

Update on current discussions among ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB (Quadripartite Group) on the basis of the Berlin mandate

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INTRODUCTION

This document provides information for the Bologna Follow-Up Group on progress towards completion of the Berlin mandate, and in particular on areas where agreement has been achieved among the four members of the Quadripartite Group, consisting of the leadership of ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, as well as those issues where further discussion is needed. The points that follow in this document have been identified in the course of the Group's discussions, most recently at a meeting held on 3 September 2004 and in its members' respective contributions to the meeting of the Board of the Bologna Follow-Up on 13 September 2004.

The contents of the two draft ENQA working group reports, one on an adequate peer review system for quality assurance agencies and the other on an agreed set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance, have been discussed within the Quadripartite Group. The comments received at the last meeting of the Group, as well as those received from the Bologna Follow-Up Group (12 October 2004) and its Board (13 September 2004), will be included with the reports when they are submitted to the General Assembly of ENQA on 4 November.

This update was circulated Tuesday 28 September to EUA, EURASHE and ESIB for comments and revisions. The contribution from EURASHE received October 1 has been directly inserted to the text. Other, more extensive comments have been received from EUA and ESIB and the European Commission today on 4 October 2004. These comments have been partially included into the document, but work on dilemmas mentioned by these two organisations in their contributions will continue. This would be in accordance with the decision by the Board of the Bologna Follow-Up Group on 13 September 2004, when it stated that "a status report should be presented to the BFUG meeting in October, outlining some of the remaining issues. Given the mandate from the Ministers in Berlin, the report should come from ENQA." The Board also acknowledged that "the final deadline for an ENQA report to the European Ministers must be submitted by the meeting of the Bologna Follow-Up Group on 1-2 March 2005." The work concentrating precisely on the details mentioned by EUA, ESIB and the European Commission would thus continue after the meeting of the Bologna Follow-Up Group of 12 October 2004 in order to finalise the report by early March next year.

It should be stated from the outset, though, that considerable progress has been made in the open discussions of the four Quadripartite Group meetings held since the Berlin conference of ministers in 2003. The following fundamental points of agreement have been achieved by the Group:

- the general framework of the two reports and their chosen approaches are a good basis for further development and the remaining differences of view amongst Quadripartite Group members are not fundamental;
- the progress made in terms of quality assurance and agency standards is still in its early stages and the process should be seen as an activity which will need to continue beyond Bergen and 2005.

Christian Thune

4 October 2004

1. AN ADEQUATE PEER REVIEW SYSTEM FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES

In the Berlin Communiqué of 19 September 2003, Ministers called upon ENQA, through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB, 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 Bologna Follow-Up Group to Ministers in 2005. In order to address the call of the European Ministers, ENQA set up a working group drawn from amongst its members. The proposals of the working group are now presented in a draft report. The Quadripartite Group, consisting of leadership of ENQA, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) has been consulted during the process in regular meetings. The following summary presents the main elements in the draft ENQA report and lists outstanding issues and dilemmas to be discussed in the next few months.

In terms of a **cyclical review of agencies**, the working group has concluded that an agency should at regular intervals submit itself (or be submitted) to a cyclical external review of its processes and activities and that the results should be documented in a report.

ENQA has proposed a model for the process of a peer review system for agencies. This model is primarily intended for ENQA-initiated reviews. However, it is recognized that an external review will typically be initiated at the national/regional or agency level and not by ENQA itself. It is expected that reviews of agencies will usually follow from national/regional requirements or from the internal quality assurance processes put in place by agencies themselves. Only in the case where there is no national/regional or agency initiative is it proposed that ENQA should take the initiative towards a member in accordance with this proposal and ENQA regulations.

Follow-up to a cyclical review will be the responsibility of national authorities or owners of the agency and of ENQA and must confirm whether or not the agency meets the expected standards. ENQA regulations will specify the consequence if this is not the case. The proposed European Quality Assurance Committee, discussed below, could be the framework within which comments on the relevance and appropriateness of follow-up to the cyclical review are reviewed.

Cyclical reviews will be required to take into account general **standards for quality assurance agencies**. ENQA proposes a structure of standards with the overall perspective that these should meet not only European but also international criteria for quality in external quality assurance. The standards also correspond with those being developed by the other ENQA working group in response to the Berlin mandate (see below). The work on these standards has been based on the premise that the results should not be too detailed and, especially, not too prescriptive. Therefore the proposed standards must not reduce the freedom of European quality assurance agencies to reflect in their organisations and processes their national or regional context in terms of experiences and expectations. The standards for quality assurance agencies will be closely linked to criteria for the membership of ENQA in order to ensure that ENQA members conform to the standards.

A **European Quality Assurance Committee** could be the framework on the relevance and suitability of follow-up on the above-mentioned cyclical review. An EQAC should consist in an initial phase of representatives of ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB. However, the additional involvement of stakeholders such as governments and employers in this proposed European quality

assurance structure is necessary, although the details of who might be involved and the nature of their involvement still remain to be considered. The committee should function primarily as a consultative and advisory forum between the four major European stakeholders. Its role would be strengthened by the absence of any bureaucratic or funding elements.

ENQA had committed itself already before the Berlin ministerial meeting of 2003 to develop in cooperation with the other members of the Quadripartite Group a **European directory of quality assurance agencies**, covering public, private and professional agencies, operating in Europe and on a wider international scale. The directory would meet the interest of higher education institutions and governments in being able to identify professional and credible quality assurance agencies outside the national or regional borders. The most valuable asset of the directory, as already identified by the Quadripartite Group, would be its informative value to institutions and other stakeholders. The directory should present agencies not only according to the scope and level of their quality assurance activities, but also in terms of their compliance with the general standards for quality assurance agencies. The purpose would not, however, be to rank agencies or to label them fit or not fit for ENQA membership.

1.1 Issues requiring additional consultation in the Quadripartite Group

The discussions in the Quadripartite Group on the development of a peer review process for quality assurance agencies have been frequent and constructive, enabling a consensus to develop on several aspects of the European framework of quality assurance, as identified above. However, the following aspects remain to be given further attention in the forthcoming consultations of the Quadripartite Group:

- **The principle of subsidiarity and meta-accreditation on a European level.** The members of the group view the importance and relevance of the subsidiarity principle differently. Consequently, the degree to which the principle of subsidiarity should apply, whether there is a need for a European meta-accreditation body and, if so, how the division of labour between such a body and national or regional arrangements should be determined, are still subjects of discussion.
- **The European Quality Assurance Committee.** Additional clarification about the mandate of the European Quality Assurance Committee and the inclusion and role of the various relevant stakeholders is needed. In particular, the involvement of public authorities and governments in the committee's work needs further elaboration.
- **Mandatory cyclical reviews.** The interval of cyclical reviews has not been decided yet.
- **The European Directory.** First, additional precision in terms of the mandate, objectives and functions of the European directory are required. Secondly, a clearer distinction between the criteria for membership of the proposed European directory and those for membership of ENQA needs to be made. It must be made clear that the directory is not a listing of agencies' eligibility for ENQA membership, but of their degree of conformity to general standards for quality assurance agencies. Thirdly, the question of whether the structure of the European directory should include the scope of agencies' evaluation/accreditation activities (e.g., professional, programme, institutional), rather than just the actual membership criteria of ENQA, should be further investigated.
- **The Division of labour between national and European responsibilities** in the peer review of agencies needs to be addressed in more detail.

- **Clarification of standards.** The standards in the report need more detail to become clear to the agencies and institutions;
- **The place of the “non-traditional”** (transnational, non-European, etc.) **agencies** in the future system is still to be discussed in the Quadripartite Group.

2. STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

ENQA, through a working group set up for the purpose, has made good progress with the task set by the Ministers in Berlin to establish an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education. It has undertaken its work in co-operation with its members and in consultation with ESIB, EUA and EURASHE (Quadripartite Group). This summary outlines the progress made by ENQA and areas of agreement achieved so far in the Quadripartite Group as well as explaining the remaining issues still under additional discussion in the Group.

The task of drafting European-wide quality assurance standards has been complicated by the extensive variations in understanding of the principles and practice of quality assurance amongst the Bologna signatory states, and amongst different stakeholder groups. Similarly, the very different stages of development of quality assurance systems among the signatory states have limited the level of detail that can be achieved with agreement at present.

To overcome these difficulties and to reflect fully the ministers’ statement that ‘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’, ENQA has focused its efforts, in the first instance, on defining common, shareable, principles of quality assurance at a basic level. Because the principal responsibility for quality is generally agreed to reside within the higher education institutions themselves, the resulting standards and guidelines refer to basic practice within higher education institutions, rather than within quality assurance organisations. It is at that level that agreement is likely to be reached initially, rather than at the level of external quality assurance, where national contexts and practices differ very considerably.

ENQA has produced 10 generic standards and sets of guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The standards are designed to be applicable to all higher education institutions (HEIs) irrespective of their structure, function, size, and the national system in which they are located. The standards are also intended to apply to the three cycles of higher education described in the Bologna Declaration (as revised).

The standards and guidelines are intended to encourage the development and embedding of institutional quality cultures which foster vibrant intellectual and educational attainment, to provide a source of assistance and guidance to HEIs and other relevant agencies in developing their own cultures of quality assurance, to inform and raise the expectations of HEIs, students, employers and other stakeholders, and to contribute to a common frame of reference for the provision of higher education and the assurance of quality in the EHEA. If implemented, the standards and guidelines will form an underlying framework of common European values to inform both internal and external quality assurance.

As their starting point, the standards and guidelines endorse the spirit of the July 2003 Graz Declaration of the European University Association (EUA) which states that ‘the purpose of a European dimension to quality assurance is to promote mutual trust and improve transparency while respecting the diversity of national contexts and subject areas’. Consonant with the Graz declaration, the standards and guidelines contained in this paper recognise the primacy of national systems of higher education, the importance of institutional autonomy within those national systems, and the particular requirements of different academic subjects. They acknowledge the work being undertaken by EUA in its ‘Quality Culture’ project. In addition, the standards and guidelines owe much to the experience gained during the ENQA-coordinated pilot project ‘Transnational European Evaluation Project’ (TEEP), which investigated, in three disciplines, the operational implications of a European transnational quality evaluation process. The standards and guidelines also take into account the quality convergence study undertaken by ENQA in 2003-04, which has analysed the state of the art of European higher education evaluation procedures in terms of a number of specific themes and aspects. Further, they have benefited from submissions to the Quadripartite Group by EURASHE and ESIB.

In drafting these generic standards, ENQA wishes to emphasise that, in its view, this is only the start, and not the end, of the development of a European dimension for quality assurance based on sound principles and practices. Further work will be required to enable the standards and guidelines to be developed in a way that will link them with the various practical functions and practices of external evaluation, whether these be in the form of quality assurance, accreditation, or quality enhancement. ENQA does not believe, however, that this link can, or should, be attempted at the same time as the underlying standards and guidelines are themselves being considered and developed.

2.1 Standards-related Issues requiring additional consultation in the Quadripartite Group

The discussions in the Quadripartite Group have led to a number of areas where consensus with regard to standards has been achieved. All four organisations are fully committed to the establishment of the quality assurance dimension within the European Higher Education Area by developing a set of standards, procedures and guidelines to which they, and other stakeholders, can subscribe. The Quadripartite Group also agrees that at this point the standards under development will offer maximum benefit if used as reference points of shared principles, values and approaches rather than strictly operational procedures in internal and external quality assurance processes.

However, additional efforts need to be made in the Quadripartite Group in order to complete the work on standards and achieve a level of agreement which can lead to effective implementation across all the Bologna signatory countries. In particular, the following topics, raised by different members of the Group, need to be fully considered in order to decide how far they should be incorporated within the report;

- recognition of the need for enough time to be given to allow higher education institutions to develop and embed their own internal quality assurance processes;
- desirability of emphasising the need to respect fully institutional diversity and the importance of innovation within institutions;
- the advisability of clarification of the key goals or principles behind the development of standards;

- the need for reference to learning outcomes as a way of defining an explicit minimum level of achievement for higher education qualifications;
- the need for reference to both generic and specific standards, the former describing general competences that students should acquire, the latter describing content-specific reference points, developed by experts in the respective fields;
- the desirability of defining an integrated quality assurance procedure, reflecting both internal and external aspects, perhaps clarified as follows:
 1. Development of quality standards and criteria
 2. Self-evaluation by the subject of the process
 3. External evaluation and judgment
- the necessity for the introduction of detailed European-wide standards at the level of the individual programme;
- The main reference of the standards should be discussed as there are different interpretations in the Quadripartite Group.

In their present form, the standards and guidelines envisage an important role for internal and external quality assurance. The nature of this varies from system to system and can include

- institutional evaluations of different types;
- subject or programme evaluations;
- accreditation at subject, programme and institutional levels; and
- combinations of these.

Such external evaluations largely depend for their full effectiveness on there being an explicit internal quality assurance strategy, with specific objectives, and on the use, within institutions, of mechanisms and methods aimed at achieving those objectives. Because of this, ENQA believes that its work on quality assurance standards on the European scale is well-founded, and that, while further work remains to be done, the glass is already half-full.