

Copenhagen  
12 September 2005

To: Ann McVie  
UK secretariat of the Bologna Follow-Up Group

From: Christian Thune, President of ENQA

Topic: E4 update on its activities and timetable

Dear Ann McVie,

At their meeting in Bergen in May 2005, ministers of the European Higher Education Area welcomed 'the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review' as proposed in the ENQA report on Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA, and requested that 'the practicalities of implementation be further developed by ENQA in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB' with a report back to them through the Follow-up Group. Since then the 'E4' group has met twice, on 22 June and 8 September. In addition, an E4 Working Group met on 25 August.

The main E4 group meetings have been devoted principally to discussions about the structure and function of the proposed Register. In its meeting, the Working Group looked in more detail at some of the associated questions concerning the possible organisation of the Register and the Register Committee. In addition, the main group has agreed on the way forward for the European Consultative Forum and has begun to plan for the Forum's first meeting.

### **The European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies**

The discussion of the Register within E4 has focused on attempts to clarify its fundamental purpose. The ENQA report described it in terms of a tool for information, transparency and comparability, 'a European register of quality assurance agencies, covering public, private, and thematic agencies, operating or planning to operate in Europe' and proposed that it 'should be open for applications from all agencies providing services within Europe, including those operating from countries outside Europe or those with a transnational or international basis'. The agencies would be 'placed into different sections of the register depending on whether they are peer reviewed or not, whether they comply with the European standards for external quality assurance agencies or not, and whether they operate strictly nationally or across borders.' The ENQA proposal was, therefore, essentially a comprehensive listing where differentiation between types of agency would be achieved through descriptive categorisation. An alternative proposal has also been discussed, based

on the European Commission's Draft Recommendation on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, which envisages an exclusive list, containing those agencies which met certain prescribed criteria. The first approach would have the benefit of allowing the users of the register to draw their own conclusions about which agencies they might rely on or wish to do business with, while the second, by undertaking a 'filtering' process (in effect an accreditation of agencies), would give a clear indication of the Register Committee's opinion of agencies' fitness to be included in the Register.

Both approaches have their strengths and limitations and these are finely balanced. The E4 Group believes that a preferred approach will be difficult to decide in the absence of a clearer consensus on the use which might be made of the Register. One way forward might be to begin with the descriptive listing, as envisaged in the ENQA report, and then to take stock of its effectiveness after an appropriate time has elapsed, in order to see whether a more selective register should be developed, building on what has been achieved thus far. Because of this uncertainty about the

Register's use and value, it wishes to undertake a fuller analysis of its possible uses and users, with the intention of discovering how it would be used, what value would be added by its compilation, and which of the two models would be most likely to meet the perceived need for the Register, in the most economical and effective way. E4 therefore intends to undertake further work in this area, with a view to reporting more fully to BFUG in early 2006.

So far as the practicalities of implementation are concerned, these must await the decision on the function and structure of the Register. The Working Group was able, however, to achieve a consensus in a number of areas relating to the organisation and management of the Register and the Register Committee.

### **Recommendation**

BFUG is asked to note the actions taken by E4 since Bergen and to confirm its wish to develop the Register in accordance with the proposals contained in the ENQA Report and endorsed in the Bergen communiqué, subject to the outcome of further analysis by E4 into the purposes and value of the Register, to be reported at BFUG's next meeting. After the 12-13 October meeting of the Bologna Follow-Up Group, ENQA, on behalf of E4, will brief the Bologna Follow-Up Group on the results and subsequent timetable, in the BFUG meeting of February/March 2006, with the hope that the European ministers convening in London in 2007 will have a full report on the achieved results on the basis of their Bergen recommendations.

Sincerely,  
Christian Thune