

Abstract of the speech delivered by Bruno Curvale, President of ENQA at the EQAF 2008, Budapest, the 22nd of November 2008

The European Quality Assurance Forum is a unique occasion that allows significant interaction between various players in higher education. For quality assurance agency professionals it is, in particular, the place where they can meet representatives from different higher education institutions, stakeholders and students from all over Europe and beyond. It is the diversity that brings the originality and the value to the forum. It is an opportunity to analyse quality assurance activities with a large number of people who have different expectations, different needs and different demands. The EQAF is an important moment during which quality assurance practitioners can listen to and exchange views with stakeholders, students and representatives of higher education. This is important for the quality of the dialogue within the E4 (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU), which must further develop the European dimension of quality assurance.

Trends

Looking at the trends in quality assurance, the last decade shows that the focus has changed over the years. The concept of quality assurance started to spread in Europe in the mid-nineteen eighties. In the context of the mass production of higher education, quality assurance agencies were asked to develop evaluation or accreditation procedures. They would help the society to develop a feeling of trust and confidence towards the capacity of higher education institutions to respond to the tremendous challenges they were facing. This was the beginning of quality assurance activities. Their goals were mainly to help decision-makers in charge of national higher education systems to battle against bogus institutions and also to help institutions and programmes to improve their work.

Today, in addition to these purposes, still being the basis of the development of external quality assurance in higher education, observers can see new demands coming. Quality assurance is more and more about helping individual decision makers, students and families in particular, when deciding about the choice of education or the choice of an institution. In parallel, quality assurance is also becoming an element in the developing debate about the increasing competition between higher education systems and individual institutions.



Rankings

The scope of quality assurance is broadening. The notion of quality assurance now covers quality assessment activities as well as the participation in multipurpose information systems and marketing. This situation poses questions to the professional quality assurance agencies. Rankings could be interpreted as symptoms of a need for information. They are also elements from communication strategies of institutions and higher education systems. As quality assurance organisations are in charge of helping the development of trust in higher education, they are also concerned with the use of tools such as rankings.

Rankings are here to stay as it has been mentioned several times during the forum sessions. It is no longer a matter of pros and cons but to ensure that they are not misleading to those who use them. There must be a demand for accuracy in the production of rankings. Quality assurance tools and all other means that are used for informing the public on quality in higher education deserve, in the European Area for Higher Education at least, a critical thought. It is of the utmost importance considering the diversity and the specificities of higher education. This is of the utmost importance considering the hopes and expectations of the students and their families as well as of the employers and all other stakeholders.

Critical thinking and professionalism in quality assurance in higher education

With regard to the professionalism in quality assurance in higher education, the EAHE has the European Standards and Guidelines. They are a major achievement and result from the dialogue within the E4. The ESG are more than a set of requirements. They also convey principles as well as a method. Dialogue between HEIs and QA agencies, and fitness for purpose of the QA activities, constitute the basis of an embryonic epistemology of quality assurance.

Fitness for purpose means that the purposes are of primary importance. The spirit of the ESG is clear. Quality assurance in higher education is a rational activity that has to constantly demonstrate that it meets the expectations of all those who are concerned with the development of higher education. Clarification of objectives, clarification of underlying assumptions or methodological choices and adaptation to the specificities of particular situations or ambitions are expected from QA agencies. This should indeed be expected from every organisation that produces information in order to benefit those who value



judgment or advice about higher education institutions or programmes. All rankings should be examined closely with the ESG in mind.

Democratising access to quality assurance outcomes

It was repeatedly stated during the forum that there will be an increasing number of higher education information providers. Ranking and quality labels will certainly continue to flourish. This is an issue with regard to fair access to relevant information.

Democratising quality assurance has been debated. What are we talking about? Is the point to have more players involved in quality assurance mechanisms? It is indeed important that all needs and perspectives are taken into account but this angle does not address all the questions. The point could rather be about democratising access to the quality assurance outcomes.

Does this mean that the tools used when communicating results, judgments or advice have to be simple? Certainly not. The issues of higher education and quality in higher education are not always easy or simple. There is always a danger of being too simplistic and the call for transparency should more often receive an answer in terms of comprehensibility. The need for information cannot be separated from the need for an education in the complexity of the information available.

If the purpose of quality assurance in higher education is to help build trust between higher education institutions and the society, the trend we observe needs the quality assurance practitioners to gain awareness about what is quality in higher education and what can be expected from the sources of information that are available to the public. In brief, the answer to the challenges of complexity is education. This forum has made it very clear that the issue of information concerns all stakeholders and QA agencies in particular.

