

## **Working on the European Dimension of Quality**

**Report of the international conference, Amsterdam, March 12 and 13, 2002.**

**The conference was part of the official Bologna-work programme as approved by the Bologna follow-up group in September 2001**

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### **Background: why this conference**

In 1999, 29 ministers of Education in Europe signed the Bologna Declaration. It aimed at promoting a structure of higher education based on two cycles, in order to create transparency for mobility and employability. Since then, throughout Europe, countries with various traditions of higher education have been transforming their system actively into a transparent two-cycle ('bachelor-master') structure.

In each country, the transformation is laid down in laws and regulations. On the one hand, legislation is very much a national process, connected with national education systems and legal and political environments. On the other hand, transparency concerning the quality of the various bachelor and master programmes requires international co-operation regarding criteria for quality.

In the Netherlands, at the moment of signing the Bologna Declaration, a system of quality assessment had been functioning for over 10 years. It consists of peer reviews of all higher education programmes and publication of the results. Complementing this system of quality assessment, independent accreditation will be introduced in 2003 to transform the situation in such a way that positive statements on proven quality can be given, at the same time opening up the system to all kinds of providers of higher education. Also in Flanders, where a similar system of quality assurance functions, such a transformation was likewise considered desirable in view of the emerging European higher education space. Therefore, further policy development on quality assurance in higher education has taken place in co-operation between the two governments.

When preparing the actual accreditation and descriptors for quality, which was done in co-operation between the Netherlands and Flanders, the question arose where to draw the line of positively judged bachelor and master programmes. This question was discussed with several other countries with comparable quality assurance systems. It resulted in attention for the issue of the quality of higher education at the ministerial meeting in Prague, May 2001, which focussed on the follow-up of the Bologna declaration. The Prague communiqué (2001) called upon various actors:

- to co-operate in quality assurance
- to design scenarios for mutual acceptance of evaluation and accreditation/certification mechanisms
- to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference
- to disseminate best practice.

At the Prague meeting the ministers of Flanders and the Netherlands announced to organise a conference on the issue of quality assurance. In September 2001 the outcomes

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of the consultation of various countries was studied in a joint meeting in Maastricht. Representatives of quality assurance agencies and of governments agreed that common problems were faced; that cross border activities in perspective of quality assurance should be promoted and that an action programme was welcomed. Those present preferred action to words or papers. Progress was expected from pragmatic and practical projects designed on the principle of 'learning by doing'. A future agenda was to be drawn up and should exist of common projects that met the demands dictated by the needs of individual participants. At the same time it was considered important to be open about the actions to all parties involved in the Bologna process. That was the onset of the *Joint Quality Initiative*. Actions undertaken were:

- Comparison of concepts of accreditation as operating or proposed in Europe.
- Review of examples of cross border quality assessment of programmes.
- Comparison of existing and proposed descriptors, which resulted in a statement of shared descriptors for bachelor and master programmes.

By focusing on what is shared there appeared to be room for a common approach of the countries and agencies represented in the *Joint Quality Initiative*, with potential to grow into a European approach.

As announced during the ministerial meeting in Prague, the conference to focus on the internationalisation of quality assurance as part of the Bologna process was organised in Amsterdam, March 2002. The aim of the conference was to present various developments in quality assurance of higher education and its internationalisation in Europe, also in perspective of developments beyond the European higher education area. At the conference various actors gave an overview of a variety of activities at various levels. And room was provided to discuss these in the perspective of the chosen theme *working on the European dimension of quality*.

### **Brief overview of the conference programme**

The conference started with the introductory keynote of minister Vanderpoorten followed by a general overview of developments and a reflection from the USA. Then the shared descriptors for bachelor and masters as originating from the joint quality initiative were presented and an overview of how similar descriptors could be generated at the programme level in various fields of knowledge by higher education institutions co-operating internationally in the so-called "Tuning project".

Next to the presentation of descriptors there was room for reflection on the possibilities of quality assurance at the programme level and at the institutional level. The lively discussion on this is also reported in the form of results and theses.

The conference was closed with the final keynote of Minister Hermans.

### **Summary of Results: Consensus and Questions**

The conference was attended by over a hundred participants from most of the countries involved in the Bologna process, representing ministries of education, quality assessment and accreditation agencies, buffer bodies, higher education institutions and students.

### *Descriptors of Bachelor and Master Programmes*

There was a widely shared consensus that the 'Dublin Descriptors', defining key outcomes for Bachelors and Masters programmes in general were useful. These generic descriptors were complementary to the more specific outcomes of the Tuning project, which were being developed at the level of areas of knowledge ('disciplines').

From the discussions it also appeared that the Tuning project outcomes are not to be taken as prescriptive. In that respect, it should be remembered that outcomes do not define curricula.

Gains from the Tuning project include that there is a broader than expected consensus among European higher education institutions on descriptors of their programmes, starting from outcomes rather than starting from curriculum inputs and elements. At the same time, there is less than expected diversity regarding length/credits of programmes in specific disciplines.

The approach to quality building on a combination of the 'Dublin Descriptors' and Tuning project outcomes apply to 'traditional' delivery of higher education as well as to transnational education, distance education, etc.

### *Quality Assurance at Different Levels*

A discussion arose on the relative value of programme vs. institutional approaches to quality assurance. Both are important, was the general view. The 'Dublin Descriptors' as well as the Tuning project outcomes are directed primarily at programme level approaches. Many, including expressly the student representatives, gave programme level quality assessment the priority for public policy, *inter alia* because this gives more direct assurance of quality ('consumer protection'). Institutional quality assurance was mostly seen as a responsibility of autonomous, well-managed higher education institutions, even though some participants voiced the opinion that with 'mass' or 'universal' higher education, and in the emerging network society, such coherent higher education institutions will become ever rarer.

*Capitalising on the broad consensus among the conference participants, next steps are envisaged in which the following questions are dealt with.*

### *An application question*

What is the right balance between generic and specific for accreditation frameworks and criteria?

Cross-border quality assessment projects will play a role in the learning process to develop a common understanding at a European level.

### *Ownership and participation questions*

- Who is involved in:
  - Development of criteria for accreditation/quality assessment?
  - Update of criteria for accreditation/quality assessment?
  - Application of criteria in actual accreditation/quality assessment?
- What are the implications of answers to the previous questions for acceptance of consequences of accreditation or non-accreditation?
- What are the implications for higher education institutions?

They have to develop their 'accreditation capacity': how to elicit all information necessary for different quality assessment or accreditation agencies?

- How to maintain quality improvement?

- What is and should be their involvement in the current quality initiatives?

Involvement of the higher education institutions is needed on the one hand in developing curricula responding to the frameworks as part of their institutional autonomy, because frameworks couched in terms of outcomes do not define curricula in terms of content and instructional design.

An associated question of involvement regards the input higher education institutions can give into frameworks or criteria defined or handled by quality assessment agencies or accreditation agencies.

#### *Transnational education*

The specific issue of quality assurance of transnational education, especially in the form of collaborative frameworks (commonly known as 'franchising' arrangements, but actually broader than that) was also dealt with in this conference.

The main question in this respect is that of the balance between responsibility for quality by 'sender' and by 'receiver'. Participants broadly agreed that the *Code of Good Practice* (UNESCO/Council of Europe) with its principle that both 'sender' and 'receiver' take responsibility is indeed a good practice.

#### *Report results to Berlin*

In his closing address Minister Hermans underlined the importance of quality assurance with the perspective of a transparent system of higher education of high quality throughout Europe, in which students can be mobile. He marked that the conference had shown that various stakeholders are working hard to internationalise quality assurance. He urged participants in the Bologna process to continue "working on the European dimension of quality", to intensify co-operation on standards and joint testing, with the aim to bring quality assurance throughout Europe into line, and to present the results in Berlin in 2003.