



## **„Quality“ in European Higher Education**

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### A. Introduction: Setting the Scene

#### I. Linking “Quality” to the Thematic Context of the Conference

Within the four aspects “access, values, quality, competitiveness” to be considered at the UNESCO-CEPES Forum, “quality” is placed roughly in the middle. This **positioning** may be interpreted in conflicting ways: either as indicating the **pivotal significance** of quality in its relation to access, values, and competitiveness; or as being **under challenge**, as if being ground between two millstones, i.e. by fluffy concepts of values on the one hand and harsh realities of doubtful competitiveness in daily struggles for survival on the other. In fact, there is **truth in both** these views on “quality”, which has become a **big buzz word** at least since quality assurance in higher education has more and more come to the fore in recent years, in Europe mainly within the Bologna Process.

As for the positive connotation of the term, for various reasons “quality” is an issue of **decisive significance** with regard to access, values, and competitiveness. For instance, **competitiveness** is obviously linked to the notion of quality since substantial ‘quality’ is a valid selling point at least in the long run when taking the case beyond the use, or abuse, of mere deceptive marketing ploys. Providing quality education appears to be a **core value** when taking students as partners – or for that matter, even as clients or customers – seriously since the ambition to provide quality education encompasses that their time and effort should not be wasted by subjecting them to inferior, useless learning experience. **Access** is technically dependent on the reliable and understandable identification of interface structures and their requirements both with a view towards prior learning and towards successive learning opportunities, which in turn depends on trustworthy identification of qualities of learning provisions. When seen from students’ perspectives in particular, using access opportunities is based on transparency of qualitative benefits to be expected from the learning experiences offered.

“Quality” is nevertheless **challenged** by notions of values and competitiveness, and even of access. As for values, **freedom** of teaching and learning and the very essence of innovation brought about by unimpeded integration of teaching and research may be **jeopardized** if and when study programmes are put into straightjackets of programme templates, standardisation, and external surveillance which might mutate into censorship in the name of ‘quality assurance’. **Competitiveness** may be **at risk** by the very same effects, if not by quality as such but by quality assurance when misunderstood and malpractised. Moreover, quality design and quality assurance slow down processes; this in itself tends to be detrimental to competitiveness. Even **access** may be at odds with quality if quality expectations define **qualitative entry requirements** in an inappropriate manner.

## II. Ambivalence of Sentiments

While these observations are tentative at this stage and need to be considered more closely in context later, it is fair to say that the **quest for “quality”** bears some **ambivalence**. This very fact may be the first common denominator in the European debate, that is to say: officially, “quality” is **high on the agenda**, and there are good reasons for that. However, at least behind closed doors there is **unease** as to defining quality, measuring and judging quality, effectiveness of quality processes and their implementation, the rule of bureaucracy, educational as well as institutional and political wisdom; moreover, there is doubt as to real effectiveness of structured quality assurance undertakings. While all these sentiments of doubt may not affect the appreciation of quality and the endorsement of quality enhancement they certainly do as far as quality assurance as a specific internal or external process is concerned.<sup>1</sup>

## III. Outline of Issues and Presentation

While **considering these** positive and negative **links** of quality and quality assurance to access, values, and competitiveness throughout the exploration of the issue of ‘quality’, and while **limiting** the aspects of research and services to society in general to their interplay with quality teaching and learning, this **presentation** undertakes **to explore** the issue of “quality” – including quality assurance – along the following lines:

- (a) Which “**politics**” are there **behind** the **quest for quality**? That is to ask: what are the reasons for – or behind – questioning, demanding, defining, measuring, judging quality in European higher education, and for drawing conclusions from quality assurance findings?
- (b) What are the **concepts of quality**, both in terms of **definitions** per se and in terms of **societal connotations** and preferred **political choices** – with at least the latter taking up matters from the previous question?
- (c) **Internal quality assurance**, following from the development of quality concepts: which tools are discussed and used in order to safeguard, support, create, and enhance quality in a formative sense within higher education institutions?
- (d) **External quality assurance**, when seen as scrutinizing study programme quality while linking up with internal quality measures: which means of external assessment of quality are in place, and what effect does external quality assurance provide?
- (e) Does the quest for quality reach **beyond management** in two ways: by embracing the notion of **quality culture**; and by realizing the context with necessities of “**good governance**” in higher education institutions and indeed entire educational systems?
- (f) With external quality assurance of study programmes being accompanied by **assessment** and explicit **identification** of **programme providers’ qualities** by means of **description, classification** and **typology** or possibly even **ranking** of higher education **institutions**: what does this **trend towards** yet another **institutional approach** carry with it in terms of opportunities and risks, and what are adequate tools fit for valid purposes?

In attempting to answer these questions mainly from a **pan-European perspective**, the report will largely refer to documents produced in the course of the **Bologna Process**. Among these the so-

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<sup>1</sup> The ambivalence of sentiment is illustrated, for example, by Jethro Newton in his presentation at the first European Forum for Quality Assurance in Munich in November 2006 by contrasting formal meanings of quality in the early 1990’s and situated perceptions of quality of front-line academics post 1990’s; cf. Jethro Newton, What is Quality?, in: Embedding Quality Culture in Higher Education, A Selection of Papers from the 1<sup>st</sup> European Forum for Quality Assurance Munich 2006, EUA Case Studies 2007, 14 – 20.

called Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education – in short: **ESG** – will obviously feature strongly.<sup>2</sup> This is so because they stipulate key concepts and methods of quality development and quality assurance in Europe. In addition, being an annex to the Bergen Communiqué of 2005, they can also claim considerable political weight.

#### IV. Limits of Scope

The outline of issues to be covered needs to be completed by a statement on what will not be dealt with, or only to a lesser degree.

Firstly, the conference focuses on higher education. Hence quality aspects concerning **research activities** will **not** be considered here. Any attempt to cover research as well would extend the report **beyond feasible limits**. Moreover, omitting this aspect here seems justified since developing and judging quality in research is a broad field which requires **criteria and processes different** from those applied in areas of teaching and learning. In fact, it is largely due to this reason that many systems – though not all – keep research activities separate as far as quality assurance processes are concerned.<sup>3</sup> However, since research is necessarily intertwined with teaching and learning in tertiary education there are interfaces to be considered in developing and judging the quality of study programmes.

Secondly, there should be a caveat as to **geographic coverage**. This report will largely concentrate on recent and impending European developments. The rationale for this option does not just lie in the fact that the report would be **excessive in** terms of unacceptable **quantity** at the price of **superficiality in** terms of **qualitative analysis** if all systems in the countries in UNESCO Europe Region [countries of Europe, North America and Israel] were comprehensively covered and analyzed. Instead, choosing a geographically focussed approach is feasible since most procedural and substantive issues in terms of quality policies, definitions of quality and internal and external quality assurance are **universal** by their very nature, and so most aspects covered **can easily be related** to matters in North America and Israel, too, without explicit reference to these systems. Moreover, when having to make choices the European developments brought about by the **Bologna Process** seem to be most significant, and so they deserve special attention. This is true both in terms of substance of essential changes as well as in terms of **recent global relevance**, bearing in mind that the Bologna Process and the quality assurance issues it has brought with it, meet remarkable interest in other parts of the world, notably in Latin America, Australia, and countries in South East Asia.

However, despite concentration in terms of geography traditional **hallmarks** of the **American system** will be considered, in particular since they impact upon developments in other regions. One of these is **classification** along the line of a typology of **higher education institutions**, which will be considered in view of the recent emergence of institutional classification in Europe. Arguably the spreading of institutional typology, if not ranking in the wake of the Shanghai list of proclaimed top-ranking research institutions, is a sign of transatlantic systems convergence worth noting. Since this development may be seen as a major – though indirect and implicit – element of cross-systems inspiration, a specifically American approach to indicating qualitative features in higher education will be highlighted when commenting on the new European phenomenon of institutional classification as a public responsibility. The same holds true for increasing influence of American-based **professional accreditation of programmes** in some European systems, as will be dealt with more closely later.

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<sup>2</sup> The text of the ESG can be found on the website of ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, under [www.enqa.eu/pubs\\_esg.lasso](http://www.enqa.eu/pubs_esg.lasso).

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Paulo Santiago, Karine Tremblay, Ester Basri, Elena Arnal, Tertiary Education for the Knowledge Society Vol 1 (OECD Publishing 2008), 301.

## B. “Politics” behind the Quest for Quality in Higher Education

**Ulterior purposes** for, and motives behind, the call for – assured – quality in higher education across the globe<sup>4</sup> and in Europe as well, which in the case of Europe dates back mainly in north-western and northern Europe well over a decade before the commencement of the Bologna Process in 1999, are **manifold**, with **not all** of them being **explicit**. These purposes and motives may be categorized as being societal, economic and – hence – political *prima facie*, or as politically induced technocracy, or as political *Zeitgeist*.

### I. *Prima facie* Societal, Economic and Political Reasoning

The first of these three groups, which is concerned with *prima facie* societal, economic and political reasoning, can be itemized as follows:<sup>5</sup>

#### 1. Global Challenge and Europe’s Future

The new millennium was heralded by a programmatic wake-up call which is still resounding today. The **Lisbon Agenda** of the European Union proclaimed the aspiration and the necessity to establish Europe globally as the “most advanced knowledge-based region”. Although the European Union, Europe and the Bologna Process area are by no means identical – neither in terms of geography nor political endeavours –,<sup>6</sup> there is a common belief in the political arena that Europe needs to **secure** its socio-economic and in effect its political **position** in the world by fully endorsing the concept of the “knowledge society” – and it may be added, also of the “wisdom society” or “civic society” in view of threats to peace, social stability and the environment. In order to do so, **adequate education** is seen as essential for translating this concept and aspiration into reality. At an instrumental level, this aspiration breaks down into demanding larger **quantities** of people to be educated – prediction of hundreds of thousands of research-oriented job vacancies in the near future warrant for this –, but also into **quality** of education. Seen in this context, the call for quality and quality assurance is a cry of fear in view of possible failure as much as a cry of confidence in terms of capability to make it happen if ranked as a priority and if tackled adequately. In short, if taking it to the extreme, the call for quality has become a call for a tool to survival. At any rate, it signals major societal interest in higher education operations, and the call for quality and quality assurance is intended to address safeguarding that very basic societal concern.<sup>7</sup>

Two facets may be seen as a **subset** to the Lisbon Agenda: Emphasis on employability, and on mobility in all its various aspects.

**Employability** on the European labour market has featured high in discussions throughout the entire Bologna Process.<sup>8</sup> From a European perspective, this objective reflects both the ambition to enhance freedom of citizens as well as European social and economic integration, and to foster collective and individual prosperity. The quality debate and the demand to ensure tangibly effective

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<sup>4</sup> A recent comprehensive perspective on the issue both in terms of in-depth analysis and geographic spread is presented by Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (no. 2), 259 pp.

<sup>5</sup> For a concise survey, readers can also refer to, e.g., Sybille Reichert, Looking back – looking forward: Quality Assurance and the Bologna Process, in: Implementing and Using Quality Assurance: Strategy and Practice, A Selection of Papers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Forum for Quality Assurance Rome 2007, EUA Case Studies 2008, 5 – 10.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. the juxtaposition and counterpoints highlighted in brief by Eric Froment in his contribution Quality Assurance and the Bologna and Lisbon Objectives, in: Embedding Quality Culture in Higher Education, A Selection of Papers from the 1<sup>st</sup> European Forum for Quality Assurance Munich 2006, EUA Case Studies 2007, 11 – 13. Cf. for a more extensive coverage Guy Haug, The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy: mutual dependencies; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter A 3.1-1.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education (ESG) of 2005, which state in the introduction to parts 1 and 2 under ‘basic principles’: “The interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education need to be safeguarded.”

<sup>8</sup> Cf. inter alia, Mantz Yorke, Employability in higher education; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.1.4-1.

quality in European higher education is expected to address this objective and to translate it into meaningful concepts in terms of clarifying features of employability and matching learning experiences and outcomes both in specific academic areas and in generic terms of so-called soft skills. These are quality challenges *par excellence* which need to be followed up in the course of quality programmes and quality assurance.

Incidentally, it is noteworthy and must be seen as a strong indicator in pursuit of aims addressed by the Lisbon Agenda drafted at about the same time as the emergence of the Bologna Process that the **Bologna Declaration** in 1999 highlighted employability on the European labour market as a key objective of higher education while being **silent on other overarching educational purposes**. It was not until a tentative attempt in the Bergen Communiqué of 2005 and, eventually, an explicit statement in the **London Communiqué** of 2007 that several more educational purposes of higher education were mentioned. Following long-standing views of the Council of Europe,<sup>9</sup> in addition aspects such as ‘preparing students for life as **active citizens** in a democratic society, ... enabling their **personal development, creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base**’ and, which is partly linked to the last item, ‘**stimulating research and innovation**’ are to be pursued. So, it is only at long last that familiar concepts of *Bildung* in its own right, both to the benefit of the individual and of democratic societies, and preservation and production of knowledge, i.e. maintaining knowledge gathered over time and research orientation as valid purposes as such, have gained specific, explicit status alongside ‘employability’ in the Bologna Process.

Moreover, very much from the beginning – and therefore, at least initially, indicating strong links to the concept of ‘employability on the European labour market’ and to the underpinnings by the Lisbon Agenda – the demand to foster **mobility** has featured high in the Bologna Process debate on quality. Mobility is to be understood in a comprehensive way, i.e. as three-fold **permeability**. Permeability in terms of traditional concepts of mobility obviously means movement of people in ‘real’ **space**, but in fact also in ‘virtual’ space by providing distant learning facilities via new media, namely the internet. Mobility in this sense meets economic globalisation as an economic factor as much as European integration and cohesion as a socio-political aspiration and an individual benefit. However, mobility in a broader sense covers more features.

In particular, the concept of mobility when interpreted broadly as permeability may also be seen as covering **time** factors as well when extending, or transferring, the ‘classic’ mobility concept of mental adaptation to new environments as they arise to similar **life-long learning** challenges to the human mind posed by the very course of time. If seen that way, the issue of maintaining a highly skilled workforce enters the stage, which is of paramount importance for European societies characterised both by acceleration of socio-economic change and the need to keep people in ageing societies in work for longer periods than before.

Moreover, social mobility in a wider political sense of flexibility of learning paths in open societies also includes the notion to allow for, and encourage, **transversal access** in particular, but not solely, between different types of formal education and experience gained elsewhere, in particular on the labour market. The term ‘Copenhagen Process’ of the EU comes in here, which denotes the aspiration to ensure interplay between vocational expertise gained and academic learning.

It is in this broad context of mobility in terms of permeability and flexibility that a new **scope of access policies and tools** broadens. These encompass easy recognition of mobile learners’ achievements as well as of prior learning and the establishment of interface structures which facilitate the integration of mobile and of non-traditional learners into academic programmes. These political motives make higher education institutions face new qualitative requirements which they

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<sup>9</sup> For this reason, specific reference is made in this context to the exposé of these concepts presented by Sjur Bergan, Promoting new approaches to learning; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.1.1-1.

are expected to address; qualifications frameworks and the European Credit Transfer System (ECTS) come in here as political elements of quality.

So, all in all, quality in higher education covers additional facets of political demands and needs. Quality assurance is expected to ensure that this fact is paid heed to.

## 2. Massification

Access policies in general have **impact upon quality** and call for **quality assurance**. For various reasons, amongst which there are valid ones such as broadening capacity to meet future needs of the knowledge society but also dubious ones such as hiding unemployment, European countries have witnessed considerable increases in the number of students since the 1960's or at least since the 1990's in the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. In a number of countries this has taken place without simultaneous proportional increases in higher education resources. As a consequence, large quantities of students without adequate funding aggravate the challenge to maintain quality services; moreover, political demands to accept and graduate more and more students while in some cases funding mechanisms linked to student intake and success rates may have put the question of standards on the agenda of higher education institutions and politicians. It is in this context that the call for quality and quality assurance mechanisms are seen as **antidotes** to balance negative consequences of massification. Whether or not there is some point in this view or whether or not this view serves as a political excuse for underfunding may be open to judgement and may vary from country to country.

## 3. Efficiency Gain

The appearance of mass higher education has reinforced a particular philosophy which seems to be prevalent due to modern **thinking in terms of economics**: 'Doing more with less' is a commonplace which has taken root throughout the public as much as the private sector.<sup>10</sup> There is a popular belief in many countries that higher education institutions could perform better with the resources available to them. Quality and more so quality assurance is seen as a tool to enquire into the scope for enhancing 'turnover' and reducing 'cost level'. More fundamentally, though, quality and quality assurance is seen as a remedy against ills of high **dropout rates** and unduly **long study duration**.

## 4. 'Commodification'

Apart from its generic value as a tool for securing the future of European societies at large, the provision of educational opportunities has become a **commodity in itself** and *per se*. This is certainly true for some European countries which run their systems on concepts of **internal competition** and on **international attractiveness to fee-paying students**. Obviously the call for quality, and for verifying and demonstrating quality through certification in the course of quality assurance processes, features highly where the notion of the "entrepreneurial university" and of "commodification" of learning opportunities has progressed towards a **market approach** that requires adequate marketing tools and strategies. Part of these is **demonstrable** quality through quality assurance. Another facet, however, is the call for **stratification** amongst higher education institutions and within entire systems, heralded by terms like 'institutional profile and mission' or the practice of ranking.<sup>11</sup>

## 5. Market Regulation

The phenomenon – which is also part of what has been coined the trend towards 'commodification' of higher education – known as '**mushrooming**' of private and in some cases also public higher education institutions in many countries, particularly so but not exclusively in former socialist countries after 1990, has cast considerable doubt on the founding motives of a number of these establishments and on the quality of their performance. As the pendulum swung

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<sup>10</sup> It is worth noting in this context that the European Commission uses the caption 'Making the best use of resources' in one of its lead documents in this field; cf. European Commission, Proposal for a Recommendation of the Council and the European Parliament on further cooperation in quality assurance in higher education, COM (2004), 642 final.

<sup>11</sup> This facet will be dealt with more extensively in part F below.

back from ‘free entrepreneurship’ to ‘**ensuring social responsibility**’, demanding quality and investigating into quality through external quality assurance was seen and used as a tool to steer higher education systems as a whole in order to prevent both individual students from falling victim to financial exploitation without adequate services and from national systems as a whole from over-fragmentation which may lead to numerous underfunded institutions devoid of sufficient critical mass to play a valid role in a knowledge-based, research-driven environment. On a second count and for similar reasons, the advent of **off-shore providers** has added to the very challenge. Here, too, both demanding and checking quality is seen as a device to separate good and bad for purposes of market clearance, although the case of off-shore providers may pose additional problems in translating information gained on matters of quality into straightforward political and legal action.

## 6. Accountability

While being more low key than outright market regulation, the neighbouring issue of accountability is broadly accepted as a possible driving force behind the quest both for quality and also for making quality achievement transparent. **Democratic societies** expect governments and those using public funding, such as higher education institutions, to **ensure** and to give **evidence of optimum use of public funds**. Providing proven quality in education is part of any such undertaking to demonstrate fair use of tax revenues. While this *ex post* assertion of quality services rendered in the past is part of **administrative correctness** there is, however, also *ex ante* political necessity to do so in order to **convince** members of society as **voters** that funding levels for higher education should be maintained or even raised. Thus accountability takes on **dual significance** in terms of both justifying the past and shaping the future. However, in as much as accountability is based on transparency of performance, providing quality and being able to demonstrate this fact by means of reliable quality assurance processes is key to passing the accountability test on good marks. Accountability per se, and hence quality issues which it entails, is high on political agendas.

With the advent of **tuition fee** in a number of countries – a divisive political topic of considerable political potential wherever debated – the demand for accountability has gained another protagonist, i.e. the fee-paying student who is so much the more anxious to experience quality education and services. Moreover, more than before **students** who are subject to tuition fees **expect verification** and **transparency of quality**, either in order to arrive at some valid judgment as to where to study or to demand improvement. In effect, it can be said that this personal expectation is a second element of ‘hands-on’ accountability which links to quality and quality assurance.

Finally, there is an additional, more recent and more specific reason for the call for quality and quality assurance in higher education in the context of accountability: **accountability** is expected to **balance** an increase in **institutional autonomy** which politics are prepared to grant to higher education institutions. The less there is detail interventionism and micro-inspection into operations, the more there is a call by politicians and governments to ensure that the result in terms of outcome and output of operations run by higher education institutions is deemed satisfactory. In consequence, the call for quality and showing it via external quality assurance becomes the reverse of the same medal which bears the promising word ‘autonomy’ on its face.

## 7. Diversity

Institutional autonomy blends with the existence of different traditions and practices in higher education, requirements of highly differentiated labour markets and of diverse social stratification in European systems, which is a strong feature of higher education provision in Europe *de facto* as much as by virtue to be preserved. If so, **diversity** is not only a burden tolerated but a **valid objective** in European higher education. In effect, however, this approach cannot be met with one-fits-all concepts of standardized education run on the principle of implementing a single formatted national or even European template. However, diversification along with decentralisation can be a threat to quality since there may **not** be **sufficient reflection** and **adequate implementation** in all cases to be found within the broad span of autonomous providers of higher education who relish the necessary scope of institutional freedom. In order to **counterbalance** this

threat of negative effects, the call for quality of study programmes, the call for **holding higher education institutions responsible** for ensuring quality, and the call for **checks** via external quality assurance which scrutinizes learning opportunities are obvious reactions.

## 8. The ‘Informed Customer’ Concept and the Call for Transparency

Free mover and open access policies which abandon concepts of regulated and closed higher education systems – especially when adding a business-type element by introducing fees – and differentiation of learning opportunities – in particular when and where entrepreneurial approaches to higher education are followed – require ‘informed customers’ who are in a position to make ‘**rational choices**’ on preferences. It is within this logic that **provision of information on quality**, hence – external – **quality assurance plus transparency** of quality judgments, is essential beyond mere accountability.<sup>12</sup> While the latter is oriented rather to evidence on track record in the past, the ‘informed customer’ view uses accountability as a **predicator** of **future potential** and opportunities.

It is therefore self-evident that the **call for transparency** is a key feature of the European quality debate. This demand is voiced both by students and certainly no less by employers. This call takes on a **specific facet** when combined with the expectation of ‘**quick and simple**’ information to enable users to make choices between alternatives, be it – from an employer’s perspective – between graduates or – from a student perspective – between institutions of higher education. It is probably due to this context and purpose to **facilitate easy comparability** of qualities that **rankings** and **ratings** of various kinds and origin, often highlighted or even produced by the media, have gained considerable ground in the last two decades.

## II. Politically Induced Mechanisms

On a **technical level**, these political contexts, objectives, and approaches require certain tools and practices which in return cannot do without quality and quality assurance:

### 1. Link to Recognition

Ensuring individual freedom and societal relevance in terms of enhancing employability by facilitating access and permeability in terms of space, time, and prior learning **requires reliable mechanisms** for academic and professional **recognition**. The Lisbon Recognition Convention<sup>13</sup> and EU directives on professional recognition are instrumental to that end. However, reliability in translating learning outcomes from case to case between systems can only be gained if and when there is **sufficient and reliable, evidence-based transparency** of the **content reality** of the learning experience and achievement to be recognized. Therefore ensuring quality, which is a task for providers in higher education, and assuring existence of sufficient quality, which is a job to be done by internal and external quality assessments, in conjunction with transparency of the quality procured are **prerequisites** for making the elaborate system of recognition work.

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<sup>12</sup> Cf Amaral/Rosa, Trends in Quality in Higher Education – Does EUA Fall into These Trends?; Essays on Supportive Peer Review (Nova Science Publishers Inc, New York, 2008), Chapter 2, pp. 21 (26).

<sup>13</sup> See short survey in the article by Andrejs Rauhvargers, The Lisbon Recognition Convention: principles and practical application; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.3.4-1.

## 2. Link to Qualifications Frameworks

European qualification frameworks<sup>14</sup> are supposed to serve as **calibration instruments** designed to **help with translating qualifications** gained in one European system into another by correlating systems information provided by national qualifications frameworks. Evidently these qualification frameworks are indispensable for easy operation of recognition between diverse systems, provided that national qualification frameworks are accurately tuned to the measurements procured by the relevant European qualification framework. However, there is a missing link for purposes of comparison, e.g. and particularly so in the context of recognition procedures, if there is no additional evidence of the accuracy of the **match between** the relevant **national qualification framework** and the **individual study programme** under scrutiny. In effect, this demands both that there is a quality design innate to each programme which relates it to the descriptor system of the applicable national qualification framework, and that there is sufficient public reliability in this fact, which is backed by adequate internal and external quality assurance. Unless this is in place, the chain stretching from individual programme level via its relevant national qualification framework up to the European qualification framework(s) and back from there via the national qualification framework of the target country to its subsequent programme level is not operational.<sup>15</sup>

## 3. Link to ECTS

Recognition and qualifications frameworks, especially through level quantifiers, are supported by the European credit transfer system (ECTS).<sup>16</sup> Again quality provision in higher education needs to embrace this concept, and quality assurance must assess whether this is in fact done, in order to make the system work reliably and to make sure that it deserves public trust.

## 4. Link to Diploma Supplement and Transcript of Records

Eventually, transparency is provided and safeguarded by proper and internationally comprehensible documentation of learning achievements. Such transparency is expected to be brought about by diploma supplements<sup>17</sup> which describe the positioning of a programme within its context, and by transcripts of record which are issued to students to document their personal track record. With diploma supplements in conjunction with transcripts of record indicating programme qualities and relating individual performance to these, these tools are essential to facilitate mobility by means of making recognition of prior learning and of qualifications easier. In that sense and to this end, these – together with the ECTS – are quality elements of considerable weight in practice.

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<sup>14</sup> The text of the so-called Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area can be found on the website of the 2009 Bologna Process Conference in Leuven/Louvain under [www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogewonderwijs/bologna/documents](http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogewonderwijs/bologna/documents). For basics, cf. 'A framework for qualifications of the European Higher Education Area', drafted by the Bologna Working Group on Qualifications Framework, published by the Danish Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation [Copenhagen 2005]; this report is also to be found via the aforementioned website. – Also see Andrée Sursock, European Frameworks for Quality, *EUA Bologna Handbook* [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B 4.3-1; Jim Murray, The Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area: challenges and opportunities; in: *EUA Bologna Handbook* [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B 2.5-1; and Jürgen Kohler, Europäische Qualifikationsrahmen und ihre Bedeutung für die einzelstaatlichen Studiensysteme: European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EFQ-LLL) – Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF – EHEA); in: *Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre* [edited by Benz, Kohler, Landfried; Berlin 2004 pp], Chapter D 1.4.

<sup>15</sup> The complexity of the issue connected to qualifications and qualification frameworks and its relevance for the quality debate is analysed in: Sjur Bergan, *Qualifications – Introduction to a concept*; Council of Europe Higher Education Series No. 6 (2007).

<sup>16</sup> Cf., inter alia, Robert Wagenaar, *An introduction to the European Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS)*; in: *EUA Bologna Handbook* [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.2.4-1; also Volker Gehmlich, *The Added Value of ECTS*; in: *EUA Bologna Handbook* [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter C.3.3-1.

<sup>17</sup> Cf., inter alia, from a practical perspective Etelka T. Dahl, *The Diploma Supplement at the University of Bergen: Why?, Who?, When?, How?*; in: *EUA Bologna Handbook* [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter C.3.3-1.

### III. Political *Zeitgeist*

Finally, prevalent political *Zeitgeist* should be considered. The following points come to mind:

#### 1. Resuming Items Highlighted Above

First of all, there is *Zeitgeist* at work in many of the items mentioned above. This comes to the fore in particular when considering that quality and quality assurance largely, though not entirely, root in **present-day socio-economic and political concerns, aspirations, and philosophies**, such as global competition and competitiveness as menacing challenge and education as salvation (Lisbon Agenda); commodification (“external dimension” of the Bologna Process) and the concept of the “informed customer” as basic assumptions of the “entrepreneurial university”; ageing societies and emphasis on life-long learning; the issue of social mix and European integration in relation to open access and transversal opportunities subject to recognition of prior learning. At the level of **mindset**, *Zeitgeist* may also be seen at work with regard to the blending of technocratic managerialism with scepticism, and with blending rhetoric of trust with a reality of accountability checks.

Beyond these observations derived from the items mentioned before there are other, basically conceptual philosophies at work. These are:

#### 2. From Quality Regulation by Law to Quality Selectivity by Market-style Competition

By tradition many European countries used to consider **quality** in higher education to be a **matter of legal provisions** and administration of legal rules. Course contents were regulated, and running programmes required specific ministerial permission; staffing was supervised by ministries administering specific rules on qualification paths, and student access to programmes followed rules of law in terms of quantity and qualitative expectations; funding of educational processes was subject to legally earmarked budgets. With more modern emphasis on autonomy along with philosophies and practices of ‘**new public management**’,<sup>18</sup> a paradigm shift has taken place, with the concept of **entrepreneurial risk and success** being the new yardstick of quality. In short, the **market** which centres around concepts of ‘service provider’ and ‘client’ or ‘customer’ is about to **succeed the law** as the significant **regulator** and major steering device in matters of quality. Quality as reflected in visible **quality assurance** for reasons of accountability to be used as a transparency tool for the ‘**informed customer**’ who makes ‘rational choices’ in order to match his or her individual expectations in a world of **competing** higher education **providers** would be the extreme version of this approach and quality concept.

#### 3. Quality in Education and Managerialism

Business-like approach is linked to managerialism, which is prevalent in numerous day-to-day operational practices and beliefs. That is to say, quality is considered from the ‘**can do**’ **perspective**; it is seen as a feature that can be created if only the right recipes are used. As a consequence, highly personalized elements of educational processes which have little to do with the personalities of the individuals as such but very much with the interaction between individuals in specific circumstances are not easily captured by managerial technocracy. However, in failing to incorporate such singular success factors beyond planning the quest for quality in higher education and the inquest into quality of higher education are prone to miss the essential point which raises learning and teaching from routine average quality to those significant moments of true interaction of creative mutual learning. The notion of ‘**quality culture**’ tends to serve as an antithesis to some extent. However, there is quite a number who frown and smile when hearing the word; nevertheless,

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<sup>18</sup> Cf on the role of philosophies of new public management in higher education and quality assurance therein Amaral/Rosa, Trends in Quality in Higher Education – Does EUA Fall into These Trends?; Essays on Supportive Peer Review (Nova Science Publishers Inc, New York, 2008), Chapter 2, pp 21 (24-26).

although those who frown might be wrong, in practice they may well represent the majority position.

#### 4. Educational Quality as being Subject to Measuring

Whether or not linked to managerial approaches as mentioned above, there is a strong belief that **quality** in education can be measured and thus, by and large, **be verified rationally and objectively**. The advent and high appreciation of **'performance indicators', at best of a quantitative nature**, bears witness to this assumption. While there may be some truth in this belief, the tendency to disregard non-measurable elements of quality follows in line with an **engineering approach** to quality and quality assurance and an overall perspective on reality as a mathematised object. It may be added that the tendency to emphasize the **juridical aspects** of external quality assurance more strongly is likely to support this tendency even more strongly.

#### 5. Trust, Distrust, or 'Guarded Trust'?

Finally, on a different note of more general, atmospheric observation, there is the **rhetoric of 'trust'** or 'confidence' while this is paralleled at the same time by the demand for external quality assurance. The legal historian David Daube once observed that people tend to talk most about those things which they possess least. If this statement holds true, there is **considerable distrust** in European systems when considering the frequent invocation of 'trust' in discussions on quality in higher education.<sup>19</sup> Indeed there are firm beliefs that higher education institutions could do better in many ways, also in teaching and learning.<sup>20</sup>

Whether or not there is valid reason for distrust in general or in specific cases or circumstances must, and may, be left undecided here. For, at any rate, there is also some indication that there is no way of escaping both the necessity and the feasibility to trust higher education provisions in principle: the very fact that the Bologna Communiqués explicitly state that the prime responsibility for quality rests with higher education institutions indicates the **belief** that these **institutions can be entrusted** with the job to ensure good quality in higher education, which by and large implies that they can be trusted to do so.

When seen in this conflict of views and sentiment, the bridge between trust and distrust lies both in new rhetoric and in a **shift in** formulating the **prime task of external quality assurance**. As for the latter, quality assurance should **not** be seen as **inspectorate-style** surveillance but rather as a supportive **collegial undertaking** – hence, perhaps and among other reasons, the shift from a governmental operation to peer review approach –, and its main purpose might not be to 'ensure' the existence and further development of quality but rather to make existing quality credibly visible to the general public, i.e. to 'assure' others of qualities available in the higher education system.<sup>21</sup> And as for new rhetoric, the terminological compromise between trust and distrust lies in the phrase **'guarded trust'**, which conveys the notion of 'trust – yes, but', i.e. of presuming the availability of quality in higher education while accepting that there needs to be a safety net to underpin this presumption reliably 'just in case'.

### C. Quality Concepts

Considering quality in higher education provision assumes that there is understanding of, and some consensus on, the concept of quality. In theory and in political reality, there is and there is not.

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<sup>19</sup> The presence of distrust is also observed by Amaral/Rosa, Trends in Quality in Higher Education – Does EUA Fall into These Trends?; Essays on Supportive Peer Review (Nova Science Publishers Inc, New York, 2008), Chapter 2, pp 21 (24-26).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. ESG, Introduction to Parts 1 and 2, which states under the heading 'Basic principles': „The quality of academic programmes need[s] to be developed and improved for students and other beneficiaries of higher education across the EHEA.“

<sup>21</sup> This indeed is the view which the ESG take, cf. introduction to the guidelines of ESG part 1 item 2.

## I. Defining Quality of Programmes

### 1. Competing Concepts

In general, there are **a number of quality concepts** as regards higher education programmes. All of these are seen as relevant and competing.<sup>22</sup> In fact, there is a strong belief that a ‘one-fits-all’ concept of quality is not desirable. Instead, **differentiation** is much **welcome** in view of differences of needs and in order to match a broad spectrum of individual and economic demands. However, so much the more there is differentiation; there is a call to **balance variety** of opportunities and educational results **by** reliable **transparency** of differences.

Among the quality concepts of higher education are – just to mention only the most common ones here –, according to broadly accepted **typology**:<sup>23</sup> quality as (a) the exceptional or excellence, which bears an element of elitism; (b) perfection or consistency, which is linked to notion of reliability and to conformity through compliance with set standards; (c) fitness for purpose, often linked to the need to address fitness of purpose as the required reference point; (d) value for money, which is sometimes linked to the notion of value for time invested, both of which relate more closely than other definitions of quality to the quality concept of – partly rational and partly emotional – customer satisfaction; (e) transformation, considering the individual gain accrued in the course of a learning experience.

### 2. Explicitly Open Choices

All of the aforementioned concepts show certain advantages and drawbacks. However, this is not the place to discuss their pros and cons. Instead, the question is whether Europe has made a choice between them. The answer is that there is **no explicit** and **official answer**.

### 3. Implicit Choices

Nevertheless, **implicit preferences** may be identified. Arguably there is a tendency towards the ‘**fitness of and for purpose**’ concept, i.e. at least in the sense that this concept appears to capture best certain features of the Bologna Process statements in a consistent way. This is indicated by documents of the Bologna Process in two ways.

First, these documents **formulate educational objectives** to be pursued by higher education programmes. Among these have for long been the calls for ensuring ‘**employability** on the European labour market’ – or in more student-centred wording of the London Communiqué of 2007, for ‘preparing students for their future careers’. Moreover, at least since the London Communiqué of 2007 additional aims<sup>24</sup> have been identified. These are: ‘preparing students for life as **active citizens in a democratic society**... enabling their **personal development, creating and maintaining a broad, advanced knowledge base**’ and, which is partly linked to the last item, ‘**stimulating research and innovation**’. In addition, overarching systems objectives have been defined. Among these are ensuring mobility and flexibility in all aspects mentioned above, and identifiability of programme quality as well as – via reliable comparability stemming from transparency – recognition by using the tools provided, such as ECTS, qualifications frameworks and the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Second, the **shift to the learning outcome concept** *per se* indicates leaning towards a fitness for purpose concept of quality. As contrasted to the – at least rhetorically – abandoned input factor

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<sup>22</sup> Again, cf. to Jethro Newton’s presentation What is Quality?, in: Embedding Quality Culture in Higher Education, A Selection of Papers from the 1<sup>st</sup> European Forum for Quality Assurance Munich 2006, EUA Case Studies 2007, 14 – 20.

<sup>23</sup> The text here follows Lee Harvey, Understand Quality, EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.4.1-1; and Doris Carstensen/Stefanie Hofmann, Qualität in Lehre und Studium: Begriffe und Objekte, Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre [edited by Benz, Kohler, Landfried; Berlin 2004pp], Chapter C.1.1. Both articles extensively list further references.

<sup>24</sup> These follow prior specification of the Council of Europe, cf. n. 8 above.

approach, looking at learning outcomes signals the need to inquire into the modes and levels and successes of achievement attained vis-à-vis the aforementioned objectives as a result of a structured learning process. In doing so, quality planning and quality judgment cannot avoid considering, but rather needs to focus on, the operational and content circumstances of educational provisions with a view towards identifying their suitability to achieve the objectives set.

**Customer satisfaction**, be it interpreted in the light of value for money or value for time invested or in any other mode, comes in indirectly, i.e. not as a material quality requirement as such but rather indirectly in that it enters the European quality concept through specifically standardized procedures of ‘feed-in and feed-back’ in the course of quality development and quality assessment. The broadly shared expectation to include students’ and stakeholders’ views gathered through feedback loops results from the conviction that students’ and employers’ opinions on educational offers and effects are significant instruments in developing and judging quality of programmes. Moreover, the expectation to include students and, in some countries, also labour market representatives in ‘peer review’ based assessments points in the same direction.

**Transformation** is necessarily included as a qualitative yardstick if and when purposes are defined in view of diversity of systems and learning expectations, and where there is a call for ‘profiling’ institutions along lines of differences of individual learning objectives at and for various levels and purposes. Seen in this light, autonomy of institutions in the context of the call for institutional profile can, and must, include the concept of transformation in the concept of fitness of and for purpose.

**Perfection** in the sense of **consistency** and **reliability** undoubtedly links to the quality concept. When seen from the fitness for purpose approach, these features are included since they relate to the demand for accurate – that is to say, reliable and consistent – implementation of model concepts which as such are deemed to be fit for purpose. Moreover, these points also blend in as sub-aspects to consumer satisfaction. Finally, they are related to notions of equality of treatment, hence to the concept of the rule of law in higher education.

In fact, it is worth highlighting here that the **rule of law** as such, for its own merit, is an obvious implicit element and overarching principle of European understanding of quality also in teaching and learning. This is evident in as much as rejection of corruption and nepotism or, generally and positively speaking, acceptance of ethic principles is concerned. However, it must be understood that the notion of the rule of law, especially the concept of egalitarianism under the law and of predictability of decision rationales, reaches deep into routine practices, stretching from admission all the way to examinations and recognition of degrees.

**Excellence** as a quality criterion comes in where there is political advocacy for stratification due to sympathy for the need of first-class innovation and leadership. In that sense, though excellence is contested in some places it is accepted at least as, and for, a specific niche of the higher education area. With the concept of fitness *for* purpose being derived from and dependent on fitness *of* purpose considerations, excellence as a criterion can be incorporated if fitness of purpose is also interpreted in terms of institutional profile and mission and not merely in terms of general educational objectives.

## II. Open and Conflicting Elements of Quality

### 1. Openness to Interpretation and Limiting Rationale

By their very nature the afore-mentioned four or five overarching educational objectives which the Bologna Process made explicit only rather late, i.e. with a hint in the Bergen Communiqué of 2005 and fully visible only in the London Communiqué in 2007, leave **room for diverse interpretation**. However, this is **not detrimental** in a political arena which is prepared not only to accept but rather to **foster diversity** and, following from that, differentiation of programmes

offered. Here the true test of quality does not lie in matching a unified answer but in **addressing** the **topical challenge** and in arriving at answers which stand the validity test in terms of **solid reasoning** and **valued achievement**.

## 2. Conflict

Due to a basically non-normative approach and due to openness of interpretation in principle (with the exception of qualification frameworks, which will be referred to below), there is little surprise in witnessing that there are numerous debates on interpretations and, perhaps even more so, heated debates on **real or suspected conflicts** between educational objectives and correlated devices. One of the favourites is the never-ending discussion on the conflict between ensuring **'employability'** and **'academic approach'** or, as appears to be close to the topic, between **'practice'** and **'theory'**.<sup>25</sup> As may apply from case to case in European countries which run a dual system of higher education institutions, the debate is aggravated by an implicit institutional conflict between universities in a traditional sense and what used to be known as polytechnics (Fachhochschule et al) which are now often called universities of applied sciences. This is not the place to enter into this debate, which is usually linked to the term 'profile' used in the Bologna Process documents dealing with qualification frameworks. However, it may be said that the debate tends to be based on reciprocal misinterpretations or undue simplifications of those elements which constitute employability at the relevant level of human profile and which characterize valid approaches in academia when considering the intertwining of 'theory' and 'practice' plus 'soft skills'.<sup>26</sup>

## III. Abandoned Quality Concepts, Ambivalent Aftermath and New Orientation

### 1. Input and outcomes orientation

Positive definition of quality approaches are necessarily paralleled by negating or abandoning others. Here the slogans 'from input factors to **learning outcomes** defined in terms of **competences**'<sup>27</sup> and, which is partly related when seen from the viewpoint of process and approach, **'from teaching to learning'** and **'student-centred learning'** come to mind. Despite **profound** and serious **difficulties** in defining the content of learning outcomes and relevant competences, in validating them, in making them operational, in installing fit-for-purpose learning devices and environments, and in measuring their accomplishment, the shift to learning outcomes and to student-centred learning rather than focussing on input and teacher perspectives has been one of the **key mantras** in the European quality debate. However, there is still **no denying** of the **relevance of input factors**, such as qualification and numbers of staff, of equipment, or of student intake. So in practice, from case to case, there seems to be considerable ambivalence between rhetoric and traditional reality in defining and measuring quality features.

The likely key to consolidating both approaches is that both factors need to be **linked** in a **methodically correct** manner. This is done by not taking input factors as isolated starting points for developing and judging quality. Instead, input factors should rather be seen as elements to be considered incidentally when addressing the question as to whether or not the envisaged educational purposes could, in terms of underpinning both at the level of concept and of its subsequent implementation, feasibly be accomplished.

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. the critical approach to any such 'conflict' by Martina Vukasovic, Deconstructing and reconstructing employability; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.1.4-2.

<sup>26</sup> Readers may find the author's view on this issue in the author's article 'Typology of the Degree Structure'; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp] chapter B.2.2-1, p. 20-21.

<sup>27</sup> For first orientation on learning outcome concepts, cf. Stephen Adam, An introduction to learning outcomes; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.2.3-1.

## 2. Compliance with Subject Benchmarks and Autonomous Differentiation

There is another facet of **ambivalence** with regard to the relation **between** the concept of programme **profiling** of autonomous, competing higher education institutions for diverse student requirements by means of providing **programme differentiation** on the one hand and the role of **compliance** by means of implementing nationally or internationally **standardized programme elements** on the other. The latter may occur to a lesser extent than used to be the case, but still there are approaches which advocate implementation of **model templates** for specific programmes or at least part of them. **Subject benchmark statements** could produce similar effects if administered improperly, i.e. rigidly; so could overarch European efforts summarized under the headline ‘tuning’.

The answer to the innate conflict between profiled, clearly communicated diversity and concepts which are more geared towards content standardisation can be found by ensuring two factors. First, by **not** misinterpreting any such benchmark statements or findings of ‘tuning’ or the like as being **normative** and binding **but** as mere **reference points** which to deviate from is permitted if quality is demonstrated concretely *in casu*. Second, by making sure that any such statements and findings refrain from defining specific content or methodological input but rather limit themselves to outlines of competences to be acquired. If not mistaken, the Tuning Project, for instance, attempts to respect this line of thought.

## 3. Advent of Qualifications Frameworks

The quality debate, and indeed the entire quality development and quality assessment in Europe hinges upon the development and true case-to-case application of qualifications frameworks, which is not often appreciated satisfactorily.<sup>28</sup> With the installation of the three-cycle system of the Bologna Process, and more so in contexts of life-long learning concepts, the development of an **interpretative scheme** emerged as a necessity in order to **facilitate** and **ensure international comparability** based on **transparency** of national educational set-ups in order to foster mobility by facilitating easy and predictable recognition of modules and degrees. With this in mind, the **Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area** emerged as an annex to the Bergen Communiqué in 2005,<sup>29</sup> and a more comprehensive framework of the European Union a couple of years later which attempts to cover entire life cycles.<sup>30</sup> Following the qualification framework of the Bologna Process, the Bologna study scheme is underpinned by interpretations namely in terms of **cycles** and **adequate level descriptors** with specific regard to **learning outcomes** and **competences, credit** and **workload** – and hence indirectly also to **ECTS**, the European credit transfer system, or a comparable national system based on workload –, and **profile**, with the so-called ‘**Dublin Descriptors**’<sup>31</sup> playing a leading role in structuring expected learning outcomes and competence development along stratification of different levels.

**National qualifications frameworks** are to be developed across the Bologna Process countries which keep **in line** with the overarching European Qualifications Framework. With this alignment of national and European qualifications frameworks intending to ensure cross-border transparency and translatability, obviously it is absolutely **essential** for **every programme** to be **reliably aligned** to the relevant national qualifications framework lest the entire scheme and its political aspirations fail altogether. If so, it is mandatory to bear the requirements of the respective qualifications frameworks closely in mind as substantive calibration elements both for purposes of programme design and for quality assurance. So, indeed, at least to that extent there is a **prescriptive** and **normative element** in quality, though not in terms of subject-related statements but rather in terms

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<sup>28</sup> For reference, cf. paragraph B.II.2. above.

<sup>29</sup> For reference, cf. n. 14 above.

<sup>30</sup> This article does not intend to deal with matters of coincidence or conflict between these two European qualifications frameworks.

<sup>31</sup> These can, for instance, be found on the website of EUA, the European University Association, under [www.eau.be/fileadmin/user\\_upload/files/EUA1\\_documents/dublin\\_descriptors.pdf](http://www.eau.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/EUA1_documents/dublin_descriptors.pdf).

of types and in-depth characteristics of learning outcomes, competences, and profiles as related to levels and workload invested.

#### **IV. Static or Dynamic Concept of Quality**

Finally, there is a notable **shift** in awareness from seeing quality as a static concept which results in merely ensuring and assuring that a specifically defined state of quality is reached and maintained **to a dynamic concept** of quality. The latter understands quality operations to be a permanent job of continuous quality **enhancement**, i.e. as a spiral rather than a plateau. Obviously this concept is bound to be a major innovation in places where there has hitherto been a tendency to see quality in terms of compliance with a set template of a model programme; obviously it is also more favourable to concepts of differentiation and profile, autonomy and competitive entrepreneurial approaches. At least in rhetoric and theory, but more and more so also in reality there is support for understanding quality as a challenge to permanent improvement rather than a once-for-all-times undertaking. This indeed influences systems of quality development and of quality evaluation profoundly by moving towards a **formative approach** in quality assurance, as will be outlined hereafter, bearing significance as to the institutional roles and responsibilities – and for that matter, governance – of higher education institutions.

#### **D. Internal Quality Assurance – from Safeguarding via Creating to Enhancing Quality**

Looking at quality and quality assurance from the **perspective of concrete activities**, there is the world of criteria and tools. However, these need to be seen on the backdrop of certain overarching principles which constitute the fundamentals of these activities.

##### **I. Fundamentals**

In terms of basic framework, the following elements should be addressed, or rather – since they have been touched upon before in different context and for different purposes – be revisited:

###### **1. Agent**

Ever since the Berlin Communiqué of 2003 the Bologna Process has made a strong point in saying that the **prime responsibility** for quality of educational provisions rests with **higher education institutions** themselves. This statement signals a number of different things.

First of all, quality is subject to **internal** activity. This signals a marked contrast to believing that quality is to be imported from, or by, externals of whatever kind, be it ministries or stakeholders, notwithstanding the necessity to incorporate their voices into developmental considerations.

Second, responsibility for quality is vested in the institution as such, i.e. it is expected to be taken up as an **institutionalised** task. This feature denotes two aspects. Matters of quality are **not only** duties to be met by **individual** members as such in areas of their personal activities, although there is no denying that individuals also bear personal responsibility for quality education. Instead, institutionalisation of quality matters means adequate development of **stable organisational structures** and **functional routine processes**. The link to questions of institutional governance becomes visible here.

###### **2. Purposes and Philosophies**

In fact, identifying higher education institutions as prime bearers of quality is linked to **ulterior philosophies** and **purposes**. Basically, the lead idea is that taking quality matters to institutional level rather than leaving it with externals addresses questions of **effectiveness** and **efficiency** best. Of course effectiveness and efficiency cannot be judged without identifying objectives to be achieved and correlated philosophies to be met. So, what procures efficiency and

effectiveness with regard to these by putting the onus of quality education and quality assurance in education upon higher education institutions?

Enhanced probability to **avoid mere window-dressing** in favour of real action is an obvious first answer. The less there is an atmosphere of an ‘inspector calling’ from time to time and the more there is day-to-day in-house collaborative activity not primarily in checking but rather in joint development of quality, the more likeliness there is in seeing the truth of true and real activity.

However, there are deeper levels of reasoning which are linked to the overarching understanding of the quality issue in the Bologna Process. In-house institutionalised routines **safeguard permanence of the quest for quality**. Therefore institutional responsibility is a useful tool to effectuate the concept of continuous quality enhancement. For this concept is in contrast to two malfunctions of external operations of quality development and assurance at the same time: first, to understanding quality as a matter of fixed status; second, to running the risk that quality enhancement, even when accepted in principle, takes place in steps and leaps only at the moment of imminent external inspection.

Moreover, bringing quality to the institutions of higher education means **decentralisation**. This is not just recommendable in order to **avoid administrative overburdening** at times of mushrooming of public and private institutions. The second reason lies in the fact that decentralisation of responsibilities is the only remedy to **ensure diversity and differentiation** of higher education provisions within national systems. Here the link to overarching philosophies in the European higher education area becomes visible quite clearly.

All in all, these reasons indicate that quality is seen as a permanent challenge and task requiring differentiated answers. In effect, this means that there is no mere implementation of externally prefabricated templates but rather the need for in-depth analysis of changing expectations of specific *clientele* in specific environments along the lines of specified learning outcomes in terms of competences. This, in effect, means that **individuality of missions** of institutions play a role as a prerequisite for identifying credible and feasible choices. **Defining** mission and position in a contextually **meaningful** and purposefully **valid** way **and translating** them correctly into concrete operations within their institutional compound, however, can again be done best by those who define it, i.e. by institutions of higher education.

This is so much the more true as the **institution** as such is eventually **held responsible** for failure; in particular when the educational system of a country or even of Europe is seen as being based on the idea of the ‘entrepreneurial university’ ready for ‘competition’. For if so, **fairness** requires making sure that **responsibility** in its **double meaning** – i.e. being held accountable and being in charge – is concentrated in the **same hand**.

### 3. Action Lines

In practical effect, the endorsement of an institution-based quality concept has necessarily evolved into the development of two different yet intertwined action lines in the realm of quality assurance.<sup>32</sup>

The first and rather **traditional** one is concerned with **specific programmes as such**. It is concerned with applying what is often called the ‘**quality cycle**’. Basically following Deming’s plan-do-check-act circle, this concept encompasses the following elementary line of thought and practice:

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<sup>32</sup> For detail, cf. Jürgen Kohler, Institutional and programme approaches to quality; in: EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B 4.7-1.

Initially, it identifies valid learning objectives based on considerations in terms of content, desirable competence outcomes and proper formatting within the Bologna model and its level descriptors, as established and defined by relevant qualification frameworks. It then works out a programme concept – including, apart from content, structure, and teaching-learning methodologies, an analysis of the means required, of access principles, and of assessment modalities – which is fit to achieve expected outcomes, whereupon it ensures true implementation of that concept. In assessing and evaluating the effective results some time after implementation, the process eventually ends in iterating the choice of objectives and the adequacy of concepts and success of implementation and outcomes achieved.

However, there is a second strand of action required which stems directly from **holding institutions responsible** for permanent development of quality, and for evaluating quality for the sake of internal improvement and for external transparency both for accountability and for stakeholder-related information purposes. It is here where governance and managerial matters arise, as is evident to the ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (ESG) when considering ESG part 1 items 1 and 2: “Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards;” and “institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes.” This institution-oriented line of action will be considered later.

## II. Programme Quality and Internal Quality Assurance – Criteria and Processes

The following items concerning criteria and processes of internal quality assurance in higher education institutions may be highlighted in brief, referencing them to the afore-mentioned ‘quality cycle’ operated at the level of concrete programmes.

### 1. Criteria

Looking at practices in Europe, there are numerous variants of sets of substantive quality criteria; these cannot be dealt with here.<sup>33</sup> However, there are some common denominators of good practice, irrespective of variants in wording and arrangement. This comes as no surprise since European institutions are expected to follow the same principles set out by the aforementioned ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’ (ESG).

Amongst these are, subject largely to **part 1 item 2** of the **ESG**, issues on **good design** and **implementation of programmes**, their **formal approval**, their **monitoring**, and their **periodic review**. The afore-mentioned ‘quality cycle’ shines through when considering the more **detailed itemisation** of the ESG here; i.e.: development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes; careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content with due regard, where applicable, to specific needs of different modes of delivery such as full time, part time, distance learning, e-learning, and to types of higher education, e.g. academic, vocational and professional; availability of appropriate learning resources; formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme; monitoring of the progress and achievements of the students; regular periodic reviews of programmes, including external panel members; regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations; participation of students in quality assurance activities.

There is also specific concern with the **assessment** of students, as is highlighted in **ESG part 1 item 3**. Here emphasis is on application of published criteria, regulations and procedures, all of

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<sup>33</sup> Nor can this article consider the problematic (various) concepts of ‘standards’ as such; as an introduction, readers may refer to Lueger/Vettori, Standards and Quality models: theoretical considerations; in: Implementing and Using Quality Assurance: Strategy and Practice, A Selection of Papers from the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Forum for Quality Assurance Rome 2007, EUA Case Studies 2008, 11pp.; and Kohler, Sachliche Maßgaben des Entscheidens: Topoi, Kriterien, Standards, Indikatoren; in: Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre (edited by Benz, Kohler, Landfried; Berlin 2004pp), chapter D.1.1.

which are to be applied constantly. In fact, matters of assessment fit into categories of the ‘quality cycle’ easily. However, zooming these issues up by highlighting them specifically in the ESG is in keeping with the importance which is attached to this facet both from student and societal perspectives.

As for **input** factors, **ESG part 1 items 4 and 5** deal with matters of quality and quantity of **staff** and of **resources** respectively. Similarly on the level of tools yet with a difference of focus, there is emphasis on the availability of adequate **information systems** and on procuring sufficient **public information** in **ESG part 1 items 6 and 7**. Apart from the latter the ESG here singles out aspects which are also part of the ‘quality cycle’ as described above.

Beyond these standard points referred to by the ESG there are differences across Europe as regards the availability and significance of **subject benchmark statements** or more rigid modes of **subject-related descriptor systems** or even core **model curricula**. In addition, note should be taken of the fact that there are diverse levels of requirements set by **specific professions**; however, some of these tend to be more and more standardised due to EU regulation on recognition of professional qualifications.

The ESG do not explicitly address two major issues of substantial quality: first, specification of socially accepted and expected **overarching learning objectives**, as outlined in the London Communiqué; and second, as has been pointed out above, ensuring the link to, and proper application of, the descriptor system behind the Bologna stratification as specified in national **qualifications frameworks**, which are expected to be aligned to the relevant European Qualifications Framework. This is probably largely due to the fact that the ESG were agreed upon in 2005 while the two elements mentioned have emerged only later or, as is the case with the European Qualifications Framework of the Bologna Process, at best simultaneously. However, it is essential for making the Bologna Process functional and for achieving its key objective to ensure mobility and easy recognition along the lines of the Lisbon Recognition Convention that the **ESG** quality requirements are **interpreted** in the light of these recent factors of content substance. Hence, these two factors must necessarily be seen **as integral to the ESG** criteria.

There is a more profound challenge in that the ESG do not really specify criteria in the operational sense of the term. In fact, the ESG largely offer *topoi* to be considered as being essential for sufficient or good quality but stop short of describing what actual reasoning should be based upon in terms of **decisive** yes-no-perhaps factors or elements in *concreto*, as the word ‘**criterion**’ suggests. Following from that, there is little on **performance indicators** to be used in order to make the application of criteria in the aforementioned concrete sense operational and objective. So it is no surprise that differences on these counts appear in Europe, varying from more refined fine tuning to confidence in wisdom of peers exercising accurate judgment from case to case.

Moreover, by stating that the ESG merely offer **guidelines** which leave room for deviation there is another element of insecurity as to all-embracing application of the ESG themselves. However, this appears to be more a problem in theory than in reality. There is strong adherence to the wording of the ESG across Europe *de facto*, largely because quality assurance agencies feel on the safe side when simply implementing the ESG as they stand, both vis-à-vis higher education institutions and for securing their own acceptance by ENQA, the European Association for Quality Assurance of Higher Education, and by EQAR, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

## 2. Processes

**Parallel to** indicating **material** standards and guidelines higher education institutions are expected to observe certain **procedural rules**.

In essence, quality processes are expected to be **reliable**. To this end, they need to be based on **fact-finding** and must thus be **evidence-based**; hence the emphasis on **information systems** in **ESG**

**part 1 item 6.** Reliability is also seen in ensuring clarity in matters of **institutionalised responsibility** for quality development and quality monitoring<sup>34</sup> leading to regular iteration of reviews,<sup>35</sup> which is in line with the concept of continuous quality enhancement. Reliability in terms of accuracy and transparency is added by the notion of fairness when higher education institutions are expected not only to avail themselves of policies, criteria, and practices in quality matters at the level of conceptual normativity but also to ensure their consistent application at the level of implementation.

Another key factor is the notion of **participation** and inclusion.<sup>36</sup> This pertains namely to **students** in so far as they are to be included in internal proceedings and evaluations related to quality, but also to **externals**. In particular, this extends to consultation with external stakeholders, namely those who can contribute to aspects of employability and labour market expectations in general.

A final procedural aspect to mention is the call for **transparency**. This feature goes beyond describing and using predefined criteria and processes in a participatory manner, all of which of course are significant features of openness. Moreover, results of findings are expected to be made available to the public.<sup>37</sup> This is to **protect** against covert deviation from predefined rules and to ensure proper, evidence-based reasoning. Beyond this ancillary role, however, transparency is expected to **raise public trust** in institutions, **help** students and stakeholders with **making** their **personal choices**, and it should provide entire systems of higher education sufficient information in order to **support system wide learning processes**, which is envisaged as a spin-off by **ESG part 2 item 8**.

## E. External Quality Assurance – Approaches, Tools, Effects

### I. Practices

Internal quality assurance is to be **backed up by external quality assurance**. External quality assurance has been established practice in Europe for some time, at least since the nineties and in some cases prior to that time, but in most cases before the advent of the ESG in 2005.

#### 1. Agents: Independent Agencies

It has become common practice to have external quality assurance carried out by **non-governmental external agencies** which act as independent bodies. This development is a **mega trend** indeed, which is strongly supported by the ESG.<sup>38</sup> It may be inspired by long-standing North American practice as regards the concept of regional accreditation authorities, but certainly by a new interpretation of the role of the state in quality assurance. However, the **level of true independence** of external quality assurance agencies **varies** de facto and de jure. Many countries operate **one** quality assurance **agency** established **by national law**, with major features of their operations and the relevant quality criteria being defined by law while granting **independence** mainly as regards concrete **case-to-case judgment**. Others allow **private institutions** to provide external quality assurance, or the quality agencies are entrusted with defining their quality criteria and processes autonomously to a large extent. Many countries still limit recognized external quality assurance to **employing the national agency only**. Others see external quality assurance as an area open to **competition** within the **national system** or even **beyond**, thus using the potential of EQAR, the European register of trustworthy quality assurance agencies which will be dealt with more closely later.

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<sup>34</sup> ESG part 1, items 1 and 2.

<sup>35</sup> ESG part 1, item 2.

<sup>36</sup> ESG part 1 item 2.

<sup>37</sup> ESG part 1 item 7.

<sup>38</sup> Cf. ESG part 3 items 1 and 6.

However, the establishment and practice of external quality assurance by more or less independent external quality assurance agencies is almost all that is common in Europe, apart from certain **procedural consensus** and framework rules provided by the ESG. As for **concrete structure of agents, criteria, and processes** as well as **objects, purposes and consequences** of scrutiny, but also the question to what extent external quality assurance is **voluntary** or **mandatory**, there certainly are **noticeable differences**, the most important of which need to be mentioned.

## 2. Approaches, Objects, and Objectives

In substance, European countries – and no less non-European systems – provide **different approaches** to external quality assurance side by side, with considerable shortcomings in clarity of terminology. *Grosso modo* there is the difference between **evaluation** and **accreditation**, each of which can be applied to **programmes** or to **institutional agents and operations** in areas of teaching and learning in particular, thus resulting in a matrix of at least two by two.<sup>39</sup>

The first type of differentiation, usually described by the terms accreditation and evaluation, is based on **modes** and **consequences** of investigations into higher education quality. **Accreditation** is usually linked to the notion of ‘minimum standards’ which defines **threshold quality** required for a **yes-or-no decision**, in some countries even in terms of **licensing**, pertaining either to a programme or an institution. **Evaluation** tends to be linked to the notion of **support** in order to facilitate quality **enhancement** of a programme or institution, leading to a more open-scale judgment than accreditation. At times the term quality assurance is reserved to evaluations only, though for little reason.

Moreover, again and again a lot of thought is invested in working out extensive philosophies as to the **differences** and also **overlaps** of evaluation and accreditation. In reality the difference is minor in essence. Every process of accreditation includes evaluation when **interpreting evaluation** as an **evidence-based process of fact-finding** leading to **judgements** on quality which are **based on explicit and coherently applied criteria and processes**. Moreover, most **accreditation decisions contain** elements of **recommendations** in as much as evaluations do. The differences may largely be seen in that accreditation processes bear direct legal consequences whereas evaluations as such do not prescribe hard consequences *per se*; but again, this may also be a fallacy from case to case, in particular when **funding** mechanisms are **linked to evaluation** result. So the spirit of collegial openness, and with it the extent to which there needs to be reasons for distrust which evokes more in-depth fact finding, may differ; this is usually to the detriment of accreditation, but not necessarily will mere evaluations be the softer approach in all cases.

The **object** of evaluation or accreditation is considered when linking these terms to the choice between programme and institutional approach; the latter is often associated with the term ‘**audit**’. As for **programme** evaluation or accreditation, external quality assurance **scrutinizes study programmes directly**. As should be the case under the ‘Bologna regime’, this should no longer be done from the input perspective but rather by considering expected learning outcomes and how these are achieved and verified in terms of fit-to-purpose concepts and implementation as well as iteration for improvement purposes, all of which can be summarized under the heading ‘quality cycle’.

An **institutional** approach queries the **capacity** of the higher education institution to **design** and **operate** the aforementioned **quality cycle** successfully, and the way it actually translates this capacity into practice. It is based on the assumption that the availability of such capacity and practice renders a sufficiently high degree of probability as to the accomplishment of qualitatively adequate study programmes. With this proven, confidence in the higher education institution has been established which may lead to ‘self-accreditation’ and ‘delegated authority’ or the like with

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<sup>39</sup> Terminology and meaning (and correlating purposes) are not standardized; for a first coverage of the issue cf. Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (no. 2), 263 pp.

regard to individual programmes, as is the case in some countries. Programme evaluation then takes on a mere secondary role in that it is reduced to the level of sample testing designed to indicate the functionality of the institution's autonomous quality development and assurance systems.

Accreditation and evaluation **processes** may be vested in the hands of one and the same agency, but it **may** also **be split** in various ways. For example, higher education institutions may be invited to present the findings of an external evaluation carried out by an agency of their choice to the accrediting agency; in other cases the results of accreditation findings are to be submitted to the national ministry to grant a decree of accreditation or, as may be the case, of refusal of accreditation. At any rate, the *de facto* and the legal complexity thus created varies in many ways, with more complexity of situations added with differences in the laws and legal cultures of the respective national systems involved.

It may tentatively be said that by and large there is a certain **shift** in Europe **towards institutional approaches**. While many, though by no means all systems apparently tend to start external quality assurance at the level of programmes, the cost factor in view of an abundance of programmes and shortcomings in programme approaches as regards developing true institutional ownership of quality issues and ensuring permanent quality enhancement becomes apparent sooner or later. Moreover, the ESG may be instrumental in supporting this trend because ESG part 2, which deals with external quality assurance requirements, formulates in **ESG part 2 item 1** that 'external quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in part 1 of the ESG'. In fact, this requirement makes including assessment of institutional steering processes in matters of programme quality essential even within the compound of programme-oriented approaches to quality assurance. The ESG thus works like a Trojan horse, unwittingly carrying typical features of institutional appraisal.

Programme orientation is of course strong where there is **professional accreditation**. This can be found in particular, though not exclusively, with regard to programmes leading to **regulated professions**. Professional accreditation is usually run by subject-related professional bodies, which are to be distinguished from authorities working along the line of general academic approaches to subject matters and quality notions. The **divide** as far as availability of specific professional accreditation seems **not** to run **between European and non-European**, e.g. North American, systems. Instead, the divide is rather between those systems inside Europe which, like the British system, have long-standing traditions of robust academic independence from state intervention in conjunction with autonomous professional bodies on the one hand and systems more strongly dependent on traditional state surveillance of academic learning and university qualifications on the other hand. Interestingly there is a noticeable development throughout European higher education institutions to go for specific professional accreditation even in **non-regulated professions**, e.g. in the sciences, engineering, and business management, and to do so by **inviting American agencies** to provide professional accreditation. This tendency is partly due to absence of relevant European agencies for professional accreditation, and partly it is due to gaining an 'internationally recognized seal of quality'. At any rate, both the emergence of a global market for accreditation and for '**global quality branding**' can be observed here, with a strong **advantage** in favour of **North American agencies**.

Finally as for ulterior objectives, it must be noted that external quality assurance is strongly based on **fostering permanent quality enhancement**. This is a core feature of the ESG since they expect periodic external assessment of quality features,<sup>40</sup> emphasise the need to carry out follow-up activities after periodic quality assessments,<sup>41</sup> and require permanent feedback from people

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<sup>40</sup> ESG part 2 item 7.

<sup>41</sup> ESG part 2 item 6.

involved.<sup>42</sup> All this applies to higher education institutions related to their programmes, but also to external quality assurance agencies.

The notion of quality as being an **unlimited learning process** can also be seen in **ESG part 2 item 7** requiring quality assurance agencies to carry out **systems analyses** based on their case findings. This, in fact, is a challenging perspective in European higher education: ensuring not merely quality operations of higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies, but also of national or regional systems as such. This can be done via identification of strengths and weaknesses of a given political higher education system via direct system analysis, or else in a grass-root approach through **identifying cross-sector issues** as they appear at programme or institutional level due to specific **conditions set by the political and socio-economic environment**. Examples of such activities can be found in various ways, such as through systems evaluations of national agencies, but also through systems analyses undertaken by the EUA or other international organisations in a number of European countries.

However, if emphasis of external quality assurance on permanent quality enhancement and learning processes both at institutional and systems level were seen as leading to an atmosphere that could be characterized as a ‘cordial discussion between the institution in question and critical friends’ the reality of external quality assurance would unfortunately be misunderstood in many cases. This is particularly true where accreditation is in place, but also in systems which carry out evaluations. Most external quality assurance proceedings carry more significance than being a mere **support tool**. There are elements of **public accountability** attached to the findings. Moreover, in some systems based on a **licensing** approach the **admissibility** of educational programmes – or even institutions – is **legally dependent** on successful external quality assurance results. Other systems relate **funding** to these outcomes. Hence there is a real and atmospheric, at any rate **delicate ambivalence of rewards and sanctions**<sup>43</sup> instead of disinterested neutrality in external quality assurance operations, though the mode of blending these elements varies from system to system and needs to be balanced to an optimum again and again.

### 3. Processes and Procedures

In terms of process and procedure, external quality assurance in Europe follows a **standard pattern** which is, by and large, described in **ESG part 3 item 7**. First, higher education institutions are expected to submit a **self-evaluation report** on the object to be evaluated, accredited, or audited. The self-evaluation report is followed by a **site visit**, or in some cases two site visits, of a panel of experts appointed by the agency concerned. The **evaluation operations** and the subsequent **report** of the evaluating team is expected to **apply predefined criteria and processes** and must be **evidence-based**, looking both at concepts and practices of the object concerned. It may limit itself to statements in terms of fact finding, but in most cases it also arrives at conclusions in terms of recommendations or affirmative or negative judgement. This is usually followed by **final judgement** passed by a specific body of the agency established for that purpose, thus making sure that there is a calibrating check across the entire field of operation and thus formally accepted institutional responsibility of the agency. In some cases this judgement is **valid directly** vis-à-vis the institution which applied for the process, in some cases it is **passed on to** the competent **governmental authority**, usually the ministry of education, to adopt the decision formally and to make it known to the institution. If dissatisfied, institutions may **appeal** using specific appeals procedures, and – as may be the case in some systems – to law courts.

While this is widely accepted practice, the presence and **role of students** and **external stakeholders** in evaluation panels is more contested.<sup>44</sup> With **ESG part 3 item 7** having strengthened the role of students, almost all quality assurance agencies include students in their

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<sup>42</sup> ESG part 1 item 2.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (no 2), 291-2.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (no 2), 281-3. Students are broadly involved in internal quality assurance in terms of questionnaires and as interviewees in the course of external quality assurance processes.

teams, whereas this may be true only to a lesser extent as far as **representation of**, for example, the **labour market** is concerned. However, enhancing roles of students is not always backed by deep conviction, as may be seen in cases where students are not seen as full team members but rather as integrated observers who are entitled to add their comments and to write their own opinions as an annex to the panel report. At any rate, in principle student involvement is widely safeguarded by now, and students will surely keep broadening their effective influence in formal quality assurance processes. Apart from these processes, however, it should be borne in mind that **students** also bear significant influence by means of their steady **involvement in** key European **policy-making operations** such as the Bologna Process, and no less in voicing their independent opinion on harsh realities of experienced quality deficiencies via publications like ‘Bologna through Students’ Eyes’.

Along with this issue of participation, or perhaps even at the root of it, there are **different concepts of panellists’ competences**. While the ESG mention the term ‘**expert**’, in some cases the term ‘**peer**’ is used more often. The latter term leans more towards the notion that only full academics should be included in panels. This does not only tend to bar students or external stakeholders but sheds some doubt as to the **right definition of the scope of expertise required** for the quality operations in question. While nobody denies that experience of the subject matter is essential, there may have to be a broader understanding of the wider requirements of quality assurance as such, which encompasses **more than mere academic competence** in specific subject fields.

In addition, there is a permanent challenge in **selecting and training panellists**, particularly where there is a narrow understanding of the term ‘expert’. This issue is specifically serious in systems which combine a narrow understanding of ‘expert’ in terms of ‘academic peer’ with the need to involve hundreds of people. This is the case particularly in big systems which operate programme-based approaches to quality assurance. Small systems, on the other hand, may find it more difficult than others to ensure a **non-bias approach** due to limited availability of experts within their systems. Internationalisation of expert panels can serve as a remedy. Apart from that and more generally speaking, integrating international experts is advocated strongly in Europe in order to prevent too narrow a national view on quality criteria and quality processes.

Finally, the ESG attach importance to **reporting** the results of quality assurance activities to the general **public**.<sup>45</sup> Practices across Europe tend to vary as to publication of negative decisions, and as to the extent of publications. However, the principle as such is largely accepted by now. Establishing this principle is not just a matter of due process; it is significant in terms of substance and political concept of quality assurance, as much as the concept of permanent quality enhancement is. This is so because the principle of reporting is intended to foster **public trust** in quality operations by making sure that everyone can judge whether or not there is valid reasoning behind quality assurance decisions. Publication as a means to **make differences in quality transparent** also blends in with efforts to enable students and stakeholders to identify preferable choices. At least *de facto*, therefore, reporting also lends itself to concepts of ‘customer orientation’, which goes well with ‘entrepreneurial’ concepts of higher education.

## II. European Dimensions

External quality assurance has gained European dimensions beyond the ESG in numerous ways. From an institutional perspective, these are either **civic** in nature or ‘**official**’; in as far as the Bologna Process itself is an inter-governmental undertaking.

### 1. Civic Society

As for the **civic**, i.e. non-governmental ‘grass root’ **approach** in the context of quality matters, certainly **ENQA** – the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education – plays a

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<sup>45</sup> ESG part 2 item 5

significant role.<sup>46</sup> In essence, ENQA is a membership organisation of European agencies which are active in the realm of external quality assurance of whatever type within the European higher education area. Being an ENQA member bears a hallmark of quality since ENQA strives to maintain a high level of competence of its members, which is safeguarded by formulating challenging membership criteria and extensive vetting procedures which candidates for membership are subject to. Inter alia, ENQA serves to represent quality assurance agencies in the European debates, namely in the Bologna Process, on matters of quality assurance, which is fully accepted by participants in the Bologna Process. As for issues of quality assurance as a whole, the following institutions are also involved: **EUA** – the European University Association – as the voice of universities;<sup>47</sup> **EURASHE** – the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education – representing universities of applied sciences and polytechnics of various types across Europe;<sup>48</sup> and **ESU** – the European Students' Union, the successor to what used to be ESIB – as the student representation.<sup>49</sup> These four institutions, jointly labelled 'E 4', share the role to define basic European expectations on quality assurance, as is officially recognized by the Bologna Process members since the Berlin Communiqué of 2003.

From a **political** perspective, readiness of governments to endow the E 4 group with defining core elements of internal and external quality assurance is quite remarkable. For it can be interpreted as strong endorsement of the principle that higher education institutions bear prime responsibility for quality in higher education if this principle is also understood as **asking autonomous**, in that sense non-governmental **institutions** to adopt a **leading role** in shaping the notions and policies in matters of higher education quality and its assessment.

From a **practical** point of view, this is also wiser than enshrining criteria and processes in matters of quality assurance in governmental decrees. Delegating the definition of quality assurance principles to essentially non-governmental organisations helps to retain as much **flexibility** as possible to be able to **adapt** the relevant criteria and processes to new and different environments, tasks, and approaches in terms of philosophies and methodologies. Moreover, such devolution provides **broader acceptance** of quality assurance proceedings by higher education institutions.

Finally, civic society is also involved in the Bologna Process by including **labour market representation**. This applies to both the **employers'** perspective included via BusinessEurope, the roof organisation of industry and commerce in Europe,<sup>50</sup> and the perspective of **employees** in the educational sector through EI, i.e. Education International as their relevant European representation.<sup>51</sup> These perspectives also filter into quality debates in Europe, formally so in as much as they are dealt with in official Bologna Process activities.

In addition to these activities which are formally integrated into the Bologna Process, numerous national and European **conferences**, presentations, and workshops on issues of quality and quality assurance bear witness of considerable involvement and incentive at grass root level. Inter alia, and probably one of the more sustainable formats, a so-called annual European **quality assurance forum** was established in 2006 which offers a platform of learning and discussion for higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies,<sup>52</sup> and various stakeholders. Activities of this kind

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<sup>46</sup> For further information on ENQA, cf [www.enqa.eu](http://www.enqa.eu).

<sup>47</sup> For further information on EUA, cf [www.eua.be](http://www.eua.be).

<sup>48</sup> For further information on EURASHE, cf. [www.eurashe.be](http://www.eurashe.be).

<sup>49</sup> For further information on ESU, cf. [www.esib.org](http://www.esib.org).

<sup>50</sup> For further information on BusinessEurope, cf [www.busesseurope.eu](http://www.busesseurope.eu).

<sup>51</sup> For further information on Education International, cf. [www.ei-ie.org](http://www.ei-ie.org).

<sup>52</sup> There are also various formal and informal networks and groupings in Europe which deal mainly with quality assurance matters, such as ECA, the European Consortium for Accreditation, or CEENet, the network of quality assurance agencies of central and eastern Europe, et al.

are more or less well supported by **research and reports**<sup>53</sup> in the field by experts and expert organizations which provide substance in terms of input, follow-up, and counselling.<sup>54</sup>

## 2. The ESG

The major outcome of 'E 4' joint ownership of quality matters is the afore-mentioned ESG annexed to the Bergen Communiqué of 2005. The ESG serve as a **common denominator** in basics of quality assurance by providing a **consented reference point** defined by stakeholders and supported by political authority. Their main features are as follows:<sup>55</sup>

The ESG are construed in **three strata**, commencing with **internal quality assurance** at the level of the higher education institution, proceeding from here to **external quality assurance** operations of relevant agencies, ending with **external quality assurance of external quality assurance agencies**. In compiling the material along this line, there is evidence for support of the concept that higher education **institutions** themselves are primarily **responsible** for providing quality of educational opportunities and for ensuring their permanent enhancement. Moreover, the ESG structure reveals that external quality assurance must **primarily consider** the institutional preparedness and effectiveness of that **institutional capacity**, in particular since part 2 item 1 of the ESG expect external quality assurance to consider this factor above all. In addition, part 3 item 1 of the ESG takes up this principal viewpoint when expecting external quality assurance of external quality assurance agencies to investigate the ability of the latter to do exactly that.

The ESG explicitly **refrain** from taking sides in disputes over **preferences between** programme and institutional **approaches**, or between evaluation, accreditation, audit or any other approach. Various methodologies are seen as being of equal rank, in principle. However, since the afore-mentioned items 1 of parts 2 and 3 of the ESG uniformly expect the establishment and subsequently the external assessment of quality assurance capabilities of higher education institutions, there may be a certain **implicit bias** in favour of institutional approaches which emphasize **institutional capacity** to internally define and implement quality processes and quality criteria. In addition, a **certain tendency towards accreditation** in recent years has been detected;<sup>56</sup> yet this is not of the making of the ESG but rather of EU documents, and it may indeed be questionable whether or not this development can in fact be proved.

Eventually, the ESG are relatively **extensive in defining processes and procedures** in the wider sense, including matters of **participation, transparency** in various aspects stretching from examination requirements to outcomes of quality assessments of programmes or institutions, and **redress** in terms of appeal. Moreover, the ESG rightly make a point in emphasizing the need to secure **consistent application of predefined standards**, i.e. of essentials of **normativity**, which is basic to the rule of law. By contrast, by and large the ESG **abstain from** defining these standards in terms of **content substance**, either in general or in relation to specific academic fields, e.g. by defining content-related quality domains, criteria or standards or reference points, and performance indicators. In so far they appear to apply *Niklas Luhmann's* concept of 'legitimacy and acceptance resulting from due process',<sup>57</sup> or perhaps even the concept of material correctness due to due process.

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<sup>53</sup> Among these reports, the Trends reports provided by the EUA play a major role, as do the reports by ESU, formerly ESIB, on 'Bologna through students' eyes'; moreover, there are stocktaking reports as regular and official features within the Bologna Process.

<sup>54</sup> To mention just two organisations as examples, CHEPS in the Netherlands and CHE in Germany.

<sup>55</sup> Readers may want to refer to Kohler, Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA, EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006 pp], Chapter B.4.3-2.

<sup>56</sup> This is maintained by Amaral/Rosa, Trends in Quality in Higher Education – Does EUA Fall into These Trends?; in: Essays on Supportive Peer Review (Nova Science Publishers Inc, New York, 2008), Chapter 2, pp 21 (29).

<sup>57</sup> Niklas Luhmann, Legitimation durch Verfahren (Frankfurt am Main, 1969)

However, with regard to content matters it is essential to **link** the ESG quality expectations to other European quality tools which contain more substantive guidance. Among these are the **learning outcome approach** in conjunction with **overarching educational goals** as defined in the Bologna Process Communiqués, the **calibration** methodology instrumented by **qualifications frameworks**, and as may be the case, for good or for bad, of **subject benchmark statements** of various kinds, be it as results emerging from projects like Tuning<sup>58</sup> or requirements defined by specific professions.

### 3. EQAR – the Register

More recently, the emergence of EQAR – the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education – has added to the European dimension in a tangible, procedural way.<sup>59</sup> The register run by EQAR provides for **listing trustworthy quality assurance agencies** operating in Europe. Since there is supposed to be credibility behind entry in the register, an admittance policy is in place which is hoped to be sufficiently robust both in interpreting the criteria and in applying them in practice from case to case to earn true credibility. The most tangible effect of an EQAR registration lies in the opportunity for higher education institutions to choose agencies from another country to conduct external quality assessment proceedings; however, this applies only if the applicable national regulations grant higher education institutions in the given jurisdiction such a right of choice, which is not usually the case at present. At any rate, once established the register will support **cross-border dissemination of various European traditions** and **diverse approaches** in quality assurance. This effect is hoped to contribute to creating more **mutual understanding** of quality expectations in Europe, which should in return **facilitate innovative programme development**, support designing **joint programmes**, and help with **recognition** of modules and qualifications.

### III. Showcase or Good Reality?

Undoubtedly the quest for quality, especially when backed by external quality assurance, has shown some **real effect** to the better of higher education. At least it has put quality issues **on agendas**; it has **alerted** those responsible in higher education institutions; it has **changed perspectives** e.g. by moving from input factors to slowly embracing, comprehending, and implementing an outcome-oriented concept; it has put some pressure into the development of **national qualifications frameworks**; it has induced more **transparency** and enhanced **participation** of students. However, it is difficult to qualify and quantify these effects across the sector more specifically.

Nevertheless, external quality assurance in particular has **not** been a **full success story**. This is not only due to elements of rewards and sanction in the wake of external quality assurance processes. The extent to which true **fact finding** is actually possible in the course of relatively short site visits during external quality assurance processes is questionable, especially where there is ample reason for higher education institutions to prefer window dressing to gathering true opinion on quality. There is some doubt in cross-sector quality and **consistency of judgment** due to **great numbers** to cope with, and due to the **qualification of personnel** which is not always quite fit to meet requirements of the job. In some cases, especially where there is strong emphasis on accreditation of programmes, success in accreditation has even worked to the detriment of quality because **programmes** tend to become **ossified** for the accreditation period; so, at times ensuring dynamics in terms of permanent quality enhancement may have fallen victim to quality assurance. All in all, demands on quality assurance have led to considerable **bureaucracy** and investment of **time** and **money** on the part of institutions concerned and evaluators involved while there is some sentiment

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<sup>58</sup> It should be noted here that the project ‘Tuning Educational Structures in Europe’ (cf [www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/](http://www.tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu/) and [www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/tuning/tuning\\_eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu/education/policies/educ/tuning/tuning_eu)) is another example of non-governmental activities concerned with quality in higher education.

<sup>59</sup> For a concise survey, cf Colin Tüch, European Quality Assurance Register: enhancing trust through greater transparency; EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B 4.3.-3.

at grass-root level that these factors are **not sufficiently balanced by** the extent of **positive returns** on investment;<sup>60</sup> hence, **fatigue** is a tangible phenomenon.

These phenomena, and the call for true effect at less expense in terms of time, bureaucracy, and money, has led to invoking **stronger emphasis on internal, institutional quality assurance**, which respects and rests upon responsibility as the counterpart of institutional autonomy, and to emphasis of ‘quality culture’. This notion requires closer analysis.

## **F. Emergence of Institutional Dimensions: From Quality Management to Quality Culture and Good Governance – towards Institutional Classification**

### **I. Managerial Competence**

Both quality and quality assurance in higher education have obviously become a matter of **managerial competence**. Concepts not only for defining, but also for measuring quality must be developed and implemented; along with these tasks, internal data related to programmes and external judgements and visions need to be collected, aggregated, interpreted, and translated into sufficient action, with all this being made transparent through adequate, evidence-based reasoning, documentation and communication, and repeatedly so in view of the iterative effect which follows from the concept of permanent quality enhancement. Achieving this in complex subject areas like higher education, often intertwined with research, general outreach to society and also funding and staffing practices, with the extra challenge posed by making institutions and staff move ahead relatively quickly require **professional expertise** and practical **managerial skills**. The emergence of ‘quality offices’ bears witness to that fact, as does the acknowledgment implied in establishing these that there are specific **differences** between ‘**quality expertise**’ and **subject-related ‘academic competence**’. In the wake of such developments sooner or later the question of **role share** between ‘academic peers’ and ‘quality experts’ may be on the agenda, and questions of **legitimacy** of processes and decisions in quality matters.

However, a mere ‘can-do’ approach in a technocratic sense is prone to suffocate vivid participation by overburdening **bureaucracy**<sup>61</sup> and will fail if there is to be a real move towards improvement, in particular when there is a prevalence of top-down approach and a strong tendency towards inspectorate for accountability purposes. Mere **window dressing** with **insignificant effect in substance** and mere filing of reports merely for the purpose of shelving them will be the likely result, with **little support in real terms** by those concerned who will pretend support by weary lip service.<sup>62</sup>

### **II. Quality Culture**

By contrast, real success beyond window dressing requires **ownership** of the quality processes of those concerned inside higher education institutions as well as a sentiment of **shared responsibility**, and **insight into the benefits** which will accrue due to proper and real quality improvement for everyone, including those inside higher education institutions. With these features being in place as an overarching organisational value and tangible priority which shape institutional

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<sup>60</sup> Cf Bjørn Stensaker, Impact of Quality Processes, presentation at the 1<sup>st</sup> European Forum for Quality Assurance, EUA Case Studies 2007, 59pp.; in addition, Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (n 2), 305-309.

<sup>61</sup> ‘Bureaucratic’ is a widespread lament, and recipes to uphold positive spirit are much sought after; cf., inter alia, Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (n 2), 296, and Angela Short, Bureaucracy – The Enemy of a Quality Culture, EUA Bologna Handbook [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter B.4.5-1.

<sup>62</sup> Cf the observations reported by Santiago, Tremblay, Basri, Arnal (n 2), 292-7.

activities and members' involvement, a higher education institution will have aspired to what has become known as '**quality culture**'.<sup>63</sup>

Arguably, the concept of quality culture<sup>64</sup> is **not** an **anti-managerial** concept but rather an **integral** one. Quality culture is an overarching notion which encompasses managerial competence that can avail itself of practical techniques and technical know-how while complementing this facet by quality culture in the narrow sense of the word, signifying communicative integration of all concerned and thus leading to ownership, true insight and enthusiasm. Again, there is reason to believe that even these 'spiritual' components are at least in part subject to managerialism in that there are **tools to foster 'quality culture'**. This can be done by active **inclusion** in and full **information** on purposes, devices, and effects of quality assurance, by creating and demonstrating **win-win opportunities** for those concerned. It is on this account that there are different situations across Europe, though not primarily across state border lines but rather from institution to institution. Admittedly, rather bureaucratic requirements of quality management and of evidence-based, criteria-oriented quality assurance processes present some permanent challenge to developing and maintaining such understanding and live practice of quality culture in matters of educational quality.

### III. Good Governance

The integrated concept of quality culture as signifying quality management backed by quality enthusiasm indicates the **link to good governance** in higher education. If good governance is tentatively **defined** as the institutional capacity to address and solve challenges to survival and growth effectively and within ethical limits – such as securing freedom of teaching, learning, and research while safeguarding responsibility vis-à-vis society –, good governance is obviously deeply concerned with quality of learning opportunities since these are core 'products' of the institution which determine its positioning. Terms and notions like 'the **entrepreneurial university**' and calls for '**leadership**', but also the increase in **societal intervention** e.g. through the advent of boards in many European universities for the first time in their history, are mere yet **strong indicators** of such interdependence between institution steering and success in teaching and learning. Moreover, from a narrower perspective of quality assurance and quality enhancement: if external quality judgment on educational provisions shifts from programme assessment to evaluating institutional capacity to develop, operate, and improve programmes, there is a **shift from** – if this terminology is permitted for once here – '**product**' to '**producer**' which is bound to **point towards** elements of **institutional good governance as essentials of quality**.

Strong interdependence between institution steering and success in teaching and learning is to be found particularly at times when funding may become scarce while there is an influx of students at present with the threat of dropping numbers looming in the future and therefore imminent acute competition in view of negative demographic developments. Moreover, the challenge to foster educational quality by means of good governance is enhanced from a general **institutional and conceptual perspective** of modern higher education institutions by the need to bridge cooperation and competition, to make the concept of higher education as a 'public good' feasible in a world depending on fundraising, to serve local needs while aspiring to visibility in a wider world, to balance and integrate learning opportunities with research excellence, and last but not least, to ensure proper freedom for individual creativity and institutional coherence. So, all in all, **quality** is

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<sup>63</sup> It is mainly the EUA which deserves credit for having put the issue on the table early on, soon after the launch of the organisation in 2001, especially via its 'Quality Culture' projects; cf. EUA, *Quality Culture in European Universities: A Bottom-up Approach* [Brussels 2006pp]. – Cf. also Andrée Surssock, *Qualitätskultur und Qualitätsmanagement, Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre* (edited by Benz, Kohler, Landfried; Berlin 2004pp), Chapter C.2.2.

<sup>64</sup> Readers may refer to Jacques Lanarès, *Developing a Quality Culture, EUA Bologna Handbook* [edited by Froment, Kohler, Purser, Wilson; Berlin 2006pp], Chapter C.2.1-1.; also Klaus Dieter Wolff, *Wege zur Qualitätskultur – Die Elemente der Qualitätsentwicklung und ihre Zusammenhänge, Handbuch Qualität in Studium und Lehre* (edited by Benz, Kohler, Landfried; Berlin 2004pp), Chapter C.2.1.

an **integral notion**, pertaining to **institutional vision** embedded in analysis of concrete contexts as much as **hands-on strategies** concerning, e.g., staff development and investment in material resources while making sure that people inside the institution keep being motivated and various stakeholders outside continue to be supportive due to realizing their opportunities and due to being actively involved and accepted.

It is here that probably the most significant trend, challenge, and opportunity of the near future can be seen: the **merger** of the ‘**quality debate**’ with exploring and integrating concepts and practices of ‘**institutional good governance**’<sup>65</sup> in its multiple facets. The latter stretches from, for example, **concrete** items of **institutional operations** such as hiring and developing staff and funding policies via **organisational matters** in general to internal and external **communication** and creation of a culture of **listening and leading**, while all these aspects need to be widened from a study perspective to a **broader view** which **integrates research** and **outreach** to society in terms of competence transfer. Moreover, and more fundamentally, since ‘quality’ is seen as a relative concept which needs to be defined from case to case and individually in view of the mission, vision, and purpose of each institution, **identifying** and promulgating **institutional mission**, vision, and purpose, which is a key feature of ‘good governance’, becomes an **essential starting point** and precondition for ‘quality’ in all operations of higher education institutions. In short: strategy, hence governance capacity, determines quality throughout, also in teaching and learning.

Looking at the issue of ‘quality’ and its link to governance of higher education institutions from the perspective of steering higher education systems as a whole, it is also realized more and more that quality development depends to a large extent on the **autonomy** of a higher education institution to address and organise its own operations adequately.<sup>66</sup> In effect, external autonomy and adequate internal management and governance are seen more and more as a major factor in effecting quality enhancement. Moreover, if the statement of the Bologna Process holds true that prime responsibility for quality in higher education is vested in higher education institutions, their capability to meet this responsibility essentially depends on the adequacy of institutional governance, management, and culture, i.e. on **being institutionally ‘fit for purpose’**. For all these valid reasons Europe as a whole is about to witness the **blending** of the **quality debate with debates on autonomy and good governance** of higher education institutions.

#### IV. Classification of Higher Education Institutions

If not for reasons of political logic, at least in theory there is a **common denominator** shared by the shift from external assessment of programmes to judging quality culture, governance and management of higher education institutions on the one hand and by a very recent European development on the other: the **emergence of** a debate on, and a call for, **measurement of institutional quality leading towards typology-based classification of higher education institutions**, if not even rankings and league tables.<sup>67</sup> The common denominator can be seen in **focussing on the institution as such**, be it as a whole or its subunits such as faculties, departments or schools, or on particular overarching features of the institution, such as research, or student learning experience.<sup>68</sup> This viewpoint puts emphasis on the identification of qualities of the institution indicated by **specific institutional performance**, with performance elements being a mere ‘input factor’ used to base judgment on the institution rather than being the objects of scrutiny for their own sake and value. All in all, the call for classification of institutions can be seen as

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<sup>65</sup> Cf. contributions to the Council of Europe fora as published in: Higher education governance between democratic culture, academic aspirations and market forces (edited by Jürgen Kohler and Josef Huber), Council of Europe higher education series No. 5 (2006); and: The legitimacy of quality assurance in higher education, (edited by Luc Weber and Katia Dolgova-Dreyer), Council of Europe higher education series No. 9 (2007).

<sup>66</sup> Cf. e.g. the observation by Sybille Reichert (n. 5 above), p. 8 and 9 – 10.

<sup>67</sup> Alex Usher’s contribution to the conference deals with this facet extensively and in particular from a North American aspect, so readers may refer to that article for more detail.

<sup>68</sup> For example, as for the latter Alex Usher refers to the (American) National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE).

moving **quality judgment** to a **meta-level of institutional capacity** rather than concentrating on specific operations, e.g. at programme level. In shifting the quality focus from ‘product’ to ‘producer’, the call for institutional classification is indeed in the same line of thinking as is an institutional approach to quality assurance in areas of teaching and learning.

However, the identification of such a common undercurrent may be misleading if it were understood as being the essential political driver. Instead, it may be more realistic to assume that there are more parochial **reasons behind** the present **political momentum**. One factor may be the **external dimension** of the Bologna Process or indeed of the EU Lisbon strategy, i.e. the attempt to **address** and improve Europe’s **relatively poor show** – if not reality – **of performance** in international research rankings such as the notorious Shanghai list on the one hand, and on the other hand to **make** strengths of European institutions **more visible** both inside and outside Europe. Another factor may be the attempt to make provisions for an American style grouping of higher education institutions into research institutions and various other categories for internal purposes of ‘**system steering**’ in order to improve quality **through stratification policies** and subsequent **funding** mechanisms along that line. While there may be an element of ‘must have’ and ‘can do’ attitude in copying these prior undertakings of others, there are inherent explicit and implicit reasons in terms of objectives for this new approach, though these are not necessarily appreciated by everyone concerned.

Foremost, classification claims to address the call for **transparency** of quality of educational or research provisions by ensuring straightforward transparency of the quality of the provider of such provisions. In that respect, classification serves the ‘**informed client**’ concept of free choice in open access systems not limited by national boundaries. It is in the same line that institutional classification is expected to meet ‘flagship’ aspirations or indeed more generally, to serve the so-called external dimension of the Bologna Process by ensuring global **visibility** of the type and scale of quality to expect from any given higher education institution in the system. Both endeavours, i.e. ensuring transparency and visibility of qualities in a mode of clear communication, is particularly important in large-scale, fragmented systems with highly different providers, as is the case equally in Europe and in North America. So, it is no surprise that a traditional American feature of the tertiary education system is now taking root in Europe, too.

Transparency of quality is seldom far off from **accountability**. This will also hold true for institutional classification, whether or not this is intended or denied. Accountability will feed into **funding** mechanisms in support of institutional stratification. In the end, classification will be one of those institutional steering devices which are described as ‘**fostering quality incentives**’, even if by means of instigating academic vanity; more simply, a tool serving a ‘stick and carrot’ strategy.

The **novelty** of the European drive towards institutional classification does not lie so much in the fact that such classifications have not been available to date. On the contrary, various league tables and rankings have been around for numerous years. However, the difference and indeed profound novelty of recent developments lies in the fact that Europe is beginning to see institutional classification as a **public responsibility** not to be left just to individual operations of research institutions usually backed and highlighted by media, and that Europe tries to come up with a system which ensures **trans-national calibration** for the purpose of **true cross-border comparability**.

If so, any system trying to turn such far-reaching aspirations into reality needs to be a very **robust** one in terms of **substance** and **process** fit to produce accurate results. This is the case because any such undertaking under the auspices of public authority, whether governmental in the strict sense or not, needs to match the traditional understanding of **normativity** – or indeed, in the understanding of some systems, needs to stand the test of legality and the rule of law – which the ESG, though in different context and yet succinctly, describe as availability of ‘predefined criteria consistently applied’. As a consequence, as for the **substance** of such undertaking, there must be adequate

**criteria** in place, and valid **indicators** pointing towards these. In **process**, these need to be **defined** in a meaningful and broadly accepted way, **interpreted** and **communicated**; moreover in concreto, these need to be implemented and **applied** in a **standardized** manner from case to case in different environments. The question may be asked whether and how this is really going to happen, although there are proposals of methodologies by relevant organisations such as, but not only by, the OECD. So, in the end there is some **doubt** as to sufficient **accuracy**, and to avoidance of a **new bureaucracy** in addition to the present-day external quality assurance operators.

While classification policy and adequate tools are in the making of the Bologna Process, there is still sufficient space for **speculation** both on the **type of classification** to go for and on the type of classification that may unintentionally emerge *de facto*. This is so because ‘classification’ is a buzz word that leaves **space for interpretation**. Some, however apparently only a minority in Europe, like to interpret classification as **ranking** – ‘league tables’ would be the same –, which means that institutional quality takes on a note of **relativity** of institutional standing. Others, the majority, see classification as **grouping** – as establishing ‘classes’ –, subject to specific categorical dimensions, which is a **descriptive concept** of identifying institutional qualities. However, classification in that sense, though descriptive, is not to be mixed up with **mere description**. As such, the latter would not entail a concept of **categorial boxes**, hence of ‘tags’ or ‘labels’ which **reference** institutional qualities to particular overarching **typological features**, but instead would try to simply **lay open** the **individuality** of the given institution in its own right.

Achieving the latter would suffice to procure transparency. Moreover, in view of safeguarding individuality in a highly diversified system, attempts to turn classification into an exercise in applied typology may be detrimental to fostering profiled institutions.<sup>69</sup> However, though this may be rejected for the time being political **reality** will sooner or later turn to **labelling**, for good and bad reasons. The general public may ask for **simplification of information**, which may best be served through a concept of limited and limiting typology, even if underpinned by mere **typology slogans** or **catchwords**. Governments may feel that the call for ‘**flagships**’ is served best that way, at least if ranking is politically out of reach for the time being. So, at present ‘classification’ will be heralded as an opportunity to make differences public, but sooner or later description will turn into simplification, thus levelling essential institutional differences while making certain gradual differences between institutions more poignant than they are in reality.

Simplified information via classification will eventually pose the **key question on public responsibility**, which is linked to, though distinct from, the afore-mentioned public responsibility for validity of classification criteria and for accuracy of their case-to-case implementation. In substance, the core question is: how to **safeguard** the notion of **institutional diversity of missions**, e.g. differences in emphasis on research, learning, service to the region, preserving heritage and others as well as differences in institutional blending of these objectives, **and to ensure equality in esteem** at the same time while typologies not only falsify by means of stereotyped description but also tend to be charged with **notions of superiority of certain missions**, at least in the eye of an uninitiated observer but perhaps no less in the practices of politics and of funding authorities. The answer may lie in abstaining from the invention of a single classification scheme under the auspices of governments which  *nolens volens* assumes specific public authority; instead, there could be mere acknowledgment of various and competing classification methodologies already available from, or to be developed by, non-governmental agencies while the role of governments could be limited to identifying their different purposes and scopes in order to ensure their adequate, i.e. limited usage both by the general public and by governments alike. At any rate, it is essential that any **classification scheme** accepted or invented or operated by public authorities’ **matches public**

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<sup>69</sup> Laying open specific qualities of institutions in a diversified higher education system and safeguarding multitudes of profiles appears to be the aim followed, e.g., by the Council of Europe, as decided by its CDESER plenary in March 2009; this may lead to a merely descriptive approach rather than to ‘classification’ in terms of establishing ‘groupings’ and ‘labels’ as characterized here.

**responsibility for supporting** a higher education system based on **differences in profile** and **equality in merit**.

### **G. Future Opportunities and Challenges**

European institutions and stakeholders are invited to **shape** the various **trends towards vesting responsibility for quality in higher education institutions** effectively yet wisely. As regards in-house activities within higher education institutions, part of this operation will be the development of true quality culture in the broad sense, which will take longer than expected for the ownership component as well as for the managerial element inherent to the concept of quality culture. Still, Europe can be proud of having achieved such a lot within such short time as defined roughly by the existence of the Bologna Process, and by such low degree of prescriptive normativity at the European level. This should give rise to realistic hope for future success.

However, when also bearing in mind the global practice of classification and league tables, it is not only Europe that will need to pay attention to **specific policy issues** arising from present-day experience and expectations of future challenges. Among these issues could be, with all of these being intertwined and equally important:

- Balancing profiled diversity, dynamic improvement and permanent integration of research developments with provision of easy information and reliable comparability of quality and with requirements of fair accountability;
- Providing space for individual academic freedom, innovation and integration of research in study programmes while providing predefined criteria consistently applied in external quality assurance, especially with due regard to risks of standardizing and ossifying effects of subject benchmarks;
- Exploring and safeguarding broader concepts of higher education objectives and the learning outcome approach in context with subject-related benchmarks, both in internal and external quality assurance;
- Addressing internal quality expertise as such vis-à-vis academic competence, i.e. the role of experts and peers, in a system of good governance and adequate administration;
- Ensuring both personal and institutional ownership and quality culture to avoid mere window-dressing;
- Making external quality assurance operational without undue bureaucracy while ensuring meaningfulness;
- De-nationalisation of external quality assurance as regards both choice of agency and of criteria and methodology,
- Identifying and valuing consequences which external quality exercises could and should have in educational systems as a whole and inside institutions;
- Ensuring clarity of information in an information system based on institutional 'classification' while safeguarding accuracy in describing the individuality of each higher education institution;
- Maintaining a diverse higher education system based both on differentiated institutional missions and on equality in esteem while facing the effects of a 'classification' scheme.

These ten items may serve as key starting points to further consideration and discussion.

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