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Realising the European Higher Education Area
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Workshop: Mobility and Quality Assurance

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Establishing a European Architecture for Quality Assurance

1.   Importance

1.1.   The quality of higher education has long been a major concern of universities. Quality assurance is also one of the prime objectives of the Bologna process. But whereas most Bologna signatories have established national QA systems, the realisation of the European dimension in QA is still lagging behind. In particular in the contexts of institutional autonomy of HEI as well as mobility of staff and students, the creation of a European architecture for QA is of crucial and increasing importance.

1.2.   There are **four levels** of the quality debate that must be carefully distinguished:

- The **institutional level** is the most important in affecting quality. It is the primary responsibility of HEI themselves to ensure that they embed an internal quality culture. Accepting responsibility for and establishing effective internal quality management will also save costs in the long run, since HEI with well-functioning internal quality systems need less interference by external quality assurance agencies.

- At **national or regional level**, quality assurance systems in Europe are characterised by their great diversity. This diversity is to be preserved.

- At **European level**, the existing diversity of the national/regional system in turn calls for the adoption of a code of principles for quality assurance agencies. Such a code of principles would foster the needed European dimension in quality assurance while at the same time ensure that national/regional diversity is maintained.

- This code of principles arises from **international discussions** within a variety of organisations (IAUP, INQAAHE, CHEA). If Europe succeeds in reaching an agreement on a European code of principles, this would allow to effectively shape and influence the current international debate.

2.   Enhancing, not merely controlling quality

2.1.   EUA's overall goal in its efforts in this context is to ensure that European quality assurance systems **enhance the quality of HEI**, rather than merely control them.

2.2.   At this point it would be fruitless to engage in controversies on quality assurance methods, i.e. evaluation vs. accreditation and institutional vs. programme evaluations/accreditations, respectively. There are many pros and cons for the various methods in different contexts or circumstances. Whereas the assurance of minimal standards that is provided by accreditation decisions may make a lot of sense for

certain higher education sectors, it may increase bureaucratic and costly procedures or even be counterproductive in others. Although universities have always emphasised the leading role of institutional quality, they are also well aware that in some circumstances programme evaluations or accreditations are preferable to institutional reviews or complement the former perfectly. Thus, the question is not, what is the best method in QA, but rather how can we use existing and well-tested methods to reach our goals in an efficient way so that input factors of QA are in due proportion to its output.

3. Urgency/Priority

3.1   At this point, the precise nature of a future European architecture in quality assurance is still unclear.

3.2   EUA is concerned that too little will be accomplished in the immediate future if it does not take action at this point. The timetable („by 2005") that has been proposed in the June 2003 Athens draft of the Berlin Communiqué is too protracted.

3.3   EUA sees in the current challenges posed by quality assurance in Europe an urgent call for action.

3.4   Higher education institutions are central actors in developing quality and must work with all stakeholders in an atmosphere of mutual trust and partnership. This is already a fact at national level: many rectors' conferences play an active role in the goverance of QA agencies.

3.5   EUA can play the same role at European level. Its geographical coverage goes beyond the Bologna signatories and includes HE institutions from countries that are parties to the European Cultural Convention.

4. Proposed Action: Establishing a Higher Education Quality Committee for Europe

4.1   EUA will establish a Higher Education Quality Committee for Europe (HEQC), for which two major functions are projected as short term goals (to be accomplished by autumn 2004):
- monitor quality assurance trends in Europe;
- create a broad consensus among the higher education community not merely on best practices, but on a code of best principles for European quality assurance agencies. This code should contain shared criteria as well as shared descriptors of degrees.

4.2.   As a medium and long term goal, EUA proposes examining national QA policies and practices at the invitation of its collective members according to the code of principles.

4.3   EUA proposes its HE Quality Committee as a generic term. While it may be the nucleus for a new organisation, it may also be integrated into existing structures, in which the concerns and interests of the HE institutions will be better represented than is currently the case.