ENQA Message to Ministers Responsible for Higher Education in the EHEA

ROME MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE, NOVEMBER 2020

The year 2020 marks the 20th anniversary of the foundation of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Since then ENQA has grown to be the key policy making body in European quality assurance and the main driver for development of external quality assurance. Quality assurance is considered as one of the success stories of the EHEA, and ENQA is proud to have contributed: as the co-author of the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* (the ESG), as the representative organisation of quality assurance agencies and as a consultative member of the Bologna Follow-up Group.

This year has been exceptional due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, which has seen higher education institutions move education online in a matter of days, and quality assurance agencies adapt their procedures accordingly, while being responsive and supportive to the needs of the sector. It has also given more urgency to the discussions on the future of quality assurance in Europe. At a time when Europe is sailing through heavy weather, ENQA's core values of inclusiveness, equality, and service to institutions, decision-makers and the public are more important than ever.

This year has brought unprecedented challenges also for the implementation of the Bologna Process key commitments, but the work must continue. While recognising of the positive developments, we need to take note that some alarming deficiencies persist in some contexts caused by disparities between national legislation and the agreed priorities of ministers at past conferences of the EHEA. ENQA believes the remaining shortcomings can be remedied if ministers embrace the following recommendations.

- **Create and safeguard the necessary conditions that enable quality assurance agencies to work with appropriate levels of independence and flexibility**
- **Enable quality assurance agencies to fulfil their mission to operate in the public interest**
- **Allow and encourage student participation in quality assurance**
- **Ensure that institutions may effectively use the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes**

The future of quality assurance in the EHEA - ENQA's recommendations to Ministers

CREATE AND SAFEGUARD THE NECESSARY CONDITIONS THAT ENABLE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES TO WORK WITH APPROPRIATE LEVELS OF INDEPENDENCE AND FLEXIBILITY

In recent years ENQA has observed an increase in the complexity of quality assurance agencies' structures and the portfolio of their activities. In addition, rapid changes in the higher education sector and consequently in the expectations placed on quality assurance require not only independence of quality assurance agencies and their processes, but also frameworks that are flexible enough to allow them to respond, without compromising on quality. Innovation in teaching and learning, including the establishment of the first European University Alliances, increased flexibility of learning paths, and the creation of smaller units of learning such as micro-credentials are good examples of situations where rigid legal frameworks prevent agencies from reacting and supporting the sector with adequate, appropriate and innovative quality assurance measures. ENQA therefore urges all EHEA-member governments to create and safeguard the necessary conditions that enable quality assurance agencies to work with appropriate levels of independence, autonomy and flexibility, while complying with the requirements of the ESG.

ENABLE QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCIES TO FULFIL THEIR MISSION TO OPERATE IN THE PUBLIC INTEREST

In some cases, national regulations do not enable agencies to fulfil their mandate to provide the public with reliable information on the quality of higher education provision. It is necessary that agencies are free to publish the outcomes of their quality assurance procedures, including the full expert reports, as required by the ESG. Any remaining legal barriers to this should be removed as a matter of urgency if quality assurance is to provide comprehensive and reliable information to the public.

ALLOW AND ENCOURAGE STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN QUALITY ASSURANCE

The involvement of students in all levels of quality assurance is a defining feature of the EHEA and enshrined in the ESG. Yet external review reports of quality assurance agencies indicate that it has not reached universal acceptance (one in seven agencies in the EHEA does not substantially comply with this standard). ENQA urges all member states to ensure that legislation allows students to participate in external quality assurance as full partners in the process and to support conditions that foster a culture of genuine involvement. The Guidelines for stakeholder involvement in quality assurance that have been created within the ESQA-project will be a useful tool to facilitate better involvement of all relevant stakeholders in the different external quality assurance processes across the EHEA.

ENSURE THAT INSTITUTIONS MAY EFFECTIVELY USE THE EUROPEAN APPROACH FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE OF JOINT PROGRAMMES

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been a welcome addition to the EHEA tools for quality assurance, as it recognises the value of educational cooperation across borders. However, the ministers' commitment to its use is hindered by legal obstacles in more than 20 countries. As a result, the benefits of this tool have not yet been fully realised. ENQA therefore recommends that ministers act swiftly to remove any national barriers to its implementation.

ENQA in 2020

As the largest association of quality assurance agencies committed to agreed European standards, ENQA drives the development of quality assurance by representing agencies internationally, supporting them nationally, and providing them with comprehensive services and networking opportunities. ENQA envisages an EHEA where all students have access to high-quality education provision and can achieve qualifications that are recognised worldwide, a goal which is furthered by ensuring that its members work in line with the ESG 2015, demonstrated through an external review. This has determined the current composition of ENQA, which now includes 55 member agencies from 31 countries in the EHEA. ENQA continues to collaborate with quality assurance agencies not yet able to demonstrate compliance with the ESG, an effort aided by a newly launched project providing specific and targeted support to agencies in six EHEA countries which do not yet have an ESG compliant agency.

ENQA also contributes to the promotion and enhancement of quality and the development of a quality culture in higher education through projects, studies, and events. This includes current activities related to the European University Alliances, engagement of stakeholders in quality assurance, QA of micro-credentials and of e-learning, and the quality of work-based learning.

The increased interest towards ENQA by quality assurance networks in other world regions, as well as of individual agencies outside the EHEA, is a testimony to the success of the European approach to quality assurance of higher education. Through several international projects, ENQA continues to support the development of external quality assurance outside the EHEA, including in the ASEAN, in Africa and in Latin America thus fostering inter-regional dialogue in the field of quality assurance.

● ENQA Member
● ENQA Affiliate
● EHEA Country