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**REPORT FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE
COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE
COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS**

**on the implementation of Council Recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998 on
European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education**

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 24th of September 1998, the Council of Ministers adopted the Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education¹. The Recommendation calls upon Member States to support or establish quality assurance systems and to encourage higher education institutions and competent authorities to cooperate and exchange experience. It also asks the Commission to support such cooperation and to report on the implementation of the objectives of the Recommendation at European and Member State level.

The Council Recommendation of 1998 was to a large extent the fruit of a European Pilot Project organised by the Commission in the nineties. The Recommendation laid the foundation for the creation of the ENQA Network, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and its growing membership.

Two political developments added new momentum to the quality agenda: the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy. Most recently the importance of quality assurance was underlined in the Joint Interim Report of the Council and the Commission, submitted in March 2004, on the implementation of the detailed work programme on the follow-up of the objectives of education and training systems in Europe². A rigorous and transparent system of quality assurance is also a necessary component of the “European Qualifications Framework”, to which Ministers have committed themselves in the framework of both the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy.

The present report consists of two parts. Part One: Establishing Quality Assurance Systems in Member States and Part Two: Cooperation activities at European and international level. The Report also addresses the ‘Berlin Mandate’ given to ENQA by the Ministers of the Bologna Signatory States. A country overview of agencies is given in annex.

2. Part One: Establishing quality assurance systems in member states

Summary

Almost all Member States and other European countries have set up quality assurance systems or are about to do so. The experience varies in duration and intensity but all regard quality assurance as an essential feature of their higher education systems. The systems in function operate along the lines set out in the 1998 Council Recommendation.

¹ Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (98/561/EC) OJ L 270 of 07.10.1998, p. 56. See annex 1

² “Education & Training 2010”, the success of the Lisbon Strategy hinges on urgent reforms. http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/2010/doc/jir_council_final.pdf

2.1. The creation of agencies

The Recommendation calls upon the Member States to support and, where necessary, establish transparent quality assurance systems. The answer of most Member States has been the creation of one or more quality assurance agencies, aiming at quality improvement through external evaluation. Higher education institutions have been encouraged to set up their own internal quality assurance mechanisms, not least to provide a basis for external evaluation.

The characteristics of the national higher education system influences the ownership, scope and focus of agencies and their activities. Hence the existence of different models. A few countries have opted for a ‘star model’ with one central accreditation agency, overseeing a series of more specific evaluation or accreditation agencies. Others have one single agency in charge of quality assurance or accreditation.

The Council Recommendation states that “autonomy and/or independence of the relevant structures, of the body responsible for quality assurance (as regards procedures and methods) is likely to contribute to the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and the acceptance of results”. On the other hand, it is generally acknowledged that agencies should operate in close contact with academia and take due account of the needs of society, public and private sponsors, students, parents and the labour market.

Next to national or regional agencies there are a great number of professional accrediting organisations (e.g. for engineers, medical doctors, accountants). They existed long before the Council Recommendation and their modus operandi is not influenced by it. There are, however, similarities and synergies worth exploring. This is also true for international accrediting agencies or bodies such as the European EQUIS (business studies) and the American agencies AACSB (Business studies) and ABET (engineering accreditation in the US and assistance in the development of accreditation systems in other countries).

2.2. Evaluation types

Eight evaluation or accreditation types can be distinguished: Subject evaluation, programme evaluation, institutional evaluation, programme accreditation, institutional accreditation, institutional audit (of internal quality assurance mechanisms), subject benchmarking and programme benchmarking. The most common remains programme evaluation, but programme accreditation comes close and institutional audit is the third most popular type. More recent is the interest in programme or subject benchmarking, looking for the best practice in a given field. There is a clear trend towards more variety in evaluation types and most agencies use more than one evaluation type on a regular basis.

2.3. Criteria and methodologies

The Council recommended that systems of quality assurance should be based on the features, listed in the Annex to the Recommendation. By and large the agencies work according to these features, although their application may differ according to the national or institutional context. A short analysis of their implementation is as follows:

Criteria

The Recommendation links quality assurance criteria closely to the aims assigned to each institution in relation to the needs of society and of the labour market. The ENQA survey³ demonstrates that there is a clear shift away from evaluation against the stated goals of the institution, towards the use of more objective external criteria and standards in evaluation and accreditation exercises. These may be minimum threshold standards, average standards or more demanding higher standards, aiming at recognising excellence.

Self-evaluation by institutions

Self-evaluation is a requirement of most of the evaluation and accreditation schemes. The self-evaluation group consists in most cases of management and teaching staff. Students rarely participate. Participation of administrative staff and students varies.

Site-visits by expert group

The site-visit is a standard element of the evaluation process. The visit consists of meetings and interviews, often a tour of the facilities, a meeting with senior management and the examination of documentary evidence.

Composition of the expert group

All agencies use external experts and very often international experts are included in the expert panel, notably in the cases of neighbouring countries sharing the same language. Experts from the world of employment are used in less than half of cases, professional associations, students and graduates even less. The inclusion of foreigners in the governing bodies of agencies is less common but increasing.

Reporting and follow-up

Reports are published in most but not in all cases of evaluation and accreditation. It is common practice to consult the evaluated institutions before the reports are published. In three quarter of cases, institutions are held responsible for follow-up on the recommendations; in half of cases they share this responsibility with agencies and government.

3. Part two: European and international Cooperation

Summary:

Most countries are involved, in varying degrees in bilateral, multilateral, European and global cooperation on quality assurance and accreditation. These transnational initiatives have similar objectives: identifying comparable criteria and methodologies and fostering the well functioning of quality agencies in order to achieve more transparency and, ultimately, the mutual recognition of quality assurance systems and assessments.

³

See footnote 9

3.1. Bilateral and regional cooperation

The Governments of Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands have decided to integrate their quality assurance activities into one joint accreditation system. Quality assurance agencies and higher education authorities from twelve countries⁴ have decided to engage in the ‘Joint Quality Initiative’, an informal network cooperating on issues of quality assurance and accreditation of bachelor and master programmes in Europe. 13 Agencies from eight countries⁵ have decided to found the European Consortium for Accreditation ECA, focussing on the accreditation aspect of the quality assurance process and aiming at mutual recognition of their respective quality assurance systems and judgements by 2007. The Network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEE Network) has 18 member agencies⁶ and Quality assurance agencies from the five Nordic countries⁷ decided in 2003 to formalize their cooperation in a Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education. All above groupings concern member agencies of the broad European Network for Quality assurance in Higher Education (ENQA).

3.2. The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

ENQA was created as a direct result of the 1998 Council Recommendation and can therefore be considered both as its most concrete outcome at European level and as a starting point and key actor for future developments. The ENQA General Assembly of June 2004 has decided to extend ENQA membership to agencies from all 40 Bologna Signatory States and to introduce reforms needed for ENQA to fulfil its future task of providing services to its members and working towards mutual recognition of quality assurance systems in Europe.

ENQA has engaged itself into close cooperation with the ENIC and NARIC networks of credential evaluators in order to explore how better information on quality can speed up the recognition of diplomas and periods of study, in particular as regards transnational education. ENQA is planning to facilitate, through its members, transnational evaluations, notably the transnational evaluation of joint and double degrees.

3.3. Networks in higher education

The Council Recommendation calls for support to higher education institutions that wish to cooperate in the field of quality assurance on a transnational basis. Several initiatives have been taken in this respect or have gained new momentum, thanks to the Recommendation and Bologna process peer pressure.

The European University Association (EUA) operates a transnational Institutional Evaluation Programme, which aims to help its members ensure that the institution as

⁴ Austria, Belgium (Flanders), [Denmark](#), Germany, Ireland, [Italy](#), Netherlands, Norway, [Spain](#), Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom

⁵ Austria, Belgium (Flanders), Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Spain, Switzerland

⁶ From Austria, Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Croatia, Estonia, Germany (Bavaria), Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Macedonia, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia

⁷ Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden

a whole takes responsibility for continuous quality assurance and enhancement. EUA is also engaged in the Commission-supported 'Quality culture' project, in which groups of universities help each other to introduce internal quality assurance mechanisms, improve their quality levels and prepare better for external evaluations

On a global level, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education INQAAHE is working on a Good Practice Guide for agencies and the International Association of University Presidents IAUP is considering the viability of a 'World Quality Register' for quality assurance agencies.

3.4. Council of Europe

According to Council of Europe/UNESCO Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education in the Europe Region⁸, each country shall recognise qualifications as similar to corresponding qualifications in its own system, unless there are substantial differences between its own qualifications and the qualifications for which recognition is sought. Among these substantial differences may figure the quality of the teaching and learning. Hence the importance of the recent close cooperation between experts in quality assurance (the ENQA network) and experts in credential evaluation (the NARIC network of the EU and the ENIC partner network of the Council of Europe and UNESCO-CEPES).

3.5. OECD and UNESCO

OECD and UNESCO cooperate on the development of non-binding guidelines on consumer protection in cross-border higher education, with a strong emphasis on quality assurance. UNESCO has set up a Global Forum on Quality Assurance, Accreditation and Recognition, building on existing regional networks and conventions for diploma recognition. In Europe, UNESCO-CEPES is carrying out a project collecting indicators for higher education that could be of use in quality assurance and evaluation exercises.

4. The Berlin Mandate

On 19 September 2003, Ministers of Higher Education of 40 Bologna Signatory States gathered in Berlin and adopted a Communiqué in which they called 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."

Two Working Groups organised by ENQA examine the different elements of the Mandate. One Working Group on standards, procedures and guidelines and one Working Group on setting up an adequate peer review system. Experts draw on existing studies and on experiences of ENQA and its members, organised in regional

⁸ <http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/Commun/QueVoulezVous.asp?NT=165&CM=8&DF=10/02/04&CL=ENG>

(North and Eastern Europe) or specialised networks (European Consortia for Accreditation). They examine EUA Institutional Evaluations, the competence based approach of the Tuning Project⁹ as well as the work of subject specific professional accrediting agencies. Experiences in other parts of the world, notably the United States, will be considered as well.

ENQA reports back through the Bologna Follow-up Group and will present a Pre-final Report by the beginning of 2005 in advance of the Ministerial meeting in Bergen in May 2005.

5. Conclusion

The implementation of the Council Recommendation of 1998 has been a marked success as most countries have indeed set up a quality assurance system and European cooperation in the quality field has been intense. The work on quality assurance obviously received extra momentum from the central position given to quality issues in the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy and has been acknowledged as an essential component of the emerging “European Qualifications Framework”.

Important efforts have been made at bilateral and regional level to create a climate of confidence which would facilitate mutual recognition of quality assurance systems and assessments. The Mandate given to ENQA in Berlin could have equally positive effects on a broader European scale.

The moment has come to take decisive steps to achieve genuine mutual recognition of quality assurance and accreditation systems and assessments and let quality assurance contribute effectively to our shared objective of making European higher education a "world quality reference". Progress can and must be made in this important field.

Annexes

1. Berlin Communiqué, extract on quality assurance
2. Existing Quality Assurance Agencies by country

⁹ University of Deusto, Bilbao, Spain (www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm) or University of Groningen, The Netherlands (www.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm)

“Realising the European Higher Education Area”

Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher

Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003

=Extract on Quality Assurance=

“The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. Ministers commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level. They stress the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance.

They also stress that consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.

Therefore, they agree that by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include:

- A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.
- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.
- A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.
- International participation, co-operation and networking.

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.”

Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies by Country

Country	Agency	Scope	Main evaluation type
Albania	Accreditation Agency of Higher Education, Accreditation Council	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Austria	Fachhochschulrat – www.fhr.ac.at	National, non-university sector	Institutional and programme evaluation, programme accreditation
Austria	Österreichischer Akkreditierungsrat – www.akkreditierungsrat.at	National, private universities	Institutional accreditation, programme accreditation
Belgium (Flanders)	Flemish Inter-university Council – www.vlir.be	Regional, university sector	Programme evaluation
Belgium (Flanders)	Council of Flemish Institutes for Higher Education – www.vlhora.be	Regional, non-university sector	Programme evaluation
Belgium	Conseil des Recteurs (CRef)	University sector	Programme evaluation
Bulgaria	National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency at the Council of Ministers – http://www.neaa.government.bg	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Croatia	National Council for Higher Education	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme evaluation in function of accreditation by ministry
Cyprus	Council of Educational Evaluation – sekap@cytanet.com.cy	National, non-university sector	Programme evaluation, programme accreditation
Czech Republic	Accreditation Commission – www.msmt.cz/DOMEK/default.asp?CAI=2856	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme accreditation

Country	Agency	Scope	Main evaluation type
Denmark	Danish Evaluation Institute – www.eva.dk	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme evaluation and accreditation, institutional evaluation
Estonia	Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre – www.ekak.archimedes.ee	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme accreditation
Finland	Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council – www.finheec.fi	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation
France	Comité National d'Évaluation – www.cne-evaluation.fr	National, university sector	Institutional evaluation
France	Inspection générale de l'administration de l'éducation nationale et de la recherche (IGAENR) – www.education.gouv.fr	National, university and non-university	Institutional evaluation
Germany	Akkreditierungsrat – www.akkreditierungsrat.de	National, university and non-university sectors	Meta-accreditation
Germany	Zentrale Evaluations- und Akkreditierungsagentur (ZevA) – www.zeva.uni-hannover.de	Regional, university and non-university sectors	Programme accreditation
Germany	Akkreditierungs-, Zertifizierungs- und Qualitätssicherungs-Institut (ACQUIN) - www.acquin.org	Regional, university and non-university sectors	Programme accreditation
Germany	Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch Akkreditierung von Studiengängen (AQAS) – www.aqas.de	Regional, university and non-university sectors	Programme accreditation

Country	Agency	Scope	Main evaluation type
Germany	Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge der Ingenieurwissenschaften, der Informatik, der Naturwissenschaften und der Mathematik (ASIIN) – www.asiin.de	Regional, university and non-university sectors, subject-specific	Programme accreditation
Germany	Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge im Bereich Heilpädagogik, Pflege, Gesundheit und Soziale Arbeit (AHPGS) – www.ahpgs.de	Regional, university and non-university sectors, subject-specific	Programme accreditation
Germany	Stiftung Evaluationsagentur Baden-Württemberg (EVALAG) – www.evalag.de	Regional, university and non-university sectors	Programme evaluation
Germany	Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation – www.fibaa.de	Regional, university and non-university sectors, subject-specific	Programme accreditation
Hungary	Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) – www.mab.hu	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional accreditation
Iceland	Division of Evaluation and Supervision – http://mrn.stjr.is	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation
Ireland	Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) www.hetac.ie	National, non-university sector	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Ireland	Higher Education Authority – www.heai.ie	National, university sector	Institutional evaluation, meta-evaluation

Country	Agency	Scope	Main evaluation type
Ireland	National Qualification Authority of Ireland – www.nqai.ie	National, non-university sector	Institutional evaluation
Italy	National Committee for the Evaluation of the University System – www.vsu.it	National, university sector	Programme and institutional evaluation, institutional accreditation
Latvia	Higher Education Quality Evaluation Centre - www.aiknc.lv	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Lithuania	Lithuanian Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education – www.skvc.lt	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme evaluation and accreditation
Macedonia	Ministry of Education and Science, Accreditation Board	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Netherlands	Inspectorate of Higher Education – www.owinsp.nl	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation, meta-evaluation
Netherlands	Netherlands Quality Agency – www.hbo-raad.nl	National, non-university sector	Programme evaluation
Netherlands	Netherlands Accreditation Organisation – www.nao-ho.nl	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme accreditation
Netherlands	Quality Assurance Netherlands Universities (QANU) – www.qanu.nl	National, university sector	Programme evaluation

Country	Agency	Scope	Main evaluation type
Norway	Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) – www.nokut.no	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Poland	National General Accreditation Commission – www.men.waw.pl	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional accreditation
Poland	University Accreditation Commission – http://main.amu.edu.pl/~ects/uka/uka.html	National, university sector	Programme accreditation
Poland	Association of Management Education Forum – www.semforum.org.pl	National, private university and non-university sectors, subject-specific	Programme evaluation and accreditation
Portugal	National Council for Evaluation of Higher Education (CNAVES) – www.cnaves.pt	National, university and non-university sectors	Institutional evaluation
Romania	National Council for Academic Assessment and Accreditation – www.cneaa.ro	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional accreditation
Slovakia	Accreditation Commission – www.akredkom.sk	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional accreditation
Slovenia	Council for Higher Education	National, university and non-university sectors	Institutional accreditation
Slovenia	Higher Education Quality Assessment Commission (HEQAC)	National, university and non-university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation

Country	Agency	Scope	Main evaluation type
Spain	National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) – www.aneqa.es	National, university sector	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Spain	Agency for Quality Assurance in the Catalan University System – www.agenqua.org	Regional, university sector	Programme and institutional evaluation
Sweden	National Agency for Higher Education – www.hsv.se	National, university sector	Programme and institutional evaluation and accreditation
Switzerland	Centre for Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the Swiss Universities (OAQ) – www.oaq.ch	National, university sector	Programme and institutional accreditation
United Kingdom	Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) – www.qaa.ac.uk	National, university and non university sectors	Programme and institutional evaluation
	European University Association (EUA) – www.eua.be/eua/	University sector	Institutional evaluation