teaching Universities (EADTU) and involves 12 European partner institutions with a stake in e-learning. The goal of the project is the development of a manual that will serve as a reference tool for the audit, assessment or review of e-learning programmes and the systems which support them. It will contain a set of benchmarks, quality criteria and notes for guidance against which e-learning programmes and their support systems may be evaluated. The manual is intended to complement existing institutional systems for monitoring, evaluating and enhancing quality for the specific field of e-learning.

<http://www.eadtu.nl/e-xcellence/>