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Conference of European Ministers responsible for Higher Education

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**Some Keywords on the Topic of Quality Assurance and Accreditation,
(18-9-03: 14.30-17.30)**

I

In his introductory remarks Professor Erichsen stated that "Licensing and certification are now at least looked at as a shared responsibility of the state and the scientific community". Our debate focusses on the accreditation as a procedure implemented by the state, but it also deals with the fundamental problem of how much state control is needed when the universities themselves are responsible for the quality assurance. In this field, each country sets its own specific accents. In Switzerland the universities have traditionally indulged in a fair amount of autonomy, and consequently their responsibility for the quality of their teaching and research has always been respected. This corresponds to the concern of the EUA, when - in its contribution for the present Conference - it stresses the fact that quality assurance is first and foremost a task of the universities. Other countries tend to emphasize the legitimizing responsibility of the state - an aspect which is also evoked during the respective debates in our country.

Let me make a few remarks on this central issue.

II

The less the state regulates its higher education in minute detail, the greater is the responsibility of the universities (which have meanwhile become more and more autonomous) for taking action in order to grant an optimal quality of education and research. If the universities have to stand their ground in the international competition, it must be their very interest to control regularly the quality of their offer of teaching as well as of their other work. They achieve such a control by themselves and with the help of

external experts, and it is indispensable that they account publicly for the results. Therefore, a modern university-legislation, which presupposes a strong leadership within the universities, must necessarily stipulate their duty to organize a quality assessment and quality development, while minimizing state control.

Several European countries successfully practise this form of quality assurance, which is based mainly on the self-evaluation by the universities and on a subsequent external assessment of the measures which they have taken in their own responsibility. These actions focus on the improvement of the quality, on the awareness of weaknesses and on the possibilities to strengthen the position of the universities and their teaching offer within a market which is worldwide getting tougher and tougher.

III

Which is the role of the state?

Even if we consider quality assurance as a prime task of the universities, and in particular as a decisive tool for the university leadership and management, it cannot be concluded that quality assurance is exclusively devolved on the universities. The state, too, bears a very specific responsibility. It has to guarantee

- that all the universities have at their disposal an efficient quality assurance system
- that evaluations are carried out periodically
- that the evaluations proceed according to internationally recognized standards
- that the results are being published, and
- that appropriate measures are being taken in due course in order to correct the discovered weaknesses.

In accordance with this conception, in Switzerland an evaluation is taking place - just now - of the quality assurance systems of all the scientific universities of our country. In charge of this task is the central Swiss Agency for Accreditation and Quality Assessment. This is an agency installed jointly by the Swiss Confederation and the cantons, i.e. by the state; it works independently, and adheres to international procedures and practices. By the end of October, all the universities have to present their self-evaluations,

and during the months of November until January experts for quality assurance from various European countries will carry out quality audits with the responsible representatives of the university managements. The result of the experts' report will enable the state to define - together with the universities - the milestones of the actions for necessary improvements, as well as to develop general guide-lines for the future quality assurance.

IV

None will contest the fact that such evaluations of the quality assurance systems applied by the universities produce useful results concerning the self-evaluation of the academic institutions, provided they are carried out according to verifiable criteria. Furthermore, they help to foster the trust of the consumers (i.e. the students, the employers, the general public, the taxpayers, the state) in the achievements of the university. It is indispensable that internationally comparable criteria are being used, and that the results are presented in a transparent way, and furthermore that the necessary corrections are not dictated but initiated autonomously.

After the preceding presentations at this Conference, the question may be allowed whether such measures are sufficient in order to strengthen - on the international level - the trust in the quality of the higher educational and research-institutions of the various countries. Such mutual trust is absolutely essential for establishing a European Higher Education Area. Or is there perhaps an additional step which ought to be taken - with regard to a systematic accreditation of the various study-programmes? Certain member-countries of the Bologna Declaration clearly approve of such a step, in view to the intended international recognition of the diplomas.

At the present stage of the development of our university structures, Switzerland has decided to give priority to the decentralized establishment of efficient quality assurance systems. Thereby, the universities have to observe minimal standards, which - as mentioned above - are being periodically controlled by an independent agency. In Switzerland, these measures are also supplemented by the accreditation, which - for the time being - remains voluntary - both for the institutions and the various study-programmes.

We fully understand that the universities fear, that an eventual obligation to accredit each and every study-programme causes an excessive bureaucratization as well as an enormous strain with respect to time and to human resources. In our view, such an obligation would also encroach on the principle of academic autonomy. Therefore, we wonder if it could not suffice to examine the accreditation of some specific study-courses - chosen as random samples - within the framework of the periodic evaluation of the quality assurance systems, in order to check whether the quality assurance mechanisms of the university in question actually function adequately, at all its various levels. We are of the opinion, that if the accreditation is indispensable - such as for state-controlled professions (e.g. for the medical professions), the accreditation should be restricted to the respective institutions (e.g. the Medical Faculty) and should not be applied to the individual courses of study.

V

From the Swiss governmental point of view, the draft of the press release ("communiqué") can be considered as being well balanced, in so far as it stresses the importance of the quality assurance but also that of the minimal standards which have to be met by the year 2005. For Switzerland, the development of common criteria, which can be used for accreditations as well as for evaluations, is of particular importance. If we succeed in reaching this aim by the year 2005, we shall have made decisive progress.

Regarding the diverging European traditions, we would, however, appreciate if for the elaboration of the criteria the EUA and the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education could be associated as partners, on a par with the ENQA. We would therefore welcome a respective addition in the press release ("communiqué").