

Prime Minister, Minister, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

May I first begin by thanking the Minister and the Secretary of State for their kind welcome, and by expressing the honour felt by ENQA at being given this opportunity to participate in such an important and trailblazing venture. It is particularly fitting that we should be here in Lisbon, which has lent its illustrious name to two of the major landmarks in the development of higher education in Europe – the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of qualifications and the Lisbon Strategy.

All over Europe the states that have signed the various agreements and communiqués associated with the Bologna Process have committed themselves to a programme of reform of their higher education systems. This is a mighty undertaking: the cultures, traditions and achievements representing many centuries of endeavour and attainment across many states and regions are being examined to ensure that they can meet the expectations of the European Higher Education Area – the EHEA. This is an important enterprise. It is not a bureaucratic process of centralisation or of meaningless standardisation. But it is an attempt to create and develop a shared understanding of what European higher education really means. It is about exploring and agreeing our fundamental values, and the expression of those values. It is about positioning our individual national and regional approaches to higher education within common frameworks.

We are doing this because only through mutual knowledge and understanding can we hope to raise our common expectations and serve the interests of knowledge, learning, intellectual development, economic growth and the personal transformation of our citizens. Some people describe these ambitions in terms only of financial or economic progress, employment and skills; vital though these are, they tell only part of the story. I should wish personally to add to them the importance of higher education in the defence and promotion of European civilisation, of its humane values, of the continuity and transmission of the best of its achievements and the overwhelming need to rediscover our capacity to think hard and deeply about the increasingly fragile human condition. In short, higher education is a necessary prerequisite for the future of European democracy.

Quality assurance is one of the key areas in the development of the European Higher Education Area. It has the advantage of being a relatively new area of activity within European higher education, and so it is one where there are no very long-standing differences between our various national approaches. The chances of all partners in higher education – institutions, students, funding bodies, employers, governments – learning to speak a common language of quality assurance, are good. Nevertheless, there are already clear examples of very different processes, methods and procedures being used across the European Higher Education Area and very different purposes and outcomes being expected from quality assurance. There is nothing inherently wrong in this: fitness for purpose and a focus on local needs must be the starting point for all quality assurance. But we do need to discover what we share, what we have in common. The European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education, created by ENQA in co-operation with its three partner groups – EUA, ESIB and EURASHE – and endorsed by ministers in Bergen in May 2005, is a first attempt to write down some of the fundamental values and expectations about quality in European higher education. If these are widely adopted and implemented throughout the European Higher Education Area they may help to minimise the chances of quality assurance becoming one of those phrases that is used by everyone, but understood by no one.

One of the recommendations which the ESG contains is that all quality assurance and accreditation agencies should be reviewed on a cyclical basis. This is clearly good practice: it is needed to ensure the effectiveness, procedural integrity and consistency of agencies' activities. It also responds to a wish on the part of agencies to learn from 'critical friends', to develop and improve their work. ENQA views the project that it is entering into here in Portugal with CNAVES in that spirit: offering in the field of quality assurance a wide European experience of observation, analysis, reflection and recommendations. The context for this work is clear: the Portuguese higher education system wishes to confirm its position in the mainstream of European higher education, and to do whatever may be needed to move forward into the new world which increasingly values the quality of education, and the worth of qualifications, above almost everything else.

This is not the first such review of a national quality assurance system that has taken place, although it is the first to be undertaken by ENQA itself. The reviews of the

Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC) in 2000 and of the Danish Evaluation Agency (EVA) this year have provided a number of lessons for us to learn from as we go forward with your project. Perhaps the most important of these is the need for review teams to leave their national baggage at the airport and to immerse themselves in the realities of the life of the agency they are reviewing. It is also important for a review team to establish a good working relationship with the agency being reviewed – and to understand the pressures and stresses which inevitably accompany an external review. Equally important if a credible and reliable outcome is to be obtained is the availability of high quality documentation and a willingness of the agency to be self-critical and forward-looking. I am sure that my ENQA colleagues will find this positive attitude amongst all those whom they meet here in Portugal. Finally, the knowledge, expertise and wisdom of the members of the reviewing team will underpin the depth and value of the final report and recommendation. The Board of ENQA will decide tomorrow on the team it wishes to engage for this review, and it will have before it some of the most respected names in international quality assurance. While the outcome cannot be predicted, of course, I am confident that the team will provide for you a report from eminent peers which will be impartial, useful, constructive, motivating and grounded in your own needs and experience.

Two words of caution: first, an external evaluation of the sort we are embarking upon can only ever provide a limited view of the complexities of the continuing interactions between agencies and institutions. More importantly, perhaps, occasional external evaluations cannot replace the systematic and regular gathering and analysis of feedback from those who are actually involved in accreditation and quality assurance activities. As the ESG makes plain, only those who provide can provide good quality. My second cautionary note is a general one which I offer to all who get involved with quality assurance: this activity is a means to an end, not an end in itself; it is not the answer to all questions or problems in higher education; it cannot guarantee quality unconditionally, although it can help to do so, and it needs time and resources if it is to be done well and offer maximum benefit.

In conclusion, can I express the hope that as a result of the work that the three organisations represented here will be carrying out over the coming months, all those

involved in higher education in Portugal will feel that they have derived some benefit and learned something about themselves. Self knowledge and a desire to improve are the starting points for good quality. We are looking forward to working with you to achieve your aims.

Peter Williams  
President  
ENQA  
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