

The 3rd European Quality Assurance Forum Summary

Corvinus University of Budapest

November 2008

1. The Berlin Communiqué (2003) emphasised the primary role and responsibility of higher education institutions in ensuring quality, and invited ENQA, in cooperation with ESU, EUA and EURASHE, to develop European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESGs). A text was agreed by the four organisations (E4 group) and adopted at the Bergen Ministerial meeting. In addition to the ESGs, the E4 proposed to organise an annual European QA forum – a proposal that was endorsed by the Ministers in the Bergen Communiqué (2005).
 2. The proposal for an annual European QA Forum grew from the observation that the dialogue among QA agencies, higher education institutions and students was occurring at national rather than at European level. Thus, it seemed important to create an annual European event that gathers all actors in order to (i) discuss quality issues in the context of the changing higher education landscape; (ii) examine European and international QA trends; and (iii) improve the articulation between quality culture and external accountability. The first forum was offered in 2006 and was immediately recognised as important in meeting these objectives.
 3. The 2008 Forum, hosted by Corvinus University of Budapest and supported by the Lifelong Learning Programme of the European Commission, attracted 500 participants from 55 countries, including 11 from outside Europe. They represented higher education institutions, students, quality assurance agencies, governments and intergovernmental organisations as well as researchers in higher education.
 4. Following a call for papers, 80 proposals for papers, workshops and posters were received. Of these, 52 were selected to complement the keynote speeches and to address the main themes of the 2008 Forum:
 - To discuss how higher education institutions and QA agencies are responding to new forms of accountability, particularly learning outcomes and rankings
 - To examine whether these new forms of accountability have the desired impact on quality levels and their unintended consequences
- The format of the forum was designed to engage participants in discussions of concrete case studies presented by internal and external QA practitioners.
5. The wide-ranging contributions demonstrated that much progress has been achieved in improving accountability. Particularly, the ESGs, the cyclical reviews of QA agencies and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register Committee were recognised as leading to the professionalisation of QA agencies, the development of internal quality processes in institutions and students' involvement in QA processes. Europe is seen as a model in many parts of the world for having created a quality assurance framework that supports regional cooperation built on trust and transparency and on a stakeholder approach.
 6. Participants confirmed that confidence and trust in higher education must be underpinned by a shared understanding of the respective roles of higher education institutions, students, employers, governments and QA agencies in developing and improving accountability processes. At its best, quality assurance is the result of a democratic process through the appropriate engagement of all these actors. It is also

a tool for democratisation when it is based on definitions of quality that integrate the perspectives of all stakeholders and is defined within specific institutional contexts.

7. Improving quality assurance faces several challenges. First, a successful **quality culture** is grounded in the engagement of all in an institution. Some governance reforms, however, are weakening the traditional, collegial decision-making process. Therefore, in order to implement an institutional quality culture effectively, it is essential to find ways to engage academic staff in internal quality processes and to offer staff development schemes.
8. Second, identifying and implementing **learning outcomes** require several changes: new approaches to teaching and learning, adapting the physical learning environments to new learning objectives and offering effective academic staff development. These aspects are essential in order to ensure that a learning-outcomes approach does not become a bureaucratic exercise but leads to improved curricular development in the context of the Bologna Process.
9. Third, despite the fact that no **ranking instrument** has ever been proven to be scientifically sound or to be able to capture the complexity of education and research activities, the number of national and international ranking schemes is growing.

A straw vote taken at the forum showed that the majority of participants did not endorse rankings, which they see as having perverse effects on institutional behaviour. While they can be used as benchmarking, they can also lead institutions to change their strategic objectives or to manipulate performance indicators in order to improve their position. On behalf of its members, ESU rejected rankings as an effective tool for students' choice.

Higher education is at the centre of the knowledge society. Institutions are asked to educate diverse categories of learners, including lifelong learners and, at the same time, to contribute to knowledge production and economic developments. In some countries, however, rankings have become the basis for funding policies that are skewed toward research-intensive and highly selective universities. While this strategy may result in short-term gains in the global economic race, it may backfire in the long term if it is not combined with embracing institutions that have other types of missions and profiles, such as those that are centred on teaching, reaching out to underprivileged learners, lifelong learning, etc.

The recommendation is to **move beyond rankings and rethink diversity**. In other words, instead of policies focused on developing highly competitive institutions, the goal should be to develop a **highly competitive higher education system**, with the right mix of institutions and **parity of esteem** in catering to a variety of societal objectives: increase and widen access, and produce new knowledge and innovation.

10. In conclusion, the forum opposed the notion that rankings are a form of quality assurance but recognised that their existence is a symptom of an information gap that must be filled by higher education institutions and QA agencies. On behalf of their respective members, the E4 pledged to fill this gap within the framework of the ESGs, and restated the four associations' commitment to engage in the construction of the European Higher Education Area post 2010, based on better information, quality and equity.