

October 2010

EUA Policy Statement on Quality and Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

Preamble

Improving the quality of teaching and learning has been at the heart of the Bologna Process reforms and continues to be of crucial importance for the further implementation of these reforms. The growth in interest in rankings, as well as recent student protests further illustrate the need for universities to reiterate their continued commitment to improving the quality of teaching and learning. Therefore EUA's policy position has been updated to take account of recent developments and to provide a solid basis for policy work and advocacy in the years to come.

This policy position focuses on the need to promote cultures of quality at the system as well as the institutional level. At institutional level ownership of quality processes among the university community is fundamental to the creation of true quality cultures which means it is crucial to ensure the commitment of students, academics and support staff alike. Governments for their part are encouraged to ensure that external quality assurance frameworks focus on promoting quality cultures aiming at institutional development rather than attempting to measure quality in quantitative terms.

Guiding principles

For Europe's universities quality assurance should be based on the following key principles:

- i. **Primary responsibility for quality assurance lies with universities themselves.** The role of external quality is to review these internal processes while respecting and promoting the primary responsibility of HEIs in designing them.
- ii. **Institutional quality management requires a comprehensive, all-encompassing approach.** This covers all activities of a university: research, teaching and learning, service to society and support services. Quality management should be derived from the mission statement and strategic goals of each institution and constitutes a fundamental part of an overarching institutional quality culture that aims at continuous enhancement of the quality.
- iii. **Quality is contextual.** This is important in order to take account of and further promote the diversity of the sector, both the diversity of institutional missions and profiles, as well as of national contexts and traditions, including national quality assurance procedures. There is no one-dimensional definition of quality for the purposes of quality assurance. Defining quality must take into account the specific institution and the national context. Equally, quality assurance processes should be flexible and adaptable so as not to stifle diversity, innovative teaching practices and creative research.
- iv. **The ultimate goal of all quality assurance – both internal and external - is to enhance quality thus promoting trust among stakeholders.** Regardless of how quality is defined, the ultimate aim of all quality assurance processes – whether they are internal or external and related to research, teaching and learning or other activities – should always be to enhance quality levels through a

considered examination of processes and their outcomes and by maintaining a balance between accountability and improvement.

Furthermore, the evidence shows the following:

- ***There is an integral link between institutional autonomy and accountability.*** One of the main finds of both TRENDS V and TRENDS 2010 is that the greater the institutional autonomy, the more robust the internal quality processes introduced in universities, and vice versa.
- ***The importance of the existence of internal quality processes for inter-institutional cooperation:*** TRENDS 2010 shows that institutions closely involved in international inter-institutional cooperation, in particular at European level are more likely to evaluate both teaching and research activities regularly than institutions that are less active internationally.
- ***The importance not only of enhancing quality but also of improving transparency.*** As part of their commitment to quality and their responsibility to society universities must be prepared to provide accurate information about institutional mission, activities, performance and results obtained to learners, employers and other stakeholders.
- ***Transparency tools such as rankings or classifications cannot be used as a means of accountability or as a proxy for quality.*** They can only – at best – serve as a means of comparing universities and thus indicating their relative position in relation to other universities using certain indicators. Thus, they do not serve the same purpose as internal or external quality assurance which examine processes and outcomes with the aim of producing a judgement reflecting strengths and concerns to be addressed.
- ***Grassroots cooperation among the various stakeholders is a crucial success factor in bringing about sustainable change and improvement.*** One of the on-going challenges for the next decade will be to ensure the continuing engagement and active involvement of all stakeholders – universities, quality assurance agencies and students – in the development of quality assurance. This will require promoting regular and ongoing dialogue between the partners at all levels.

Principles for implementing internal and external quality processes in teaching and learning

The development of quality assurance in teaching and learning has been an integral part of the Bologna Process reforms and the TRENDS 2010 report shows the need for further consolidation of the changes made as the European Higher Education Area takes shape over the next decade.

In this context the emphasis is put on improving the teaching and learning process, albeit in the institutional context of overall quality management as outlined above. The following principles have been developed taking account of the association's work over the last decade.

Internal quality assurance must:

- Promote **shared values and attitudes about quality** (i.e. quality culture) rather than regarding it as simply a managerial process and ensure that the internal evaluation processes develop professional attitudes and competence, thus fostering creativity and innovation.
- Be **fit for their purposes**. While there is no single way to set up these processes, the cycles and scope of internal evaluations should be linked in a pragmatic and cost-effective way and attention should be paid to the global picture that emerges through the internal evaluation of the different activities.
- **The role of leadership** consists in communicating the need for these processes, framing them **in consultation with the university community** – students, academic and support staff – and using their results in the strategic cycle.
- Ensure central institutional **data collection and analysis** to measure institutional performance of all activities.
- Ensure an **appropriate leadership and staffing** of a quality unit in order to avoid over-bureaucratisation.

External quality assurance must avoid undue bureaucratic processes and thus:

- Seek a balance between autonomy and accountability by **promoting institutional audits or evaluations** based on an evaluation of internal quality processes.
- Adopt a **fitness for purpose** approach respecting national, institutional and disciplinary diversity with the institutional mission statement as a starting point.
- Demonstrate an **improvement orientation** that stresses the self-evaluation phase and confidentiality of parts of the process while promoting the transparency of the results.

The key success factor will be finding meaningful ways of improving the articulation of internal and external quality assurance processes so that they are in balance and thus complement each other in support of a sustainable quality development in the context of the enhanced university autonomy and institutional responsibility for quality. In this context EUA continues to promote the implementation of the ESGs, and, in as far as this is compatible with national quality assurance frameworks, to advocate freedom of choice for institutions in selecting their external quality assurance agency from among those agencies listed on EQAR.