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

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ROLE, RESPONSIBILITIES AND MEANS OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES AND INSTITUTIONS

ALBERTO AMARAL

(Synopsis only – Full written contribution to follow)

Quality mechanisms can have diverse uses in higher education, some more honourable than others. These uses range from improvement of institutions and programmes and quality management to compliance with government objectives or government control, and even as supranational policy enforcement tools.

Quality has always been a concern of universities. In the Middle Ages it was possible to distinguish three major models of quality assurance. The universities of Oxford and Cambridge were self-governing communities of scholars that had the right to remove unsuitable masters and to co-opt new members using the equivalent of peer review mechanisms. The chancellor of the cathedral of Notre Dame had the power to decide about the content of studies at the University of Paris, an example of quality assessment in terms of accountability. And the University of Bologna, ruled by students who hired the professors on an annual basis, controlling their assiduity and the quality of teaching, is a precursor of the present en vogue principles of customer satisfaction.

It was only after the early 1980's that quality has become a public issue, giving rise to what Neave (1996) describes as the emergence of the evaluative state. This can be explained by a number of convergent factors such as massification – that has created much more heterogeneous higher education systems in terms of institutions, students and professors –, the increasing role of market regulation, accompanied by the emergence of new public management, and loss of trust in higher education institutions and their professionals.

The emergence of the market in higher education gives legitimacy to state intervention to avoid the negative effects of markets such as the building of monopolies and the production of ethically or socially unacceptable distribution outcomes in terms of equity. The need of consumer information for markets to operate efficiently also gives legitimacy for state intervention in quality assurance by disclosing the results of quality assessment exercises and by providing an array of performance indicators.

Autonomous institutions forced to compete in a market may follow strategies aiming at ensuring their own development and their survival, which may lead to strategies contrary to the public good or the government's objectives. Massy (2004) argues that "...the way institutions currently respond to markets and seek internal efficiencies, left unchecked, is unlikely to serve the public good", a danger exacerbated when competition is excessive, or when the state cuts public subsidies.

When quasi-markets are used, the government agencies making the purchases in the name of consumers face the classical principal-agent dilemma: “how the principal [government] can best motivate the agent [university] to perform as the principal would prefer, taking into account the difficulties in monitoring the agent’s activities” (Sappington 1991). The principal attempts at conditioning the behaviour of institutions using performance indicators or quality assurance as a compliance tool, a not so honourable role.

The emergence of the new public management and the attacks on the efficiency of public services, including higher education, resulted in loss of trust in institutions and professionals, and the gradual proletarianisation of the academic professions (Halsey 1992). Institutions use micromanagement mechanisms to respond to outside pressures demanding “economy, efficiency, utility, public accountability, enterprise and various definitions of quality”. Management control technologies include evaluation and performance measurement of research, teaching and administrative activities. For Martin Trow (1996) accountability is an alternative to trust, and efforts to strengthen it usually involve parallel efforts to weaken trust, and he adds that accountability and cynicism about human behaviour go hand in hand.

At international level, the Bologna process is being influenced by its appropriation by the Lisbon strategy and by a move from a paradigm of cooperation to a paradigm of competition. The decision of the Commission to finance a prospective study for a qualification system of higher education institutions, the document “Best use of resources”, the participation of international agencies in rankings and the way the European accreditation system might develop are indications of a stratified European Higher Education Area.

The Council of Europe has produced two timely and important documents, one on Public Responsibility for Higher Education and Research, the other on Higher Education Governance. Both documents contain several important ideas and I will stress two of them: that governance should avoid micromanagement, leaving reasonable scope for innovation and flexibility, and that quality assessment mechanisms should be built on trust and give due regard to internal quality development processes. I am sure that every academic will strongly support these ideas based on elevated and generous principles.

Unfortunately, the growing emphasis on market mechanisms, new public management and competition, accompanied by the loss of trust in institutions and the proletarianisation of academics may well lead to developments in the opposite direction. Therefore I would like to end this presentation with an appeal to the Council of Europe to remain attentive to developments taking place in the European higher education and to use its moral and legitimate power to ensure that the core values of universities are preserved in the European Higher Education Area, becoming an example in this new world where the human being is seen as a trader, persistently engaged in making judgements about the (economic) advantages and disadvantages of various courses of action (Drache 2001).

**EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE IN QUALITY ASSURANCE: THE
POLISH EXPERIENCE IN THE PRACTICE OF QUALITY
ASSURANCE**

ANDRZEJ CEYNOWA

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE IN QUALITY ASSURANCE: THE IRISH EXPERIENCE IN THE PRACTICE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

FERGAL COSTELLO

(Synopsis only – Full written contribution to follow)

This case study will review recent developments in quality assurance systems in Irish higher education. There are 4 particular areas of focus

1. The basis for quality assurance

This will examine the underpinning legislation which provides the basis for the two different quality assurance regimes in place in the binary system, of Irish higher education. The role and responsibilities of institutions, state quality assurance and funding agencies, and other stakeholders will be examined, as well as the processes to be used for quality assurance. Some description will be given of general societal and political perspectives on the role, and objects of quality assurance will be given.

2. The practice of quality assurance in the Irish university sector

This will describe some of the practices that have evolved for quality assurance in the university sector in particular, drawing both on the legislative framework described above, and the practices and framework that have emerged to manage this system. The role of the HEA as the funding body in supporting and encouraging these developments will be described and evaluated.

3. Recent reviews of Irish quality assurance systems

There have been at least 2 major relevant reviews of the Irish quality assurance system in recent years. In the first instance, the OECD as part of a system review of Irish higher education have considered the processes in place and made recommendations for future progress. In the second, the HEA, and the Irish universities have jointly commissioned the European Universities Association to review the processes in place in Irish universities, their effectiveness, and to make recommendations for the future. The findings of these reviews will be discussed. In the case of the OECD review, submissions made by Irish stakeholders to the OECD review team will also be discussed.

4. Conclusions

This will seek to draw together the current position in relation to policy and practice on quality assurance within Ireland. There will be some discussion of approaches which have been found to particularly useful in the Irish experience, and some description of possible directions for the future.

EXAMPLES OF PRACTICE IN QUALITY ASSURANCE: THE BULGARIAN EXPERIENCE IN THE PRACTICE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

PATRICIA GEORGIEVA

1. Background

In 1997 accreditation was implemented in Bulgaria as a means of external peer review for accountability and quality improvement of all types of higher education institutions and programmes.

For nearly a decade the accreditation in Bulgaria was legally defined as recognition by an authorized body of compliance with the law and the state requirements.¹ The term “quality” in that period was barely mentioned in legal documents and only to legitimize accreditation as something that stimulates institutions to improve their quality. In effect, the evaluation reports and accreditation decisions of the Agency represented accounts of compliance to the legal requirements, but very little was said about the quality and academic standards in the courses and programmes offered by the respective institution. Considering Agency reports as descriptions of how well the public money are spent on higher education, it remains doubtful whether it is in the interest of the tax payers to be periodically assured that universities abide the law and adhere to the state requirements, externally imposed on them. Perhaps it would be more relevant to inform the stakeholders whether students in Bulgarian universities acquire knowledge and skills comparable to that of their European coevals and whether the achieved qualifications will help them to find a place on the job market?

2. The new quality assurance setting

2.1. Legal provisions

In an attempt to overcome these inconsistencies, the 2004 legal provisions define accreditation as a recognition of degree awarding powers of the institutions on the ground

¹ The initial period between 1996 and 1999 was dominated by the publicly accepted need for external measure of quality and control over the standards of programmes and awards that Bulgarian institutions offer their students. To this end, the Ministry of Education and Science initiated and coordinated in 1994 a process of design of uniform state requirements for each programme of study. By 1998 nearly 200 study programmes had been provided with state requirements, approved by the Government as individual legal acts. The first task of the newly established (by a Government decree, in August, 1996) National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency was to check the compliance of programmes with the uniform state requirements. The process ended up in 2002, when a Government decree abolished programme-by-programme state requirements and replaced them with a national qualifications framework. By that time the Agency was also gaining experience in institutional evaluation and accreditation, yet again led by the perception of quality assurance as process and procedures for checking compliance with the legal framework.

of *evaluation of the quality of their provision*. Compared to the 1999 legal definition, the new text marks the shift from evaluation of compliance to evaluation of the quality. In addition, the amended Higher Education Act makes a strong point on higher education institutions' responsibilities for implementing internal quality control systems and designates their effective and efficient operation as an aspect of external monitoring and evaluation, carried out by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency. The change of the paradigm is illustrated by comparing the legal provisions for institutional and programme accreditation set by the Higher education Act before and after the amendments:

Institutional accreditation legal definitions:

2004 Higher Education Act	1999 Higher Education Act
An outcome of the evaluation of how effective and efficient is the higher education institution in maintaining, monitoring and improving the quality of education in the fields of education on offer.	Determines conformity of internal arrangements and all activities of the higher education institution and its units with the higher education act and the state requirements.

Programme accreditation legal definitions:

2004 Higher Education Act	1999 Higher Education Act
An outcome of evaluation, based on examination of the quality of student learning in all types and forms of study and in particular qualification levels.	An evaluation of the quality of education in individual courses and programmes of study.

Thus the focus of institutional accreditation shifted from conformity with the law to internal quality assurance and quality enhancement arrangements set by the institution. In programme accreditation, the evaluation of student learning experience is in focus now, rather than compliance with the uniform state requirements, designed in a prescriptive form of national curricula. In consistence with this new approach, the Higher education institutions' responsibilities are clearly identified with the quality of provision and research, which they are legally obliged to assure through a formal quality management system. The system has to be included into the Statute of the higher education institution and there must be a place in it for a regular feedback from students [HEA, 1995; article 6(4); 6(5)].

Following the legal change, the present quality method emphasises outputs rather than the inputs to quality. What matters now is whether institutions are achieving pre-determined levels of quality in the design, delivery and evaluation of higher education courses and awards. In the guidelines to accreditation the Accreditation Council defines institutional and programme accreditation as both based on analyses of the quality of education, research and the management of the institution [NEAA, 2005, p. 91]. This indicates a

significant change of perception about quality and quality assurance of higher education in Bulgaria.

Whether this conceptual shift could bring about system transformations is a valid question, since numerous legal changes in the last decade proved to be unable to help improving the quality of higher education. It would be worthwhile, therefore, to consider the prospects for improved quality in the sector under the present situation. In addition, the influence of the present framework of the quality assurance system over its orientation to improvement or accountability needs to be considered.

2.2. The government and public legitimacy of the new accreditation model

The new legal setting provides a clear line between the role and responsibilities of the major legislative and governing bodies that make the final decision about the establishment of a higher education institution, or a faculty, or a branch, and the accreditation agency role in providing the Government and the wider public with independently produced conclusions and recommendations as an outcome of its accreditation processes and procedures. Thus the independent role of the Agency as professional body with a mission in external quality assurance is strengthened.

The legal change added to the powers of the *National Assembly* as a licensing body with regard to opening and closing down of faculties providing courses and degrees in the field of regulated professions. This is attached to the already existing powers for deciding about establishment, transformation and closing down of higher education institutions. All such decisions require assurance from the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, based on an ex ante evaluation. The new legal setting preserves *The Council of Ministers* decision making powers regarding the establishment and closing down of faculties, institutes, branch campuses and colleges inside the state universities. The amendments strengthened the role of *the Minister of Education and Science* in controlling whether the higher education institutions respect the law. In cases of legal infringement he/she can address the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency with proposal to revoke the accreditation status by initiating a re-accreditation.

National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency is a governmental body with key coordinating role in accreditation in Bulgaria. As a public establishment recognized by law (i.e., the Higher Education Act), its accreditation decisions and its conclusions about the quality of the projects for the establishment of new institutions, faculties and branches have formal consequences for higher education institutions and their activities. Only accredited institutions can run their teaching and research activities and their academic awards are recognized only upon subject or programme level accreditation. Only accredited institutions and subjects are liable for public funding and the volume of funding depends on the accreditation grade rate of particular institution and subject.

The public legitimacy of the Agency is prompted by a legal obligation to make publicly available its accreditation decisions and the provisions for an appeal procedure against these decisions. Additional source for public credibility of the Agency conclusions and recommendations lies in its independent status and professional management. A growing

understanding of the need for professional management of the processes and criteria developed and used by the Agency is marked by the new position of the Accreditation Council members and the Standing Committees Chairpersons. They are appointed on a full time basis in the Agency for their six or three year terms of office respectively, so that they can be independent of their universities and devote relevant amount of time for running the Agency business.

The Accreditation Council and its Chairperson, who is also the Agency President is the Agency governing body. The Council is appointed by the Prime-minister, on a quota principle, which represents the interests of universities (6 seats, nominated by the Rectors' Conference), scientific organizations (two seats, nominated by Bulgarian Academy of Sciences and the National Centre for Agricultural Science) and the Government (two nominees of the Minister of Education and Science and one of the Prime-minister, who is usually the Agency President). The number of seats in the Accreditation Council is determined in the Higher Education Act and it currently consists of 11 members (compared to 9 until 2004). The interests of Rectors' Conference represent the majority of the Council (6 members). There is a new position in it, the one of the Vice-President, who is responsible for the post-accreditation monitoring. The Vice-President is appointed by the Prime-minister from the Rectors' Conference quota.

The Act also transfers accreditation decision making powers to the 8 subject based *standing committees of the Agency* with regard to the subject level accreditation.

Currently all members of the Council and of the Standing Committees are senior academics coming from various subject fields and types of institutions and some are with background experience in higher education management and governance. Nonetheless, both groups are occasionally challenged in reaching consistency in their conclusions and decisions in view of the great variety and considerable amount of procedures, set by the legal framework.

The main forms of accreditation are firstly at the level of a university as a whole, and secondly, at the level of the individual subject. The Agency also evaluates projects for the establishment of new institutions, new faculties and branches, and new subjects. Evaluation and accreditation of programmes, leading to qualifications in the so called "regulated professions" is under specific regulations and the Agency organizes for these separate procedures. Accreditation of doctoral programmes is also carried separately from the subject accreditation. In effect, the number of external evaluations expanded to 10 different types. All these are supplemented by procedures for post-accreditation monitoring and control- a new function for the Agency, brought with the legal change in 2004. The established new unit is responsible for the organisation and implementation of the follow-up processes. It became operational in October 2005.

Thus in the scope of accreditation falls almost each and every activity of the university, which leads to unnecessary duplication and the phenomenon of 'accreditation fatigue' of academic community.

May be a small compensation for the universities is that now the length of the cycle depends on the accreditation result and varies from 6 years to 18 months for institutions

and subjects that failed to get accredited. As a result, the good performing institutions and programmes enjoy longer period (maximum to 6 years) of their accreditation validity.

3. Outcomes and lessons learned

The revised quality assurance model became operational in 2005 and since then 70% of all higher education institutions are being accredited or re-accredited.

The accreditation results so far demonstrate that universities have made a significant progress in developing and implementing their internal quality assurance system on a more systematic basis. The majority of institutions have officially introduced their systems. Among the first outcomes are improved student achievements rates and improved research productivity of academic staff. These are related to the massive internal reviews of existing programmes and the following update in many and close down of some programmes. Other typical measures taken by universities include greater financial autonomy for faculty research and strong connection of staff promotion with research productivity.

In September 2005 the Accreditation Council approved protocols for student participation in institutional evaluations, thus ensuring the student voice in the external quality review. The model programme for site visits of Agency peer experts includes interviews with employers of the university graduates. For smaller higher education institutions providing financial resources for effective and efficient work of the already introduced quality assurance systems is a real problem. Many others raise concerns whether they will be able to support financially their just implemented quality systems in a longer period.

The first session of *subject accreditation* started up on January 2006 and already 20 subject fields (out of 52) are under review. According to the National Schedule, adopted by the Agency in September 2005, all 52 subject fields will be reviewed by July 2009. The method shifts the focus of institutional and programme reviews to the processes and structures set by the institution in order to ensure the quality and standards of its academic programmes, rather than compliance with the law. The subject level approach in programme accreditation is expected to allow for a broader, cross-sector analysis of particular subject field and to help identifying issues that need to be addressed nationally. It also allows the reviewers to concentrate on the characteristic features of qualification degree as a main unit of assessment, which might contribute to the future establishment of national reference points regarding the standards of qualifications.

The accreditation prerogatives of the Agency prompt high expectations on the part of the government, and the Ministry of Education and Science in particular, as to its ability to reform the sector and improve the quality of higher education. While the quality and its assurance at all times is the prime responsibility of the higher education institutions, the external quality assurance processes used by the Agency can strengthen institutions and reinforce their efforts to improve quality. This requires from the Agency to develop further as a competent and trustworthy partner of the institutions, which conclusions and decisions are reached in a consistent manner and in accordance with declared principles [ENQA, 2005].

Two principle concerns arise from the discussion on Agency responsibilities regarding quality assurance. First, strong governmental influence over the Agency may easily become an obstacle to its transition from an authority exercising control over higher education institutions to one capable to advise and act as a professional partner in line with the vision of the role of external monitoring and evaluation in helping institutions to improve the quality of higher education and research. Thus the opportunity to set the new quality assurance framework on an improvement-oriented path seems endangered. With expanding scope of accreditation (the number of types of evaluation grew up from 6 to 10 since 2004) there is a danger for too much preoccupation of higher education institutions with accountability activities. The quality assurance framework *orientation towards accountability* is therefore quite clear. This is in contrast with the official policy statements of the last two governments and their strategic documents in the sector, describing *quality improvement* in Bulgarian higher education as a top priority [Government strategy 2003-2006].

The place of students and employers under the new framework is another source of concern. Institutions rarely provide opportunities for students to involve into internal quality assurance processes. Although a widespread practice in our universities, student feedback questionnaires and the information contained in these are not systematically used to form a ground for correcting or improving the existing practices. While the place of the student feedback in internal quality assurance processes is a legal requirement, there is no legally provided place for employers. They are typically excluded from the internal processes of programme design and approval. Thus the decisions for course and programme content are not supported by valuable and up to date information about the skill needs of the job market in particular field, where the graduates are expected to apply their qualifications. Employers are not involved in the accreditation decision-making process either, but the external evaluators meet them upon their site visit and take into consideration their opinion in their evaluation reports.

Although no subject field has been evaluated and accredited under the new model yet, first review teams' feedback reports reveal issues for consideration in several areas:

- The process of preparation of the self-evaluation reports apparently posed problems to some universities and colleges that are lacking sufficient internal integrity and have problems with communication between units and programmes
- The implementation of the credit accumulation and transfer system is lagging behind the schedule in many universities and programmes, especially when these enjoy high student interest and good reputation;
- Students' and employers' interests are rarely taken into account in the programme design, monitoring and approval;
- Internal arrangements for doctoral studies prevent students from timely transition to the final stage of their defence, particularly in the social sciences and humanities;
- The aging staff becomes a common problem.

Discussions with university managers and student representatives point to the lack of enthusiasm for reforms and criticism about the ‘top down’ approach and hasty action of the Government and the legislators in introducing change.

A prerequisite for successful implementation of the revised quality assurance framework in Bulgaria is the engagement of universities with quality and quality improvement. In this process the development of a sense of *ownership of the quality processes* at all levels of the individual institution is of vital importance. For this to take place institutional autonomy is essential. The outline of the trends in quality assurance practices points to the relationship between the level of autonomy and the successful implementation of quality assurance processes and procedures in universities across Europe [Trends IV Report, 2005]. The autonomy of Bulgarian universities is legally guaranteed by the Higher Education Act, yet there is some controversy between the legal definition of autonomy and the texts defining the scope and content of autonomy. What the notion of autonomy comprises according to the law is “freedom in determining educational programmes and content, rules of study, standards and criteria for student enrolment and graduation, as well as their research agendas”. What is missing is determination of internal organisation, selection and promotion of the teaching staff. Universities’ internal organisation is mirrored in their statutes and these in turn are comprehensively prescribed by the law. The staff selection and promotion is subject to external regulation by a separate law and a governmental body, namely the Academic titles and awards committee. In this situation the internal institutional management would have a limited role and managers – scattered responsibilities. This results into a lack of internal integrity, which is an important condition for successful organisational reform. At this point we come to the issue of quality assurance, which at the level of the institution as a whole is at its best a set of unrelated instruments.

4. The way forward

4.1. Internal quality assurance processes need to be sufficiently financed on a continuous basis, if we want to see good results.

4.2. Currently, employers’ interests are presented in reviewers’ meetings at their site visits in the institution. But HEIs should organise meetings with employers on a *regular basis* and should inform their decisions about course and programme design and approval with employers’ views. The massive initiative of Bulgarian universities in setting up career guidance centres in the last couple of years provides a forum for regular contacts between the graduates and their employers. This positive step of establishing institutional contacts with employers needs to reach further to the university programme managers and designers.

4.3. Students are already involved in external quality assurance and with their growing awareness and experience in the quality issues they can contribute significantly to the quality enhancement of their own institutions and programmes. The quality management bodies inside the HEIs should involve students on a more systematic basis than they are doing this at present.

4.4. The involvement of international reviewers, from reputable universities and agencies must be financially supported by the government, as well as cooperation between the quality assurance agencies.

4.5. The implementation of the Bergen standards implies a level of autonomy for the national agency not just in terms of its operational independence from other bodies, but from the Higher education act, which is prescriptive and detailed in issues dealing with daily routines of the agency. The national agency freedom to independently define its methods and criteria for external evaluation needs to be legally regulated. Such a regulation should be limited to a small set of requirements to the agency like: (a) following predetermined goals and objectives of the external quality assurance processes and procedures; (b) not implementing external quality assurance processes and procedures before consulting them with other stakeholders, including higher education institutions; (c) publishing these with detailed descriptions of the criteria and procedures for evaluation, accreditation and follow-up.

4.6. Quality can and should be improved by the HEIs, not by the ministry or agency. Institutions need to have more power over their internal affairs in order to fulfil their responsibility for quality. Good practice in quality assurance across European universities shows that good quality is associated with greater institutional autonomy [Trends IV Report, 2005]. With their growing confidence in assuring quality, Bulgarian universities may gradually take over periodic review of their courses and programmes and the Agency would then only check from time to time the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance arrangements. Such an approach has been recently under discussion among academic circles and it leaves room for re-consideration of the future role of the national agency as a partner and consultant to universities in their efforts to enhance the quality.

4.7. Last but not least, future considerations of the quality assurance concept in Bulgaria should take into account that whenever evaluation of quality is taken to form the basis for **accreditation** decisions, it is most likely that accountability process rather than improvement or enhancement ones will occur.

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QUALITY ASSURANCE: ROLE, RESPONSIBILITIES, AND MEANS OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES, AND THE IMPLICATIONS FOR GOVERNANCE OF INSTITUTIONS AND SYSTEMS (FULL TEXT)

JÜRGEN KOHLER

I. The Topic – Approaches

Identifying and assessing roles, responsibilities, and means of public authorities in matters of quality assurance calls for an approach which categorises and segments, correlates and integrates, values and optimises all those elements constituting the given headline. So, this approach induces a basic pattern of analysis which applies the scheme: agent – object – action and objective. Using a more elaborative code, this translates into answering questions along the following itemisation: who does what, how, and why?; or else, looking at

- the object: what is ‘quality assurance’ as far as identifying concrete objects subjected to quality assurance is concerned (hereafter, sub II.);
- the agent: who are, or could be seen as, ‘public authorities’ (hereafter, sub III.);
- the action and the objective: how, and why, are roles, responsibilities, and means – de facto or optimally – attributed, shared, and used by public authorities (hereafter, sub IV.).

Having dealt with these items, the context has been set in order to deal with the second challenge, i. e. to consider

- implications for governance of institutions and of systems with regard to answers to these items (hereafter, sub V.).

Due to the fact that this contribution is expected to set the scene it will indicate the relevant issues and suggest a feasible method of approach. It will not undertake to present answers in a ready-made way.

II. The Object in Focus: Quality Assurance

Quality assurance in higher education institutions is the object to consider. When leaving aside research activities here, this issue raises the question: assuring quality of exactly what, from which perspective, and with which consequence?

1. As for the ‘what’ question, the issue is about identification of objects which are to be subjected to scrutiny. There is a multitude of choices. Quality assurance can focus on, and often does in an additive way:

(a) Staff: Developing and selecting staff is a traditional approach, at least as old as Humboldt and his university which brought about a serious dispute as to whether it was up to the university or the state to choose new academic teachers and researchers. In modern days this conflict still exists, but in some cases its solution has been transferred to agencies at least as much as decisions on eligibility of candidates is concerned.

(b) Programmes: There are two essentially different activities which can be related to the headline labelled 'programme approach'.

(aa) Firstly, evaluating and accrediting quality of concrete programmes offered by higher education institutions is a common feature of quality assurance in many systems. It is much favoured by professional bodies which assess programmes geared towards future would-be professionals. Beyond that programme assessment is viewed with some scepticism mainly due to the costs accrued. All in all, there is scepticism in substance since this approach might stifle permanent quality enhancement within evaluation or accreditation periods and prevent higher education institutions from developing their own responsibilities for quality ambition and quality management by making them rather prone to wait-and-see attitudes and reliance on compliance-based policies of merely copying programme templates.

(bb) Secondly, there is a more normative understanding of programme-based quality assurance with systems which provide a methodology for the development and proposal of model curricula for certain given academic fields. Here programme approach to quality assurance is concerned with the ideal of templates and standardization. There is a strong tendency to operate quality assurance on the notion of compliance, which may prevent institutions from developing profiles, from interdisciplinarity, and from free transfer of current research into up-to-date teaching and learning.

(c) Institutions: This approach considers the entire operations of a given higher education institution. It is a complex matter covering educational and research activities as such, but also the legal, the funding and the administrative issues which shape and maintain the institution in all its facets.

(d) Quality processes: Looking at quality processes means taking that segment of the institutional approach which is linked to institutional operations designed to contribute to education, i.e. namely to developing, implementing, monitoring, and improving quality programmes. While assessing quality processes of a higher education institution can be described as an excerpt of the institutional approach, it can at the same time be seen as a meta-approach in relation to programme-based quality assurance since it views the circumstantial conditions which determine the quality of programmes provided as the result of planning, implementation and improvement activities.

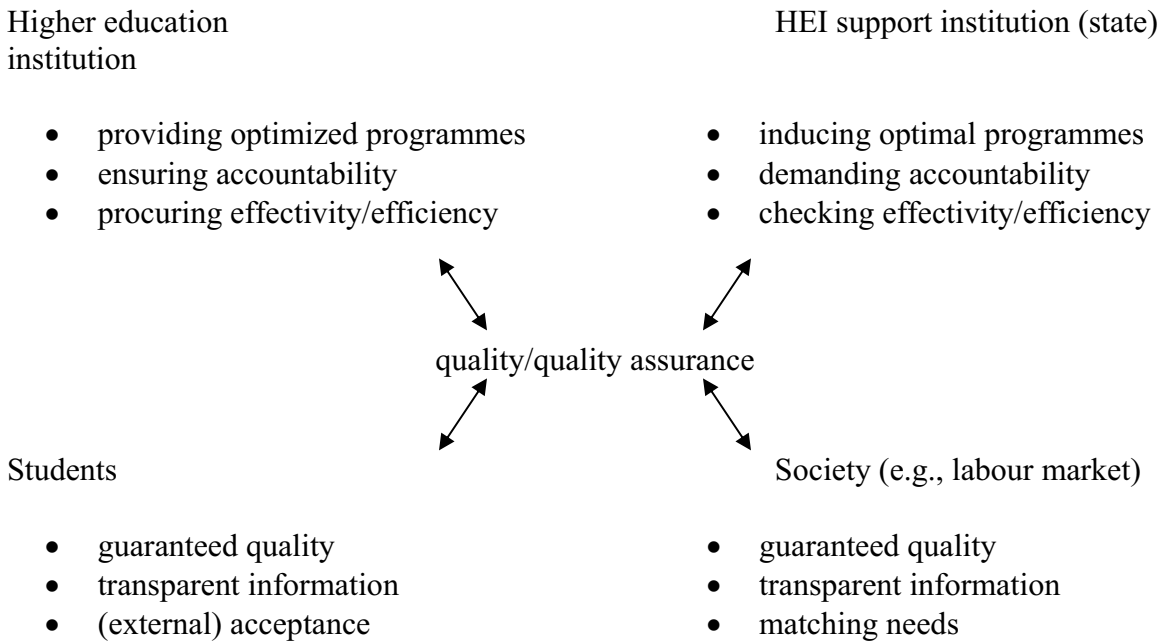
(e) System assessment: System assessment considers the entire national or regional organization of higher education as a provision made to serve the area in question best. This approach will usually encompass elements of institutional approach but will go beyond this microlevel by addressing the overall optimisation of the system as a whole, i.e. both its internal and societal interfaces, structures, and implications.

2. The ‘what’ question may also be seen as covering matters of ‘perspective’, i.e. by the viewpoint from which the issues mentioned above are seen, and to what end, and which interests are to be served.. In that respect, there may be three different aspects.

(a) Firstly, whose perspective is being sought. This indicates mainly the difference between in-house appraisal and external assessment. Both approaches can be applied to all of the five different objects of quality assurance mentioned above.

(b) Secondly, there can be differences as to consequences of quality assurance. Quality assurance can be advisory, as is usually the case with mere evaluations. However, if evaluations take on an element of certification to be used externally for reasons of funding or of advertising, or even a legal function in the sense of permission or licensing to operate a particular activity, quality assurance can be much more invasive and more or less prescriptive.

(c) Eventually, there is a need to consider interests of various participants, or stakeholders, in higher education concerning specific features and characteristics which they, from their particular perspective and needs, consider to be essential elements of quality and would therefore like to be covered by quality assurance. Looking at providers and recipient, yet interacting partners, a survey of those involved and their vested interests may look like this:



III. The Agent: Public Authorities

Identifying ‘public authorities’ as agents in quality assurance seems to be a straightforward matter. It certainly includes states, as represented by ministries charged with higher education and research. However, it is suggested that there could be a wider notion of ‘public authorities’, which could, all in all and perhaps to some surprise or doubt, comprise the following institutions:

- higher education institutions
- nation state(s)/national ministries
- international public organisations
- quality assurance agency(ies)
- professional organisations

1. Higher education institutions are certainly agents in matters of quality assurance. Ever since at least the Berlin Communiqué there is an explicit understanding across Europe that it is them who bear prime responsibility for quality of higher education offers, and for quality assurance as well. And yet, there may be some doubt as to whether higher education institutions are public authorities in the sense used here. However, leaving aside the issue of private higher education institutions, it is true in a formal sense that they are bodies established by public law endowed with institutional and operational rights and duties immediately derived from, and vested in, public authority derived from legislation and serving the public good. In substance, it is correct and inevitable to count them as public authorities in this context since their absence would ignore both their significance in steering the quality system as a whole and their vested obligation and prerogative to do so delegated to them by virtue of state authority.

2. It is self-evident that the nation state is a relevant public authority. However, even here things can get complex wherever there are federal systems of various kinds in place. Still, this item is easily seen; by contrast, the other agents will need some explanation and justification.

3. International public organisations may at first glance not be seen as self-evident ‘public authorities’ in the realm of quality assurance. However, institutions such as the European Union and the Council of Europe are undoubtedly public authorities; the question comes down to whether they act as such in matters of quality assurance. Indeed, they do so, either in terms of law or de facto.

As for legal involvement in quality assurance, for example, even cases such as the Lisbon Convention promoted by the Council of Europe impacts on quality assurance. The question whether or not qualifications are recognized across borders is intrinsically linked to guarded trust in the quality of programmes provided by the higher education system the qualifications of which are to be recognized, and so the recognition issue will have to take into consideration – or, to say the least, it will indirectly promulgate – how developed a quality assurance system of countries party to the convention is.

More subtly, there is tremendous de-facto influence on quality and quality assurance issues exercised by certain activities and approaches of the European Union. This pertains to undertakings to draft a number of ‘Euro-models’, e.g. the ‘Euro-chemist’ or the ‘Euro-engineer’ or else. These activities indicate that there will be pan-European programmatic reference points of considerable significance since inertia, to maintain the imagery, will work towards using them as templates and applying them in quality assurance processes as yardsticks, asking for compliance as the ‘simple way to quality’.

Furthermore, and not in the least, the Bologna Process might be considered as a ‘public authority’ in the wider sense. Although, or possibly because, it is not a formally recognized operation leading to legal instruments under international law, it is an activity operated jointly by public authorities which work out common policies and instruments. In doing so, the process has emerged to produce considerable impact as a means of orientation, calibration, validation, and general reference point for numerous matters of quality in higher education. To name just the essential ones, the European Qualifications Framework which defines the entire system of the European higher education area with de facto binding effect for member states, including the descriptor system and ECTS as well as the essential shifts from teaching to learning and from input to outcomes orientation, and the standards and guidelines for quality assurance lead the way towards developing, implementing, and assessing matters of quality authoritatively.

4. As for quality assurance agencies, these are – at least whenever they wield power to the extent that their decisions are more or less essential for operating academic programmes, as may be the case in systems based on accreditation – ‘public authorities’ because they operate on the basis of authority delegated by their nation state – or by higher education institutions –, thus exercising legal and economic authority on behalf of that country and its democratic institutions. This is clearly indicated by the fact that agencies, their duties and rights are established by national legislation or some type of ministerial decree, and that these duties and rights are vested in them as agents operating in lieu of the state or of higher education institutions which would otherwise act itself in the area of quality assurance. This is also why decisions made by these agencies are – or at least should be – subject to the rule of law and judicial review.

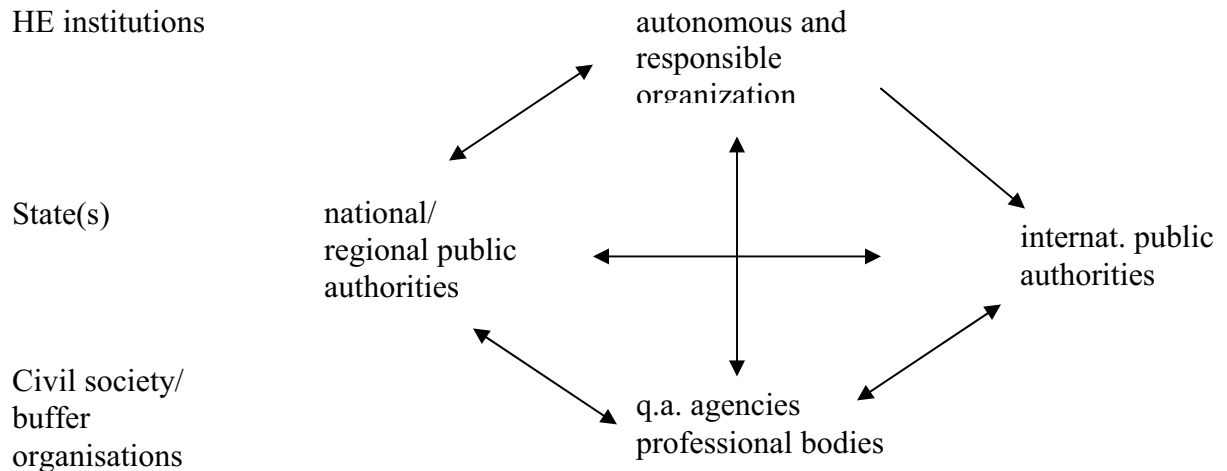
However, there is a specific difference as compared to direct state intervention and role. Quality assurance agencies are ‘buffer organizations’ in several aspects, which follows directly from the “Standards and Guidelines” as accepted by the Bergen Communiqué. Firstly, they should act independent from state operations, though subject to the rule of law. Secondly, they should include peer involvement, which is an element of self-governance of those concerned. In that respect, it may be fair to say that the establishment of, and the role attributed to, quality assurance agencies is part of states’ policies to accept and even to promulgate activities of what has become known as ‘civil society’.

When having a brief look at research, it may also be said that national, or self-governing, research councils serve as quality assurance agencies. They judge quality by making judgments on the quality of proposed research programmes on behalf of the budget

provider, which is, by and large, the state. In that wider sense of administering public functions under public authority, they could also be seen as ‘public institutions’.

5. Finally, taking up the notion of ‘civil society’ and carrying it further, professional organizations should be counted among ‘public authorities’. This may be arguable, since indeed these are not necessarily public entities. However, to some extent they are, and they may accurately be identified as public-private-partnerships. These agents, such as law societies, medical, veterinary or pharmaceutical associations, engineering bodies in some countries, enjoy authority to define programme standards – be it by virtue of specific legal instruments under national law, by virtue of tradition or just by de-facto dominance of the specific labour market sector. Any such authority in ‘regulated professions’ is of utter significance, partly in a legal sense and partly de facto, for higher education institutions, either directly or via accreditation. This would not be the case if national authorities did not permit this to happen, and that is why it may be said that this setup is another example of devolving state, i.e. public, authority to a ‘buffer organisation’ embedded into certain spheres of the civil domain.

6. An overview summarizing the relevant agents may look like this:



IV. Objectives and Action: Roles, Responsibilities, and Means

1. Asking for roles, responsibilities, and means provokes drafting organisational charts and diagrams, and also provokes sketching workflow sheets. There is a point in doing this; but it is not the starting-point. These items are results, but not the initial concern. They cannot be the foremost item because they require orientation – a yardstick – in order to be able to answer the question: why should this particular organizational setup be chosen or be preferable to others?

2. Instead, it is crucial to realize that the well-known Bauhaus maxim for good architecture applies to identifying apt attribution of roles, responsibilities, and means in higher education organizations as well, which is: form follows function. So, what are higher education functions, i.e. ulterior purposes? In concrete terms, as far as quality assurance is concerned: what is understood by ‘good quality’ in higher education, or research, or service to society as an overriding concept?

a) So, from an overall point of view, the guideline of institutional quality, and also the guideline for public authorities in safeguarding quality in higher education institutions, is “fitness for purpose (“purposefulness”). Aims and mission are key indicators to governance and management issues, and these aims and mission are:

- to be productive in research and learning and to enhance quality and quantity in these fields;
- to support individual students’ personal development;
- to aim at meeting cultural needs and international, national, or regional advancement of society, also in economic terms.

On this background, higher education institutions are instruments to meet these objectives. Their quality is defined by the quality of the outcome mentioned above which results from their operations supported and encouraged by a suitable institutional framework. So, institutional governance and management, as well as any quality assurance approach by public authorities, must ensure that there is, and will be, such quality of outcome to the highest degree possible, achieved at a minimum of administrative, financial, and “political” waste and delay.

These questions and challenges, i.e. the points to raise in order to arrive at maximum quality by means of optimal organizational devices, will be considered hereafter. This will here be done by limiting the aspect to matters of quality assurance with specific focus on matters of teaching and learning, thus not addressing more closely aspects of research or knowledge transfer into society.

b) Quality (of teaching and learning) is the key feature of orientation. However, quality is an ambiguous concept. Here are some proposals:

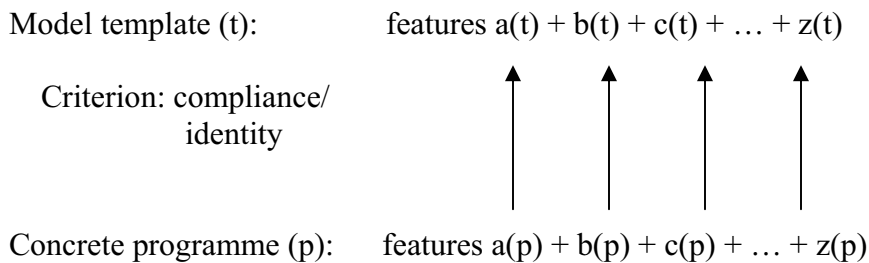
- excellence
- fitness of, and for purpose
- matching directives (complying with curricular templates)
- meeting thresholds (complying with standards)
- client/customer satisfaction
- value for money/time invested (efficiency)
- individual enhancement (transformation)
- (institutional) capacity for change

It is obvious that the choice between the quality concepts listed here is of paramount significance to governance and management choices in systems. For instance, where there

is a ‘compliance’ approach, in essence matters of design are located outside higher education institutions – ministries, or expert teams of various kind –, and while these bodies are entrusted with matters of concept higher education institutions will only be asked to implement truthfully. This results in a concept of merely executionary functions, consisting of implementation management and monitoring. On the other hand, where there is an open concept of quality, as is the case in a fitness of and for purpose approach, there needs to be an entrepreneurial style of governance and management which first of all identifies future opportunities and threats based on sound analysis of present-day strengths and weaknesses, scrutiny of societal environment and means, and then transforms such analysis into profiled concepts which are then implemented, monitored, and improved again and again.

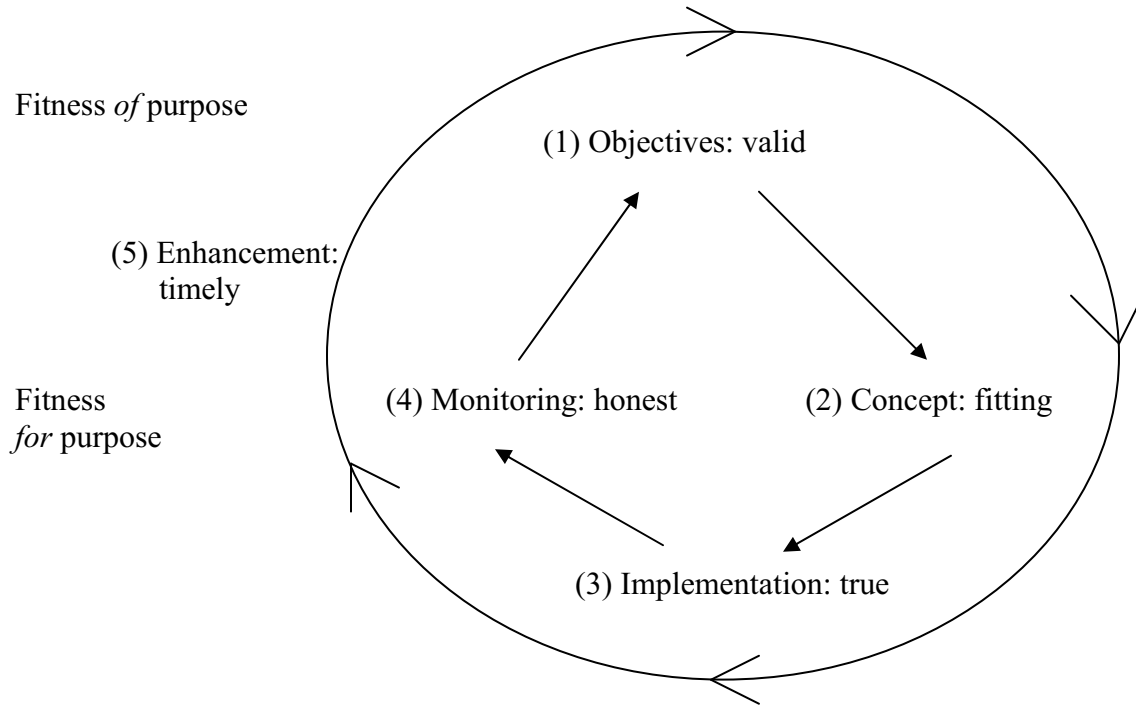
Putting just these two concepts side by side in a graph clearly indicates that the challenge posed to establishing a ‘good quality system’ heavily depends on the concept of quality adopted.

A ‘compliance-based approach is, in principle, rather simple; it may look like this:



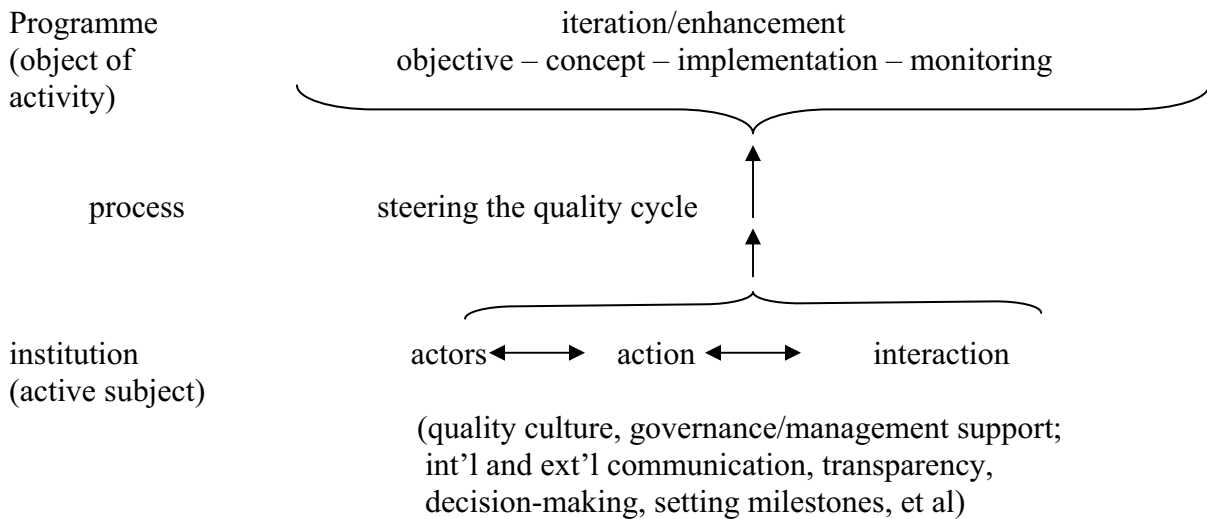
It does not ask for much competence at the level of higher education institutions, nor does it ask for much at the level of external quality assurance agencies. However, it is highly complex when it comes to defining *centralized* authorities and the level of governments or particular agencies set up for developing any such reference templates or standards, and this is true both for matters of institutional legitimacy and for aptness of their concrete operations and decisions.

On the other hand, a fitness of, and for purpose approach is a much more open concept. It may be illustrated as follows by depicting what is aptly known as the ‘quality cycle’:



Any such more complex notion of quality requires more complex structures of governance and management at the level of higher education institutions. This is the point where institutional challenges to mastering true autonomy begin. These challenges encompass the ability of an institution, by means of its quality culture, its governance and its managerial operations, to steer the ‘quality cycle’ effectively and efficiently to utmost satisfaction.

At this point, at the latest, the link between the ‘issue of programme quality’, as a matter of institutional ‘function’, and the ‘issue of institutional quality’, as a matter of form, becomes transparent. To be more precise, the link between the purposes of education and institutional setup in terms of governance, management, and culture, is made via the ability of the institution to steer those processes autonomously, effectively, and efficiently which constitute the quality cycle. This link could be put into the following diagram:



If this is a concept of quality which shapes the concept of quality management, it lays open the close dependence of programme related quality on governance and management matters. The key understanding is: programme quality is best ensured by steering the institutional process optimally along the line of the quality cycle, i.e. to shape and organize institutional culture and management – with all its facets of actors, action, and interaction – by asking which institutional setup, devices, processes render substantial results when considering each item along the line which constitutes and safeguards quality of study programmes.

Moreover, however, this connection influences external quality assurance as well. As a consequence, its task is focussed on supporting and assessing whether or not the process described above is established, both by concept and in reality. Good governance of systems is indicated by the extent to which this is accomplished, and moreover, to what extent it applies the very same concept to its own operations.

3. Another element of basic orientation must to be borne in mind: What are the corollaries, namely the circumstantial features which higher education is embedded in, and of the people involved in higher education? Mechanistic approaches to roles, responsibilities, means of public authorities, as well as to governance principles, will fail and be detrimental if they do not take heed of cultural circumstances, including the very essence of research and research-based teaching and learning, and of the type of people involved in any such activity. The following items may be recalled here, which are prerequisites defined by, and consequences deriving from, purpose and people inside the system and society outside the system:

- Freedom of research and teaching/learning: This is not only a right pertaining to the individual; it is a prerequisite for progress and innovation since it is an essential to move the frontiers of knowledge and to ensure dynamic evolution rather than promulgate static concepts of passing on traditional acquired expertise only.

Freedom of teaching, learning, and research encompasses, within the limits of ethics, the freedom to choose subject, hypothesis, and methodology, thus safeguarding that ‘the unexpected can be expected’; as a consequence, there is a limit to the expedience of managed planification approaches to higher education and research;

- freedom of research and learning attracts, and needs, free individuals whose integration into a team is a major challenge;
- change of paradigm towards the “entrepreneurial university” facing national or international competition subject to transnational educational frameworks and mobility;
- increasing cost (staff, equipment, media, buildings, etc) and advanced communication technology, cheap transport, internationalisation of standards, increasing mobility, programmes provided globally could lead to concerted structures (franchising systems, “chain-stores”, and “trusts”);
- increasing awareness of the difference between legitimacy to be involved (de-jure-competence) and ability to be involved (de-facto-competence) – also pertaining to role-sharing between government level and ‘performance level’ at higher education institutions;
- not only politics in the traditional sense, but also society as such may define themselves as stakeholders who seek influence.

V. Implications for Governance of Institutions and Systems

Translating the aforementioned orientations and circumstantial opportunities, which may also be seen as limits, into governance matters at institutional and systems level cannot be done by developing a blueprint which serves as a ready-made for everyone. This is prevented by the fact that institutions and systems vary not only in size, which brings about different constraints and opportunities, but also with regard to mission, tradition, legal and economic frameworks, and mentalities.

Therefore, at this stage governance issues can only be tackled by identifying the points to consider. These may be a matter of considering conflicting, or rather integrating, aspects, which must eventually be brought into an integral concept.

Items to

- consider,
- explore,
- define,
- correlate,
- translate into governance and management structures,
- integrate into synergetic forces,
- test-run,

i.e. the action to be carried out – following the sequencing as mentioned above – in order to arrive at valid answers as to developing a quality system of governance and management of

higher education institutions and systems, could be the following. These are broken down into two major categories:

- basic and overriding points of orientation,
- concrete operational challenges: functions, actors, action, and interaction.

These items should, first of all but not exclusively, be applied to higher education institutions, and then to systems steering as well. This prioritization follows from the fact that higher education institutions are to enjoy autonomy, and that their autonomy should lead them to accept prime responsibility for the quality of their operations; this, at least for teaching and learning, is the overriding principle as expressed in various communiqués of the Bologna Process. Hence higher education institutions should primarily meet demands on governance and management required to match their institutional roles and responsibilities so assigned.

1. As for basic and overriding points of orientation, the following may be considered – and it is namely at this point where the issue links up with those points considered above as regards roles, responsibilities, and means:

- in substance: key orientation of judgment on organizational quality, to be based on aptness

- to identify valid aims ('fitness of purpose'), and
- to achieve them by suitable means ('fitness for purpose');
- while distinguishing between strategic dimension ('capacity for change [to the better]') and managerial operations; and
- while observing 'embeddedness': societal expectations, legal framework, funding, character of partners, stakeholders, employees.

- in maxims: governance based on, and supporting

- motivation rather than external control ('ownership');
- transcending from managerial mechanisms to spirit ('quality culture');
- blending of leadership and responsiveness to staff incentives ('bottom-up, top-down');
- self-balanced system rather than permanent intervention;
- responsibility (rights) and accountability (liability) inseparable;
- values, e.g. observing ethics and education for democratic citizenship;
- permanence of review and updating (move from quality assurance to quality enhancement);
- effectiveness and (cost-)efficiency;

These maxims may need to be explained in the context of the aforementioned key orientation of any quality judgment on organizational matters of higher education institutions or systems:

Steering devices of a higher education institution and indeed the entire system must be gauged against its purposefulness as to the ability of the system, i.e. its organisation and its

proceedings, to meet the aims defined above. Within this overall approach, it is sound policy to ensure minimizing waste within the system (“efficiency”); this encompasses optimizing procedures (effectiveness of cost and time). It is part of such policy to ensure that a self-steering, intrinsically stabilized and intrinsically mobilized system is developed; i.e. a system consisting of elements which are designed, composed and arranged to form a system within which all people and all institutional elements interact as much as possible to bring about and achieve the aims mentioned above. Evidently, this encompasses the need to strengthen self-motivation of those to be involved. Again, it follows from this maxim that managerial tasks, responsibility and accountability, and handling finances must be concentrated in the hands of those people and levels institutions which carry out the job in question, while making sure there is no wasteful doubling of operations.

- in process: transparency and integration, i.e.

- monitoring of and reporting on activities ;
- internal and external communication and responsiveness

- in organisational clarity: defining structures, organs, actors, action in terms of

- creation
- selection and election
- attribution of rights and duties
- interfaces and interaction
- responsibility, accountability, and liability
- cancellation, revocation

- itemisation drafted above to be concretely applied to all fields of activities; i.e.

- study programmes (existence and design/contents);
- research (current projects, and strategic development);
- knowledge transfer (service to society; cooperative activities)
- quality management;
- financing (income sources, allocation, expenditure);
- staffing (in particular: senior staff – professors and top management);
- communication (internal; external)

2. With regard to operational challenges – or rather: choices – relating to concrete functions, actors, action, and interaction, the following items should be explored:

- internality and externality

- roles and functions of state and of higher education institution
- roles of civil society (namely, role of boards)
- in particular: role of (other) ‘buffer organizations’, e.g. quality assurance agencies
- safeguarding responsiveness to society (e.g., the labour market)

- leadership, integration, and the individual:

- consultation

- participation
- cooperation
- checks and balances
- freedom and integration of the individual

- centralisation and devolution

- international bodies/state/higher education institution
- head office/faculty-department/flexible ('project') structures
- individual

- choice of steering and learning devices

- legalistic/normative standards: regulation, and contract management
- economic/funding: distributive and/or competitive success, reward systems
- communicative: feedback, creating conviction, rallying support
- expertise: substantial competence
- responsibility: personal ownership and liability
- political: external values and directives given

3. It may be assumed that the itemisation presented here pertains to higher education institutions only. However, these would be doubly wrong. First of all, at systems level the very same questions will have to be asked in order to optimize governance and management of any such system as such. Moreover, as far as there is a responsibility at systems level to ensure that the quality of its higher education institution is assured, safeguarded, and enhanced it is indispensable at system level to know how to approach the organizational quality issue at the level of higher education institutions. For if such expertise and methodology is not applied, there will be no sound yardstick as to judging established or projected governance or managerial matters inside the organizations of higher education of that system. This is a clear indicator of the coincidence and convergence of governance issues at systems and at higher education institutional level under the auspices, and with regard to, the overriding common denominator: to serve society through teaching and learning, research and knowledge transfer, as well as possible, i.e. by providing 'good' quality within the mission of higher education.

ROLES, RESPONSIBILITIES AND MEANS OF PUBLIC AUTHORITIES AND INSTITUTIONS

OSSI V. LINDQVIST

One of the key elements in setting up the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is the quality of higher education and the development of quality assurance (QA) systems for the higher education institutions (HEIs). In Bergen in 2005, the European ministers adopted the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA. The implementation of the progress in quality assurance will again be assessed in London in 2007. Earlier, in Berlin in 2003, the Ministers had agreed that the national QA systems should include a “system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures”.

The development of QA systems in European countries is well under way, though a lot is still to be done. There exists considerable variation in the HE systems in Europe, with some countries having numerous private institutions, established especially after 1990, while in some countries all the institutions are publicly funded and thus legitimised by their HE laws. The new private HEIs may need (public) accreditation for the sake of recognition of their degrees, or for being part of the European mobility system, or for receiving public/governmental support, etc.

There is a wide agreement that the ENQA Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso) provide the basic instructions for an overall QA system for the Bologna countries. However, it also leaves room for diversified national circumstances in terms of the very nature and details of the processes and, even the interpretation of the ‘common’ terminology; the same terms may have very different connotations in different countries and in different cultural contexts.

In Finland, for instance, we have been embarking on a quality audit type of procedure starting in 2005, but each institution can decide which type of quality system it is following; it may be based on ISO standards, or on EFQM, or their modifications, or something else. The higher education institutions are also free to approach any national or international quality accreditation agencies or organisations, but only The Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) has a national legal status as an evaluation agency. (The legal mandate of FINHEEC only covers Finnish HEIs, not foreign universities, etc.) In principle, the rectors have to respond to the Ministry of Education concerning the results of their evaluations and audits, in their annual contract negotiations. (FINHEEC also performs thematic and programme evaluations in addition to the quality audits; currently and in the next few years quality audits are the main task of FINHEEC, though).

The audit criteria are set in consultation with the HEIs, and they are public. Each team of external auditors undergoes a period of intense training that in principle is the same

regardless of the type of HEI being audited. The audit process also includes both student and labour market representatives. The audit report is published and dealt with in an open seminar. (All audit reports are publicly available on FINHEEC's home page.) At the end FINHEEC will give the quality certificate which is valid for six years, but if a HEI has shortages or deficiencies in its QA system, the agency will revisit the HEI in two years' time.

The audit, as well as all other FINHEEC evaluations, are based on the overall principle of quality enhancement, which may also serve as a psychological 'carrot' for the institutions. Right now (in 2006) virtually all Finnish HEIs have registered to participate in the audit of their QA systems, simply because they see it as an asset in the international HE market, especially concerning the student and staff mobility, or in attracting foreign students. Because the audit is based on a specific contract between the HEIs and FINHEEC, it is generally not seen as limiting the autonomy of the institutions.

Anyway, the higher education institutions are responsible for their own quality, also in the context of their autonomy, which gives the FINHEEC the principal role of a 'helper' or a role of a 'liaison' towards the HEA. The HEI itself covers the costs of its self-evaluation process, while other audit costs are covered by FINHEEC. This issue of independence is also one of the key principles of the ENQA Standards and Guidelines. Thus 'infringing' with the autonomy of the HEI is avoided by concluding a specific contract for the audit between FINHEEC and each HEI. It is important that the process aims also towards mutual trust-building, so that the HEI really feels it can gain from the overall exercise by developing its QA activities as a result of its audit.

The issue of the legitimacy of the audit/accreditation process is still partially open. The national evaluation agencies are usually covered by a specific law or decree, which gives them a national mandate of operation. But an audit process itself which provides transparency, is consistent and professionally performed by an independent agency is a necessary basis for the legitimacy. It is also necessary to build a trust between the agency and the HEIs, which also supports both legitimacy and accountability.

As part of their membership of ENQA, all European agencies must undergo an external cyclical review periodically (within 5 years). The purpose is to assess whether the agencies meet the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance which was endorsed by the European Ministers in Bergen in 2005, and, simultaneously, the ENQA membership criteria. A special European register of external QA agencies operating in Europe is in the making, under the umbrella of ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, listing the agencies that are deemed 'valid' and fulfil the criteria. The structure, management, etc. of this register are still open, but at least general guidelines are expected to be ready for the Ministers' meeting in London in 2007.

The European institutions of higher education live and work within a cultural, historical, administrative and legal diversity that may be a cause for certain difficulties or even pitfalls in the implementation of the 'European Standards and Guidelines'. In principle, the situation is similar to that facing the European Union at large.

Recently (2006) the Nordic evaluation agencies, working together in the framework of the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA), finished a common project that analysed the situation concerning the application of the 'European Standards and Guidelines', but in a Nordic perspective (www.noqa.net). The Nordic agencies each have slightly different tasks, but in general they work under relatively similar legislation and cultural background.

Certain observations from this Nordic project may be useful in developing further the overall applicability of the European standards. One of the major obstacles is that all European quality assurance agencies work in the context of their national higher education system, and within the national culture and traditions. And the same applies to all higher education institutions as well. This has to be mentioned here, though in Europe at large there is a common awareness of this 'limitation', or we may call it also an 'asset'.

Following this, the project noted that it is necessary to produce more precise threshold values in relation to the standards if the European agencies (and the HE institutions) are to be reviewed in a consistent manner, of course also respecting the national contexts and models. This has implications even down to the institutional level. The concept of European consistency may thus need further attention. Furthermore, the Nordic project noted that each agency has a set of informal practices ('tacit' knowledge) and arrangements that are not apparent in the written documents but which may influence the outcome. Again, the same observation may apply to the assessment of every HEI as well.

A major obstacle in the application of the European Standards and Guidelines may however be hidden in the language. The Standards contain a fairly complex terminology in English which may not be possible to be translated and understood the same way in every country and every culture, even if the Standards and Guidelines were intended to function basically as reference points. Thus the legal documents and their terminology may not be sufficient as such in the consistent application of the procedures and methods. One pair of terminology that is often seen confusing is 'management' and 'governance', while in fact the latter one usually has a strong connotation of civil society. (Actually, ENQA ran a workshop on 'The Language of European Quality Assurance' in June 2006, where these problems were discussed at length.) And finally, the overall credibility of the reviewing process itself, be it targeted at the agencies or at the higher education institutions themselves is not of secondary importance.

The Nordic project further discussed the issue of the official status of the agencies, that is, if they are part of the national quality assurance systems of higher education. In Finland, the HEIs can choose other agencies than FINHEEC for their quality assurance, but, at the same time, all HEIs are also participating in the quality audit of FINHEEC. The European register of the agencies that is in the planning may give the eligible agencies the possibility of working throughout the HEA. Furthermore, the requirement for the independence of the agencies is a central issue for the credibility of the overall QA process: it may involve legal, administrative, financial, and operational independence. E.g., FINHEEC has issued a

special Audit Manual (www.finheec.fi/english/index.lasso?cont=index) where the whole process including the assessment of the audit criteria have been made public.

The main message here may exist in the fact that legitimacy as such is a complex issue and it may not depend on its legal status, but, even more crucially, that the QA process itself is transparent, coherent throughout Europe, and performed with credibility, and also applying proper ethical standards to ensure the rights of the institutions themselves.

But, at the end, the main impetus for the legitimisation of QA systems is the Bologna process itself, and the deep European commitment to it. Bologna is the European trademark for higher education, and it has created a lot of interest also outside Europe. Thus a ‘stamp’ of passing the European QA criteria should be an important factor for all HEIs in the competitive, international HE market. Of course, the Lisbon Recognition Convention is also an important pillar in building the HEA, and it is simply strengthened by the European quality standards, the new degree structure, etc. This does not prevent the universities or polytechnics from obtaining other quality labels from other, professional or private sources, like EQUIS for the business schools, for instance. In this sense also we are moving more towards the market orientation in QA in the HE sector.

Needless to say, the leadership and governance of the HEI plays an important role in the creation and implementation of its QA system. (This does not imply that the universities did not have any ‘quality’ before this system, quite the contrary.) It is important, however, that this system is based on a quality culture that concerns 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. Thus we can make the entire European HE system a coherent and also a successful learning organisation.

CONTRIBUTION OF QUALITY ASSURANCE TO THE RECOGNITION OF QUALIFICATIONS

ANDREJS RAUHVARGERS

Contribution of quality assurance to recognition of qualifications

Professor Andrejs Rauhvargers, (Latvia)

President of the Lisbon Recognition Convention Committee

There is no doubt that a link exists between quality assurance /accreditation on the one side and international recognition of individual qualifications on the other.

The link between quality assurance and recognition is very tight yet not that trivial as it may seem at the first sight. While recognition of qualifications is impossible without knowledge about the quality of the particular programme and the institution behind the qualification, it not can be granted based on quality indicators alone [1].

Since 2001 regular meetings between representatives of the European Quality Assurance Association (ENQA) and European recognition networks ENIC and NARIC have served as a platform for exchange of views and have, no doubt, lead to better understanding between quality assurance and recognition specialists.

Some features of recognition

To assess a qualification fairly means to adequately position it in the grid of qualifications of the receiving country. The outcome of assessment is therefore dependent not only on the features of the HE system from which the qualification originates, but also on those of the host system and the differences between the two higher education systems.

The best practice in recognition of foreign qualifications, as codified in the Lisbon Recognition Convention for academic recognition and the Directives establishing the General system for professional recognition, has moved from seeking 'equivalence' towards recognition if the differences between the foreign qualification and the host country's prototype are not substantial [2], Article VI.1. Further, because qualifications of comparable level may show considerable differences in terms of function, profile and learning outcomes, these differences should be considered in view of the purpose for which recognition is sought (e.g. further studies in a particular programme or employment in a non-regulated profession), cf. [3].

While the 2005 Stocktaking exercise [4] demonstrated the progress in ratification of the Lisbon Recognition Convention, there are still problems related to its practical

implementation. Bologna official seminar on recognition in Riga on 3-4 Dec, 2004 indicated that unfortunately some countries having signed and ratified the Lisbon Recognition Convention have not properly transposed the principles of the Convention in their national legislation [5]. As a result, in these countries the recognition practices may still include seeking full equivalence (or even applying nostrification procedure) of foreign qualifications. In their Bergen Communiqué ministers [6] agreed to draw up national plans for improving the recognition system of foreign qualifications. Hopefully the implementation of the Lisbon Recognition Convention will be included in the 2007 stocktaking exercise.

Benefits brought to recognition by quality assurance

Quality assurance is a very important first step in individual recognition.

A credential evaluator needs to know that the qualification has been earned at an institution or in a program of sufficient quality. Once that has been established, however, the more individualised work begins – the credential evaluator can then assess the other components of the qualification: workload, level, profile, learning outcomes with a view of the aim for which recognition of qualification is sought.

In 1997, when the Lisbon Recognition Convention was adopted, nationally organised quality assurance systems were just emerging. Therefore the issue of the quality of qualifications actually had to be left to trust between countries Parties to the Convention, which were obliged to compile and publish lists of state-recognised institutions, cf. Article VIII.2 of the Lisbon Recognition Convention [2].

At present credential evaluators can expect much more from their quality assurance counterpart. Firstly, at this stage when national quality assurance systems have been created in practically all countries involved in the Bologna process, it would be difficult to imagine that countries would compile lists of their state-recognised institutions and programmes without referring to the results of national quality assurance of the institutions or their programmes in question.

To justify what has been said above, the overarching qualifications framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in addition to workload, level, profile and learning outcomes also includes quality assurance as one of the components of a qualification. Moreover, when creating the national qualifications frameworks, countries should include qualifications in their national framework using a transparent procedure, which necessarily involves quality assurance [7]. Thus, one could argue, that with the emergence of qualifications frameworks the „list of state-recognised programmes” to be published internationally for the purposes of recognition is nothing else but a “contents list” of the national qualifications framework and thus linked to national quality assurance.

A statement confirming quality. The main issue that the ‘recognition community’ needs from its quality assurance counterpart is a simple and reliable statement confirming the quality behind the foreign qualification in question.

In case of national qualifications such statement could confirm the national approval of the qualification (programme) in question, be it accreditation or another judgement based on assessment.

In future it could become a statement confirming that inclusion of the qualification in question into the national qualifications framework of the awarding country has involved quality assurance and the national qualifications framework that in turn meets the compatibility criteria with the European overarching qualifications framework [7].

Mutual trust. Another important issue is related to the mutual trust between national quality assurance systems. Taken the wide diversity of higher education systems and institutions there can be differences in the quality standards between qualifications bearing similar names. In the ‘Bologna area’, which has been extended to 45 countries there is always room for the assumption that there may be differences in quality.

But while it is easy to say that there may be differences in quality then to actually prove them in of order to motivate decisions upon recognition.

Although the international legal documents on recognition mention substantial differences in the quality of provision as one of the potential reasons for partial recognition or non-recognition of a foreign qualification, in practice it is a very delicate issue. Recognition specialists may have experience-based opinions about the quality of provision in other countries, yet it is not up to them to make judgements on the quality.

Thus, for the recognition specialists it is extremely important that the quality assurance agencies co-operate, that they themselves are being assessed (if possible, internationally) and that they trust each other and can therefore supply the recognition counterpart with reliable information on quality.

In the Bergen Communiqué of ministers [6] request to strengthen cooperation among national quality assurance systems with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions and assessment of quality assurance agencies that should be organised nationally but involve international peers. Such developments will be highly beneficial for cross-border recognition of qualifications.

The idea of a European register of trustworthy quality assurance agencies welcomed by the ministers in their Bergen Communiqué is currently being further developed. Such a register is seen by recognition specialists as a promising development. Yet, the actual establishment of such a register is likely to happen only after the next ministerial meeting in London in 2007.

As regards the co-operation of the agencies with a view to improve mutual recognition of quality assurance decisions, an interesting activity so far has been the one by the European Accreditation Consortium² (ECA) formed by the accreditation agencies in Austria, Germany, Flemish Community of Belgium Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway Spain and

² See more at <http://www.eaconsortium.net>

Switzerland. ECA aims at mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among its member agencies [7] mutual recognition of accreditation decisions made by the ECA member agencies. In 2005 some of the ECA members went even further by signing a joint declaration [8] whereby they set conditions for automatic recognition of qualifications based upon mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. The development is interesting and positive, yet it is difficult to imagine that the practice could be easily spread among all the 45 'Bologna' countries in a foreseeable future, especially because a number of countries have introduced either quality assessment systems without accreditation or use institutional rather than programme accreditation.

Cross-border qualifications. The recognition of cross-border qualifications is one of the most difficult recognition issues. The cross-border provision is a growing phenomenon and the further development of the technical means for distance provision is stimulating it. While the legal framework for recognition has been extended to cover this need through the adoption of the UNESCO/ Council of Europe Code of good practice in the Provision of Transnational Education [9] in 2001, the main practical difficulty remains to be the quality assurance of the qualifications awarded across borders. There is a widespread assumption that non-serious cross-border education providers tend to avoid quality assurance and in a number of cases it may be true. However, serious cross-border education providers may be faced with an issue of access to quality assurance – on the one hand, quality assurance agencies of the sending countries may not have a duty to assess the extensions of the programmes/ institutions that are located abroad, the receiving countries sometimes tend to ignore cross-border providers at all or create rules that may make cross-border provision impossible.

One of the major needs of the recognition community from quality assurance therefore is cooperation between quality assurance agencies of the sending and receiving countries in the assessment of cross-border provision with a view to both make serious cross-border provision legal and possible and to eradicate fraud.

Joint degrees. Joint degrees are another area where the international cooperation of quality assurance agencies is required for successful recognition of the degrees awarded. Like in the case of cross-border provision, also regarding the joint degrees the international legislation for recognition has been adapted for the need –the Council of Europe/UNESCO Recommendation for the recognition of joint degrees [10] is in place since 2004. Excellent guidelines to common quality assurance of the joint programmes [11] have been prepared in terms of the EUA Joint Master project. Yet, even more than in the case of a 'regular' qualification, credential evaluators will need a reliable statement from the quality assurance side that the institutions cooperating in the delivery of the programme are recognized institutions and that all parts of the joint programme are of a trustworthy quality. The question is still open who can issue such statement – as several countries and several quality assurance systems are involved. For this reason, likewise the 'regular' degrees, in cases where the actual information on quality is not available (or at least not available in such a way that it would specifically regard the programme and qualification in question), the credential evaluators judge on the quality indirectly – asking the issuing country whether the qualification is recognised. In the case of joint degrees that actually multiplies

the effort – it is important to know that all (or at least most) countries whose institutions have participated in the joint programme recognise the qualification in question.

Recognition of qualifications and different quality assurance models

Further some of the quality assurance models with regard to recognition of individual qualifications will be discussed.

Programme accreditation. While rightly criticised from other points of view e.g. costs, high time consumption, main concentration on the status quo and weak or missing link with continuous improvement, from the point of view of recognition of individual qualifications programme accreditation is still the type of quality assurance that provides a kind of “quality checked” label to the qualifications awarded and therefore makes it easier to make recognition decisions.

However, due to the aspects mentioned above it seems that in these countries that are currently establishing quality assurance systems introduction of programme accreditation might not be the main trend.

Institutional accreditation/ assessment. From the point of view of recognition of individual qualifications there is in principle no difference between institutional accreditation and other type of institutional assessment leading to a judgement that allows qualifying institution as nationally recognised.

For recognition of individual qualifications institutional accreditation/assessment is somewhat less helpful compared to plain programme accreditation. One might expect that in the case of an accredited/ positively evaluated and state-recognised higher education institution all programmes should be of a certain quality standard and enjoy recognition in the country where they are issued. This is unfortunately not always the case. In some countries status of a ‘recognized institution’ does not automatically imply that all the qualifications awarded by those institutions are recognised nationally. Here I refer to such countries in which in parallel to programmes leading to ‘national’ qualifications recognized institutions can legitimately provide other programmes that do not lead to ‘national’ qualifications but to qualifications issued “in their own name”. If national authorities of these countries are asked whether such qualification is recognized, the answer is usually negative. As a result, there is little chance that such qualification will be recognized abroad, although the quality of the education is not necessarily poor.

This is one of the areas where cooperation between recognition and quality assurance is indeed necessary to help international recognition of valuable results of learning.

Internal quality culture of the higher education institutions. In their 2003 Berlin communiqué the ministers [12] stated that ‘consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself’. Developing internal quality culture inside the higher education

institutions is being referred to as the best way to continuous quality improvement and it is also being mentioned that it is less costly than e.g. external assessment of each programme. Yet, from the recognition point of view it is important that the internal quality assurance inside the institutions is supplemented with an external assessment results to provide individual qualifications with a kind of a national 'quality label'.

How far are the needs covered and what are the perspectives

Bologna stocktaking. The Bologna Stocktaking report [4] published at the Bergen ministerial conference shows a huge progress towards establishing national quality assurance systems. Progress in introduction of national systems of external quality assurance looks good and promising for the Bologna process, especially looking into the future perspective.

For the recognition needs in the 'Bologna zone' at present the question however is about the current scope of full implementation of quality assurance so that credential evaluators can rely on it in their daily work. Examining the stocktaking results from that point of view shows the following. In May 2005 a fully established quality assurance system existed in 22 countries. In most other countries the legislation that will establish a quality assurance system currently was at different stages of readiness for adoption and in two countries the discussions related to planning for the establishment of a quality assurance system are at a preliminary stage.

As regards the important elements of quality assurance systems identified in the Berlin Communiqué [12]: internal assessment, external review, participation of students, publication of results, international participation, they are fully implemented in 18 countries. While this is again a good sign of progress, in today's reality it means that even the most basic need for recognition – the approval that education leading to a particular qualification is in some way quality assured - is fully covered in less than half of the 'Bologna zone'.

EHEA Standards and guidelines for quality assurance. In Bergen the ministers adopted the Standards and guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area [13]. It is certainly a major step forward as the standards and guidelines will be the main reference document for internal quality assurance, external assessment and assessment of the quality assurance agencies. To facilitate further development of quality assurance systems, the ministers in their Bergen communiqué [6] requested that progress in implementation of the standards and guidelines for quality assurance should be include in the stocktaking exercise for 2007.

From the text of the Standards and guidelines [13] one could conclude that the main actors in quality assurance of the programmes will be the higher educational institutional institutions themselves rather than the external reviewers. The guidelines for quality assurance of programmes are quite detailed within the part devoted to internal quality assurance while the external assessment seems to serve as monitoring of institutional procedures and, hopefully, providing a national confirmation of the quality for international use.

In any case, implementation of the Standards and Guidelines will increase transparency, stimulate the move towards mutual recognition of accreditation or other decisions resulting from quality assurance and improve access to information on quality needed for recognition of qualifications.

Qualifications frameworks. Creation of national qualifications frameworks is a new phenomenon for most of the countries involved in Bologna process. The most visible effect of introducing national qualifications frameworks is switching to description of qualifications in terms of learning outcomes and linking them to each other using the nationally defined levels. Yet, including each particular qualification into the national qualifications framework should be done through a transparent procedure involving quality assurance [8] that could include ensuring that the qualifications are properly described in terms of learning outcomes and whether the stipulated learning outcomes are actually achieved and thus help recognition of individual qualifications.

Cooperation between accreditation and recognition agencies. The recently started activity involving several accreditation agencies members of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and the ENIC/NARIC recognition centres of the same countries is interesting and promising. Basing on both the trust in the results of (mutually recognized) accreditation and on the recognition specialists' knowledge of the higher education systems, it could indeed be possible to estimate the eventual position of the other countries' qualifications among own qualifications.

Such an exercise however requires a huge amount of bilateral cooperation, which, if extended to the whole European higher education area, might become a Sisyphus job. The cooperation among the accreditation and recognition agencies indeed could and should lead to 'automatic' recognition of qualifications in the sense that the quality and the level of qualifications is considered as recognised. In such a case the further individual assessment that will be carried out by the recognition specialists, will have to establish whether or not the particular foreign qualification has substantial differences from the home prototype with regard exactly to the purpose for which the applicant wishes to have his/her qualification recognised.

Summary

The needs of recognition with a view of quality assurance are well known and acted on in the quality assurance community.

First of all, fair recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area is only possible if there is sufficient information on the quality behind the qualifications. It means that fair recognition of qualifications needs full implementation of quality assurance across the EHEA. Statements of good quality as such are needed but what is also needed, is the trust in these statements. So, cooperation among quality assurance systems, the assessment of quality assurance agencies and finally a register of trustworthy quality agencies will promote recognition.

It is important that any programme or institution, either national, cross-border or jointly established by several national systems, has access to a fair quality assessment with a view to recognition of qualifications awarded.

Where the national quality assurance is mainly based upon internal quality culture of the higher education institutions, a national review confirming the quality for international use is still needed.

And finally – the more quality assurance and recognition specialists will communicate and cooperate, the greater chances of the holders of individual qualifications to be fairly recognized.

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THE USE OF OUTCOMES OF QUALITY ASSURANCE

NORMAN SHARP

Introduction

The forum has provided us with a very well constructed programme round the issues of legitimacy of quality assurance and the role of public authorities and institutions. We have heard from the Conference Chair about approaches to, and rationales for, quality assurance in higher education in Europe. (As requested, this section will be expanded in presentation.) We have also been led in discussion by Alberto Amaral and Ossi Lindqvist on the roles and responsibilities of public authorities and institutions. (As requested, this section will be expanded in presentation.) In addition to the excellent exemplars provided during the conference, the panel discussion yesterday focused on the central issue of winning acceptance for quality assurance. (As requested, this will be expanded in presentation). The forum is to be congratulated on providing a platform for discussing these important and I believe closely inter-related matters. In many conferences and discussions in Europe on quality matters the focus is frequently on the 'how' question:

- How can we devise efficient and effective, valid and reliable systems for review at subject level?; for review at the institutional level?; for the allocation of credit points and levels to our degrees and course units?

Essentially in this session I would like to change the focus from the 'who' question and the 'how' question to the 'why' question. My thesis is essentially in three parts. Firstly I will argue that we can only understand and deliver effectively in respect of the 'how' and 'who' questions once we have understood, in our own particular social, economic and politic contexts, the 'why' question. I participated recently in a discussion on quality assurance with colleagues in Chile³. During these discussions Professor Henrik Montenegro posed a very interesting question for all of us involved in the business of quality assurance and quality enhancement. He asked, 'when we look back in 10 years time what will have changed as a result of our efforts? Will we look back and say that we have devised neat processes, efficient review structures, clever audit methodologies, that ran increasingly smoothly? Or, will we be able say that we have contributed to a real impact on the quality of the student experience?' It seems to me that Professor Montenegro was getting to the heart of the why? question.

As we have discussed over the last two days, when you ask the 'why' question there will be many varied answers from different perspectives. The particular focus of our answer will depend on our particular frame (or frames) of reference. There are three very commonly used frames of reference which are by no means mutually exclusive:

³ Impacto y Proyecciones : Seminario Internacional 2005 Consejo Superior de Educacion and Comision Nacional de Acreditacion, 2005

- market failure
- public accountability
- educational excellence

In the first of these, the rationale for intervention in relation to quality assurance is based on the failure of the market. From this perspective it is argued that, in a perfect market the free choice of well informed and frequent consumers would drive out poor quality and support the growth of efficient and effective high quality institutions. The evidence is, of course, very clear: the higher education ‘market’ does not operate in this way. The market cannot be relied on to provide secure quality assurance, let alone quality enhancement arrangements. The second line of argument is that all education, including higher education, is a public good directly and indirectly involving significant sums of public money and these aspects bring with them a requirement for public accountability. It is argued that the institutions themselves operating freely cannot be relied on to meet the requirements of public accountability and that we therefore require some form of external intervention in relation to quality assurance. The third line of argument is based on the importance of quality assurance arrangements in supporting the delivery of educational excellence. As I indicated a moment ago these three perspectives are not mutually exclusive and indeed in many areas are closely inter-related. Some matters of public accountability in themselves will derive from aspects of market failure and issues of public accountability will, in general, be closely related to matters of educational excellence. The second part of my thesis follows exactly from this and that is that to some significant extent if we focus our attention appropriately on educational excellence the requirements of public accountability and the problems posed through matters of market failure will largely be satisfied⁴. The third and final part of my thesis is that, in general, the power of the outcomes of quality assurance is maximised when the outputs of the quality assurance systems themselves become inputs and we move into the virtuous circles of quality enhancement. That is, we manage quality, not for its own sake, but rather explicitly to enhance the experience offered to the students we are there to serve.

In summary, my simple thesis is:

- in relation to quality management, the who? and how? questions can only be addressed meaningfully once we have answered the why? question;
- the why? question is most effectively answered from the perspective of ‘educational excellence’ which, to a significant extent, will address the problems posed by public accountability and market failure;
- the impact of quality assurance processes will be maximised when the outcomes of the quality assurance systems themselves become inputs and we move into the virtuous circle of quality enhancement.

If colleagues are interested in pursuing these matters further, a more detailed analysis is provided in the report published by the Scottish Executive, ‘Learning to Improve: quality approaches to lifelong learning’.

⁴ Learning to improve : quality approaches for lifelong learning, Scottish Executive 2005

In the sections that follow I will apply aspects of my thesis to the use of four strategic macro level outcomes from quality management.

Outcome 1: a shared vision (within a system/country) of a high quality sector

Let us start with a tautology. Before we can provide any effective management of quality in relation to a particular system or country, we need to know what our target is: what is the definition of a high quality higher education sector within our system or country? As a prerequisite to having effective quality assurance arrangements in place, I would argue, for example, all 45 Bologna process countries will be involved in different ways in answering this question. It may well be that over time there will be more shared aspects of the definition of high quality over the Bologna countries, as to some extent is apparent in the work of ENQA outlined earlier in the conference by its President, Peter Williams. In general, how the question is answered and who answers the question will of course vary widely from country to country. In some highly market oriented system where there is little public funding in higher education it may well be that this sector-wide definition of high quality is fairly loose. In other contexts it will be a much tighter definition of quality. Such a definition is likely to change and develop over time and to result from the interplay of the range of stakeholders. Notwithstanding the complexities involved, it seems to me that, if there is to be an effective framework of national policy in relation to quality assurance, it is vital that there is clarity in sense of purpose i.e. what kind of higher education system are we seeking to provide. My own experience would suggest that the more participatory this exercise the more powerful will be the outcome. Such a sector or system-wide definition of high quality will then set a general context within which the mission and policies of each individual institution will be derived. The more explicit and shared the sector-wide vision, the more powerful the outcome: the more implicit and widely contested, the shakier the foundations for any system of quality assurance. Before moving on to provide an illustration of this outcome, let me reinforce my view that, used effectively, this outcome should support both institutional diversity and institutional autonomy.

Illustration 1: A shared country/system-wide vision of high quality.

Outcome 2: a shared vision of high quality within an institution

For brevity I will not repeat much of what I have said above which is also highly relevant in the context of deriving an internal vision of high quality within an institution. Effective management of quality requires that an institution (and its staff) understands itself: that it has a clear picture of what, in its own terms, are the characteristics of a high quality institution: in relation to the needs of its particular students and the needs of the particular populations it serves. As with outcome 1 above, the more explicit and shared this vision, the more powerful the outcome: the more implicit and contested, the shakier will be the foundations on which to build any system of quality assurance.

Illustration 2: A shared institutional vision of high quality.

Outcome 3: supporting students as effective, demanding lifelong learners

In many ways it seems to me that this is the most fundamental outcome of all: the *raison d'être* of quality assurance systems. There are many different dimensions of 'high quality' which are not central to this presentation. Much could be said, for example, about the importance of learning outcomes. These are indeed vital – vital for clarity of purpose: for relevance of assessment instruments and pedagogical approaches; and, for the recognition of prior learning. However, I would like to focus this afternoon on what is probably the most fundamental aspect of quality assurance: the role of learners and the function of quality assurance systems in supporting the learner. In general, we are successful, to a greater or lesser extent across most European countries, in getting feedback from our students following their studies – at programme, course and institutional level. This is important, and there is a growing body of evidence now available to us on more and less effective approaches to getting and using this student feedback. This much is relatively uncontentious, well understood and documented. I would like, however, to look at a different aspect of student engagement – supporting the effective learning of students in higher education. To do this, I would like to spend just a very brief moment reflecting on the nature of learning in higher education. In this section of the presentation I will draw heavily on the work of John Biggs whom I think summarises very helpfully many of these issues in his excellent book, *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*⁵ Lets start with a very basic question: What do we mean by 'high quality teaching' in higher education? It seems to Biggs that one of the defining features of higher education is the engagement of students in the process by which knowledge is created. In other words, students, even first year students in university, should be exposed to the temporary nature of knowledge. Our understanding of the world and of our particular academic discipline has arrived at its current stage through a process of knowledge creation. This process will continue over time, and the boundaries of knowledge will continue to get pushed beyond that which we currently understand. This is true for all disciplines: only the methodology of discovery varies. It seems to me that this simple premise lies at the heart of what is sometimes referred to as research-lead teaching. This is simply an approach to learning which introduces students to the notion of discovery: how that discovery comes about, and understanding the tools of discovery. This in turn lays the foundations for students as graduates who will become lifelong learners, and effective, over their lifetimes, in the workplace. If these outcomes are to be achieved, the student must engage in what Biggs and other writers refer to as deep learning. Deep learning is contrasted with surface learning, the latter being at the other end of the spectrum from the process of knowledge creation. Biggs describes surface learning as engaging in such activities as: memorising; identifying things; naming things; paraphrasing; enumerating; and, describing. On the other hand, deep learning is characterised by activities such as: reflecting; applying to novel problems; hypothesising; relating new information to principles; arguing; and, comparing and contrasting different perspectives.

⁵ *Teaching for Quality Learning at University*, John Biggs, Open University Press and the Society for Research into Higher Education, 2nd Edition, 2003

The question then arises, how is an institution and an individual academic going to encourage deep learning? How is a mature institution going to continually enhance the student learning experience? How are we going to approach the task of quality assurance of the teaching/learning process? The brief answer to this, according to Biggs, is that the institution must become an enhancing institution. By this he means that the institution requires to develop a reflective culture that builds-in systemic ways of reflecting with their students on the outcomes of learning experiences and how these experiences might be improved. By reflecting on what the evidence indicates, the institution, and its various sub-structures, will be led to develop further refinements, and so enter the 'virtuous circle' of quality enhancement referred to earlier.

The next part of the jigsaw is to think about approaches to teaching. Biggs describes these different approaches which, he argues, might be thought of as successive steps taken by academics as they approach the task of teaching, progressing from novice to expert. The first stage he describes as focusing on the student. The caricature here is the academic preparing excellent material for lectures or tutorials. If the student fails to learn then the problem is seen to lie with the student – the students are ill-prepared, or lazy, or poorly motivated, or 'not as bright as they used to be' etc. In this approach, the teacher is the knowledgeable expert who expounds the information, and the students' task is to absorb and report back accurately what they have 'learned' from the course. Teaching therefore becomes focused on the transmission of information, and it is entirely up to the students whether they receive or don't receive this information. The role of the teacher is to transmit. The role of quality assurance, would be to assure the transmission.

The second approach he caricatures as 'the tool box' approach. In this context staff will think carefully about the different ways in which teaching might be undertaken: choosing the right tool for the job. New lecturer induction courses will be designed to expose staff to the different tools available and how they might be deployed effectively. If there is a problem in ineffective teaching, the solution is to provide better pools or more tuition to support more expert utilisation of the tools. The role of quality assurance would be to assure the tools.

Beggs' third stage is to conceive of learning in terms of an effective partnership between the teacher and the student in the creation of the student's knowledge. It is of course not simply a relationship between the teacher and the student, but involves all of the educational resources that the institution represents, often channelled through the teacher or the individual academic. The focus here becomes a focus, not on teaching, but on learning and on what the student does in order to master learning. From this perspective, it is of course important that students are appropriately prepared, that they do have required prerequisite knowledge and that they do have accessible means for accessing new knowledge. Equally, the teaching context is important and the effective exercise of the teaching role and responsibilities is fundamental. But giving 'good' lectures per se may be largely irrelevant. The key question for quality assurance is: is it supporting effective student learning? The task, according to Biggs, is to create a teaching context where deep learning can take place. If we are going to achieve this then we need to achieve what the jargon terms as 'constructive alignment', ie where there is a clear alignment between the

curriculum that we provide, the teaching/learning methods that we use, the assessment procedures adopted, the climate and context within which individual academics interact with their students and, the institutional climate within which all of this occurs.

If we are to achieve this most challenging of outcomes, what are the implications for our quality assurance systems? The first is the importance of the enhancement focus which I will deal with in the final section of my talk. The second lesson relates to the very fundamental question this raises about how we conceive of ‘high quality pedagogical practice’ and the kind of evidence we should be collecting from students together with the kind of processes and criteria we should be putting in place for programme/course validations, monitoring and review. However, the implication I would like to dwell on for a moment is the need to support the active role of students in all this. The simple model of quality assuring a transmitter/receiver relationship will no longer do. Students are ‘joint producers’ of their knowledge and must be appropriately engaged in the quality assurance of the process of knowledge creation. Therefore, a key part of the approach to achieving this most important of all outcomes, is the effective involvement of students in our quality systems. From this perspective, students should be represented on all key internal committees and engaged appropriately in internal and external quality assurance structures. Fundamentally, their engagement must not be token. Students must be prepared for and supported in these important roles. A key element of this would be supporting students in developing appropriate learning styles.

Illustration 3: Supporting effective student engagement.

Outcome 4: a virtuous circle of quality enhancement

Can I start this section with an apology? I apologise for repeatedly using the term ‘enhancement’. I share many people’s hatred of jargon, and I would have to say, in particular, educational jargon. There is seldom anything more effective in turning off mainstream academics faster than reading papers or listening to presentations that are full of educational gobbledegook. However, the word enhancement is actually important in this context. It is not simply improvement. Enhancement implies a continuing process. It implies a process of making change, evaluating the outcomes of change, capturing the benefits of change and repeating the cycle of reflection and evidence gathering. Hence, I deliberately use the term ‘enhancement’.

My simple thesis contends that the main outcome of institutional quality assurance strategies should be to support enhancement of the experience available to students. Enhancement, I define in this context as ‘taking deliberate steps to bring about continuous improvement in the effectiveness of the learning experience of students’⁶. In order to take these deliberate steps, an institution (and its constituent departments, faculties, schools etc) will ask itself:

- Where are we now? How effective is the current learning experience of our students?

⁶ Handbook for enhancement-led institutional review : Scotland, Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2003

- Where do we want to be in the future? What are the patterns and mechanisms of supporting learning which the institution wishes to develop in order to enhance the learning experience of its students? What appropriate benchmarks should we use in this context?
- How are we going to get there? How are we as an institution going strategically to manage the process of enhancement that will allow us to move towards meeting our aspirations?

The first step in this process is therefore to have an accurate picture of the current position: without this, enhancement cannot begin. A key part of the function of internal quality assurance systems is to inform an institution about itself – course/ programme monitoring and review, student feedback, employer feedback etc. To collect this information and do nothing with it is largely a waste of resource. The real value comes from the academic community – students and staff – asking the ‘so what’ question. Institutional quality frameworks need to use a structure of benchmarks to make comparative sense of this information in addressing the second question above. Some of these benchmarks might well be internal to the institution (eg internal targets) others will be country-wide (participation rates of different social groups, graduate employment statistics etc). Some benchmarks will be shared throughout European countries; others will be shared with particular international groupings of universities. This process of benchmarking will enable an institution to evaluate its own position and decide on quality objectives for the future.

The third question in the trilogy, ‘how are we going to get there’, is equally vital. ‘Quality improvement does not happen by accident: it is the result of intelligent effort’⁷.

The final part of this complex jigsaw is the ‘intelligent effort’ of the institution: how does it manage effectively the process of quality enhancement? This is likely to involve the development of the internal culture of the institution and the alignment of its internal quality systems. For example, course/programme reviews should not simply be backward looking at what has been happening in the past. They require to be forward looking to address the question of how we can learn from the past – and experience elsewhere – to improve the future. Outcomes from such processes should identify areas for development and improvement and these should be managed institutionally to provide the means for delivering on this improvement. For example:

- Staff support and development activities need to be aligned explicitly with the outcomes of institutional quality systems and targets.
- At an institutional and/or system level whatever resources are available should be systematically channelled into addressing areas recognised to be difficult across the institution/and or across the country or system.

Let me give you a final example of one attempt to achieving this outcome.

Illustration 4: Supporting the virtuous circle of quality enhancement.

⁷ Quote in a conference address by Peter Williams, London 2006

Conclusions

I am very conscious that I have touched very lightly on some very heavy topics. My purpose has been simply to place some of the fundamental outcomes of quality processes in a significantly different context from that in which they are frequently placed. In order to think constructively about the role of different players in relation to quality and to plan quality systems, it is vital in my view to first of all reflect on the question why? – what is the purpose of all this? I have attempted to argue for the pre-eminence of the driving force of quality enhancement: to enhance the quality of the experience of the students our institutions serve. That is not to say that other ends are not important: they clearly are. However, the probability of achieving them, I would argue, is greater to the extent we are successful in enhancing the experience of our students. In general, I have attempted to argue that the rewards of investing in quality systems will be the richer, the more these systems are forward looking and enhancement focused, rather than backward looking and focused on sterile box ticking exercises. I have tried to argue briefly that the achievement of these outcomes will maximise the probability of autonomous universities serving our countries by creating individuals who are: effective lifelong learners; productive, dynamic and mobile members of the workforce; and, perhaps most importantly, engaged citizens of Europe.

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION: FROM ADOLESCENCE TO MATURITY

LUC WEBER

(Translation to follow)

1. Introduction

L'enseignement supérieur et la recherche sont en plein bouleversement en Europe. Le fait le plus visible est sans doute le processus Sorbonne-Bologne (1998, 1999, 2001, 2003 et 2005), cet effort conjoint de 45 pays Européens visant à créer l'espace européen de l'enseignement supérieur, afin de faciliter la mobilité des étudiants et de faire de la diversité européenne un atout. Les initiés savent que la mise en œuvre est articulée autour de dix piliers. Les deux plus connus sont l'organisation des études en trois cycles, baccalauréat universitaire, maîtrise et doctorat, et la mesure de l'effort d'apprentissage des étudiants à l'aide d'un système uniforme de crédits (European Credit Transfer System – ECTS). Un troisième pilier prend actuellement une importance grandissante : l'attention portée sur la qualité des établissements et de leurs activités grâce à la généralisation de l'évaluation ou de l'accréditation. Dans un même registre, on notera encore la ratification et l'application de la convention Conseil de l'Europe-UNESCO sur la reconnaissance des diplômes (1997).

Les bouleversements de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche sur la scène européenne ne s'arrêtent pas là, bien au contraire. La mondialisation et les progrès fulgurants des sciences et techniques ont deux effets marquants :

- Une augmentation rapide du climat de concurrence qui touche, avant tout, les entreprises et les individus, mais qui, aujourd'hui, touche aussi, et de plein-fouet, les universités : la concurrence entre les établissements traditionnels augmentent, et ceux-ci sont de plus en plus mis au défi par de nouvelles formes d'établissements (enseignement à distance et/ou transfrontière, universités privées, universités d'entreprise).
- Face à la concurrence féroce des puissance économiques émergentes, telles que la Chine et les Indes, qui peuvent non seulement produire à prix très bas, mais qui sont aussi capables d'innover grâce à une formation qui s'améliore, les pays développés doivent impérativement recourir pleinement à toute la potentialité de l'économie du savoir afin de sauvegarder leur niveau de vie privilégié. Cette situation est d'ailleurs déjà vécue au sein de l'Europe suite à réindustrialisations des pays de l'Europe centrale et de l'est. Cette concurrence constitue un défi majeur pour la gouvernance et la direction des établissements d'enseignement tertiaire, en particulier les universités. Pour affronter cette concurrence et contribuer efficacement à l'économie du savoir par leur enseignement et leur recherche, les établissements

universitaires devraient bénéficier d'une grande autonomie à l'égard de l'Etat et de leurs sponsors privés, ce qui implique en contrepartie qu'ils soient efficacement gouvernés et dirigés, et qu'ils portent une très grande attention à la qualité de toutes leurs prestations.

Ainsi, les bouleversements en cours, le processus de Bologne et l'émergence d'un véritable climat de concurrence, ont désormais placé la notion de qualité – que nous désignerons ci-après sous le terme générique d'assurance qualité – au rang de thème phare du débat de politique de l'enseignement supérieur, alors qu'il était depuis longtemps omniprésent en matière de recherche. Ce décalage est étonnant car la notion de qualité a depuis très longtemps été reconnue essentielle dans tout système d'échange de biens ou de services. Que le système soit marchand (essentiellement l'économie privée) ou non marchand (essentiellement le secteur public), il gagne en efficacité s'il est assorti d'un système efficace de sanctions et de récompenses attachées à la valeur d'un bien, d'un service ou d'un facteur de production. Dans le système marchand, la sanction/récompense est faite impersonnellement par le marché et se manifeste essentiellement dans l'évolution des ventes. Dans le secteur public, comme il n'y a en principe pas de vente contre un prix, la sanction/récompense apparaît indirectement, en particulier au travers du soutien politique. L'analyse de cette question dans le cadre de l'enseignement supérieur est particulièrement intéressante du fait que la quasi totalité des universités sont publiques et parce que l'on assiste depuis une quinzaine d'années à l'émergence d'un secteur privé, essentiellement dans les pays d'Europe centrale et de l'Est.

La coexistence d'un système public et d'un système privé soulève toute une série de questions de responsabilité publique et de gouvernance, tant du système que des institutions. C'est pourquoi, le Comité de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche du Conseil de l'Europe (CDESR) a organisé deux fora et publié deux livres pour débattre et faire le point sur ces questions, soit un forum sur la « responsabilité publique » en automne 2004 (Weber & Bergan) et un autre sur la « gouvernance » en automne 2005 (Kohler & Huber). C'est pourquoi aussi, étant donné que l'assurance qualité s'impose comme un élément clé de la responsabilité publique et de la gouvernance, il organise aujourd'hui un troisième forum sur « *La légitimité de l'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur* ».

Cette contribution est divisée en deux parties. Dans une première section (2.), nous chercherons à répondre **pourquoi** l'assurance qualité est aussi importante aujourd'hui pour le monde de l'enseignement supérieur en nous plaçant successivement dans la position des autorités publiques et celle des institutions d'enseignement supérieur. Dans la seconde section (3.), nous chercherons à définir **comment** s'y prendre pour assumer aux mieux cette responsabilité partagée entre autorités publiques et institutions. Nous nous risquerons pour **conclure** (4.) d'examiner à la lumière de ce qui précède les formes d'assurance qualité les plus susceptibles de contribuer à une amélioration de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur, et par conséquent de la faire entrer dans l'âge mûr.

2. Le pourquoi

2.1 La responsabilité publique

Le forum de l'automne 2004 mentionné ci-dessus (Weber et Bergan, 2005) a très clairement confirmé la responsabilité des autorités publiques en matière d'enseignement supérieur et de recherche. Il y a au moins deux raisons à cela :

- L'enseignement supérieur bénéficie largement à la collectivité dans son ensemble, y compris à ceux qui n'ont pas passé par là. Il est l'élément clé de la société de la connaissance, source de plus en plus cruciale du développement économique, mais il contribue aussi à l'enrichissement social et culturel d'une nation, et du monde tout entier, à sa cohésion et à sa durabilité⁸
- Les autorités doivent veiller à ce que, selon la déclaration des droits de l'homme des Nations Unies, toutes les personnes qui en ont la capacité puissent accéder à l'enseignement supérieur (United Nations, 1948, UNESCO, 1998). Elles doivent éliminer les entraves à l'accès causées par des discriminations pour raison de genre, de couleur de la peau, de religion ou d'ethnie, ou encore liées à la capacité financière. Elles doivent aussi remédier à l'insuffisance d'information sur les avantages d'une formation longue dont sont victimes les milieux qui n'y ont pas eu accès. En conséquence, on attend des pouvoirs publics non seulement qu'ils fournissent un enseignement supérieur, mais encore qu'ils le financent et le produisent tout ou en partie.

Trois facteurs au moins justifient que les autorités d'un pays se préoccupent de la qualité de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche:

- L'importance des moyens financiers qu'ils y engagent,
- Le fait que, dans le secteur public, il n'y a pas de système spontané et efficace de sanctions/récompenses
- La participation à l'effort conjoint de créer l'espace européen de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche.

C'est en vertu de ces considérants que les ministres de l'éducation engagés dans le processus de Bologne ont insisté sur l'impératif de l'assurance qualité dans les universités européennes à l'occasion de leurs réunions et communiqués de Prague (2001), Berlin (2003) et Bergen (2005).

La responsabilité publique en matière de qualité des établissements d'enseignement supérieur sous tutelle publique est donc bien établie et indéniable. Cette responsabilité se limite-t-elle à ces établissements ou concerne-t-elle aussi d'autres établissements ? L'observation de l'offre d'enseignement supérieur dans le monde montre en effet que l'engagement public n'est pas une nécessité absolue : l'entreprise privée à la recherche de

⁸ Nous entendons par système social "durable", un système qui respecte et applique toute une série de valeurs de société comme la culture démocratique, le respect des droits de l'homme, la résolution des conflits par le droit, la tolérance, ou encore une distribution équitable du bien-être, de telle sorte que les tensions propres à tout système social ne prennent pas une ampleur telle que le système soit mis en péril.

profit, qui vend ses prestations aux étudiants-consommateurs, connaît un énorme essor dans pratiquement toutes les régions du monde, sauf, pour l'instant, en Europe de l'ouest. Le fait que, dans ce cas de figure, l'Etat n'engage en principe pas de moyens dans ces institutions privées implique-t'il qu'il n'a pas à se préoccuper de ce qui se passe dans les établissements privés ? Même si les opinions et pratiques divergent sur ce point d'un pays à l'autre, on observe un renforcement de la tendance des autorités publiques à vouloir se préoccuper également de la qualité de ces établissements, principalement pour une raison de protection des étudiants-consommateurs. Cette attitude est conforme à l'enseignement économique qui invite les autorités publiques à surveiller et réguler les activités privées ; il s'agit en particulier de garantir une saine concurrence et de s'assurer qu'une prestation, dont la qualité est difficile à apprécier par un non connaisseur, soit au moins convenable.

2.2 L'impératif de la qualité pour les établissements

Même si ce rappel de la responsabilité publique en matière d'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur légitime à lui seul l'assurance qualité, il ne suffit pas. Afin de bien comprendre les véritables enjeux et d'identifier les méthodes les plus adéquates, il est essentiel de saisir que l'assurance qualité est aussi un impératif pour les établissements eux-mêmes. A cet effet, relevons deux arguments :

- Le premier a trait à l'autonomie des établissements. L'histoire mondiale de l'université et l'examen des facteurs qui déterminent l'excellence d'une institution montrent que les meilleures universités du monde sont, pour la toute grande majorité d'entre elles, très autonomes. C'est ce qui leur permet de se comporter de manière pro-active ou entrepreneuriale et d'échapper au cercle vicieux suivant : les restrictions à l'autonomie, l'augmentation des contrôles ex-ante, le micro-management politique et les pressions extérieures de toute sorte, le plus souvent cycliques, qui caractérisent l'environnement d'un très grand nombre d'universités en Europe continentale, entraînent inévitablement une diminution du dynamisme et du sens des responsabilités internes – les établissements réagissent au lieu d'agir pro-activement -, ce qui justifie, aux yeux des autorités, un nouvel accroissement de leurs interventions, qui ne manqueront pas de placer l'institution encore plus sur la défensive. En bref, les restrictions à l'autonomie des établissements – même si elles partent du point de vue que c'est pour leur bien – péjorent, plutôt que n'améliorent leur qualité :
-
- Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur européens souffrent en général d'une importante insuffisance de financement. La principale raison en est que l'augmentation absolue du financement public n'a de loin pas permis de compenser les conséquences financières d'une augmentation – par ailleurs réjouissante - du taux de participation à l'enseignement supérieur. Dans ces conditions, une importance encore accrue doit être accordée à la direction et à la gestion des établissements, afin qu'ils puissent répondre le mieux possible aux besoins les plus importants et le fassent avec efficacité.

Cela dit, la question que nous devons nous poser maintenant est de déterminer si la qualité de la gouvernance et de la direction des établissements d'enseignement supérieur justifient l'autonomie qu'ils revendiquent et est à la hauteur du défi posé par l'insuffisance de financement. Le milieu universitaire, en particulier le corps professoral, donne en tout cas l'impression d'être convaincu que le système de direction partagée - dans lequel ils occupent une place dominante, même si la participation des étudiants et des autres corps est institutionnalisée - garantit les meilleures prestations possibles en matière d'enseignement et de recherche. Il est vrai que la très longue durée de leur formation, la procédure compétitive à la base de leur recrutement et la concurrence à laquelle ils sont soumis pour obtenir des crédits de recherche et pour publier dans les meilleures revues sont des garants très importants de leur capacité et désir de bien faire. A cela s'ajoute, que l'institution a l'opportunité de répondre aux nouveaux besoins à l'occasion de nouveaux recrutements. La question posée est de savoir si ce système très largement décentralisé au travers duquel les établissements d'enseignement supérieur s'adaptent à leur environnement en transformation continue garantit une adaptation suffisante? On peut en douter. Divers facteurs font que cela peut difficilement être le cas si les individus sont laissés entièrement libres de leurs décisions (Weber, 2006a et b). De plus, les systèmes en vigueur de gouvernance des établissements sont rarement propices à la prise de décision stratégique et les responsables n'ont pas toujours la peau d'un leader – même s'ils sont des académiques remarquables – ou la possibilité d'agir en véritable leader. En conséquence, on peut admettre que la qualité d'une institution donnée est en règle générale inférieure à ce qu'elle pourrait ou devrait être.

Les conséquences de cette situation sont appréhendées selon deux angles de vue opposés :

- Les autorités publiques en déduisent – non sans raison -, que cette situation n'est pas acceptable et qu'elles doivent par conséquent intervenir pour forcer les établissements à améliorer leur qualité.
- Les établissements, pour leur part, doivent prendre conscience qu'il est dans leur intérêt bien compris, face à l'augmentation de la concurrence et à l'insuffisance des moyens, de se prendre en main pour améliorer leur qualité. En outre, ils doivent réaliser que, si ils ne le font pas, ils courent le risque que les autorités publiques s'en chargent et qu'elles recourent pour ce faire à des méthodes qu'ils ne considéreront pas nécessairement comme adéquates ou pire à leur désavantage. En d'autres termes, et dans leur propre intérêt, les établissements d'enseignement universitaires devraient développer une véritable culture de la qualité au sein de tout l'établissement. En outre, plus une institution est autonome par rapport à sa tutelle, plus sa bonne gouvernance exige la mise en place de systèmes rigoureux d'assurance qualité, ce qui implique, rappelons-le, une gouvernance, un leadership et un management adéquats.

3. Le comment

Il ressort des faits et arguments développés dans la première section que l'assurance qualité – terme générique – est une nécessité. D'une part, c'est une responsabilité publique

essentielle, compte tenu de l'importance de l'enseignement supérieur pour la société, du climat de confiance exigé par le processus de Bologne et de la nécessité de réguler l'offre privée. D'autre part, l'assurance qualité est dans l'intérêt direct des établissements parce qu'ils ont tout avantage à tirer le meilleur parti des ressources financières dont ils disposent et parce que, en raison de leur nature très particulière, ils sont le plus souvent incapables d'agir de la façon qui leur serait la plus bénéfique. Etant clairement établi que l'assurance qualité dans les établissements d'enseignement supérieur s'impose tant du point de vue de la responsabilité publique que de la gouvernance des établissements, il convient maintenant d'examiner comment il faut s'y prendre pour que les efforts faits dans ce sens contribuent effectivement à l'amélioration des établissements et pour en réduire autant que possible les effets secondaires négatifs. Afin de répondre à cette délicate question, il est déjà essentiel de bien comprendre ce qu'est un établissement d'enseignement supérieur et en particulier une université.

3.1 La spécificité d'un établissement d'enseignement supérieur

Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur, et tout particulièrement les universités, sont des institutions tout à fait uniques en leur genre, ne serait-ce que parce qu'ils comptent parmi les plus anciennes institutions humaines. Leur principale spécificité tient à leurs missions et à la manière de les remplir. Les établissements d'enseignement supérieur et en particulier les universités :

- sont les garants du savoir acquis par l'humanité et sont responsables de transmettre les connaissances les plus utiles et/ou récentes aux étudiants qui fréquentent leurs programmes, et mieux encore de leur apprendre à apprendre, c'est-à-dire de les inviter à rester curieux et à leur donner les moyens de suivre et de comprendre le développement des connaissances dans leur discipline,
- sont le lieu privilégié de la découverte de nouvelles connaissances, grâce à la recherche, et ils contribuent à leur utilisation au bénéfice de la société grâce au transfert de connaissance. En outre, ils ont un quasi monopole dans la formation des jeunes chercheurs.
- mettent la société au bénéfice de leur savoir et méthodes en examinant en toute indépendance et scientifiquement les problèmes de société et en diffusant le savoir humain dans des cercles aussi larges que possible.

En d'autres termes, les établissements d'enseignement supérieur et les universités ont une grande responsabilité à l'égard des collectivités et autres organisations publiques qui financent leurs enseignements et recherches, ainsi qu'à l'égard des individus ou entreprises qui les soutiennent directement ou encore des individus qui suivent leurs programmes d'études. Fortement redevables à l'égard de ces groupes, ils ont la responsabilité de transmettre un enseignement et de produire une recherche de qualité, et de servir aussi la collectivité.

Afin de mieux faire ressortir encore la spécificité d'un établissement d'enseignement supérieur, il est aussi utile d'examiner la nature de ses prestations. On constatera, si besoin est, qu'il n'a pas grand-chose de commun avec d'autres institutions publiques ou semi-publiques faisant régulièrement l'objet d'évaluations, comme par exemple une compagnie de transport public.

En ce qui concerne l'enseignement, face à l'abondance de connaissances actuelles, même dans une discipline bien délimitée, un établissement d'enseignement supérieur doit trouver un compromis entre la transmission de connaissances strictement factuelles ou « pré-digérées », la formation à l'apprentissage à apprendre et la transmission de concepts et méthodes allant très au-delà des connaissances factuelles ou professionnelles. De plus, il est difficile de mesurer les connaissances acquises par les gradués à la sortie de l'établissement car la qualité d'une formation dépend largement de la capacité d'apprentissage de chaque étudiant et de ce qu'il va en faire au cours des premières années de sa carrière. Le résultat de l'évaluation d'une institution axée sur les connaissances acquises par les étudiants à un moment donné de leurs études dépendra donc aussi de facteurs sur lesquels l'institution n'a guère de contrôle.

L'évaluation de la recherche pose des problèmes similaires. Certes, il semble facile de mesurer l'efficacité d'une recherche en regard du projet et /ou en considérant l'impact des publications qui en sont tirées. Mais comment évaluer le résultat d'un projet ambitieux n'apportant pas les résultats escomptés, mais qui en apportent d'autres totalement inattendus. Ce qui compte aussi, c'est le caractère innovant d'une recherche, qui est beaucoup plus difficile à mesurer parce qu'il est à plus long terme. Et comment évaluer l'efficacité de la recherche d'un philosophe, littéraire ou d'un mathématicien, qui passe des mois à lire et à penser, sans financement additionnel, avant de poser les résultats de sa réflexion dans une publication, parfois très courte.

3.2 L'assurance-qualité en pleine adolescence

Bien que les premières démarches d'assurance qualité remontent déjà à quelques deux décennies avec la création d'agences qualité notamment aux Pays-Bas, en Angleterre et en France, nous n'hésitons pas à affirmer que l'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur est encore au stade adolescent. Une preuve parmi d'autres en est la multitude des termes encore utilisés pour désigner une démarche ou une autre, dont la liste non-exhaustive ci-après donne un bon échantillon (Vlasceanu and Co, 2004) : accréditation, appréciation de la qualité (assessment), audit de qualité, assurance de la qualité, autorisation (licensing), certification, classification (ranking), classification (Carnegie), comparaison (benchmarking), contrôle de la qualité, culture de qualité, descripteurs, évaluation « sommative » ou « formative », évaluation de la qualité (evaluation), évaluation par les étudiants, homologation, management de la qualité (totale) (Total Quality Management), qualification, reconnaissance, revue (de la qualité), standards, standards ISO, etc... De plus, les procédures y relatives s'appliquent aux institutions, aux programmes d'enseignement conduisant à un grade, aux subdivisions (facultés,

départements), aux disciplines, aux enseignements, aux projets de recherche, et la liste n'est pas complète.

Cette situation, que l'on peut sans autre qualifier de chaotique si l'on regarde l'ensemble de l'Europe, a des conséquences défavorables, parfois relativement lourdes.

- **Faible efficacité** : l'expérience montre que dans les systèmes prévoyants une accréditation, seule une petite minorité des institutions ou des programmes ne la reçoivent pas et que dans les cas où le système prévoit une évaluation, les conclusions de celle-ci n'ont le plus souvent que très peu d'effets car elles ne sont pas suivies de mesures.
- **Mauvais rapport coûts-bénéfices** : les différentes formes d'assurance qualité sont coûteuses, notamment celles qui sont articulées autour de la rédaction d'un rapport d'auto-évaluation par l'institution et la visite d'experts : l'institution visitée, si elle fait son travail d'auto-évaluation sérieusement, mobilise beaucoup de ressources, en particulier du temps de travail, et la participation d'experts extérieurs est coûteuse. Si, en plus, l'exercice n'apporte pas de résultat valable pour l'institution ou si celle-ci ne tient pas compte des résultats, la situation devient tout à fait insatisfaisante.
- **Dynamique favorisant des comportements stratégiques de la part des établissements et bureaucratiques de la part des agences** : Dans certaines démarches évaluatives, l'établissement concerné est induit à opter pour une attitude stratégique par lequel il se présente sous son meilleur angle, ce qui le conduit à occulter les points faibles, alors que leur identification lui permettrait d'y travailler. Quant aux agences ou instituts chargés des évaluations, ils risquent, en voulant objectiver la démarche, de tomber dans des comportements bureaucratiques où le respect de la procédure ou le respect de critères prédéterminés devient plus important que l'appréciation elle-même. De plus, lorsque le but final de l'évaluation est une sanction, comme dans le cas de l'accréditation, il y a danger d'inégalité de traitement, parce que la frontière qui sépare la satisfaction et la non satisfaction des critères est très ténue pour les institutions qui sont de toutes façon en bas de la liste. A la limite, le résultat risque d'être aléatoire.
- **La généralisation de l'assurance qualité et certaines stratégies font d'elle un véritable « business » (un commerce)** : Plus la méthode est ambitieuse et raffinée, plus il faut recruter de nombreux experts et moins il est possible de compter sur leur engagement bénévole au service d'une institution sœur. L'assurance qualité risque de devenir une affaire commerciale à part entière, ce qui ne manquera pas non plus d'entraîner des problèmes d'indépendance.

L'origine de ce développement encore chaotique de l'assurance qualité provient, à notre sens, de l'absence d'une recherche suffisante sur fondements scientifiques et managériaux. On a plutôt assisté à une succession d'initiatives spontanées, le plus souvent de nature politique, pour répondre rapidement aux pressions du moment, et développées dans des administrations pas toujours suffisamment averties de la complexité de la tâche. Il en est

résulté une forte tendance à réinventer la roue, c'est-à-dire à ne pas prendre en compte les expériences faites par d'autres et à ne pas suffisamment prendre en compte les caractéristiques très spécifiques des établissements d'enseignement supérieur. Cette politique relativement débridée du « y a qu'à faire comme cela » explique ce bourgeonnement de termes et de démarches. Pas étonnant donc que personne ne soit vraiment satisfait et que chaque pays revoie sans cesse sa méthode. N'est-il pas étonnant de constater que ce monde si proche de la science puisse à ce point oublier d'appliquer les méthodes scientifiques en ce qui concerne la formulation d'une politique d'assurance qualité.

3.3 Les choix stratégiques en matière d'assurance qualité

Le développement d'un système d'assurance qualité à l'échelle d'un pays nécessite que l'on fasse des choix sur un ensemble de solutions alternatives possibles dont dépendra la philosophie de la démarche retenue. Notre but ici est d'identifier et de discuter ces principaux choix

1) Procédure formative ou « sanctionnante » ?

Sans nécessairement que la démarche suivie soit bien différente, les procédures d'assurance qualité divergent grandement au niveau de leur finalité. Une procédure « formative » vise avant tout à aider l'institution ou l'activité concernée à s'améliorer de son propre chef grâce à une procédure d'évaluation. La démarche évaluative doit aider les institutions à mieux identifier ce qu'elle font de bien et de moins bien afin de prendre les mesures nécessaires pour s'améliorer. Cette démarche est typique de l'esprit d'une évaluation et du développement d'une véritable culture de la qualité.

Dans une procédure « sanctionnante », le résultat est une décision qui, réduite à sa plus simple impression, dit si oui ou non le test de qualité – quel qu'en soit sa définition – est réussi. Nous sommes là dans le cas de figure de l'accréditation, de l'homologation ou de la certification.

Cette distinction peut paraître insignifiante aux yeux de certains ; pourtant, elle engendre une attitude totalement différente de la part de l'institution. L'institution qui joue son accréditation va évidemment recourir à toute la rhétorique dont elle est capable afin de montrer à quel point elle est de qualité ou qu'elle satisfait tous les critères qui lui assureront l'accréditation ; elle va donc en bonne stratégie chercher à cacher ou en tout cas à minimiser les faiblesses dont elle a connaissance. La situation est diamétralement différente dans le cas de figure de l'évaluation. Si l'institution prend l'exercice au sérieux, car elle est consciente de ses responsabilités, elle a au contraire tout avantage à montrer tant ses faiblesses que ses forces, c'est-à-dire à procéder à une véritable analyse SWOT (Strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats), alors que si elle procédait à une tel exercice de vérité dans une procédure d'accréditation, il pourrait même se retourner contre l'institution jouant la transparence.

2) Appréciation en fonctions des buts annoncés par l'institution ou application de critères prédéterminés et uniformes ?

Cette deuxième alternative soulève un problème de même nature que le précédent. Une procédure fondée sur des critères prédéterminés et uniformes a sans doute l'avantage de fournir une base de comparaison uniforme pour l'évaluation des institutions, programmes ou autres. Ceci est à première vue positif du point de vue de l'égalité de traitement. La question est cependant de savoir jusqu'où des établissements, programmes, subdivisions, etc.. différents peuvent valablement être évalués à la lumière de critères donnés. Si ceci est sans doute parfaitement valable pour les critères très largement admis par la communauté, comme par exemple l'organisation des études en trois cycles ou l'application du système des crédits dans le cadre du processus de Bologne, cela devient très discutable pour les questions qui ont trait notamment au contenu scientifique ou à la pédagogie car, par définition, ces domaines ne sont pas standardisés et sont en constant changement. C'est pourquoi, la stratégie alternative consistant à évaluer en fonction des objectifs affichés et poursuivis correspond souvent mieux à la spécificité du monde universitaire. En d'autres termes, on considère l'adéquation par rapport aux buts (fitness for purpose). La perte apparente de rigueur est compensée par une évaluation où prévaut l'effort autocritique de l'institution et la capacité de jugement des experts appelés à se prononcer sur l'adéquation d'une approche suivie pour atteindre des objectifs donnés. De prime abord moins satisfaisant, la nature même de plusieurs aspects des prestations de l'enseignement supérieur impose cependant ce changement de paradigme.

3) Critères qualitatifs ou quantitatifs ?

Afin de garantir une évaluation objective, il semblerait idéal de pouvoir mesurer tous les critères pertinents et de pouvoir juger ainsi de la qualité, en principe au moyen d'un pourcentage de satisfaction par rapport à un score maximal illustrant la perfection. Une telle rigueur serait évidemment idéale si elle était réaliste. Le problème est que la réalité de l'enseignement supérieur ne se laisse pas facilement mettre en chiffres. Certes, on peut mesurer une multitude de données comme le nombre d'étudiants, de diplômés, les surfaces, les crédits, les livres, les publications, etc... , les ventiler selon différentes catégories et sous-catégories et tirer de ces données toute une série de rapports arithmétiques afin de mesurer une forme ou une autre d'efficacité et/ou de faciliter les comparaisons.

La réalité est cependant plus complexe, ce qui a pour conséquence que cette quantification donne une dangereuse impression d'exactitude. Le principal problème provient de ce que les faits mesurés (les indicateurs) ne sont souvent pas homogènes ou suffisamment pertinents. Par exemple, pour mesurer le taux d'encadrement, il faudrait faire des distinctions selon la discipline, le cycle d'études, la durée des études, le grade obtenu, la provenance des étudiants, etc.. et établir aussi les distinctions adéquates pour le corps enseignant. De même, l'amélioration du taux de réussite à la fin de la première année peut provenir du fait que le niveau d'exigence a été abaissé, ce qui risquerait d'entraîner une augmentation des échecs en deuxième année. Ainsi, l'utilisation de données pour des comparaisons interinstitutionnelles peut facilement conduire à des conclusions erronées.

Pour mesurer la production scientifique, il convient de considérer la qualité des publications ou leur impact dans l'immédiat, mais aussi plusieurs années après. Pour évaluer la richesse des collections d'une bibliothèque, il ne suffit évidemment pas de compter simplement le nombre de livres, sans se soucier s'ils ont pertinents pour l'étude aujourd'hui et s'ils sont facilement accessibles. Il ne suffit pas non plus pour apprécier la qualité de la formation dispensée dans une discipline par exemple de regarder la proportion de diplômés ayant trouvé un emploi dans les six mois suivants, mais il faut également considérer la qualité de leur emploi et regarder ce que les diplômés d'il y a cinq ans font aujourd'hui. A l'évidence, les promoteurs d'évaluations quantitatives sont conscients de ces difficultés et conçoivent des mesures de plus en plus sophistiquées. Ceci est parfaitement possible dans certains domaines si on y met les ressources, mais cela devient très difficile dès que l'on cherche à établir un rapport arithmétique entre deux grandeurs (indicateurs), lorsqu'on cherche à appréhender des questions de contenu scientifique comme l'adéquation d'une formation, ou encore à porter un regard dans le temps.

4) Responsabilité de l'institution ou d'une agence?

Dans une première phase de mise en œuvre des procédures d'assurance qualité, les initiatives émanaient essentiellement des gouvernements, qui avaient institué des agences qualité, le plus souvent subordonnées, ou simplement lancé des procédures ad hoc d'évaluation. Le regard portait principalement sur les établissements, la production scientifique, les programmes ou encore le niveau d'une discipline, soit dans un but de comparaison, soit dans celui d'une accréditation. La démarche était avant tout externe, la responsabilité des institutions elles-mêmes étant mineure. Une des conséquences mentionnées ci-dessus était que l'organe évalué cherchait à se présenter sur son meilleur jour et se sentait relativement peu concerné par le résultat, à moins bien sûr qu'ils ne reçoivent une décision de non accréditation.

C'est pourquoi, la tendance aujourd'hui est de susciter autant que possible l'engagement des responsables de l'institution, du programme, etc.. On se réfère au principe de subsidiarité, qui nous enseigne que les décisions doivent être prises et mises en œuvre au niveau le plus bas possible d'organisation capable de garantir l'efficacité de l'action. Les ministres de l'éducation engagés dans le processus de Bologne ont d'ailleurs retenu ce point de vue dans leur communiqué de Berlin en 2003 en y affirmant « consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself ? ». Cela signifie que la responsabilité du premier niveau de l'assurance qualité devrait être laissée aux établissements, non seulement parce que il est dans leur intérêt bien compris de développer une culture qualité, mais encore parce qu'ils sont les mieux placés pour le faire. Concrètement, l'évaluation de la qualité de l'enseignement, des unités d'enseignement et de recherche et les services administratifs (facultés, départements, services, etc....) et des programmes d'enseignement devrait être conduite par les établissements eux-mêmes, selon la méthode la plus appropriée. L'évaluation des enseignements sera faite principalement par les étudiants, celle des programmes et des unités d'enseignement et de recherche, ainsi que les services de l'administration (par exemple le service des étudiants) selon une procédure en trois

temps : élaboration d'un rapport d'auto-évaluation, visite et rapport d'experts indépendants et suivi rigoureux des conclusions de l'évaluation.

Toutefois, il serait erroné, du point de vue de l'institution elle-même comme des autorités de tutelle, d'admettre à priori que l'établissement procède à ces évaluations nécessairement de la meilleure manière possible. Il est donc indispensable que les démarches d'assurance qualité des établissements soient à leur tour évaluées à intervalles réguliers. Ce rôle revient à une agence nationale, internationale ou spécialisée dans un champ disciplinaire. La démarche sera très semblable : rapport d'auto-évaluation, visite et rapport d'experts et suivi des résultats de l'évaluation.

Dans un tel système imprégné du principe de subsidiarité, les établissements ne peuvent évidemment pas s'évaluer eux-mêmes ; cette tâche incombe en principe aussi à une agence externe, qui peut être la même ou une autre spécialisée dans l'évaluation des institutions. Il est en effet capital que les évaluations institutionnelles ne se limitent pas à l'examen des démarches qualité internes, mais considèrent la capacité à changer de l'institution, c'est-à-dire sa capacité à transformer en actes sa vision stratégique et les résultats d'une éventuelle évaluation.

Si l'on pousse la logique jusqu'au bout, il est indéniable que les agences elles-mêmes doivent être évaluées et probablement accréditées ou homologuées. Ceci devient d'autant plus important que l'évaluation devient un commerce ; il faut donc s'attendre à ce que le pire côtoie le meilleur. En outre, si l'on est cohérent avec le but de créer un espace européen de l'enseignement supérieur, il faudra bien accepter que les pays et institutions acceptent qu'une évaluation puisse être faite par une agence étrangère, et ceci pas seulement dans les petits pays pour lesquels il n'est pas efficace de créer une agence nationale. Les ministres réunis à Bergen ont décidé (2005) que l'homologation des agences prendrait la forme d'un registre. Cette question est traitée plus loin dans cet ouvrage ; nous n'en dirons donc pas plus si ce n'est que nous nous trouvons de nouveau dans un cas d'initiative politique difficile à concrétiser avec pour risque que la décision ne puisse être concrétisée ou que les décisions d'homologation ne soient pas prises au sérieux par de nombreux pays.

Dans ce débat sur les agences, il est évident que les autorités publiques ont la responsabilité de s'assurer que des agences examinent tant les procédures mises en place par les établissements pour évaluer leur qualité que pour évaluer l'institution toute entière ; de même, il est important que les autorités publiques nationales, les organisations gouvernementales concernées, ainsi que des associations représentant les établissements d'enseignement supérieur et les étudiants se mettent ensemble pour prévoir, par convention ou autre accord, l'évaluation et l'homologation des agences.

5) Autres alternatives ouvertes

A l'évidence, d'autres questions encore doivent être résolues lors de la conception ou de l'adaptation d'un système d'assurance qualité à l'échelon international, national et des

institutions. Faute de place et parce que ces sujets sont traités dans d'autres contributions, nous nous contenterons ici de n'en mentionner que quatre. Il s'agit :

- de déterminer si les résultats d'une évaluation ont une incidence sur le financement de l'institution, et si oui, lequel : récompenser la qualité ou contribuer à une amélioration indispensable. La réponse à la première question a en fait déjà été donnée ci-dessus : seules les évaluations « formatives » par conséquent libres de sanction, accréditation ou financement, créent les bases à un engagement objectif en vue d'une amélioration. Cela dit, face à la concurrence croissante qui frappe le secteur, il devient indispensable aussi de moduler le financement selon la performance, en tout cas en matière de recherche.
- de garantir l'indépendance de l'agence : celle-ci ne devrait dépendre ni du gouvernement, ni des universités ; ou alors garantir une représentation égale des points de vue. Cela est-il cependant vraiment possible si son financement est assuré presque exclusivement par le gouvernement, dont c'est la responsabilité et les universités n'ayant pas de moyens pour cela.
- de garantir l'indépendance des experts. Si cela peut sembler de prime abord aisé de choisir des experts indépendants, cela peut s'avérer difficile dès qu'il faudra commencer à les rémunérer pour les inciter à accepter le travail important que cela implique?
- De fixer si les résultats des évaluations doivent être rendus publics ? la transparence recherchée parle en faveur de la publication, mais cela a inévitablement pour conséquences que les experts rédigeront leur avis de façon beaucoup plus « feutrée » experts, tout particulièrement lorsque des personnes sont en jeu.

3. Pour conclure, vers l'âge mûr

La place à disposition dans le contexte de ce livre ne permet à l'évidence pas de traiter tous les aspects de la mise en place de la culture de qualité recherchée au niveau de l'Europe, des pays et des établissements. Nous espérons cependant que les éléments de réflexion développés ci-dessus sur la légitimité de l'assurance qualité et sur les principaux choix à faire compte tenu de la nature très particulière des établissements d'enseignement supérieur contribuera au développement d'approches plus matures. Le développement d'une culture de qualité dans le monde de l'enseignement supérieur est une nécessité, c'est indéniable. Cette nécessité dérive d'une part de la responsabilité publique en matière d'enseignement supérieur, responsabilité qui a récemment pris une autre dimension avec le processus Sorbonne - Bologne, qui nécessite notamment un renforcement de la confiance réciproque entre les établissements d'enseignement supérieur européens. Elle dérive d'autre part de la responsabilité que tout établissement d'enseignement supérieur a de remplir ses missions le mieux possible, responsabilité qui est d'autant plus forte qu'il dispose de la très large autonomie qu'il revendique en permanence, convaincu que celle-ci est une condition nécessaire pour satisfaire pleinement ses missions dans un monde en plein bouleversement. Rappelons que si le marché offre un système automatique et satisfaisant de sanctions et de

récompenses, le système public doit recourir à des outils spécifiques pour sanctionner ce qui ne fonctionne pas de façon satisfaisante et récompenser ce qui va bien.

Durant le quart de siècle d'initiatives et de balbutiements sur la mise en place d'une assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur et la recherche, de nombreuses expériences positives et négatives ont été glanées, qui permettent d'y voir plus clair. Dans cette conclusion, nous allons nous efforcer de tirer quelques enseignements concrets de l'examen qui précède des choix méthodologiques ouverts pour la conception d'un système d'assurance qualité à l'échelle institutionnelle, nationale et internationale.

Rappelons en tout premier lieu qu'il semble préférable que la démarche

- soit adaptée à la nature particulièrement complexe de l'organisation et des prestations d'un établissement d'enseignement supérieur,
- qu'elle soit plus formative que sanctionnante,
- qu'elle soit fortement tournée sur l'avenir, notamment sur la capacité des institutions à changer,
- qu'elle respecte le principe de subsidiarité,
- que la démarche mobilise l'institution et ses différents corps,
- que ses coûts soient en relation avec les résultats que l'on peut vraisemblablement en attendre,
- que les experts engagés, à titre individuel ou dans le cadre d'une agence, soient indépendants,
- que les prestations d'un échelon soient contrôlées par un organe à un échelon supérieur,
- que l'on privilégie une évaluation en fonction des objectifs à une évaluation à partir de critères prédéterminés et uniformes,
- que l'on privilégie l'appréciation d'experts à des mesures quantitatives, tout en reconnaissant que des indicateurs bien élaborés sont utiles,
- etc....

Ces critères considérés comme importants pour la bonne pratique de l'assurance qualité sont à la base de l'approche mise en place il y a plus de dix ans par la Conférence des recteurs européens et qui constitue aujourd'hui le programme phare de l'Association européenne de l'université (European University Association - EUA), dont elle est issue par fusion. Les évaluations institutionnelles conduites par l'EUA (plus de 150 jusqu'à ce jour dans toute l'Europe et certains pays d'outre-mer) offrent un juste équilibre entre l'engagement spontané de l'institution elle-même (rapport d'auto-évaluation) et l'apport des experts extérieurs. Cependant, comme l'évaluation se fait à l'instigation des institutions elles-mêmes, rien ne les engage à tenir compte des recommandations faites, ce qui est sans doute la principale faiblesse de cette approche. Cette situation change cependant lorsqu'un gouvernement ou une branche de celui-ci recourt à l'EUA pour pratiquer de telles évaluations institutionnelles, ce qui s'est produit à quelques reprises ces dernières années.

Le fait que les références et lignes directrices pour le management de la qualité dans l'espace européen de l'enseignement supérieur et de la recherche (*Standards and*

Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area) (2005) développés par l'Association européenne pour l'Assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQUA) avec ses partenaires⁹, dans le cadre du processus de Bologne et sur mandat des Ministres de l'éducation procèdent du même esprit est de bonne augure pour le développement à terme d'une stratégie de l'assurance qualité conforme à la nature des universités et efficace. De plus l'assurance qualité dans un pays dynamique comme l'Irlande est organisée sur les mêmes principes, à savoir sur une responsabilité forte des établissements de veiller à l'évaluation périodique de leurs facultés ou départements et l'évaluation de ces démarches qualitative par un organisme externe, comme cela a été fait par l'EUA en 2005. (site de l'Irish Universities Quality Board - IUQB). Notons enfin que des universités européennes ont depuis quelques années spontanément pris sur elles de développer un système interne d'évaluation des facultés reposant sur une auto-évaluation et la visite d'experts.

Relevons aussi la pratique croissante visant à évaluer – certains disent accréditer – les procédures internes d'évaluation de la qualité ; relevons toutefois que le danger de cette approche est de considérer les mesures qualité comme un but en soi, déconnecté de la stratégie de l'institution et de sa mise en œuvre, à savoir de son principal défi qui est sa capacité à changer. Soulignons également l'intérêt pour un nombre restreint d'institutions de se comparer entre elles (benchmarking). L'évaluation des enseignements par les étudiants, qui est systématiquement pratiquée depuis longtemps dans certains pays et qui est difficilement introduite dans d'autres, constitue aussi une source d'enseignements très utiles, à condition que les questionnaires soient intelligemment conçus et que les responsables de l'institution – en principe les doyens - prennent le relais si des manquements sont constatés.

L'évaluation des choix stratégiques en matière de méthodologie évaluative faite ci-dessus incite à une certaine retenue en ce qui concerne l'accréditation. Si un tel examen est largement justifié pour les institutions privées dans une optique de protection des consommateurs, il est important que la démarche soit menée avec souplesse afin notamment d'éviter que la non satisfaction d'un critère empêche toute accréditation, même si l'institution obtient de bons résultats sur d'autres critères. Une application intéressante de l'accréditation consiste à sanctionner un certain niveau de qualité comme c'est par exemple le cas avec l'accréditation EQUIS (European Quality Improvement System) des écoles de commerce. Il s'agit d'une motivation supplémentaire pour une institution de progresser ; toutefois, cette démarche ne devrait pas se substituer à une approche formative. La principale réserve concerne la solution appliquée dans certains pays de soumettre à l'accréditation tous les programmes d'enseignement du système. Selon le principe de subsidiarité – auquel les Ministres de l'éducation se sont d'ailleurs référés à Berlin (2003), l'évaluation des programmes devrait être de la responsabilité des établissements eux-mêmes. Ceci est d'autant plus sérieux que ces procédures n'aboutissent que très rarement à la non accréditation d'un programme, d'où un coût disproportionné par rapport au résultat. Par extension, l'accréditation d'un établissement tout entier est encore plus discutable. Si cela

⁹ The European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB)

est probablement justifié pour les institutions qui s'ouvrent, cela ne l'est certainement pas pour celles qui existent depuis des décennies, voire des siècles, à la condition cependant que des agences contrôlent leurs mesures internes d'assurance qualité et/ou procèdent à une évaluation de leur capacité à changer. Dans ce cas de figure, il y a lieu de trouver une solution non discriminatoire et intelligente.

Espérons que ce chapitre rédigé par un responsable universitaire plutôt que par un spécialiste de l'évaluation saura convaincre d'une part les sceptiques que le développement d'une culture de la qualité est indispensable et, d'autre part, les perfectionnistes que les établissements d'enseignement supérieur sont des institutions complexes, mais en règle générale matures. Il s'agit par conséquent de leur donner le rôle qui est le sien, mais aussi de ne pas craindre de les soumettre périodiquement à un examen professionnel pour les amener à corriger leurs faiblesses.

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IMPLEMENTATION OF THE GUIDELINES ADOPTED BY THE EUROPEAN MINISTERS RESPONSIBLE FOR HIGHER EDUCATION IN BERGEN, MAY 2005

PETER WILLIAMS

In September 2003, the ministers of education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) gathered in Berlin for their biennial meeting and signed a communiqué which included the following sentence: 'At the European level, Ministers call upon ENQA through its members, in co-operation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005.' This came as a surprise to ENQA, which had not been consulted about the proposal. The communiqué gave no indication of the intended purpose of such standards, procedures and guidelines, how they were to be used, or, indeed, what was meant by the phrase itself. Nevertheless, over the next 18 months ENQA, EUA, ESIB and EURASHE came together to form the so-called 'E4 Group' and worked hard to devise a European dimension to quality assurance which would meet the ministers' call.

Two working groups were set up by ENQA. One worked on the peer review system for agencies. This drew heavily on ENQA's own membership approval procedures and produced a model review process which would provide a robust, independent, assessment of agencies. The second working group set about devising standards and guidelines for institutions' and agencies' quality assurance processes.

Any pan-European set of standards would have to meet some tough criteria. They would need to be acceptable to all EHEA signatories; respect national and regional autonomy over higher education; recognise the very great differences in traditions, approaches and expectations among the higher education systems of Europe; and yet say something useful about quality assurance which all (or most) could accept as representing sound principles and good practice. This did not prove to be an easy task. An overriding need to reflect the principle of subsidiarity in European practices led the working group to drop 'procedures' from the 'standards, procedures and guidelines', because procedures would have been descriptions of 'how' the standards should be met, and that would have encroached on local arrangements and responsibilities.

Eventually the two working groups produced a single unified report, which the E4 Group endorsed and forwarded to the 2005 ministerial meeting in Bergen. The report proposed not only standards and guidelines for quality assurance, but also a register of assurance and accreditation agencies operating in Europe and a quality assurance forum covering the interests of a wide range of stakeholders. The ministers adopted the standards and guidelines and these now stand as the key reference points for quality assurance across the

EHEA.¹⁰ The E4 Group was also asked to examine the practicalities of a register and report back to the next ministerial meeting, in London in 2007.

One of the main problems facing the working groups was the basic definition and purpose of the very words ‘quality assurance’, ‘standards’ and ‘guidelines’. These are all generic terms with many interpretations across Europe (and more widely). Because of this, the group had to make a decision not to define quality assurance or the other terms arbitrarily, in ways that would be understood or recognised in only some parts of the EHEA, but instead to identify principles and values which it hoped would find acceptance as representing an authentic and truly European approach to the way in which good higher education is provided (and guaranteed).

Underpinning the standards and guidelines are three fundamental principles: the interests of students, employers, and society more generally, in good quality higher education; the central importance of institutional autonomy, tempered by a recognition that this brings with it heavy responsibilities; and the need for a ‘fitness for purpose’ test for external quality assurance, which ensures that the burden that it places on institutions is no greater than is absolutely necessary.

The standards and guidelines are also dependent upon on a series of general assumptions about European higher education, which follow to a large extent the spirit of the EUA’s Graz Declaration of 2003: ‘the purpose of a European dimension to quality assurance is to promote mutual trust and improve transparency while respecting the diversity of national contexts and subject areas’. These assumptions are as follows:

- providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education need to be safeguarded;
- the quality of academic programmes needs to be developed and improved for students and other beneficiaries of higher education across the EHEA;
- there need to be efficient and effective organisational structures within which those academic programmes can be provided and supported;
- transparency and the use of external expertise in quality assurance processes are important;
- there should be encouragement of a culture of quality within higher education institutions;
- processes should be developed through which higher education institutions can demonstrate their accountability, including accountability for the investment of public and private money;
- quality assurance for accountability purposes is fully compatible with quality assurance for enhancement purposes;
- institutions should be able to demonstrate their quality at home and internationally;
- processes used should not stifle diversity and innovation.

¹⁰ Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, ENQA, Helsinki, 2005; <http://www.enqa.eu/files/ENQA%20Bergen%20Report.pdf>

For their part, the standards and guidelines themselves are intended to encourage the development of higher education institutions which foster vibrant intellectual and educational achievement; provide a source of assistance and guidance to higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance; inform and raise the expectations of higher education institutions, students, employers and other stakeholders about the processes and outcomes of higher education; and contribute to a common frame of reference for the provision of higher education and the assurance of quality within the EHEA.

The European standards and guidelines comprise 23 standards grouped into three sections. Seven cover institutions' internal quality assurance, eight cover external quality assurance processes, and eight cover the quality assurance of agencies themselves. The internal quality assurance standards state principles of good practice relating to different aspects of academic activity; the external quality assurance standards are concerned with agencies' review activities; and the final group is designed to establish the constitutional and operational basis of trustworthy and credible agencies. For each standard there are guidelines, which explain the individual standards and offer illustrations of good practice.

As important as the standards and guidelines themselves, though regrettably rarely mentioned, is the commentary in the ENQA report on them and their intended uses. This highlights the danger of using the standards simplistically as a checklist; the importance of steady evolution and development of institutional and national quality assurance systems, rather than the imposition of 'compliance' requirements; and the inappropriateness of trying to turn the standards and guidelines into the basis of a standardised European quality assurance system. So, for example, the report makes clear that 'The EHEA operates on the basis of individual national responsibility for higher education and this implies autonomy in matters of external quality assurance. Because of this the report is not and cannot be regulatory but makes its recommendations and proposals in a spirit of mutual respect among professionals; experts drawn from higher education institutions including students; ministries; and quality assurance agencies. Some signatory states may want to enshrine the standards and review process in their legislative or administrative frameworks. Others may wish to take a longer view of the appropriateness of doing so, weighing the advantages of change against the strengths of the status quo.'

Unfortunately, the intention that the standards and guidelines should be viewed and used as common reference points in the context of national and regional subsidiarity, appear to have been ignored in some countries. Several have indeed enshrined the standards and guidelines into their national legislation, with a mandatory requirement that they be implemented, but some may have done so without due reflection on whether this was the most appropriate response to the real challenge that the standards and guidelines present. In these cases the standards are being used as statements of obligation, rather than as reference points to guide institutions and agencies as they move forward on what, for many, will inevitably be a very long journey. As a result, the true value of the standards and guidelines, as a formative and developmental tool, is less likely to be realised.

There is a further problem. The European standards and guidelines have also been proposed as the criteria for entry into the envisaged register of European quality assurance agencies and this is likely to bring with it a call for revisions to make them more easily usable for that particular purpose. Inevitably, if this happens, the standards and guidelines will slip towards the checklist of compliance requirements which the authors were at such pains to avoid.

Does this matter? Isn't it right that progress in quality assurance should be speeded up, if necessary by mandatory requirements? There is here a balance to be struck. Quality assurance remains a very contested area of both policy and practice, and there are only a very few countries in which the words are not greeted with a shudder of fear or hostility by the academic community. The concept has too frequently been presented simply as a form of burdensome external inspection, perceived by higher education as undermining its academic freedom in the name of consumer protection, or demanding compliance as a way of guaranteeing ultimate public control of universities, as a trade-off for increased notional autonomy. But there is another version of quality assurance, one which places at its centre the professionalisation of teaching and the conscious organisation of learning, which emphasises the need for careful effort to make sure that students are offered the best opportunities possible to achieve their full potential as learners. This version of quality assurance focuses on student and teacher, on the clarity of educational purpose and the means of meeting it, and on the collective endeavours of all who are involved in teaching and learning. It downplays the idea of quality assurance as a regulatory tool and instead emphasises its developmental value and practical usefulness.

One of the lessons that the past 10 years have taught us is that quality assurance in higher education is most effective when it is owned by the individuals and institutions that are providing the learning opportunities for students. Only academics and institutions can truly assure quality, and it is much better if they are encouraged to take that responsibility upon themselves, as part of their professional role, rather than being dictated to by external controllers. Legislative imposition of the European standards and guidelines, although offering a highly visible indication of national commitment, may not always help the improvement of the quality of higher education.

We must be alert to this danger and do our best to avert it. How can we do this? First by trying to create and then consolidate the idea of quality as an intrinsic thread in an institution's academic life. The EUA has done groundbreaking work in its Quality Culture Project, and it is now necessary to analyse the lessons learnt from that exercise and develop ways of broadening, deepening and embedding across the EHEA the good practice that has been identified.

Secondly, there is an educational task to be undertaken to help policymakers at government level to recognise the value of alternative models of quality assurance to those which rely on blind compliance with externally-imposed requirements. The public interest in Europe may be best served by strong, autonomous higher education institutions which recognise and respond constructively to the serious public responsibility they hold, and which equally accept the benefit and value – to them as well as to others with a direct or indirect interest –

of external reviews of their work. This is not to belittle the accountability function of quality assurance, which remains centrally important, but to advocate that the maximum benefit will probably be extracted from activities which cost a lot of time and money and which, if not carefully managed, can divert too many resources from the central purposes of higher education institutions.

Thirdly, quality assurance and accreditation agencies should use their pivotal position between institutions, funders, governments and the public to promote and foster a wider and clearer understanding of quality in higher education. Everyone wants 'good quality', but few can identify it or give a coherent account of its characteristics. 'We know it when we see it' is not a sufficient response to the question 'What is quality'? The agencies have a duty to answer that question more helpfully.

Finally, there needs to be a wide discussion of the European standards and guidelines themselves, to see how far the assumptions underpinning them are truly shared and do truly represent the values and principles of European higher education, as understood by practitioners in higher education institutions, students, governments, employers and others. Only dialogue will ensure the proper development of the ideas contained in the standards and guidelines, and this will be a long and, at times, possibly confusing debate. It is important that this, their principal purpose and value, is not diluted or diminished by an overenthusiasm to use them as a checklist with no other intention than to ensure that the boxes can be ticked.

The European standards and guidelines are still new and will take some time to be understood and their usefulness fully discovered. Despite this there is already considerable evidence that they are being seen as making a serious contribution to the work of higher education institutions in the EHEA countries. The text had been translated into a number of languages (which itself has given rise to a number of questions relating to the meaning of some of the key words) and they are the subject of debate and discussion in many conferences and seminars. This is good, so long as they do not become the starting point for a standardised European quality assurance system, but do meet their objective of helping towards a wider understanding across the EHEA of the importance of quality in higher education, and offering shared lines of enquiry and action to assure and improve it.