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ENQA statement on the European Commission's Report on Progress in Quality Assurance

With this statement, ENQA welcomes the progress report by the European Commission on quality assurance in higher education.

By way of following up its recommendation of 2006, the Commission demonstrates the increasing centrality of quality assurance within several policies of the EU, and within the wider European context, particularly in the Bologna Process: "Quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area" (Berlin Communiqué 2003).

ENQA, as the association of quality assurance agencies from 25 countries within the EU and the wider EHEA, welcomes the fact that quality assurance is of high importance in the activities of the Commission. This has been demonstrated by way of constantly supporting major developments in this field in Europe and the EHEA and contributing to the discussion in the Bologna Process.

The notion of Quality assurance in Europe and in the EHEA: quality enhancement and accountability

External quality assurance procedures may cover a wide spectrum of processes designed to monitor, maintain and enhance quality. Quality assurance serves two main purposes: enhancement and accountability. Internal quality assurance naturally focuses on the enhancement of quality in teaching and learning, while external quality assurance, at its best, both serves the needs for accountability of institutions to stakeholders and the wider public and plays a developmental role for enhancing quality in institutions.

This understanding is based on the core principle of quality assurance in the EHEA whereby the primary responsibility for quality rests with the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

ENQA is well aware of the fact that different actors and stakeholders in higher education weight the two main purposes differently. But rather than reducing quality assurance to one of the two, ENQA will continue supporting the development of quality assurance processes by maintaining the close link between both dimensions which is clearly to the benefit of the European higher education. There is a danger if HEIs are forced to focus on rankings or transparency tools that they will gear their efforts to this end, rather than





striving to build a true quality culture encompassing both assurance and enhancement.

The ESG and the European Dimension of quality assurance

In fulfilling the request by the ministers of the Bologna signatory countries, the E4 group developed the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG). The main purpose of these standards and guidelines was to guarantee professionally conducted quality assurance procedures on a high quality level. The ESG prefer the generic principle to the specific requirement and focus more on what should be done than how it should be achieved. Therefore, the ESG were never meant to explicitly comprise standards for quality of higher education as such (i.e. requirements for HE institutions and the design of programmes). Consequently, quality related standards like the proper application of degree-cycles, the qualifications framework for the EHEA and ECTS to name but a few are not part of the ESG.

The ESG combine two aspects in particular:

- Common standards for professionalism in terms of procedures and agencies which nowadays are not only shared within Europe and the EHEA but more and more worldwide;
- The European notion of quality assurance which is in the first instance laid down in the following principles:
 - The primary responsibility for quality lies with the institutions
 - Internal quality assurance forms the basis of the whole quality assurance system. External quality assurance has to take into account the results of the internal part.
 - Quality assurance processes, irrespective of the very nature and design of the chosen approach, have to serve the developmental function of quality assurance.
 - Involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including students, in quality assurance processes and quality assurance agencies

Thanks to the application of the ESG in quality assurance systems and processes in the 46 countries of the Bologna Process, quality assurance in the EHEA, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity, is based on a common ground of shared values and principles and is conducted in the specific European way of professionally sound processes with participation of all stakeholders. The four-stage model as evidenced in the Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey¹ is a good example of a widely shared external quality assurance procedure. The application of the ESG can be considered a major achievement of the Bologna Process.

¹ <http://www.enqa.eu/files/ENQA%20Occasional%20papers%2014.pdf>





The four-year experience in the implementation of the ESG has provided clear evidence of their usefulness and applicability in various national contexts and within differing organisational missions and setups. It is noteworthy that there is no notion of *overall compliance* applied in opposition to *compliance with every standard*. ENQA and its members rather apply the notion of *substantial compliance*, which means that *each and every standard has to be met in substance* in order to fulfill the ESG.

Therefore, ENQA does not promote transforming the ESG into a tool for monitoring the implementation of the different action lines of the Bologna Process, and neither does the Leuven Communiqué express support for such a translation of the ESG or for transparency tools. There are other instruments in place. However, the links between quality assurance and the other action lines could be made more explicit. ENQA would be willing to support such activities and thus encourages its member agencies to initiate such research projects that would help to make these links more explicit.

The applicability in different settings is a clear asset of the EHEA and constitutes a real European dimension in opposition to a European straitjacket. ENQA, therefore, does not promote the creation of a unified, pan-European quality assurance regime. However, while respecting the principles of diversity and subsidiarity, it does promote the compatibility and comparability of quality assurance processes, based on common principles.

This has to be taken into account when discussing any future review of the ESG which should take place on the basis of a thorough consultation with all relevant stakeholders.

The quality assurance infrastructure and the European dimension of quality assurance

The implementation of quality assurance in the EU and the wider EHEA has been a highly dynamic process, mainly triggered by the Bologna Process. The application of the ESG in both higher education institutions and agencies, at national and European level, safeguards professionalism, reliability and their comparability in terms of principles and applied processes.

At the European and wider EHEA level an infrastructure of various actors with different or overlapping tasks has evolved over the last couple of years:

- ENQA as the pan-European voice of quality assurance agencies functions both as the core platform for exchanging information, sharing experience and developing good practice on the one hand, and as a political actor





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- performing the role of representing the interests of agencies within different political processes and authorities, etc.
- Networks, such as the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA) and the Central and Eastern European Network, also function as communication platforms but with specific regional perspectives.
 - The European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) as a time limited project explores and develops mutual recognition agreements between the participating accreditation agencies by exploring their concrete applicability such as joint accreditation procedures and the accreditation of joint degrees.
 - The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) serves as a list of trustworthy agencies which operates in the EHEA and, in particular, gives agencies from outside the EHEA the opportunity to gain recognition.
 - A recently growing number of the so-called quality labels which combine aspects of quality assurance with development of standards for quality in higher education and with marketing aspects.

All these actors are complementary, as they foster the European dimension of quality assurance in higher education by bringing different angles of vision and foci. It would be important to evaluate all these actors in order to know more about their impact on the quality of higher education in the EHEA.

In addition, one can see a high level of co-operation between agencies on the European level, be it in joint pilot projects, in joint quality assurance processes and in joint developmental projects. The increasing demand for international experts for quality assurance processes even creates a need for specific European training schemes which ENQA is beginning to develop. ENQA considers this close co-operation as the best way to create sustainable and mutually beneficial trust between agencies.

