

excessive increases in the cost of imported energy, or a decline in the quality and efficiency of the supply of oil, electricity or natural gas to which European consumers have been accustomed for decades. It is vital, therefore, that the energy sector — and hence energy policy — are able to rise to these challenges and meet the demands of European citizens.

3.10. This Communication could thus serve as the basis for a real programme for the energy sector. The Economic and Social Committee could be consulted again and have another chance to make a positive

contribution to the document. Finally, this programme for energy policy could be included in the discussions on Agenda 2000, which will include debates on the challenges and opportunities opened up by EU enlargement, the overall financial outlook and the new operating framework for the institutions. This would also mean that the European Commission's Directorate-General for energy would have a substantial work programme covering several years, which would consolidate the role of the energy sector in a European Union which is geographically larger, economically more competitive and socially more cohesive.

Brussels, 29 October 1997.

*The President
of the Economic and Social Committee*
Tom JENKINS

Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the 'Proposal for a Council Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education'

(98/C 19/11)

On 5 June 1997 the Council decided to consult the Economic and Social Committee, under Article 198 of the Treaty establishing the European Community, on the above-mentioned proposal.

The Section for Social, Family, Educational and Cultural Affairs, which was responsible for preparing the Committee's work on the subject, adopted its opinion on 17 October 1997. The rapporteur was Mr Rodríguez García Caro.

At its 349th plenary session (meeting of 29 October 1997), the Economic and Social Committee adopted the following opinion by 112 votes, with one abstention.

1. Introduction

1.1. Article 126(1) of the Treaty establishing the European Community states that the Community shall contribute to the development of quality education by encouraging cooperation between Member States and by supporting and supplementing action designed to attain the objectives of the Treaty, while fully respecting the responsibilities of the Member States.

1.2. Given the interest shown by the Member States in improving the quality of higher education in their universities, the Council meeting of Education Ministers held in November 1991 urged Community action in the field of quality assessment. In 1994 the Commission and the Member States implemented two pilot projects with the aim of assessing the quality of teaching and learning in a few specific subject areas in selected institutions.

1.3. At the time this action was launched, quality assessment systems had been developed to different degrees in the Member States. Consequently, the fundamental aim of the projects was to raise awareness of the need for quality assessment in higher education establishments, with a view to improving the actual teaching received by students.

1.4. The results obtained in the pilot projects and the conclusions drawn from this interesting experiment were set out in an information note presented by Mrs Cresson to the Council meeting of Education Ministers on 6 May 1996. The Council took note of the Commission's intention to produce a recommendation following the guidelines of the note.

1.5. In accordance with Article 126(4) of the Treaty, the Council, acting on a proposal from the Commission, presented this draft recommendation which it has submitted to the Economic and Social Committee for opinion.

1.6. The Committee regards it as extremely important to address the quality of higher education from a Community perspective and endorses the approach adopted by the Council and the Commission to achieve their objectives.

The systematic application of the methodology of quality assurance as an instrument for continuously improving quality is the best way of achieving genuine quality higher education in the Union's teaching establishments. It will encourage university education in the Member States and make it easier to draw comparisons between different education systems in the Union.

2. Proposal for a recommendation

The proposal presented by the Council has two basic objectives which are consistent with the further development of the actions undertaken by the Community in this field. Firstly, it is intended to alert the Member States to the need to establish quality assurance systems in their higher education establishments; secondly, it places at the disposal of the Member States and their educational institutions a series of support measures centred on the creation of a European Quality Assurance Network.

The content of the recommendation can be summarized briefly as follows:

2.1. The proposal recommends that the Member States:

2.1.1. Create transparent systems of quality assessment and assurance in order to guarantee the quality of higher education, help establishments to use quality assurance methods, and serve as a support for cooperation based on mutual experience.

2.1.2. Base these systems on the following principles:

- autonomous and independent assessors;
- appropriate procedures;
- a mix of internal and external assessment;
- involvement of all players;
- publication of assessment reports.

2.1.3. Ensure that follow-up measures are adopted to enable higher education establishments to implement plans for improving quality.

2.1.4. Ensure that education authorities and those responsible for establishments give due priority to

exchange and cooperation in the field of quality assessment and assurance.

2.2. The proposal urges the Commission to:

2.2.1. Support the creation of a European Quality Assurance Network with the following tasks:

- exchange of information and experience;
- technical assistance to Member States;
- assistance to institutions wishing to cooperate in quality assessment and assurance, particularly in the Socrates thematic networks;
- assistance to institutions, providing information on methodology, facilitating contact with experts, etc.;
- creation of links between quality assessment and other Community activities under the Socrates and Leonardo programmes;
- preparation of methods for facilitating the integration of graduates into the labour market.

2.2.2. Present a report every two years on the development of quality assurance systems in the Member States and on cooperation activities, with proposals for strengthening these systems.

3. Comments

3.1. *General comments*

3.1.1. The Committee welcomes the Commission initiative in the form of a proposal for a Council recommendation. Treaty Article 126 establishes quite clearly the Community's obligation to contribute to the development of quality education. Although the term 'education' is broad and covers different stages in the education of an individual, the Committee sees the approval of this recommendation as an important and encouraging step forward.

The above-mentioned obligation can only be fulfilled if we know whether the teaching being given to students really is of a high quality. Hence there is no better way of knowing whether higher education meets quality standards than to develop a range of measures, such as those which concern us here, to encourage awareness of the need to establish quality assurance systems in higher education establishments while at the same time providing the means and methods whereby quality can be assessed.

3.1.2. Young people wishing to embark on higher education in the different establishments in the Member States have an empirical and traditional knowledge of the quality of education that these establishments offer their students.

A familiar, comparative quality assessment system in each and every higher education institution would enhance the teaching in these institutions both at national and Community level through their legitimate wish to improve on their own past performance and outstrip other institutions in the quality of teaching. Not only would such a system help to improve quality, but citizens would have information on quality levels in different educational establishments.

3.1.3. At the brink of the new millennium and in a technologically advanced society that uses quality assurance and total quality as an undisputed basis for progress and best service to the customer or user, we must do everything possible to provide higher education establishments with the means to develop quality assessment methods.

Consequently, the Committee feels that it is necessary to adopt initiatives promoting quality assurance methods in education as a sure means of improving the end-product of the education system. At the same time, looking for new ways of bringing universities closer to society may help the former to educate students in such a way that they are able to adjust to present realities and face the situation that awaits them when they have to integrate into the labour market and into society itself.

3.1.4. The Committee agrees on the need to introduce quality assessment systems into the different higher education institutions of the Member States. However, quality assurance cannot be imposed; it must be accepted by the main players who, in this case, are the teaching staff and the academic authorities. For this to happen, as a prior step and perhaps while the quality systems are in the process of being set up, the Member States would have to take appropriate steps to create structures in higher education establishments whose task would be to encourage and assist the understanding and implementation of quality assurance methods. A suggestion along these lines should be incorporated in the text of the recommendation.

The Committee thinks that quality will improve and have better prospects if it is approached from the perspective of the institutions themselves, on a basis of consensus rather than imposed from above. The methods and techniques of quality assurance require the constructive participation of the teaching staff. Without their assent to these methods, internal assessment is impossible and external assessment cannot analyse in depth.

For this reason even more effort should be focused on raising the awareness of the teaching staff than on the academic authorities.

3.1.5. The Treaty expressly rules out the possibility of harmonizing education systems. This incontrovertible fact does not in principle rule out the adoption of duly agreed and standardized assessment systems whereby some common basic criteria can be established for comparing the quality of the different education systems and establishments.

The Committee is also against establishing league tables or classifications of teaching establishments, but does believe that students and society in general should be aware of the quality levels of their teaching establishments, especially if they are supported by public money.

Besides allowing each Member State and teaching establishment to use its own criteria, the Commission should at the same time encourage the implementation of common criteria which show the level of teaching quality from a Community perspective.

3.1.6. The Committee believes that, with both a local and a European input, cooperation on quality issues would go much further than just knowledge of the methods and systems used. It would also highlight the shortcomings of some institutions in relation to others when it comes to achieving higher levels of quality, since all institutions would be assessed using identical criteria and standards.

In other words, once you have identified your own shortcomings, the example of others, as revealed by a common assessment method, can serve as a model for meeting the objective of improving quality. Improving quality is the ultimate objective of quality assurance; identifying undesirable situations which are amenable to improvement and implementing solutions to the problems detected is the ultimate purpose of any quality assurance process in an institution.

Consequently, the Committee would emphasize the advantages of aligning certain assessment procedures, including external assessment, as a means of improving quality.

3.1.7. The Committee would wish to make it clear that unswerving respect should be shown to two principles that affect the Member States and teaching establishments and are mentioned and argued over throughout the Commission document and this draft opinion and which may give rise to confusion. These two principles are:

— under no circumstances is there any question of harmonizing the education policies of the Member States, nor therefore their education systems or the courses given by teaching establishments. The

Committee would, however, wish to stress that for the recommendation to be sufficiently valid, it is necessary to move firmly towards the adoption of quality assurance systems which include standardized assessment methods which can be used by all those who voluntarily accept assessment as a system for helping to bring about improvements and do not regard it as an imposition. The Committee thinks that the text of the recommendation should be clearer on this point;

- it should be expressly stated that the principle of university autonomy is neither under debate nor called into question in the opinion. It is however important for citizens to be aware which teaching establishments in Europe have introduced assessment as a systematic quality assurance method in their organizations. Citizens not only have the right to be informed of quality levels in the institutions which apply these systems, but also to know which institutions use standardized quality assessment methods. Information is a key element in our society and for this reason the Committee believes that such information should be available to citizens, possibly through a periodic vademecum containing a list of Community higher education establishments which have assessment systems based on the principles of quality assurance.

3.2. *Specific comments*

3.2.1. The Committee considers that, in line with the title of the proposed recommendation, which centres on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, the word 'assessment' should be deleted from the text of the proposal since it is never mentioned separately but merely precedes quality assurance repeatedly throughout the text.

The Committee does not wish to exclude the idea of assessment from the proposal, but to enrich it by integrating it into the meaning of quality assurance as an essential part of the system. Quality assurance is a methodological process of which assessment is a fundamental part, but it also comprises other actions which seek to improve what we are doing, such as the search for solutions to the problems detected, their implementation and a reassessment of the new situation.

In order to make the meaning of the recommendation clearer, it is therefore proposed that the simultaneous references to quality assessment and assurance be deleted.

3.2.2. The Committee believes that the criteria and standards implemented in each institution, as part of the internal quality assessment method, must be anchored in the institution's own particular context. In the early stages, comparison with the surrounding environment provides the best information on quality levels.

The recommendation should, as far as possible, stress the promotion of the concept of quality assurance in teaching establishments, in order to prompt increasing awareness of the need for it.

The exchanges of information and experience planned as possible tasks for the European Quality Assurance Network should focus initially on alerting people to the need to use quality assurance in teaching establishments, encouraging the exchanges and meetings required to pass on the experience of those who practise it to those who wish to practise it.

3.2.3. The Committee considers that since this proposed recommendation has a very precise objective but is at the same time very open in its possibilities, it is not necessary to include, along with the guidelines on how to promote the participation of institutions in the methods of quality assurance, purely methodological and procedural aspects such as are included in the explanations under point IB.

The Committee thinks that the general message to be put across is that of encouraging and promoting quality assurance among those institutions not familiar with it or not using it and of strengthening and supporting its use in those institutions already employing it.

3.2.4. In connection with point IB, the Committee thinks that students have a key role to play in the process of assessing quality. The relationship between hopes and achievements, between the expectations placed by students in their studies and what they see themselves as having actually achieved, makes the young university student a necessary part of quality assessment.

In this respect, the Committee agrees with the approach of the recommendation. The opinion of students, obtained and drawn up on the basis of quality assurance methods, can provide valuable information for improving quality.

3.2.5. The Committee believes it is both useful and necessary to create a European Quality Assurance Network as proposed in the recommendation. However, its tasks may seem incomplete without a component enabling it to establish comparisons at national and Community level as to the quality of teaching and of the institutions themselves.

In other words, the tasks of the network should include the further development of assessment methods that are applicable to all subjects and higher education establishments, with a view to drawing comparisons at European level. Finally, and bearing in mind that assessment of a fixed criterion requires comparison with an accepted standard, the Committee considers that European-level comparisons could have a useful role to play in the European dimension of education.

3.2.6. The Committee's view is also supported by the third recital of the recommendation, which highlights the increased awareness in higher education institutions of the need to be able to judge the quality of studies available in other countries and compare it with that of studies available within their own education systems.

The Committee considers that this recital fully justifies incorporating these tasks into the European-level tasks of the network.

3.2.7. The Committee, as a socio-economic body, would express its great concern for improving the integration of graduates into the labour market, especially bearing in mind how competitive this market is at the moment. Those best geared to meet the needs of the market will be those who receive the best offers of employment enabling them to integrate into the market.

While the Committee agrees that there is a need to improve the integration of young graduates into the labour market, it does not see the link between quality assessment and the 'preparation of methods to achieve better integration'. Any increase in quality leads to an improvement of training and, consequently, increases the young person's chances of entering the labour market; but the aim of quality assessment methods and procedures is, among other things, to enable us to draw comparisons between what we think should happen and what happens in reality.

The methods of quality assurance show, through the process of assessment, whether it is possible to improve the teaching given to students to train them for entry onto the labour market, including a reassessment of any corrective measures taken. The methods of quality assurance cannot on their own, however, improve the integration of graduates in the labour market.

Therefore, the Committee believes that point II 1(f) of the recommendation should be made more clear, since its current wording does not clearly state the role of the network in this respect.

3.2.8. In the report on the results obtained during the period 1995/1996 by the Community action programme in the field of education, Socrates (COM(97) 99 final), on which the Committee has recently delivered its opinion, the Commission recognizes that the programme exceeded its budget due to the large demand for projects and subsidies.

The proposal for a recommendation considered by this opinion states that the European Quality Assurance

Network may receive financial support within the framework of the Socrates and Leonardo programmes.

The Committee does not understand how it will be possible to assign funds from these two programmes when the Commission has had to propose an increase in the Socrates budget in order to cover the last part of the five-year period. If this initiative has not been provided for in the budget, the budgetary difficulties will increase if the network is included under the funds allocated to Socrates and Leonardo.

The Committee believes that the importance of quality assurance in higher education is such that it justifies the allocation of specific funds. It therefore urges the Commission and the Member States to ensure financial support for the measures proposed in the recommendation.

3.2.9. In the recommendation, one of the principles upon which quality assurance systems are based is that of involving all the main players. It recognizes the need for the social partners to be involved in the expert groups considering the external component of assessment.

The Committee believes that socio-economic operators can play an important role by providing the benefit of their own experience which can be useful from a methodological point of view. Companies in particular have a long history of implementing quality assessment methods and often have a broad experience in quality assurance. Indeed, these concepts emerged in the business world, constantly concerned as it is with improving quality and service to the customer.

Consequently, the Committee feels it is both important and necessary to give employers' organizations the role they deserve in the creation of the planned European Quality Assurance Network, thus completing, along with the organizations representing the workers, the active participation of the socio-economic players in the network.

3.2.10. In the interests of greater efficiency, and with a view to reducing costs, the Committee considers that it is necessary to agree on specific mechanisms for better cooperation between the European Quality Assurance Network and the networks which have emerged in the wake of the Socrates⁽¹⁾ and Leonardo programmes.

⁽¹⁾ See also: OJ C 287, 22. 9. 1997, p. 23, 'Opinion of the Economic and Social Committee on the Proposal for a Decision of the European Parliament and of the Council amending the Decision 819/95/EC establishing the Community action programme Socrates'.

Brussels, 29 October 1997.

The President
of the Economic and Social Committee
Tom JENKINS