

Interim Report of the E4 Group on Quality Assurance (26 September 2006) to the Bologna Follow-Up Group, Helsinki, 12-13 October 2006

INTRODUCTION

This report updates the BFUG on progress since its previous meeting in Vienna in April 2006, on the development by the E4 Group (ENQA, ESIB, EUA, and EURASHE) of the practicalities of implementation of the European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies.

In order to have an external, independent view on the possible models and practicalities of implementation of a Register, the E4 Group decided to appoint a consultant to undertake a study of possible models, based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). This consultancy project was funded by the European Commission and by the Swiss government; the E4 Group is grateful to these two bodies for their generous assistance with this project. At its meeting on 18 April 2006 the E4 Group appointed Mr Bastian Baumann (Germany) as a consultant for the Register project. Mr Baumann submitted his final report to the E4 Group for the meeting of 21 June. He interviewed for this report the E4 members, quality assurance agencies, students, the European Commission, employers' and employees' bodies, professional experts, legal experts, some BFUG members and representatives from extra-EU countries. The report of the consultant is attached as an annex to this report.¹

The present report contains the outcomes of the discussions of the E4 Group. It is an interim report, which will constitute the basis for the final report to be submitted to the BFUG meeting in March 2007.

SUMMARY OF PRESENT CONCLUSIONS

The Summary of present conclusions lists the basic features of the Register on which there is a consensus within the E4 Group. Subject to any over-riding advice which the BFUG may wish to offer to the Group, the outstanding questions, where a consensus remains to be found, will be discussed by the Group during the autumn and winter period and presented to the BFUG in March 2007 in the draft final report for the London ministerial meeting.

¹ Please note that due to time constraints the report by the consultant has not been proof-read.

1 General

The E4 Group has taken as its starting point the ministerial request that ENQA, in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, develop further the practicalities of implementation of the Register. It has not felt constrained to follow the model for the register contained in ENQA's report to ministers, since the Bergen communiqué stated only 'We welcome the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review' and did not make reference to the ENQA report's proposed model. As a result, the E4 Group has taken a wider view of the possible structure, functions and organisation of the Register.

2 Purposes of the Register

The Register should have the following purposes:

- to promote student mobility by providing a basis for the increase of trust among the higher education institutions;
- to provide a basis for governments to authorise higher education institutions to choose any agency from the Register, if that is compatible with national arrangements;
- to provide a means for the higher education institutions to choose between different agencies, if that is compatible with national arrangements;
- to serve as an instrument to improve the quality of the quality assurance agencies and to promote mutual trust between them;
- to reduce opportunities for "accreditation mills" to gain credibility.

3 Name of the Register

The Register should be called the Register of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies (REHEQA).

4 Legal form

REHEQA should be a private non-profit association.

5 Ownership

REHEQA should be owned by the E4 organisations jointly.

6 Organisational structure

The organisational structure of REHEQA should consist of:

- a Committee, which would be the governing body of REHEQA and should consist of two representatives from each E4 and of representatives of stakeholders. BFUG (or any successor body) would be invited to nominate three observers to represent governments' interests;
- a formal annual meeting, to be organised in conjunction with the Quality Forum and to provide a consultation forum between REHEQA, the BFUG and the wider QA community;
- an independent secretariat to manage the work of the Register.

7 Location

REHEQA should be located in Brussels, Belgium.

8 Funding

REHEQA should be funded through a combination of sources, including, for example, application fees, funding from EHEA governments and from other appropriate European organisations. The E4 organisations do not have sufficient resources to fund REHEQA themselves.

9 Nature of the Register

Inclusion in the Register should be voluntary. The majority of the E4 Group believes that inclusion in the Register should be restricted to applicant agencies that satisfy the Committee that they comply substantially with all of the criteria of the ESG. There should be no information on any other quality assurance or accreditation agencies operating in Europe.

10 Information to be included in the Register

The Register would consist of a database of agencies publicly available on its own website. The following general information about it should be included on the website:

- general information about REHEQA and about its organisational structure;
- information about the application procedures;
- information about the approval procedures;
- information about the appeals procedures;
- contact information of the secretariat.

The following information about the agencies included in the Register would appear on the website:

- name;
- date of establishment;
- date of first entry into the Register;
- contact information and website address;
- ownership;
- field(s) covered;
- type(s) of quality assurance services provided;
- countries the agency operates in;
- countries the agency is officially recognised in;
- ENQA membership of the agency: yes/no (if yes, then also the year of having become an ENQA member should be mentioned, together with the date of the last five-yearly review);
- hyperlinks to evaluation / accreditation reports by the agency.

The REHEQA Committee should decide for itself in due course whether the review reports of the agencies should be published.

11 Application and approval policies

The application and approval rules and procedures of the Register should be clear and transparent, so that applicants are fully informed in advance of the requirements and approval process. Applicants should be required to undergo an external review in order to be considered for inclusion in the Register. The Committee should decide on the type and level of evidence required from the external reviews. A set of principal indicators, to determine whether satisfactory levels of compliance with the ESG have been met, should be developed by the REHEQA Committee. Applicants should be required to demonstrate to the Committee, through their external reviews, that they meet the principal indicators in a consistent manner. The Committee should use a test of substantial compliance to determine whether the criteria have been met. In order to ensure that agencies are not unnecessarily burdened by the demands of duplicative reviews, ENQA membership reviews or other reviews (notably national reviews carried out to an acceptable standard) could be recognised as sufficient for the needs of the Register.

12 Appeals system

There should be an appeals system, including an independent external element. Applicants who were dissatisfied with the outcome of the application process should be informed of the reason for the negative outcome, and should have the right to make a representation to the REHEQA Committee. The grounds for appeal should be limited to a substantive procedural shortcoming or perversity of judgement. The applicant could also withdraw its application at any time.

13 Amendments to the ESG

It is probable that the ESG will need to be revised from time to time. They should not, however, be changed during the first two years of the Register's existence, in order that there should not be uncertainty about the status of the criteria for inclusion. Given that the purpose of the ESG is not primarily to meet the needs of the Register, care should be taken to make sure that they do not become a simple checklist for compliance purposes and that any revisions reflect the needs of higher education institutions more broadly. Responsibility for commissioning revisions to the ESG should rest with the BFUG or any successor body; the BFUG should request E4 to recommend revisions when E4 considers it appropriate to do so. Alternatively, BFUG could delegate fully that responsibility to E4. In normal circumstances, however, revisions might be expected every five years.