

**ENQA POSITION PAPER ON QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EHEA
in view of the Leuven meeting of ministers
responsible for higher education of 28-29 April 2009**

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) welcomes the Leuven meeting of the ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna signatory countries. ENQA agrees with, and supports, the priorities drafted for the Communiqué, especially the pursuit of excellence, transparency and accountability, which are directly related to quality assurance.

ENQA acknowledges the progress that has been made in developing internal and external quality assurance procedures and national quality assurance systems since ministers stated in Berlin in 2003 that “quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area”, and since they adopted the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in Bergen in 2005.

ENQA and its members, quality assurance agencies from the Bologna signatory countries, keep to their responsibility to contribute significantly to achieving the goal of maintaining the quality of European higher education at a high level and raising it even further. They are committed to continuing their efforts in the future.

ENQA is convinced that the ambitious goals, which Europe has set itself within the framework of the Bologna Process, can only be achieved by means of constructive international co-operation.

In submitting this position paper to the ministers responsible for higher education in the countries participating to the Bologna process, ENQA intends to highlight principles and priorities for the work to be done in the coming years as agreed upon by its members. At the same time, ENQA will naturally take into account any mandates requested from it by ministers in the Leuven Communiqué and the challenges that these may present.



I. Principles

Members of ENQA adhere to the following principles. They invite all participants in the Bologna Process to consider them.

1. The **diversity of European higher education** as a major cultural heritage and strength of the emerging European Higher Education Area (EHEA), together with the diversity of quality assurance and enhancement approaches and measures, is of paramount importance and must be maintained. It is of crucial importance that differing national contexts be taken into account, both as far as higher education in general, and quality assurance and enhancement in particular are concerned. The diversity of the EHEA makes a single monolithic and prescriptive approach to quality, standards and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate and impracticable.
2. **National quality assurance systems**, while embedded in the national context, should be organised and operated with special regard to the **European and international contexts, developments and best practice**. ENQA does not promote the creation of a unified, pan-European quality assurance regime. However, while respecting diversity, it does promote the **harmonisation and convergence** of quality assurance processes, based on common principles.
3. The **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)** form the overarching framework of quality assurance in the EHEA. The ESG recognise the primacy of national systems of higher education and the importance of institutional and agency autonomy within those national systems. The four-year experience in the implementation of the ESG has provided clear evidence of their usefulness and applicability in various national contexts and within differing organisational missions and setups.
4. The purpose of the European dimension to quality assurance is to promote mutual trust, improve transparency and provide reliable information. In this respect, the **external evaluation of quality assurance agencies**, foreseen by the ESG and now implemented in many of the signatory countries with the support of ENQA, is crucial. The external evaluation of the quality assurance agencies, in accordance with the ESG's recommendations is also the cornerstone of the European quality assurance register for higher education (EQAR), which will act as an additional location of information about trustworthy agencies. In relation to this, **the autonomy of quality assurance agencies within national HE systems is a necessary condition to the full exercise of their**



responsibilities, notably with regard to provision of accurate and consistent information to the general public.

5. The fundamental responsibility for quality rests with the world of academia. **Internal quality assurance** is a duty of the HE institutions and a clear link can be seen between the development of an effective quality culture inside institutions and the degree of operational autonomy they enjoy. **External quality assurance** fulfils a different need: at its best it combines both accountability for the reassurance of the public and an objective and developmental role for enhancing quality in institutions.

6. ENQA recognises that **the link between education and research is essential** to higher education and that it can take various forms, depending on the missions and specificities of HEIs. This link should be taken into account in quality assurance processes.

7. One of the major lessons of the implementation of ESG has been that **a sound balance has to be maintained between internal and external quality assurance processes**, which should mutually support each other and contribute both to the development of a quality culture within the higher education institutions and to the construction and operation of coherent and integrated national quality assurance systems.

8. A second major lesson has been that **different national legislations may require diverse approaches** to the set-up of national quality assurance systems, which respect and apply the principles of the ESG as a generic framework.

9. All activities related to quality assurance in higher education or production of information about the quality of higher education should respect **the fitness for purpose principle (purpose-process alignment)** that is at the core of the European dimension of quality assurance. It is of crucial importance that the **purpose(s) should determine the types of scrutiny, the methodology and the procedures** applied. Decisions on the type of scrutiny, methodology and procedures to be applied should be preceded by, and based on, the identification of purpose(s).

10. ENQA promotes the **co-operation of quality assurance agencies** and their regional and project based networks both at the European and wider international levels, based on common values and principles. Beyond the well-



established networking activities, ENQA especially promotes the implementation of **joint projects**, and efforts and schemes aiming at the **mutual recognition of the results** of external quality assurance activities.

11. ENQA is aware that external quality assurance activities in higher education set up by quality assurance agencies are producing only part of the information needed by the various stakeholders of higher education and the higher education institutions themselves. Besides quality assurance agencies that enshrine their activities in the ESG, **there is a growing number of providers of information about higher education**. The proliferation of ranking schemes is one aspect of this increasing need for information about higher education institutions and their activities.

12. ENQA wishes to assert that it is of utmost importance for the development of trust that **all activities related to the production of information about higher education in the EHEA have explicit goals and methodologies**. This should concern all types of providers, whatever their status is, and should notably be true with regard to:

- a) Information, recommendations or accreditation outcomes used by decision-makers in charge of steering higher education policies;
- b) Information and guidance for students;
- c) Evaluations and recommendations devoted to help higher education institutions and programmes in their continuous improvement strategies and actions;
- d) Benchmarkings or rankings developed for the purpose of external communication.

13. The enhancement of quality in higher education results largely from the interactions and relationship of various actors and stakeholders. With regard to external quality assurance, the relationship in any national arrangements of higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies, and governments should be based on a **clear distribution of roles and responsibilities**, respecting institutional **autonomy** and the **independence** of quality assurance agencies.

14. In order to build globally competitive European higher education, **all partners**, higher education institutions, students, stakeholders, quality assurance agencies and governments, should engage in a **continuous and attentive dialogue**.



II. Priorities for the near future

ENQA recognises that priorities for the future need to take into account the changing nature of higher education nationally, in the EHEA and globally. The increasing emphasis on lifelong learning, transnational education, e-learning and the changing nature of the student body itself, to name but a few, will impact on the teaching, learning and assessment of students and, thus, on the quality assurance of those processes. It will also be important for this changing context within which we work to be communicated effectively to all stakeholders.

With this in mind, members of ENQA envisage the following major priorities for themselves for the coming years:

1. **The implementation of ESG**, with particular regard to **clarification and interpretation** of terms and individual standards and guidelines. The first cycle of independent **external reviews** of ENQA member agencies in accordance with the ESG's recommendations should be complete by the end of 2010.
2. **Maintaining and intensifying the co-operation between quality assurance agencies** in the EHEA, and, more widely, **continuing the dialogue within the E4 group** on quality and excellence which is of utmost importance for ENQA and for the common good of all stakeholders as well as of the general public.
3. External quality assurance processes should pay more attention to **qualifications frameworks** in general, and to intended **learning outcomes** in particular, and to the assessment of their actual attainment. Similarly, in the changing context of higher education, those processes should address the **recognition of prior learning**. ENQA will organise workshops/seminars to discuss these issues and to help members in finding the most appropriate ways and methods to fully incorporate qualifications frameworks and prior learning into their external quality assurance scrutiny schemes.
4. ENQA is willing to support EHEA's goals for **internationalisation and mobility** by exploring how they could be taken into account in the external quality assurance processes of its member agencies. ENQA will devote special effort to address more thoroughly the issue and specificities of **transnational education** (TNE) with particular regard to the external quality assurance of joint international study programmes.



5. ENQA welcomes the Charter on Lifelong Learning of EUA and wishes to express a strong interest in participating in its development and implementation. ENQA will explore possible ways of assuring **the quality of lifelong learning** through common projects with stakeholders.

6. ENQA realises that there is a steadily growing interest amongst students and all stakeholders of HE and the public at large in accessing **detailed and reliable information on the quality of individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions**. ENQA will address the information issue and try to work out appropriate ways to help its member agencies to meet the information demand in general.

7. ENQA, as it has done in the past, will continue to work towards the **continuous development of the staff** of its member agencies and quality assurance professionals in general. Organising workshops and seminars, promoting best practices, and serving as a think tank and information platform will remain high on the agenda of ENQA.

8. ENQA realises that in a growing number of cases the results of external quality assurance procedures are used by third parties for purposes that were not originally intended. This mismatch of design between the procedure and the usage of its results potentially compromises the value of the results of external quality assurance. To address this issue, **ENQA will develop actions devoted to helping improve awareness of all partners and stakeholders about what can be expected of sound quality assurance mechanisms** and the extent to which their outcomes are valid.

