



# **The Legitimacy of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Role of Public Authorities and Institutions**

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**Roles, responsibilities and means of public authorities and institutions**



## The Legitimacy of Quality Assurance in HE

- One of the basic elements of EHEA is the quality in HE and the development of QA systems for HEIs;
- The standards and guidelines for QA adopted by European ministers in Bergen in 2005;
- The progress of implementation will be reviewed again in London in 2007.



But also, diversity exists:

Berlin 2003: the Ministers agreed that the national QA systems should include a *”system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures”*.

Simply, also the HE systems in Europe vary, often for historical reasons alone:

- old *vs.* new universities
- private *vs.* public
- comprehensive *vs.* special HEIs
- etc.



But,

interpretation of the 'common' quality terminology  
in different cultural and historical contexts?



In Finland, FINHEEC has adopted a *quality audit* type of procedure, starting in 2005;

But each HEI can decide itself which type of quality system it is following (ISO, EFQM, etc.) if any,  
- some HEIs have developed their own that fits best their very strategy and tasks;

Virtually every Finnish HEI is willing to go through the FINHEEC audit, but the HEIs are also free to approach any national or international quality accreditation agencies or organisations (e.g. EQUIS);



The audit criteria are based on the *European standards and guidelines*:

- but the more detailed criteria are set in consultation with the HEIs, and they are public;
- the audit process involves partly a peer review, but includes also student and labour market representatives;
- the audit report is published, and it is public;
- FINHEEC gives a *quality certificate* to the HEI that has passed the criteria;



All FINHEEC evaluations are based on *quality enhancement*, and are thus development-oriented;

Virtually all Finnish HEIs registered now to be audited by 2011; their motivation based largely on enhanced national and international competitiveness and visibility;

Each audit based on a *specific contract* between the HEI and FINHEEC; thus it is not seen as limiting the autonomy of the HEIs;



As often noted, the HEIs are responsible for their own quality: the role of FINHEEC may primarily be that of a 'helper' or 'liaison' towards better quality;

The overall process aims towards *mutual trust-building*, so that the HEIs really feel that they can gain from the exercise involved in the audit;

Such trust will also support both the *legitimacy* and the accountability of the audit process and its results;

FINHEEC has produced a special *Audit Manual*, where the audit process is described; it is also a public domain.





The issue of *legitimacy* of the audit/accreditation process:

The national evaluation/accreditation agencies usually covered by law or decree, which gives them a national mandate of operation; but other international agreements may also support it; the basic element is the *Bologna process* itself;

As part of ENQA membership, European agencies must undergo an external cyclical review periodically (within 5 yrs) to see that they meet the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance*, endorsed by the European ministers in Bergen in 2005;

A special *register* for the agencies in the making;



NOQA (Nordic Quality Assurance) has recently produced a joint analysis of **'European Standards and Guidelines in a Nordic Perspective'**;

Some observations:

- each QA agency works within the context of its own national HE system, and within the national culture and traditions;
- more precise threshold values *re* the standards, if the European agencies are to be reviewed in a consistent manner; also, the concept of 'European consistency'!
- the role of 'tacit knowledge' and other informal practices, can they ever be made explicit in evaluations?



## - 'Common European language'?

- can the standards be applied consistently?
- how about legal documents?

ENQA Workshop on 'Language of the European Quality Assurance', in June 2006



- the *official status* of the agencies?
- *independency* of the agencies, for their credibility!
- the *ethical* issues involved!



The *legitimacy* of QA may not only depend on its 'legal' status, but more crucially that the QA process itself is transparent and coherent throughout Europe, and performed with credibility, with the application of proper ethical standards, and also noting the rights of the institutions themselves;

At the end, the impetus of the legitimisation of QA systems is the *Bologna* process itself, and the deep European commitment to it. Bologna is the true European trademark for HE.

But indirectly it is also supported by several other actions, incl. *the Lisbon Recognition Convention* , etc.



Finally, the *leadership* and governance of each HEI plays an important role in the implementation of its QA system. (But still every university already has 'quality'.)

A system that is based on a *quality culture* that embraces everybody in the institution.

The leadership has to be the initiator of the strategic quality improvement in the institution, and its role is further enhanced in the dissemination of *good practices* through national and international networks.



## The aim:

Can we make the entire European HE system a coherent but also a successful and competitive *learning organisation*

**Thank you!**