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(Information)

COUNCIL

COMMON POSITION (EC) No 29/98

adopted by the Council on 26 February 1998

with a view to adopting a Council recommendation of . . . on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education

(98/C 178/01)

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

teaching and the organisation of education and training systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity;

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and in particular Articles 126 and 127 thereof,

(2) Whereas in its conclusions of 25 November 1991 ⁽⁴⁾ the Council stated that improving the quality of higher education was a concern shared by each Member State and by every institution of higher education within the European Community; whereas, in view of the diversity of methods used at national level, national experience could be complemented by European experience acquired, in particular, through pilot projects aimed at establishing cooperation in this area or at strengthening existing cooperation;

Having regard to the proposal from the Commission,

Having regard to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee ⁽¹⁾,Having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions ⁽²⁾,Acting in accordance with the procedure laid down in Article 189c of the Treaty ⁽³⁾,

(3) Whereas the replies to the Commission memorandum on higher education stress *inter alia* that quality should be guaranteed at all levels and in all sectors, with differences between institutions only in terms of objectives, methods and educational demand; whereas there is general support for the introduction of efficient and acceptable methods of quality assurance which take into account European and international experience and the possibility of cooperation;

(1) Whereas a high quality of education and training is an objective for all Member States; whereas the Community is called on to contribute to their ongoing efforts by promoting cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action while fully respecting their responsibility for the content of

⁽¹⁾ OJ C 19, 21.1.1998, p. 39.

⁽²⁾ Opinion delivered on 19 November 1997 (OJ C 64, 27.2.1998, p. 76).

⁽³⁾ Opinion of the European Parliament of 18 November 1997. (OJ C 371, 8.12.1997, p. 33), Council common position of 26 February 1998 and Decision of the European Parliament of . . . (not yet published in the Official Journal).

(4) Whereas a Commission study on the state of quality assurance in the Member States revealed

⁽⁴⁾ OJ C 321, 12.12.1991, p. 2.

that the new quality assurance systems had certain points in common; whereas the two pilot projects conducted subsequently were based on these core elements of existing national systems; whereas they tested a common method successfully and showed that the players in the field are all eager to pursue exchanges of experience which demonstrate the diversity of national evaluation cultures as well as the importance of quality assurance in general;

- (5) Whereas, in view of the great diversity of education systems in the Community, the definition of the term 'higher education institution' to which the recommendation refers includes all the types of institutions which confer qualifications or degrees at this level irrespective of how they are described in the Member States; whereas this definition is used in the decision establishing the Socrates programme;
- (6) Whereas higher education institutions have to meet the new educational and social requirements of a worldwide 'knowledge society' and the resulting developments; whereas they will, therefore, endeavour to improve the required attributes of the services they provide by developing, where appropriate, new initiatives (individually or on a collaborative basis within higher education associations), aimed at increasing the quality of teaching and learning;
- (7) Whereas the technological and economic changes and their consequences for the labour market pose new challenges for higher education institutions and whereas, in view of the challenges of global competition as well as the ever-increasing influx of students into higher education institutions, Member States face the task of organising their higher education systems and their relationships vis-à-vis state and society in ways which respect existing academic standards, training objectives, quality standards, the autonomy and/or the independence — in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State — of higher education institutions, and the need to be accountable to and inform the public;
- (8) Whereas discussion of the Commission communication of 13 February 1994 has demonstrated that quality assurance systems could contribute towards mutual recognition of academic or professional qualifications at Community level;
- (9) Whereas the Commission White Paper on 'Growth, competitiveness and employment', the White Paper on 'Teaching and learning: towards the learning society' and the Green Paper on 'Education — Training — Research. The obstacles to transnational mobility' indicate how important high-quality education is for employment and growth within the Community and for its competitiveness at world level; whereas these documents highlight the link that exists between the social and cultural functions of education and training, on the one hand, and their economic functions, on the other hand, and therefore the many aspects of the concept of quality; whereas it is clear that transparent educational systems are required for transnational mobility;
- (10) Whereas encouraging mobility is one of the aims of Community cooperation in the fields of education and training; whereas the Commission Green Paper on 'Education — Training — Research. The obstacles of transnational mobility' examines the principal legal, administrative and practical obstacles encountered by students wishing to study in another Member State, proposes measures to improve mobility and stresses that this type of mobility is beneficial to an education of high quality which can enable individuals to compete internationally and to take advantage of freedom of movement within the Community;
- (11) Whereas the size, structure and funding of higher education systems differ from Member State to Member State and the objectives of these systems will continue to evolve; whereas in certain Member States the higher education system includes universities and other higher education institutions, often pursuing vocational aims; whereas the concept, scope and methods of quality assurance will be defined by each Member State and will remain flexible and adaptable to changing circumstances and/or structures;
- (12) In view of Member States' exclusive responsibilities for the organisation and structure of their higher education systems and of their budgetary constraints, and in view of the autonomy and/or independence of higher education institutions, in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State,
- I. HEREBY RECOMMENDS that Member States:
- A. support and, where necessary, establish transparent quality assurance systems with the following aims:

- to safeguard the quality of higher education within the specific economic, social and cultural context of their countries while taking due account of the European dimension and of a rapidly changing world,
 - to encourage and help higher education institutions to use appropriate measures, particularly quality assurance, as a means of improving the quality of teaching and learning in a rapidly changing world,
 - to stimulate mutual exchanges of information on quality and quality assurance at Community and world level and to encourage cooperation between higher education institutions in this area;
- B. base systems of quality assurance on the following features, as explained in the Annex:
- autonomy and/or independence in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State for the bodies responsible for quality assurance in their choice of procedures and methods,
 - adaptation of quality assurance procedures and methods to the profile and aims of higher education institutions, while respecting their autonomy and/or independence in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State,
 - targeted utilisation of internal and/or external aspects of quality assurance adapted to the procedures and methods used,
 - involvement of the different parties concerned according to the purpose of the quality assurance,
 - publication of quality assurance results in a form which is appropriate to each Member State;
- C. where necessary, encourage higher education institutions, in cooperation with the competent structures of the Member States, to take appropriate follow-up measures;
- D. call upon the competent authorities and higher education institutions to attach special importance to the exchange of experience and cooperation regarding quality assurance with other Member States, as well as with international organisations and associations active in the field of higher education;
- E. promote cooperation between the authorities responsible for quality assessment or quality assurance in higher education and promote networking.
- This cooperation could cover some or all of the following areas:
- (a) encouraging and developing the exchange of information and experience, in particular on methodological developments and examples of good practice;
 - (b) fulfilling the requests for expertise and advice from the authorities concerned in the Member States;
 - (c) supporting higher education institutions which wish to cooperate in the field of quality assurance on a transnational basis;
 - (d) promoting contacts with international experts.
- In pursuing these objectives the developing links between quality assurance and other existing Community activities in particular in the framework of the Socrates and Leonardo da Vinci programmes should be taken into account, as should the *acquis communautaire* in the field recognition of qualifications for professional purposes.
- II. HEREBY RECOMMENDS that the Commission, in close cooperation with the Member States and on the basis of existing programmes and subject to their objectives and normal open and transparent procedures, encourage the cooperation referred to in point I.E between the authorities responsible for quality assessment and quality assurance in higher education, also involving organisations and associations of higher education institutions with a European remit and the necessary experience in quality assessment and quality assurance.
- III. HEREBY REQUESTS the Commission to present triennial reports to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on progress in the development of quality assurance systems in the various Member States and on cooperation activities at European level including the progress achieved with respect to the objectives referred to above.

Done at . . .

For the Council
The President

ANNEX

Indicative features of quality assurance

The features referred to below are common to existing European quality assurance systems. The European pilot projects assessing the quality of higher education have demonstrated that all parties involved in this area can benefit from observing these features.

The autonomy and/or independence, in terms of the relevant structures in each Member State, 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 their results.

Quality assurance criteria are closely linked to the aims assigned to each institution in relation to the needs of society and of the labour market; the different quality assurance procedures must therefore include allowance for the specific nature of the institution. Knowledge of the institution's objectives, be it at the level of the whole institution, at the level of a department or at the level of a single unit, is essential in this respect.

Quality assurance procedures should generally consist of an internal, self-examination component and an external component based on appraisal by external experts.

The internal element of self-examination should aim to involve all the relevant players, especially teaching staff and, where appropriate, administrators in charge of academic and professional guidance, as well as students. The external element should be a process of cooperation, consultation and advice between independent experts from outside and players from within the institution.

In the light of the objectives and criteria used in the quality assurance procedures and with reference to the structures of higher education in the Member States, professional associations, social partners and alumni could be included in the expert groups.

The participation of foreign experts in the procedures would be desirable in order to encourage exchange of experience acquired in other countries.

Reports on quality assurance procedures and their outcomes should be published in a form appropriate to each Member State and should provide a source of good reference material for partners and for the general public.

STATEMENT OF THE COUNCIL'S REASONS

I. INTRODUCTION

1. On 12 May 1997, the Commission submitted to the Council a proposal for a recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education.
2. The Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions delivered their opinions on 29 October 1997 and 19 November 1997 respectively.
3. The European Parliament delivered its opinion on 18 November 1997.
4. On 3 February 1998 the Commission presented a modified proposal.
5. On 26 February 1998 the Council adopted its common position in accordance with Article 189c of the EC Treaty.

II. AIM OF THE PROPOSAL

The proposal takes the form of a recommendation addressed to the parties concerned (the Member States, the Commission in close cooperation with the Member States and the Commission solely) with the objective of promoting cooperation between Member States in the field of quality assurance in higher education.

1. General comments

In its common position the Council has approved the essence of the Commission proposal while making some amendments which it thought desirable.

2. Specific comments

2.1. *Amendments made by the Council to the Commission proposal*

2.1.1. Structure of the recommendation

The Council considered that the detailed request addressed to the Commission to support the establishment of a 'European quality assurance network' under part II — 1 of the original proposal was not appropriate. The content of this request has therefore been transferred, with some modification and clarification in wording, to part I, addressed solely to the Member States. However, the Commission's role in encouraging inter-Community cooperation in the field of quality assurance (in close cooperation with the Member States and on the basis of existing programmes) is now dealt with under the new part II. Part II — 2 of the original proposal concerning progress reports has now become the new part III, addressed to the Commission.

2.1.2. Annex to the recommendation

The Council considered that in the interests of clarity, it would be more appropriate to transfer, with some expansion and textual modification, the explanatory details concerning the characteristics of quality assurance systems to an Annex entitled 'Indicative features of quality assurance'.

2.1.3. Recitals

In the interests of rationalisation, certain recitals have been, as appropriate, merged or modified or in one case deleted. One recital concerning Member States' responsibilities and the autonomy and/or independence of higher education institutions has been added.

2.2. *European Parliament amendments*

2.2.1. Parliament amendments adopted by the Commission

The Commission adopted in full, in part or in essence 17 of the 38 Parliament amendments. Those amendments are Nos 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 41, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 30, 31, 32, 33, 35 and 36.

2.2.2. Parliament amendments adopted by the Council

The Council accepted in full, in part or in essence 13 of the amendments proposed by the Parliament and adopted by the Commission. Those amendments are Nos 1, 2, 3, 5, 9 and 41, 11, 12, 13, 14, 30, 35 and 36.

2.2.3. Parliament amendments not adopted by the Council

Apart from the amendments not adopted by the Commission, the Council did not adopt the following amendments:

— *Amendment 15*

Reference to education and research mandate of educational establishments

The Council considered that the mention of research was inappropriate, since not all educational establishments are involved in research,

— *Amendment 31*

Expansion and completion of existing structures for the creation of a 'European quality assurance network'

The Council thought that it was for the Member States to decide if such expansion was necessary,

— *Amendments 32 and 33*

Examples of exchange of information and experience and/or assistance

In the Council's view, these examples are to be worked out by the competent authorities.

III. CONCLUSIONS

The Council considers that its common position constitutes a balanced text which will contribute to the development of quality education within the European Community by encouraging cooperation between Member States.
