

ENQA Workshop: 'Outcomes of the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve
Ministerial Conference and Expectations of the Future of QA'
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Panel Session: The Role of QA in the Coming Decade from the Stakeholders' Perspective
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QA has and will continue to play an important role in the EHEA, however, it is not the “miracle medicine” and needs to be constantly developed and worked upon, both by internal and external stakeholders of the HE community.

In the Leuven Communiqué as agreed there are three issues that are of particular interest to EI:

First, is the reference to Multi-Dimensional Transparency Tool – Communiqué Para 22

Although national systems in the EHEA have been realigned through Bologna, there is a clear need for more transparent information about higher education systems and institutions. At the grassroot level, networks of academic or student peers share information about other institutions. Despite attempts to make this information more understandable, we have not yet been able to respond to the needs of students and academic staff, enabling them to take an informed decision on an institution.

But we consider that Rankings are not the answer - nor classification tools. Our position against any form of rankings or classification is clear. They give an incomplete picture of the diversity and effectiveness of systems and institutions and lead to very simplistic conclusions about the quality of complex and highly differentiated systems, processes and institutions. We believe that rankings and classification are detrimental to the aims of developing a quality culture in HE, and that they destroy the important work undertaken in the field of QA so far.

We have to always remain vigilant that it is proper QA - truly involving all parts of the academic community – that remains the core basis of proper information-building and sharing. Quality, from our point of view, has to do with a range of factors, including the conditions and activities of staff and free enquiry.

However, the call for such transparency tools in the Communiqué reflects a real and existing problem – namely that politicians feel that they do not know what is going on in HEIs. Therefore internal QA mechanisms, involving all stakeholders, and clearly linked to different forms of external QA, really have to be put in place. Furthermore, it is of utmost importance that the results of evaluation and accreditation exercises be made public. This should be done both by the publication of evaluation reports, as well as through more easy accessible and readable publications.

Second, is the Reference to Improving Teaching Quality – Para 14 of Communiqué

The Communiqué mentions the need to improve teaching quality. This is done without going into detail about what this means. We need to be careful about the implications of this, and the way that we put such a mandate into practice.

In the first instance, it is clear that higher education teaching staff is not amenable to teacher assessment in the same manner as teachers in primary and secondary education.

Furthermore, we are against this turning into the implementation of projects such as AHELO (Assessing Higher Education Learning Outcomes) that the OECD is proposing, or any other such “PISA” like exercises, and we are a bit worried that this is what is meant here.

On the other hand, we are aware of the great deal of problems that exist in many programmes regarding workload, learning outcomes, curriculum development and such like. This needs, however, to be addressed through making proper use of ECTS and supporting teaching staff in their pedagogical developments. In Leuven, EI called for the need for both institutions and governments to take more responsibility for the implementation of the Bologna action lines, and to plan adequately in terms of financial and human resources required for all action lines of the Process.

In particular, when it comes to teaching quality, it is of extreme importance that staff be able to access opportunities for their professional development.

Third, is the Reference to QA of Trans-National Education – Para. 17 of the Communiqué

The Communiqué also calls for further use of the OECD/UNESCO Guidelines on Cross-border Provision of Higher Education. We want to emphasise the need for really taking issues of cross-border education into account and to further develop QA for such programmes. We are of the conviction that if high QA standards apply in the home institution and the home country, they should also be applied to the provision of education in the host country.

As far as the ESG are concerned therefore, it means a clear application of the standards and guidelines to all programmes offered by a European HEI, whether operating in the EHEA or outside it. Both the ESG and the UNESCO-OECD guidelines are amenable to HE provision of various types – whether delivered by distance, online or in the form of traditional lectures, and they can be used to address both traditional and new teaching methods in higher education.

Apart from what is mentioned in the Communiqué, there are clear outstanding issues which have largely been ignored in work on QA within the Bologna Process – the tackling of staff-related issues within QA processes and the involvement of staff in QA.

The tackling of Staff-Related Issues within QA Processes

QA, both in internal and external processes should take into consideration staff working conditions, possibility for professional development, the work environment, collegiality, possibilities for promotion, and related matters. This within the framework of the possibilities that staff have to fulfil the institutional mission of their respective HEI, and to contribute to creating a real quality culture.

Involvement of Staff in QA

As we stated in Leuven, whereas EI has been actively involved in the development of the Bologna Process at the European level, there is still reluctance to involve academic staff and their unions in the implementation of Bologna at institutional and national levels. As the people who implement the Bologna agenda on a daily basis, academics must be central to all Bologna-related initiatives, and it is essential that they be supported and participate fully in the Process at all levels. This is also the case for QA. It is important that both institutions and QA agencies provide for the systematic involvement of staff and their unions at all levels of QA.

At the Institutional Level -

In particular, HEIs need to ensure that academic staff also have the *real* possibility to be included - in terms of resources and time available to them. Academic really need to be fully involved in QA at the institutional level, thus at the starting point of the QA process.

We are afraid that a rather great number of academic staff around Europe still has the feeling that they are excluded from real participation in QA and that QA is something that is forced upon them. For it to

be real and meaningful QA, as well as a quality culture, all staff needs to be engaged and involved in the work, and there needs to be proper interaction with, and feedback to, central QA units or departments within HEIs.

For this to be possible, staff need to be given the time and the support to actually engage with these important processes. There will never be a real quality culture if academics feels forced to align with alien rules and regulations – that only adds to their work-related stress and workload in a time when staff is ever more facing the reality of precarious, short-term employment.

At the National and European Level –

There is a need for improved international peer-participation in external evaluation and accreditation teams. This is one way to spread understanding and inspiration for reforms across Europe. The broad international pool of QA experts should not only involve University rectors and leaders of QA Agencies, but also members of academic staff, in the same way that students are represented, and with the same underlying rationale for this core group of the higher education community. Indeed, we see a real gap in the kind of questions asked to academics during quality evaluations – staff conditions are often completely disregarded as though they were alien to the issue of teaching quality. Academic peers are needed as QA experts, in order to ask the right questions and to be able to identify the real reasons as to why QA procedures are successful or otherwise within HEIs.

What we have also seen across a number of institutions, is that where staff is less and less involved, and collegiality threatened in favour of more managerial-type governance of institutions and departments therein, less attention is paid to working conditions of staff, which in turn is detrimental to quality, and completely excludes members of the academe from development of institutions and departments.

In relation to this, although, as I mentioned, EI has been heavily involved in the Bologna Process at the European level, we have not made the full contribution to topic of QA in the manner we would have liked. At the European level, the E4 group is the particular body that is entrusted with the formulation of QA policy, and EI is excluded from this body – which is made up of ENQA on the one hand and, on the other hand, EUA and EURASHE in representation of institutions and ESU in representation of students. While it is clear that EUA, EURASHE and ESU are there to represent the interests of the *internal stakeholders on QA*, it is also clear that there is a gap which needs to be filled by the role of EI in this group at the European level, particularly as we look forward to further development of the ESG and discussion as to their implementation.

In this context, we are very grateful for ENQA's invitation to contribute to this workshop, as well as previous similar invitations, as it gives us an opportunity to constructively contribute to the QA debate at the European level.

Conclusion – Financial Crisis

In conclusion, we must not forget that we are currently in the midst of a financial crisis, which is affecting education at all levels – from early childhood education to higher education. Looking forward to the coming decade, while it is a well-known fact that both internal and external QA processes are extremely costly, they remain necessary for the proper functioning of HEIs and the delivery of their programmes. Institutions, QA agencies and governments need to ensure that the crisis does not negatively impact upon QA, and that the progress in this field continues to take place.