

Workshop
“Quality Assurance and Accreditation”
Berlin, 18th – 19th September 03
Introductory Remarks
by
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I.

By signing the Bologna declaration in June 1999 29 European ministers have committed their governments and their countries to create a European Higher Education Area. At the Prague meeting on May 19th 2001, 32 Ministers “reaffirmed their commitment to the objective of establishing the European Higher Education Area by 2010.”

II.

If you keep in mind “that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy ... we must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities“ as it is said in the Joint Sorbonne Declaration (1998). Living in a period of continuously changing education and working conditions the European Higher Education Area will meet the challenge of offering students and society a higher education system, which opens access to the labour market and fosters and supports the development and existence of areas of excellence in science and humanities.

III.

Having in Prague “particularly stressed that the quality of higher education and research is and should be an important determinant of Europe’s international attractiveness and competitiveness” the draft of the communiqué of this conference says: “The quality of higher education has proven to be the heart of the setting up a European Higher Education Area”. The Graz Declaration of EUA and the Council of Europe also underline the crucial importance of high academic quality and the necessity “to foster the highest level of quality”. And indeed this is obvious if you

want to promote the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area and make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world” – as the heads of state and government of the European Union have declared in Lisbon and Barcelona.

IV.

But quality of higher education in Europe as well as in every country participating in the Bologna-Process is rather different. To improve and to guarantee quality in most of the participating countries systems of quality assurance have been established. The ministers commit themselves in the communiqué of this conference “to support the further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level.” EURASHE believes it necessary “to further improve quality control mechanisms.”

V.

Among the tools of quality assurance are evaluation and accreditation. Accreditation is becoming increasingly accepted in European countries. Following the results of a study published to prepare this conference there is only one country in Europe that does not see any added value in shifting from its well functioning evaluation system in combination with state approval to an accreditation system in combination with evaluation.

VI.

Unfortunately there is some confusion about the meaning of these terms. In order to avoid misunderstandings in our discussion, I propose to follow the terminology being more and more used in international cooperation. Accreditation then means a formal decision concerning the quality of a programme or an institution expressed by a legitimate body taking the decision following predetermined standards (benchmarks). So accreditation is a particular form of quality assurance certifying the result of a quality assessment. Dutch law is for example describing accreditation as “granting a quality mark indicating that certain standards are met”. The decision at the end of the accreditation procedure is yes or no; in some countries it can be yes, but or can be not yet. Accreditation is valid only for a limited time. The purpose of accreditation in detail and other aspects will be dealt with in the first presentation of this afternoon “Function, Aspects and Consequences of Accreditation”. Shortly: accreditation is aiming at external effects whilst evaluation is focussing on internal effects helping an institution to take stock of its quality level and to develop strategic planning by itself to improve quality.

VII.

Licensing and certification of quality have for a long time in Europe been an – exclusive – responsibility of the state. In USA accreditation as a rule is organized without participation of the state. The quality of programmes and institutions is certified by associations e.g. of universities or their departments or of professions. Corresponding to the increasing autonomy of public institutions of higher education in Europe – a process that has begun in all countries but has not yet come to a satisfactory end in most countries - a change of paradigm has taken place determined by the idea, that quality assurance is or should be an essential part of the responsibility of a university. So the EUA Graz Declaration claims that “the universities are responsible for developing internal quality culture” and the draft of the communiqué of this conference says that “the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with the institution itself and this provides the basis for the real accountability of the academic system within the national quality network.”

Licensing and certification is now at least looked at as a shared responsibility of the state and the scientific community. So in Europe corresponding to the role of the state and the role higher education institutions have to play in the Bologna process there is a double legitimation for accreditation: It is with the responsibility of higher education institutions and of the state. This is the reason why we invited the Vice-President of EUA, Prof. Dr. Georg Winckler, and Dr. Schuwey, Federal Office for Education and Science, Switzerland, to contribute to the discussion in a special statement.

VIII.

In the communiqué of Prague ministers “reaffirmed that efforts to promote mobility must be continued to enable students, teachers, researchers and administrative staff to benefit from the richness of EHEA including its democratic values, diversities of culture and languages and the diversity of the higher education systems.” So ministers – followed now by the Graz Declaration of EUA – encouraged “universities and other higher education institutions to take full advantage of existing national legislation and European tools aimed at facilitating academic and professional recognition of course units, degrees and other awards, so that citizens can effectively use their qualifications, competencies and skills throughout the EHEA.” They reaffirmed that improving mobility “is of the utmost importance”. “Student mobility in itself promotes academic quality” is said in the EUA Graz Declaration.

IX.

Being aware not only of the richness of diversity but also of the different quality of higher education and research in Europe as well as of the institutions of higher education in each country participating in the Bologna-Process and being aware of the fact that recognition for academic purposes is within the responsibility of the universities and other institutions of higher education to promote cross-border mobility it is necessary to ensure comparable quality of courses, course units and degrees and to make this transparent in order to encourage and promote the development of mutual trust.

Following this concept in Prague the ministers “recognized the vital role that quality assurance systems play in ensuring high quality standards and in facilitating the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe.”

Accreditation as an important component of quality assurance does not only meet national needs but can be rather effective in enhancing mutual and cross-border recognition of courses and degrees if decisions are taken following comparable quality standards. Therefore it is worthwhile to work - as is already said in the Sorbonne Joint Declaration - on a “common frame of reference”. Some cooperating European networks as DACH, CEE, ECA, ENQA and the Joint Quality Initiative try to elaborate agreed standards. The EUA Graz Declaration sees a priority in developing common definitions of qualification frameworks and learning outcomes at the European level and the Contribution of the European Commission declares it necessary “to have, by 2005, agreed sets of standards, procedures and guidelines for external evaluations carried out by quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies.” It is a big step forward if - as it is said in the draft of the communiqué of this conference - “ministers encourage the member states to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems” and that “ministers also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area”.

X.

As cross-border recognition of results of national accreditation systems is dependent on mutual trust and to create it - and following the recommendations of the Prague communiqué - multilateral and continuing information about accreditation systems and a constant exchange of views, concepts and ideas is necessary. To stimulate this, it will be necessary to create a European platform that supports the process of multilateral information, the exchange of experiences and ideas and the development of principles of good practise.

An important contribution to the development of mutual trust can be the periodical evaluation of the accrediting organisation by a group of external experts as is claimed by the Graz Declaration of the EU and ENQA and as has taken place in Germany two years ago. “The ultimate challenge for Quality assurance in Europe consists in creating transparency, exchange of good practice and enough common criteria to allow for mutual recognition of each others’ procedures, without mainstreaming the system and undermining its positive forces for diversity and competition” as is said in Trends 2003 (S. 12). There are different proposals to achieve these aims. Details will be presented in the second presentation of this afternoon on “Requirements and Perspectives of cross-border Recognition by Accreditation.

XI.

Recognition of credits and degrees awarded by another university for academic purposes is part of the autonomy of the universities or their faculties, where it often takes place on a case-by-case basis. On the other hand in many European countries the state has at least an overall responsibility in the field of higher education. Therefore in addition to the Lisbon Convention and to the ENIC/NARIC networks it could be desirable to recognise the results of national accreditation procedures in a multilateral agreement like the Bologna Declaration. Signatories should be the Member States of the Bologna Process, the EUA, EURASHE and the Accreditation Organisations of the member states. This agreement should be open to join for all institutions of higher education concerned.