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# Programme-oriented and institutional-oriented approaches to quality assurance: new developments and mixed approaches




Education and Culture DG

International co-operation in  
higher education and training

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# Foreword

Quality of higher education and the development of quality assurance systems for higher education institutions are among the essential features underpinning the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Most countries in the EHEA have now established agencies responsible for quality assurance in the field of higher education. Since the European Pilot Project for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education of 1995, and especially after the European Council's Recommendation of 24 September 1998, the European quality framework has been constantly expanding with the establishment of new quality assurance or accreditation agencies.

Quality assurance in European higher education has been, since the beginning, in a state of constant and dynamic flux, which is now gathering pace, owing to the influence of the Bologna Process and the increasing use of, and alignment with, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area on the one hand, and regional/national and international constraints on the other hand.

Besides the formation of new agencies, in many countries across Europe there are also changes in the focus of agencies' work. By adapting to new national and international legislation or requirements, quality assurance approaches have changed significantly. The European quality assurance of higher education landscape is now characterised by a mixture of programme accreditation, institutional accreditation, and non-accrediting external quality assurance evaluations. Some countries are moving, or have already moved, from the programme to the institutional approach to quality assurance, while some others are moving the other way, or have adopted a mixed approach.

Nevertheless, behind the resulting complex and diverse national quality assurance models, a careful observer can recognise a few basic features that underline the ongoing convergence. The recognised responsibilities of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) towards society and the necessity for collaborative work between HEIs and independent quality assurance agencies are driving the development of QA systems towards a frank and open dialogue about quality, which is a true foundation of trust.

The present report brings together articles presenting national experiences and approaches to quality assurance in six European countries, and offers a range of various examples of quality assurance systems. I hope this report will prove inspirational, informative and reassuring about the implementation of the shared European values that drive the development of quality assurance systems.

BRUNO CURVALE,  
*President*

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

# Chapter 1: Introduction

*Nathalie Costes, ENQA Project Manager and Achim Hopbach, Managing Director of the German Accreditation Council*

## 1.1 Background information

Two factors have contributed to the increasing importance of the relation between programme-oriented and institutional-oriented approaches to quality assurance.

The first factor is the Bologna Process and especially the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Whereas the Bologna Process has focused very much on programme-related issues of higher education, such as degree structures and qualifications frameworks, the notion of quality assurance developed slightly differently and put the institutional aspect into focus.

In 2003 the European ministers of education stated at the Bologna Process conference in Berlin that “the quality of higher education had proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area”. They also agreed that “by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include [...] evaluation of programmes or institutions [...]” and “a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures [...]”. Two years later in Bergen the ministers adopted the ESG. These two years represent remarkable steps towards a common understanding of quality assurance in European higher education.

Today (2008), after three years of experience with the ESG, it can be observed that not only the importance of quality assurance in the Bologna process has changed but also its notion, which affects to a certain extent the national approaches to quality assurance. The Berlin Communiqué highlighted the primary responsibility of higher education institutions for quality assurance in higher education, and the ESG emphasised the consideration of the existence and effectiveness of internal quality assurance mechanisms as a cornerstone of any external quality assurance procedures. In practice, the evaluation of internal quality assurance systems is gaining importance as a prime aspect of external quality assurance procedures compared with directly programme-related approaches.

The second factor is the background of national contexts. Significant reforms in the systems of external quality assurance occurred, or are currently occurring, in some European countries. These changes are, to a large extent, related to the correlation between programme and institutional approaches. The reasons behind these developments may differ from country to country. For example, the French QA system moved from the institutional focus to a mixed approach. The former *Comité National d’Evaluation* (CNE) only conducted institutional evaluations. Together with other national agencies or services previously part of the Ministry in charge of Higher Education, CNE has been integrated into the new *Agence d’Evaluation de la Recherche et de l’Enseignement Supérieur* (AERES), which combines programme-based procedures, evaluation of research activities and institutional evaluation. The German accreditation system, on the contrary, was *purely* programme-oriented and an additional institutional type of accreditation was implemented in early 2008. Nevertheless, in both cases, the underlying discussions were widely dominated by the

same question: how can institutional- and programme-oriented components of quality assurance be combined? In Germany, the most recurring reason for change was the large number of more than 10,000 degree programmes and the consequent incapacity – due to human and financial resources constraints – of higher education institutions and of agencies to handle such a large number of cyclical accreditation procedures. Another reason, related to the above-mentioned new notion of quality assurance after 2005, is that programme-oriented approaches have too little effect on the institutions' internal capacity of continuous improvement in the management of teaching and learning quality.

## **1.2 The programme and institutional approaches to quality assurance**

The current discussions and developments are not a new phenomenon. Since the mid-nineties, when quality assurance in European higher education started to develop significantly (and is still doing so), the question whether to choose programme- or institutional-oriented approaches has extensively been discussed and remained a permanent item on the agenda.

This section will give a characterisation of both approaches, which does not pretend to be exhaustive.

The programme-based quality assurance consists in evaluating or accrediting the quality of programmes offered by higher education institutions. The audit model is applied only rarely on the programme level. This approach is often considered as the most appropriate when a quality assurance system has just been implemented because it allows the content of programmes, which are the core business of higher education institutions, to be thoroughly examined. Other positive aspects of this approach encompass the possibility to make transversal comparison between subjects, its outcome orientation, better information about programmes offered, recognition of joint degrees, etc. On the other hand, some may have reservations about this programme-based approach due, for example, to the high costs it entails, the extra bureaucracy it creates, or as mentioned in the previous section, the limited effect in improving the institution's management of teaching and learning quality. In systems where a standardised model curriculum is developed, programme-based quality assurance consists in evaluating whether the syllabus aligns with the model curriculum.

The institutional approach considers the institution as a whole, including most or sometimes even all of its operations, from educational and research activities to administrative, legal and funding aspects. The institutional approach is carried out either as quality audit, accreditation or evaluation. In most systems, its objectives are, among others, to enhance public confidence in the quality of education, training and standards of qualifications and to assess whether the internal monitoring and quality assurance arrangements are effective. This approach is often considered to allow for more flexibility in terms of structure, content and implementation of study programmes. It emphasises the autonomy and the primary responsibility of the institutions for their quality. Thus, institutional audits based on an evaluation of internal quality processes are often deemed to be a suitable method to ensure a balance between preserving autonomy and meeting the need for accountability. One of the central questions in this approach is how to address the students' and founding institutions' demands for assuring and demonstrating high quality of the programmes.



### **1.3 The ENQA workshop**

The ENQA workshop, hosted by the German Accreditation Council in Berlin in June 2008, gave an opportunity to share experience of linking both programme-oriented and institutional-oriented approaches and to present different paths to a combined approach according to the different legal and political national backgrounds.

After a presentation on the current trends in European QA with respect to the overall topic of the event, the workshop discussed the stakeholders' demands on external QA and the approach they would opt for. The question of how the systems deal with these various demands was also considered. The workshop examined the procedure design and effectiveness of each approach, the strategies used by QA agencies and the potential opportunities and threats in case of combination of approaches. Case studies were presented to introduce three different systems and reflect on the background and rationale behind the reform. The workshop demonstrated that there exists a wide variety of different models and approaches that should be respected. The articles in this report reflect this variety and present the situation in six different countries: Germany, Ireland, Greece, Sweden, Norway and the United Kingdom.

# Chapter 2: From programme to institutional approach: the implementation of system accreditation in Germany

*Achim Hopbach, Managing Director of the German Accreditation Council (GAC)*

## **2.1 Background: framework conditions and reasons for change**

In early 2008, the German Accreditation Council introduced a new accreditation approach into the German higher education system in addition to the well established programme accreditation. The so-called system accreditation is carried out in way of accrediting the internal quality assurance systems of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).<sup>1</sup> Both system and programme accreditation approaches coexist and HEIs must opt for one of them, as accreditation is a legal obligation. This has been the first major change since the German accreditation system was established in 1999.

The system accreditation approach, as well as its goals and purposes, assessment criteria and process regulations, can only be understood within the historical and legal contexts.

In September 2005 the Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Laender (KMK) asked the Accreditation Council, “[...] to submit recommendations for the further development of the accreditation system, which sees as a perspective, a simplified accreditation procedure and correspondingly reduces the time and effort for the HEIs when proof of a reliable internal quality assurance system is available.”<sup>2</sup> This request, which marked the starting point for the development of recommendations by the Accreditation Council, makes clear what the KMK basically wanted; it did not intend to introduce a completely new accreditation approach, but rather further develop the existing programme approach by simplifying the procedure and reducing the effort.

As the Accreditation Council was preparing the recommendations, the KMK further specified its request at the beginning of 2007, “in addition to the current programme accreditation introducing (a system accreditation) which leads to accreditation of the quality assurance system and thus, the HEIs’ study programmes after an external review of the internal quality assurances procedures. This possibility should be available in addition to the existing programme accreditation.”<sup>3</sup> Above all, the stipulation of the accreditation object and the legal consequences of system accreditation are of special significance. The evaluation and accreditation of the internal quality assurance system of HEIs does not only result – if the outcome is successful – in the accreditation of this system, but also in the accreditation of the study programmes. The KMK thereby confirmed what the original purpose of accreditation is, i.e. assurance of high quality in teaching and learning, and compliance with formal criteria in study programmes. It is also noteworthy that the ministers did not remove the legal obligation of programme

1 See all relevant resolutions by the Accreditation Council of 29 February 2008 (“Criteria for System Accreditation” and “General Rules for Carrying out System Accreditation Procedures”) [www.akkreditierungsrat.de](http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de)

2 Resolution by the KMK of 22 September 2005, see [www.akkreditierungsrat.de](http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de)

3 Resolution by the KMK of 1 February 2007

accreditation. System accreditation, thus, acts de facto like another approach to accreditation of study programmes in addition to the already established procedures.

In giving the Accreditation Council this mandate, the ministers picked up a controversy about the effectiveness, the efficiency and the appropriateness of programme accreditation in Germany.

Criticisms to the programme approach, which were found among almost all actors in the system and stakeholder groups, put forward especially the following arguments:

- The programme approach is too burdensome and costly for HEIs;
- It is an improper approach for large HE systems, since after six years in practice only about half of the programmes have been accredited;
- The programme approach bears a tendency of persistence of programmes between accreditation procedures, because HEIs are concerned about losing the accreditation status when modifying the programmes;
- Because of the very small focus on single programmes, this approach contributes very little to the development of a comprehensive internal QA system.

Basically, neither the accreditation system itself nor its basic purpose was challenged. Thus, the accreditation goals defined in 1988 by the KMK and the German Rectors' Conference – meaning above all quality, diversity, mobility, employability, and equality – kept their validity also for the new approach of system accreditation.

## 2.2 Principles

The Accreditation Council took these criticisms into account when drafting the recommendations. Consequently, the system accreditation approach is based on the following principle:

“Only HEIs themselves are in the position of guaranteeing high quality in teaching and learning. They thus have the responsibility for the assurance and continual improvement in the quality of the curricula they are offering. For this purpose, the compliance with legal and formal regulations in teaching and learning are part of this. The further development of the accreditation system must therefore take into account the autonomy of HEIs and strengthen it and, with regard to the organisation of the process, maintain the principle of the appropriateness of efforts and costs.”

This corresponds to a European-wide observable development trend in which internal quality assurance plays a major role for the design of external quality assurance processes, insofar as external quality assurance shall take into account the results of internal quality assurance and thus can be less burdensome. This is stipulated in the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) 2.1:

*Standard: External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.*

*Guidelines: [...] If higher education institutions are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.”*

## 2.3 Accreditation object and legal consequences

The assessment object of system accreditation is the internal management and quality assurance system of a HEI in the field of teaching and learning. The structures

and processes relevant for teaching and learning are assessed with regard to their appropriateness for achieving the qualification objectives of the programmes and for ensuring high quality, with the ESG, the formal regulations, and the criteria of the Accreditation Council being applied.

Thus, a positive system accreditation attests the HEI that its quality assurance system in the field of teaching and learning is appropriate to achieve the qualification objectives and to ensure the quality standards of its study programmes. Accordingly, those study programmes that have been set up after the system accreditation or that have already been the subject matter of internal quality assurance, as specified by the accredited system, are accredited.

## 2.4 Process regulations

The procedure is quite similar to that of the programme approach and comprises the well-known elements of external quality assurance as laid down in the ESG: basic elements are the preparation of a self-evaluation report by the institution, the review carried out by an expert panel, a site visit, and stakeholder involvement. In addition to the well established processes of programme accreditation, three steps have been integrated: the review on the systemic level, the random samples and the midterm review. The effectiveness of the management and quality assurance system is not only based on the assessment of the system as such, but also, and in particular, by way of two random samples:

- the feature random sample, which consists of a review of a small number of specific features across all study programmes of the institution;
- the programme random sample, which is a detailed and comprehensive review of all relevant features of a small number of study programmes.

The third new step is the so-called midterm review, which follows the same rules as for the programme random sample and takes place after the first half of the six-to-eight-year accreditation period.

### 2.4.1 SPECIFIC FEATURES OF SYSTEM ACCREDITATION

#### a) Documentation

The fifth process regulation represents an important change in the German accreditation system compared to the programme approach. The documentation to be submitted by HEIs consists of documents that do not have to be prepared specifically for the accreditation procedure, but are rather produced regularly within the internal management system. Thus, the documentation partly comprises texts that are presumably available to the public anyway (such as the Mission Statement, the statement on educational goals, and the catalogue of study programmes) and partly includes reports that are regularly prepared, such as reports on the examination of the qualification goals or other reports on processes of the internal quality assurance. Therefore, it is not a *conventional* self-evaluation report.

This alludes to a basic assumption of the system accreditation approach: HEIs should be able, at any time, to generate documents on their activities, on the effects of their management processes and on the outputs and outcomes of teaching and learning without having to prepare these deliberately for any particular reason. It becomes clear where the largest challenge of the system accreditation lies for many

HEIs: not in the new accreditation procedure as such but rather in the *formalised* set-up of the required management, reporting and quality assurance systems and the *regular* documentation of their results. Although the goals of programme accreditation and of system accreditation are the same in the end (confirmation of the quality of study programmes), the requirements on the maturity level of internal management mechanisms, however, are entirely different.

### **b) Random samples**

The core question of the system accreditation approach relates to the effectiveness of the management and quality assurance systems, and, as a result, to their suitability for guaranteeing high quality and complying with formal guidelines for study programmes. Besides the review on a systemic level, two process elements are especially designed to answer this question: the feature random sample and the programme random sample.

In the feature random sampling the experts single out relevant features of the programme design and examine, on the basis of all programmes, whether or not they are actually implemented according to the particular qualification targets, as well as to the formal guidelines. Experts have to answer the question: has the HEI implemented processes that ensure that all programmes fulfil the structural guidelines of the KMK, e.g. ensure the correct student workload for Bachelor's and Master's study programmes? The experts receive resilient evidence especially with regard to the question of whether or not the management and quality assurance systems function similarly institution-wide. Thus, they also receive evidence with regard to the central question of whether (i) "the" HEI *as an institution* is able to offer "the" course offerings corresponding to its own quality goals and to the formal guidelines; or (ii) "the" HEI *as an institution* does not deserve the necessary trust and therefore cannot be system accredited. The objects of the feature random sampling can be in particular: the modularisation concept of the university, the system of the awarding of ECTS points, the examination system, etc.

The programme random sampling as a second random sampling for the assessment of the effectiveness of the management systems and quality assurance systems also applies at programme level. Its direction is, however, not horizontal but vertical. Instead of assessing selected features of the programme design and delivery among all study programmes, the programme random sampling assesses all relevant features of a programme in a selected number of programmes.

The results of the two random samplings play an important role in the review. Although these two random samplings focus on features at programme level, in the final analysis the evaluation of the effectiveness at systemic level is concerned. Thus, the core question is: which conclusions can be drawn from the results of the random samplings on the functions of the management and quality assurance systems? A management and quality assurance system can be accredited only when the review yields that such system *causally* leads to high quality in study programmes and their compliance with the formal guidelines.

### **c) Decision**

The review leads to a decision of the "classical" type in accreditation processes because it can only be positive or negative. However, contrary to programme accreditation, system accreditation cannot be conditional. The reason lies in its procedure's high

level of complexity compared with programme accreditation. While the grounds for conditions in programme accreditation is, as a rule, a deficiency in the programme itself, a condition in the system accreditation refers to a deficiency on a systemic level and thus, potentially to all programmes. While the fulfilment of a condition in programme accreditation leads directly to rectifying a deficiency, the time span for solving the deficiency in the system accreditation approach is much longer because the rectification of the deficiency can first be effective on systemic level and only subsequently on programme level.

#### **d) Midterm review**

After half of the accreditation term (six to eight years) has passed, the HEI is obliged to undergo a so-called midterm review, which is by and large another programme random sample. However, the role of this review differs: first, the agency prepares a report on the result of the review, which, if applicable, contains recommendations for the removal of quality deficiencies. Then, it makes it available to the institution and publishes it. There are no formal consequences, like prolongation or withdrawal of the accreditation status. Thus, the sole aim of this review is to give feedback to the institution.

## **2.5 Accreditation Criteria**

With regard to a major aspect of accreditation, the criteria for system accreditation follow the same tradition as the ones for programme accreditation: they describe standards for management and quality assurance systems and processes related to teaching and learning. These standards contain the request for a transparent definition of the internal processes, of the responsibilities and the expected results. The accreditation criteria do not describe how a management or quality assurance system should be like. This is forbidden because of the considerable variety of HEIs in terms of size, structure, constitution, but also in terms of tradition and culture. One of the unshakeable principles of the German accreditation system is that certain effects or results are defined, but not defined on how to achieve the results. So, there is no “blueprint” for the internal quality assurance. Against this backdrop it should also be understood why the Accreditation Council limited itself to a comparatively short list of only six criteria.

The criteria concern, for one thing, the formulation of qualification goals by the HEI (Criterion 1), the internal management systems of the HEI in the area of teaching and learning (Criterion 2), the internal processes of quality assurance of the HEI (Criterion 3) and, finally, overall and formal aspects (Criteria 4 to 6).

### **Accreditation criteria**

1. Qualification targets
2. Management system in teaching and learning
3. Procedure of internal quality assurance (ESG part 1)
4. Reporting system and data collection
5. Responsibilities
6. Documentation

Basically, criteria 1 to 3 refer to the “classic” four steps of programme design and programme delivery: definition of qualification targets, conversion into programme concepts, and implementation of the programme within adequate general conditions, examination, and last but not least, regular evaluation of the programmes. The HEI must prove that it has adequate mechanisms in place to systematically – and not only in concrete isolated cases – and independently guarantee the delivery of its programmes in compliance with the criteria for the study programme accreditation.

# Chapter 3: Validation of programmes of higher education in Ireland – The role of the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)

*Deirdre Lillis and Tara Ryan, HETAC*

## **Abstract**

*I think we may safely trust a good deal more than we do.*

HENRY THOREAU

This paper considers the programme validation arrangements in place in one half of the Irish higher education sector. It outlines how responsibility for programme validation can be safely delegated to Institutions within a robust overarching framework for quality assurance. It compares programme validation in Institutions with self awarding status with Institutions that have their programmes validated by a national Awarding agency. The paper concludes that when programme validation in Ireland and (potentially) across Europe is examined more closely, processes that appear to be very different on the surface can be quite similar in reality. From a philosophical perspective it appears that the degree to which higher education providers can be trusted to manage their own quality assurance is a key consideration, however difficult it may be to measure trust.

## **3.1 Context**

Ireland has a binary sector of higher education with seven universities, 14 institutes of technology and over 50 other providers of higher education. These other providers include independent, private, for-profit colleges and as well public sector providers such as the Garda (Police) College and Military College. In recent years they include an increasing number of work-based learning providers and specialist colleges offering programmes in niche areas. The Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) is the awarding body for Institutes of Technology and these other providers of higher education<sup>4</sup>. All HETAC providers may have programmes validated from two year Higher Certificate level up to and including doctorate level. Recent developments on the National Framework of Qualifications mean that providers can also offer minor, supplemental and special purpose awards. The principle that providers of higher education have primary responsibility for their quality assurance underpins all of HETAC's activities.

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<sup>4</sup> The Irish universities are autonomous, self-governing institutions. The Dublin Institute of Technology operate its own quality assurance arrangements. Both of these are beyond the scope of this paper.



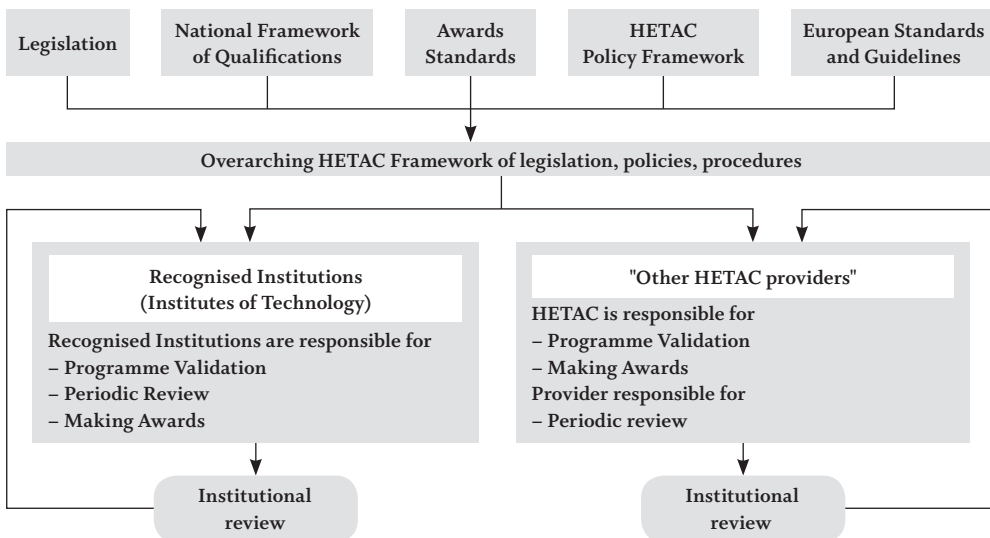
HETAC providers are of one of two types (see Figure 1):

- i. “*Recognised Institutions*” are defined in the Qualifications Act and currently only constitute the publicly funded Institutes of Technology. HETAC may delegate authority to make awards and validate programmes to Recognised Institutions only. There is a basis for this delegation within Irish law and delegation is subject to an Institution meeting and continuing to meet a set of stringent criteria. These include criteria for operations and management, quality assurance arrangements, adherence to the National Framework of Qualifications, *etc.* For example Recognised Institutions must agree their quality assurance procedures with HETAC. These procedures are aligned with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and must include a programme validation and a periodic review procedure. As part of an institutional review process, undertaken once every five years, the effectiveness of these quality assurance procedures, adherence to the criteria established for Delegated Authority and adherence to the National Framework of Qualifications are reviewed. In essence this means that HETAC sets the overarching criteria for programme validation and delegates responsibility to each Recognised Institution to operate within these criteria, subject to a five year review.
- ii. All other HETAC providers work within a similar philosophical environment to Recognised Institutions in that they:
  - a. have to agree their quality assurance procedures with HETAC;
  - b. are responsible for conducting their own periodic reviews;
  - c. are reviewed once every five years through institutional review.

The key difference is that HETAC remains directly responsible for the validation of programmes and the making of awards.

Self-awarding status is a critical distinction that is made between institutions in higher education systems worldwide. This therefore provides an interesting case study of two approaches to programme validation within the same quality assurance agency. In the first approach, HETAC delegates authority to a Recognised Institution for programme validation and in the second it does not. On the surface it appears that they are two distinct approaches - however it will be seen from a comparison of the two that programme validation process is almost identical in both cases except for a number of finer points of the process.

**Figure 1: Programme Validation in the HETAC sector in Ireland**

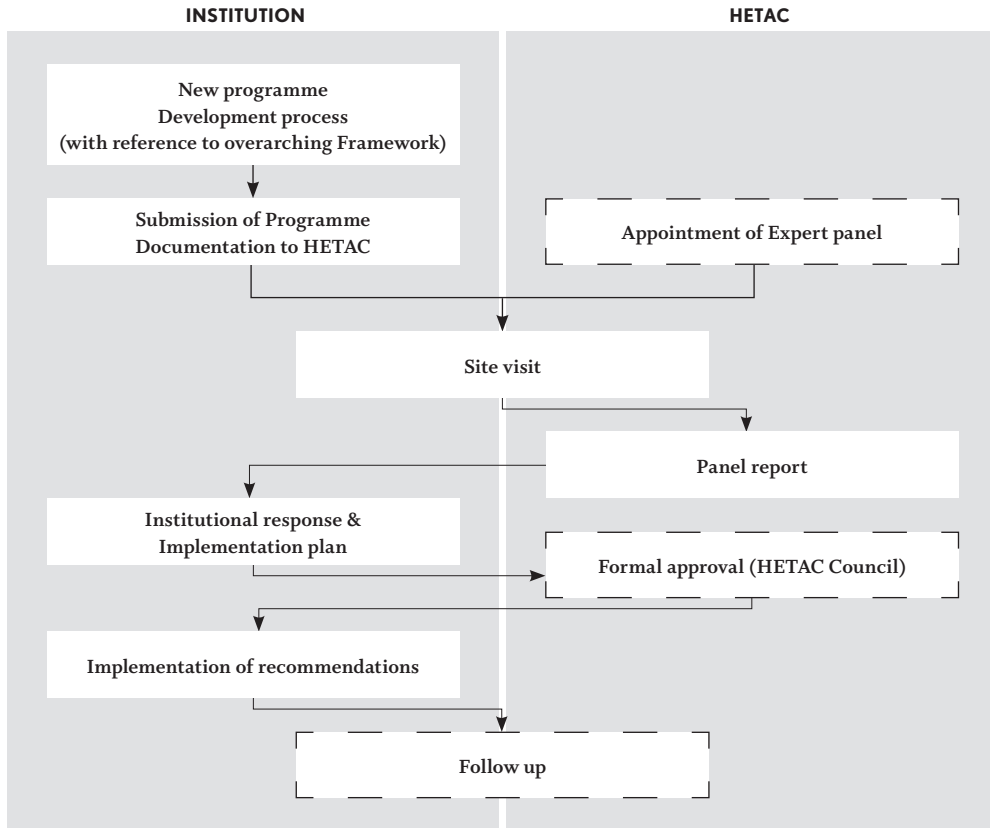


### 3.2 Programme Validation process when awards are made directly by HETAC

In essence, within this framework, a provider of higher education either has its programmes validated directly by HETAC, or validates its own programmes in accordance with criteria established by HETAC. The main components of the programme validation procedure are outlined in Figure 2. A similar process and similar principles are in place for periodic review (programmatic review), but programmatic review is not managed by HETAC.

When a provider wishes to create a new programme, it follows an approved development process. On the completion of the initial phase of this process a draft programme document is submitted to HETAC for consideration. HETAC arranges for the evaluation of new programme to be undertaken by an expert panel. The evaluation normally takes the form of a review of programme documentation and a site visit to the provider's premises with associated meetings with the relevant staff members. Expert panels are selected to ensure that there is a range of expertise available in areas such as: quality assurance, programme validation/review and issues relating to teaching methodologies, assessment and learner support mechanisms and ability to make national and international comparisons. Expert panels normally include members who represent industry and or broader stakeholders, either nationally or from within the region where the provider is located.

**Figure 2: HETAC programme validation process**



HETAC exercises two key principles of **competence** and **independence** in its selection of panel members. In terms of competence, there must be confidence that the review is being conducted by competent persons who have appropriate levels of experience and knowledge and who can offer an informed, expert opinion on the activities and/or processes being evaluated. While each organisation is distinct and each review panel is unique and, as such requires different competences, panels should have an appropriate mix and balance of expertise.

In terms of independence, a panel must arrive at its decision in an independent manner, free of influence from the organisation or unit being evaluated and of other interests. Stakeholders must have confidence that the review has been conducted by independent experts. It is important that panel members engage in the review process without any conflict of interest, or perception of conflict of interest. It is in providers' and the public's interest that any review or evaluation is conducted in a transparent manner by independent external peers as an endorsement of their practice.

Recognised Institutions with self awarding status operate a very similar programme validation procedure. The key points where it differs from the HETAC programme validation process are as follows:

- The selection and appointment of the expert panel is undertaken by the Recognised Institution, and the same HETAC principles of competence and independence apply. This ensures that experts are **external** to the Institution. There has been a long tradition within HETAC of interpreting these principles as being synonymous with the appointment of persons who are completely external to an organisation. Indeed ‘external’ is the starting point when considering potential members of panels.
- The formal approval of the programme and follow up on recommendations is undertaken by the Institution’s internal governance structures.

The HETAC Institutional Review process, undertaken once every five years, reviews how the Recognised Institution has adhered to these principles in their programme validation process.

### **3.3 Overarching Framework**

Programme validation within the HETAC framework is underpinned and enabled by some key components:

#### **3.3.1 NATIONAL FRAMEWORK OF QUALIFICATIONS (NFQ)**

The NFQ was introduced in 2003 by the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI), as a system of 10 levels, based on standards of knowledge, skill and competence and incorporating awards made for all kinds of learning, wherever it is gained. Qualifications in higher education and training are included in the framework from Level 6 (Higher Certificate) to Level 10 (Doctorate). The level indicators that were published by NQAI form the first reference point for the design of qualifications leading to NFQ levels.

#### **3.3.2 AWARDS STANDARDS**

HETAC has elaborated upon the generic award-type descriptors at Levels 6 to 9 of the NFQ by developing awards standards for broad fields of learning (including Business, Computing, Art and Design, Engineering and Science). These standards facilitate specialists in particular fields of learning to create the link between their programmes and the NFQ. The awards standards are a reference point and a point of comparison against which individual programmes may be justified. They are intended to provide general guidance for articulating the learning outcomes associated with a particular field of learning. In the programme validation process providers must take cognisance of the standards for specific fields of learning where they generally relate to the programme being developed. HETAC however recognises that there is a significant growth in multi-disciplinary/inter-disciplinary programmes and that there are emerging fields of learning and within each field there is a vast spectrum of programmes possible, which range from highly practical to very theoretical.

#### **3.3.3 CRITERIA AND PROCEDURES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE**

Prior to the development of the ESG, HETAC had a comprehensive framework of policies and criteria in place for quality assurance. This legacy stretches back to 1988 through its predecessor the NCEA. These guidelines and criteria are intended to assist providers in establishing, maintaining and improving quality assurance procedures which will meet the requirements of the Council. These quality assurance

procedures explicitly include procedures for programme validation, periodic review, learner assessment, etc. Providers have to agree their quality assurance procedures with HETAC, in advance of validation of their first programme (in the case of new providers). All providers have to demonstrate, as part of Institutional review, the effectiveness of their quality assurance arrangements.

### 3.3.4 INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW

A core element of contemporary quality assurance practice is external review of the institution as a whole. All providers offering HETAC awards are subject to external quality assurance review of their institutions. HETAC carries out such reviews on a five year schedule. The objectives of institutional review are to:

- enhance public confidence in the quality of education and training provided by the institution and the standards of the awards made;
- contribute to coherent strategic planning and governance in the institution;
- assess the effectiveness of the quality assurance arrangements operated by the institution;
- confirm the extent that the institution has implemented the NFQ and procedures for access, transfer and progression;
- evaluate the operation and management of delegated authority where it has been granted; and
- provide recommendations for the enhancement of the education and training provided by the institution.

In line with the HETAC philosophy, the ideal scenario is that institutional reviews focus not on processes or outcomes but on the capacity of the provider to review itself.

## 3.4 Reflections

Research on this topic, where it exists, has demonstrated that ownership of quality assurance is a key consideration in higher education. There is general consensus that the impact of externally driven quality assessments is modest when compared to internally driven quality assessment. The principle that providers of higher education have primary responsibility for their quality assurance is fundamental to the approaches to programme validation and institutional review processes just described.

The tensions that arise therefore are between trusting providers to manage their own quality assurance and holding them accountable; between institutional autonomy and external control; and between a principle-based and rule-based approach. The key distinction made between self-awarding Recognised Institutions and other HETAC providers is in the validation of a new programme (and the making of awards associated with those programmes). They are equal in most other regards in this framework (both undertake their own periodic reviews of programmes for example). The question it poses is why is the initial programme validation procedure so important?

The making of awards associated with a programme is intrinsically linked to the validation of the programme in the first instance and it is difficult to separate these two issues. There may be a distinction drawn between programme validation in publicly funded higher education institutions, who are subject to other public sector controls such as openness, transparency and value for public money, and independent providers who do not operate within this framework. There may be a recognition of the notion of the maturity of HEIs and the learning curve associated with quality assurance of

programme standards. Ultimately it is underpinned by the degree to which providers can be trusted to take ownership of their quality assurance, however difficult it is to measure this.

# Chapter 4: Subject or institutional evaluations or both – the case of Greece

*Spyros Amourgis, President of the Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (HQAA)*

## 4.1 Background in Greece

In Greece, higher education has always been exclusively provided by the state, which has kept close control through legislation regarding the establishment, finances and management of the country's higher education institutions (HEIs). Therefore, there has been no process in place for accreditation or evaluation of educational services, except financial auditing, until 2005.

## 4.2 Prevalent practices

HEIs operate under state legislation. The Minister of education supervises the implementation of the law. Thanks to the patronage of the state, the teaching staff in the name of academic freedom has defended its academic autonomy. Subsequently, the only evaluation of the work of the staff has been the process it underwent as regards its appointment, tenure and/or promotion.

When the European University Association (EUA) started institutional external evaluations<sup>5</sup>, a number of Greek HEIs voluntarily participated in the process. It is also worth mentioning that a number of departments began, on their own initiative, curricula reviews which were conducted by external experts. Students were invited to take part in the reviews and formally express their views on the teaching process.

## 4.3 Present situation

The Greek law n.3374 of 2005 regarding quality assurance of higher education specifies that the full cycle of evaluations (of all state HEIs) includes two stages: the internal self-evaluation and the external review by a team of five experts. It also specifies that the departments must first complete their internal and external processes before the internal and external evaluation of the institution as a whole can take place.

The Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, HQAA, established under Greek law, is an autonomous agency accountable to the Parliament. The members of the agency are nominated by all HEIs whereas the President is nominated by the Minister of education and approved by the Parliament's Committee of Education and Cultural Affairs. The agency, on the basis of the Greek legislation, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)<sup>6</sup>, and the best international practices, designed and developed a number of documents detailing quality assurance processes.

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5 European University Association Institutional Evaluation Programme (EUA-IEP) <http://www.eua.be/events/institutional-evaluation-programme/home/>

6 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ENQA, Helsinki, 2009

The basic areas of evaluation are:

- quality of curricula;
- quality of teaching;
- quality of research; and
- quality of other services for students.

#### **4.4 Difficulties and challenges**

Implementing the new law of 2005 has been necessary to fill a number of gaps or reduce limitations in the existing legal framework of the public sector. However, the most important difficulty and challenge has been to overcome the resistance to the new process, which for some has appeared as a threat to their academic autonomy. The agency is fully conscious that this process must not be an end in itself or another bureaucratic measure. During the first two years of its existence, HQAA has concentrated on gaining the trust of the various departments by offering them support and advice on the internal self-evaluation process.

#### **4.5 Subject or departmental evaluation**

The departments are the main providers of university services. At this level, the assessment can more easily be qualitative and only in some areas backed by quantitative indicators. A good performance of all departments would benefit the institution as a whole. Departmental reviews examine all aspects from the micro to the macroscopic, that is from the more detailed and current aspects of the function of a department to the scope, potential and future aims and development plans. The advantage of this process is that the departments are forced to be more dynamic, to assume their responsibility, and to be accountable.

#### **4.6 Institutional evaluation or accreditation process**

The objective of this procedure is to review the management and effectiveness of the existing processes which support and nurture HEIs' mission. If there is no subject review in place, the academic work can only be presented in quantitative terms and reviewed macroscopically. A limited number of external experts cannot, owing to time and resource constraints, judge the quality of numerous departments and programmes, except in quantitative terms with benchmarks of outcomes and performance.

On the other hand, when subject reviews are in place, the institutional review will compare the conclusions of the subject reviews to the effectiveness of the management and the performance of the institution.

There is no doubt that performing reviews at all levels is an arduous task. The systematic and cyclical evaluation of HEIs' educational services is a relatively new practice in Europe. Therefore, it is important to continue carrying out reviews both at subject and institutional levels.

Finally, it is important to remember that the general goal of this evaluation process has been to contribute to the creation of the European Higher Education Area, with high quality HEIs, mobility of graduates and competition for continual improvement. In this way, quality can only be achieved if institutions adopt a dynamic approach to quality assurance and keep moving forward. Academia is a complex environment that relies on synergy, foresight and dynamism, but it can easily slide to stagnation.



# Chapter 5: A Mixed Approach to Quality Assurance – the case of Sweden

*Clas-Uno Frykholm and Staffan Wahlén, Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (NAHE)*

## 5.1 Introduction

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) have been highly instrumental in creating a common language and a common framework for internal and external quality assurance of higher education in Europe. Within this framework, however, there is scope for considerable variation particularly as to the object of national external evaluation. A number of countries concentrate their efforts on programme and subject evaluation, others on academic audit, yet others on accreditation of programmes and/or institutions. Many also shift from one methodology to another so as to be able to focus on different perspectives of quality in higher education from time to time.

The first model of quality assurance of higher education introduced in Sweden was institutional academic audit. It was carried out in two three-year cycles between 1995 and 2001, and the approach was fundamentally developmental. It was followed, between 2001 and 2007, by evaluation of all subjects and programmes leading to a degree. A distinct link between educational quality and the right to award degrees was established. If the evaluation at a certain institution indicated low quality, the Swedish National Agency for Higher Education (NAHE) issued a so-called *warning* and if the perceived defects in quality were not rectified within one year, the institution's right to award degrees in a particular subject or programme could be withdrawn. This model of ex post accreditation is still in operation.

In addition to the subject and programme evaluation, the agency also assessed the entitlement to award degrees (a form of ex ante accreditation), in particular master's degrees to be offered by university colleges and professional programmes at all higher education institutions (HEIs). A further element was thematic evaluation (audit) of certain quality aspects, such as internationalisation and student influence.

Towards the end of this period (2001–2007), a new model was developed, partly to lay more emphasis on the outcomes of higher education provision, partly to emphasise the ESG requirement to focus the HEIs' own quality assurance systems.

## 5.2 A new system

In many ways the subject and programme evaluation cycles worked well. They provided a good national picture of quality in various educational areas, while at the same time programmes that did not maintain sound standards were identified and warned of the possible withdrawal of their entitlement to award degrees. All of the programmes evaluated received feedback in the form of recommendations and proposed measures to enhance their quality.

A follow-up organised after three years showed that nearly all the recommendations had been taken into account and that quality had improved. Experiences were similar to the assessments of entitlement to award degrees, where the shortcomings identified were usually remedied before another application was submitted.

The thematic evaluations have served to provide a platform of knowledge and a source of inspiration for development in important areas.

Nevertheless, there were reasons for making changes, the most important one involving a shift of emphasis on responsibility for quality assurance. As a result of the large number of national subject and programme evaluations that have been made, the higher education institutions have become much better equipped to assume the responsibility for their own quality assurance and quality development. Increasing the responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves also coincided with European developments, following the Berlin communiqué of 2003 in which European Ministers of Education stressed that “the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself”.

Greater responsibility for the higher education institutions means that external evaluations of the quality of subjects and programmes need not be as extensive. At the same time the state must be able to guarantee that reasonable minimum standards are being maintained in all higher education. This is now achieved by undertaking a smaller number of in-depth evaluations of subjects and programmes after an assessment of “the risk of failure to maintain good standards” based on key statistics, monitoring and simplified self-evaluations.

There is also a greater need for international participation in the evaluations. It is important to broaden perspectives and compare Swedish quality evaluations with those conducted in other countries. Consequently, it was considered important that certain evaluations should be carried out using English as working language.

There were also grounds for focusing greater attention than before on activities that maintain very high standards. Therefore a distinction for centres of excellent quality in higher education was introduced.

The new quality assurance system for the period 2007-2012 combines institutional audit and programme evaluation and consists of the following five components that interact with and support each other:

- evaluations of subjects and programmes;
- audits of institutional quality procedures;
- thematic studies;
- appraisal of entitlement to award degrees;
- distinguishing centres of educational excellence.

Each of these components is described below.

### 5.2.1 SUBJECT AND PROGRAMME EVALUATIONS

In the new organisation of the programme evaluations the assessment takes place in three stages. Initially NAHE compiles an overall national report of the major subject areas that describes the programmes to be evaluated in any given year. In the next stage, a *selection* of individual programmes is made on the basis of these reports. This selection is based on self-evaluations, key statistics and other factual material. Programmes that risk failing to maintain sound quality are always selected for in-depth evaluation. The choice may also be made for other reasons, for instance a programme

may have an interesting focus, be innovative or an example of good practice. The decision to conduct an in-depth evaluation is made by the University Chancellor on the basis of a report presented by the responsible project administrator at NAHE. In the third stage the programmes selected undergo in-depth appraisals.

As previously, programme evaluations take place in accordance with a six-year plan. Changes have been made in the six-year plan to coordinate the appraisal of programmes in related subject areas, which makes it easier to provide national reports of the major disciplines. At the same time, this offers a greater possibility of assessing programmes in a broad subject area on the same terms. It should also offer the possibility of synergy benefits for HEIs as there is a more concentrated focus on the faculties concerned for a limited period of time.

The overall appraisal and the production of the national reports cover all major areas and programmes that lead to the award of at least a bachelor's degree, a bachelor's degree in the field of arts or a professional qualification. Thus, all the degrees in the new Bologna-based degree ordinance, apart from university diplomas, will be evaluated.

One important aim of the national reports is to provide information about the educational areas evaluated: where programmes are offered in Sweden; what profiles they adopt; how many undergraduate and graduate students there are at the different institutions; the number of teachers and their qualifications; resources and infrastructure; other factors that significantly affect the programmes and a general impression of the quality of what is offered.

The national reports are produced by analysts at NAHE, who co-opt subject experts for the task of appraising programme-specific issues. The reports are based on data, key statistics and simplified self-evaluations. Web-based questionnaires addressed to different stakeholders, for instance students and teachers, are also used. On the other hand, no site visits take place during this stage. It is only the programmes selected for in-depth evaluation that will receive site-visits.

The evaluations are described as "simplified". The simplification consists of a reduction of the number of aspects to be reviewed and removal of the requirement that every quality aspect has to be analysed. On the other hand, considerably more quantitative information is required in self-evaluations than during the last six-year cycle. In their self-evaluation the programmes have to compile certain statistical information about their teaching staff, students, degree projects, research students and degrees awarded in third level programmes. If possible, data has to be provided for a five-year period. In addition current syllabi and curricula must be attached.

On the basis of the quantitative data NAHE produces the key-statistics to be presented in the national reports. The key-statistics describe teaching resources, teachers' qualifications, resources for supervision, performance level and the proportion of permanently appointed teachers in undergraduate programmes as well as the supervisors' qualifications and turnover in third-level programmes.

The simplified self-evaluation reports with their appendices also provide the basis for the in-depth evaluations. These adopt methods similar to the current evaluations of subjects and programmes, with panels of external assessors and site-visits. Before in-depth evaluation takes place, the panel of assessors is able to request supplementary material to cover any gaps in the data supplied.

The aspects and criteria for the evaluation of the quality of programmes are worded in general terms and intended to specify the areas and the general standards that programmes are expected to attain. Before every evaluation these will be reformulated in concrete terms on the basis of the programmes involved. This will be the task of the panel members appointed for each evaluation. They alone have the expertise and the insights required.

Just as in the earlier system, the panel of assessors submits its report on which NAHE bases its decisions. In cases where the in-depth evaluation reveals quality shortcomings of a serious nature, NAHE will also question the entitlement of the HEI to award degrees. Then, the institution is given one year to remedy the shortcomings indicated. Unless sufficient measures have been taken, the entitlement to award degrees is withdrawn.

### **5.2.2 AUDITS OF INSTITUTIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES**

The audits carried out between 1995 and 2001 took place at a time when the institutions were in the process of developing their own systems for quality assurance and quality development. The audits focused on development and were based on a vision of “the good higher education institution”. To a large extent they concentrated on central functions and the assessment of systems as they were formulated in plans and documentation.

It is now assumed that these systems have been developed and that they have functioned well for some time, which means that the audits can focus more on the outcomes and effects of the quality procedures of HEIs.

In order to determine how well grounded the quality procedures of the HEIs are in operation and how they are conducted in practice, the audits are now also conducted at faculty and departmental levels. At each higher education institution two to six areas will be selected for in-depth study. These areas may be organisational units, such as departments, centres of different kinds or other units that provide teaching at first, second or third level, a programme, a major discipline/subject or a setting in which first, second and/or third level teaching is offered. Libraries, IT support and other administrative units are not selected for in-depth study but it is important for the panels of assessors to meet representatives of these environments during their site visits. Settings in which only research takes place are not selected for in-depth study.

The audits are based on the self-evaluations of the HEIs, quality procedure plans, follow-ups, evaluations and other material requested by the panel of assessors. For areas selected for in-depth studies, it is also required to submit a brief account of how their quality assurance procedures are organised and how they relate to the overall quality assurance measures at the HEI.

Quality assurance procedures are assessed on the basis of the seven aspects recommended in the ESG. The general aspects of quality are appraised not merely on the basis of plans and documentation but also on how they are integrated, implemented and monitored in day-to-day operations. The audits focus, to a larger extent than previously, on the outcomes of the quality assurance procedures.

Every HEI is audited over a six-year cycle. Institutions where circumstances are similar will be audited in the same year. The methodology used for the audits resembles the previous one, with panels of external assessors, self-evaluation, site visits and written reports.

The panels of assessors draw up a final report describing and evaluating the quality procedures at all HEIs that have been audited during a specific year. The final report contains a general section in which shared strengths and weaknesses in the quality procedures are specified and analysed. The report also contains specific feedback for the individual institutions and recommendations and proposed measures for improvement.

NAHE bases its analysis and reflections on the assessors' report and this results in a decision in which the University Chancellor makes one of the following judgements:

- *The NAHE has confidence in quality assurance procedures at the higher education institution;*
- *The NAHE has limited confidence in ...;*
- *The NAHE has no confidence in...*

The judgement of confidence is based on an overall appraisal guided by assessment of the various aspects.

Confidence in the quality assurance procedures means that the HEI has a system that functions well, but even systems of this kind *can* be improved. Limited confidence in the quality procedures of a HEI means that there are aspects of these procedures that function well but that there are certain areas that *should* be improved. In those cases where NAHE has no confidence in the quality procedures, such serious shortcomings must be dealt with. The institutions are then given one year to remedy the shortcomings specified.

### 5.2.3 THEMATIC EVALUATIONS / THEMATIC STUDIES

In order to shed light on more general aspects of quality, NAHE has undertaken a number of thematic evaluations of areas that are central to quality in higher education. The themes studied so far are gender equality, student influence, diversity, cooperation with the surrounding community, internationalisation as well as the support services offered to students by HEIs.

The aim of these evaluations has been to provide a national overview of how certain aspects of quality are being dealt with. This kind of national perspective, where the operations of all HEIs are studied at the same time, also enables comparisons to be made and examples of good practice to be highlighted. These evaluations are meant to provide inspiration and spur other institutions to improve quality.

The experiences from the thematic evaluations have been positive and they should continue. However, the emphasis has been more on describing and appraising rather than on probing, analysing and explaining.

We have seen an increasing need of thematic studies which are intended to produce in-depth knowledge about various phenomena in higher education in Sweden. Four thematic studies of this kind have been made, in which external researchers have been engaged to cooperate with NAHE in studying issues that play an important role for the quality of programmes. Within the framework of these projects different forms of examination and degree projects were compared and also the links with research in various programmes at different HEIs. There are many examples of other areas that would be interesting subjects for similar studies. One study was recently undertaken about the working conditions of academic teachers and academic governance and another on entrance qualifications and the standards required in

higher education. Both of these provide interesting information that may be used for decision-making at various levels.

Thematic studies should be regarded as an integrated aspect of the quality assurance system in which the results of evaluations of HEIs or of programmes can be probed into more deeply. Thematic studies can also be initiated in other ways, for instance issues can be raised by the Ministry, HEIs, students, future employers or other stakeholders.

#### **5.2.4 APPRAISAL OF ENTITLEMENT TO AWARD DEGREES AND TO AWARD PARTIAL OR FULL UNIVERSITY STATUS**

Appraisal of entitlement to award degrees continues to be an important element in the quality assurance system. HEIs applying for entitlement to award professional qualifications are assessed by NAHE, which decides on them on a case-by-case basis. Independent course providers apply to the Government, upon which NAHE assesses the application and recommends a decision. The Government has also given NAHE the task of assessing applications for areas of research (partial university status) or for full university status on which the Government can base its decisions.

A new degree ordinance came into force on 1 July 2007. As a consequence of the Bologna process, general degrees are awarded at three levels: first level (diplomas and Bachelor's degrees), second level (Master's degree, first year, and Master's degree, second year) and also third level (licentiate degrees and PhD's). Corresponding degrees have been introduced for programmes in the fine arts.

NAHE has formulated the aspects and criteria on which appraisal of entitlement to award degrees are based. These criteria are general ones. The concrete criteria that apply for each specific appraisal must be determined by the appointed panel of assessors. The descriptions of learning outcomes in the new degree ordinance are to provide guidelines for this task.

HEIs that are not entitled to award third level degrees must be appraised for the entitlement to award a Master's degree (two years) in these subject areas. NAHE has drawn up instructions for applications for entitlement to award these degrees and the quality aspects and criteria on which such appraisals will be based.

Programmes leading to the award of a Master's degree (two years) are to have a specific focus to be determined by each HEI itself and comprise advanced study within a major field of study. The ordinance also states that NAHE is to ascertain whether the quality and extent of the academic environment in the field is adequate to enable the institution to offer a programme with close links to third-level programmes.

The method used for appraisals of entitlement to award degrees resembles that of an in-depth programme evaluation, with a panel of external assessors, a site visit, expert opinion and a decision by the University Chancellor.

#### **5.2.5 CENTRES OF EXCELLENT QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

So far, most of the components of the system that have been described are intended to monitor quality with a focus on the lowest acceptable levels. There are few incentives for educational organisations that already maintain high standards to seek further improvement. This is the main motive for the introduction of a distinction for centres of excellent educational quality.

Distinction of centres of excellent quality in higher education at national level is new for Sweden, although awards of this kind exist in several other Nordic and European countries, such as Norway, Finland and England.

The aim of distinguishing centres of excellent quality in higher education is to stimulate quality enhancement and to inspire others by offering examples of good practice. One important element in this – possibly more important than the award itself – is the process initiated at the HEI level and the thorough analysis of its operations in the preparation of the application. Of additional importance is the feedback from the panel of external assessors and the positive publicity that results from the award of that particular distinction. Applications are voluntary, and the HEIs themselves decide which educational organisations they want to nominate as particularly excellent. These may be units, departments, sections, centres or organisational collaboration between different units. They may be offering programmes at first level, second level or third level.

The educational organisations that apply for the distinction submit a report that offers a convincing description and analysis of how they operate and how this benefits student learning. They must also provide convincing evidence of their results and the way in which these results are particularly outstanding. To provide guidance, NAHE has listed a number of aspects on which appraisal will be based. In order not to restrict the opportunity to apply for the distinction in advance, NAHE has opted to specify these at a general level. The agency assumes that a centre of excellent quality in higher education will have local learning outcomes and clearly formulated criteria for their attainment. In addition to the general aspects, HEIs must also account for and analyse their own circumstances and the criteria for and attainment of the centre's local learning outcomes.

Evaluation is carried out by panels of highly qualified, international experts who are particularly familiar with issues relating to centres of excellent quality in higher education. Site visits are made to the organisations that can be considered to have any chance of being awarded the distinction on the basis of their application. The requirements for the award of the distinction are very stringent and only a few organisations are likely to be considered for this award each year.

### **5.3 Back to programme evaluations again?**

Since the system described above was developed and came into operation in 2007, the Government has announced that it wants to see a resource allocation system for undergraduate education based on quality. The design of such a system has not yet been decided, and it is still unclear how exactly the link between quality reviews and resource allocation will look like. However, it seems likely that it will be based on evaluation of programmes and subjects and that it will encompass at least two of the three levels in the Bologna system. *If* this is the case, we will see an incisive system of programme review with a direct impact on the financial situation of institutions. The implications of such a development remain to be seen.

# Chapter 6: The Norwegian model of external quality assurance of higher education

*Wenche Froestad, the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)*

The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) was established on 1 January 2003. NOKUT is responsible for:

- Quality assurance of Norwegian higher education and vocational (trade and technical) tertiary college education;
- General recognition of higher education obtained abroad;
- Information about Norwegian higher education abroad.

NOKUT is independent of the institutions and the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. The work is done in conformity with laws, regulations, and prescribed guidelines, on which NOKUT's decisions are based. The accreditation decisions taken by NOKUT cannot be overturned.

NOKUT's quality assurance of higher education in Norway includes the following activities<sup>7</sup>:

- Quality audits;
- Accreditation of higher education institutions (HEIs);
- Accreditation of study programmes at HEIs;
- Revision of earlier accreditations; and
- Evaluations to assess quality in higher education.

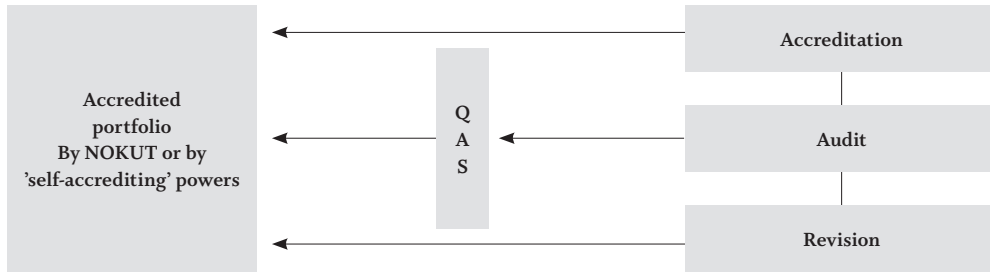
Under the Norwegian Act relating to Universities and University Colleges, all providers of higher education in Norway are required to operate a quality assurance system which promotes quality development and which can reveal possible weaknesses in the programmes of study offered. An overall view of the Norwegian model of external quality assurance is given in figure 1 below<sup>8</sup>.

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7 Some of the text in this article is taken from Liv Langfeldt, Lee Harvey, Jeroen Huisman, Don Westerheijden and Bjørn Stensaker: Evaluation of NOKUT, report 2: NOKUT's national role

8 QAS: Internal quality assurance systems of the higher education institutions



**Figure 1: System picture**

As shown in Figure 1, the Norwegian model is a dual system of accreditation and quality audits. Also, it is a dual model of accreditation of HEIs and accreditation of study programmes. The duality in the Norwegian model does not imply a parallel or double model. Audit is a core element used to assess all providers of higher education. Initial accreditation of study programmes and accreditation of institutions are mainly based on applications. There is no time limit on the period that accreditation is valid, but NOKUT may initiate revision of awarded accreditations. If the standards are not met, the accreditation will be withdrawn. Revision of awarded accreditations may be triggered by complaints, by an audit or may be applied on a national basis to assess quality of all study programmes of the same kind. However, there are no plans to use such revisions in a cyclical manner.

The different aspects of the Norwegian model of external quality assurance of higher education will be described below.

## 6.1 Quality audits

Audit of the institutions' internal quality assurance system is the basic cyclic element in the Norwegian system of quality assurance in higher education. All institutions are to be evaluated at least every six years. NOKUT makes the decisions concerning timing of the audits and notifies the institutions six months prior to the visits. The audits are conducted by external expert panels appointed by NOKUT. The panels are composed of three to five members who (together) must cover a broad set of competencies: quality assurance systems and quality work, professorial qualifications and experience from leadership of HEIs. Each panel is required to have a student representative and a non-Norwegian member.

The task of the panel is to assess whether or not the institution's quality assurance system and quality work meets the standards and criteria set by the Ministry and NOKUT. The Ministerial regulation states that:

- Universities and university colleges are to have a system for their quality assurance work that ensures continuous improvements, provides satisfactory documentation of the work and reveals deficiencies in quality.
- The quality assurance system shall cover all the processes that are important for the quality of the study programme, from information to prospective applicants to the completion of the course. Routines for student evaluation of the course, self-evaluation and the institution's follow-up of the evaluations, documentation of the institution's work relating to the teaching environment and routines for quality assuring new study programmes must form part of this.

NOKUT's criteria specifies the Ministry's requirements of quality assurance systems and the European Standards and Guidelines<sup>9</sup>, and then presents ten aspects to be evaluated, most of which emphasise the desired general characteristics of the system itself. The criteria are meant to be flexible enough to be used for all sorts of HEI. NOKUT will start the second cycle of audits in 2009, and the criteria are presently (2008) under revision.

The focus of audits in Norway is on the system, its objectives, its acceptance among students and staff and the way in which it helps to develop a quality culture in the entire institution. It is understood that the system should include the collection of data and the information from internal evaluations, which should be analysed and used for decisions on internal resource allocation and prioritisations. The internal process of self-evaluation must include an annual report on quality to the institution's board.

By June 2008, NOKUT has evaluated the quality assurance systems of 59 institutions. Eight of the institutions were assessed not to have a quality assurance system that complied with the criteria. The common arguments for *not approving* a quality assurance system relate to lack of implementation and lack of system qualities (it is too informal, ad hoc, not convincingly tied to the formal management structures and decision-making system).

Quality audits in Norway result in a judgment whether the system as a whole is satisfactory, and the ruling also indicates areas of development. If NOKUT finds fundamental deficiencies in the quality assurance system, the institution is granted a time limit of six months to rectify them. NOKUT will then conduct a second audit. If the institutional quality assurance system fails approval again, the institution will lose its right to start or to apply for approval of new provision. After one year the institution may ask for a new audit. It never happened that an institution did not pass the second audit. The audit panel may also advise NOKUT to initiate revision of accreditation already granted. Additionally, the Board of NOKUT may initiate such revision on the basis of the audit report itself.

## 6.2 Accreditation of higher education institutions

The Norwegian system counts three different categories of institutional accreditation, giving the institutions different degrees of autonomy in establishing study programmes (see Table 1):

**Table 1: HEIs and their self-accrediting powers**

University	Specialised university	University college	Un-accredited
PhD	PhD	(NOKUT)	(NOKUT)
MA	MA	(NOKUT)	(NOKUT)
BA	BA	BA	(NOKUT)

The Government takes the formal decision on institutional accreditation, based on recommendations from NOKUT. NOKUT appoints the expert panels conducting the evaluation. There are specific requirements for the composition of the panels, including

9 Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, ENQA, Helsinki, 2009

academic competence, competence in institutional management, representation from abroad, student representation and representation from a relevant sector of work or public service. The procedures include a self-evaluation report from the institution and a panel visit to the institution.

The standards for accreditations are set by the Ministry and specified through criteria in NOKUT's regulations. The following is required for all accreditation categories:

- Education, research and development and dissemination as primary activity;
- An organisational model, facilities, infrastructure and services that supports its primary activities;
- Research and development activities;
- A sufficient body of teaching staff with appropriate qualifications in key subject areas of their study programmes;
- A satisfactory academic library;
- Participation in national and international networks.

The major differences between the categories concern requirements for accredited study programmes at certain levels and the level of research and development activities.

So far NOKUT has completed eight institutional accreditations. Looking at the panel reports concluding that the institution should *not* be accredited, there are three issues dominating the arguments: the level of research and development activities, the stability of researcher training and the steering and autonomy of the institution. These seem to have been the criteria most difficult for the panels to assess and for the institutions to fulfil. Two of the eight applications for institutional accreditation ended up with a negative final decision. The NOKUT Board, basing its judgement on the report, on the comments from the institution and in some cases on supplementary panel statements following the comments from the institution, has (in three out of eight cases) made a decision that was contrary to the conclusion of the panel. So far the Government's decisions have not deviated from the conclusions of the NOKUT Board.

All institutional accreditations were based on applications from the institutions. They resulted in three new universities, one new specialised university institution and two new accredited university colleges. NOKUT is also authorised to initiate revision of accreditations of institutions but has not done so thus far.

### **6.3 Accreditation of study programmes at higher education institutions**

The study programmes that the institution is not authorised to establish on its own, need accreditation from NOKUT. Expert panels, appointed by NOKUT, conduct the assessments. All panel members are required to have academic competence: the level of competence depends on the level of study. Likewise, the standards and criteria, and partly the process, depend on the level of the programme. The same criteria apply regardless of the discipline.

The criteria relate to the plan for the programme, the academic staff, infrastructure, quality assurance and internationalisation and international cooperation. Some of the major differences in requirements for the different levels concern the plan for the programme and the academic staff. For example, for Bachelor studies at least 20 percent of the staff assigned to the programme are required to have associate or full

professorial status, whereas for PhD programmes at least 50 percent are required to hold full professorships and the remaining associate professorships.

**Table 2: Outcomes of the applications assessed by NOKUT by August 2007**

	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS ASSESSED BY NOKUT	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS APPROVED / ACCREDITATION	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS REJECTED / NO ACCREDITATION	NUMBER OF APPLICATIONS WITHDRAWN, DISMISSED OR FOR OTHER REASONS ENDED WITHOUT A FORMAL DECISION
Shorter programmes than Bachelor	74	45	9	20
Bachelor programmes	35	19	3	13
Master programmes	119	96	7	16
PhD programmes	11	7	3	1

#### 6.4 Revision of earlier accreditations

NOKUT may re-evaluate any previously awarded accreditation. Procedures for revision of accreditations are more thorough than for programme accreditations, including additional data collection to study the academic level and outcome of the programmes, as well as site visits and student representation on the panels. The formal standards and criteria are the same as for initial accreditation of new study programmes, except that the regulations state that emphasis is to be placed on the study programme's academic standards and documented results. When not passing a revision of accreditation, the institution is given a fixed time to correct the shortcomings. NOKUT will then make a new assessment before ultimately deciding whether or not to withdraw the accreditation of the programme.

So far NOKUT has completed revision of accreditations of:

- all Bachelor and Master programmes in nursing. Initially, nearly all Bachelor programmes received a negative outcome; however, all programmes passed a positive accreditation after rectifying deficiencies.
- one university college Bachelor programme in journalism (positive outcome)
- one university college Bachelor programme in ballet (negative outcome)
- Master and PhD programmes in pharmacy at two universities (with positive outcome for one university and negative outcome for the other)
- Master and PhD programmes in dental medicine at two universities (with positive outcomes)
- Master and PhD programmes in law at three universities (with positive outcomes)

## **6.5 Evaluations to assess quality in higher education**

Evaluations to assess quality in higher education may be initiated by the Ministry or by NOKUT itself. The purpose, terms of reference and methods of these evaluations may vary. The overall aim of the only evaluation that has been completed so far was to improve the quality of Norwegian teacher training (evaluation of all teacher education programmes 2005–2006). There is also an ongoing (June 2008) evaluation of engineering education with special emphasis on assessing relevance and interaction with the labour market.

# Chapter 7: Combining programme and institutional aspects in QA: U.K.

*Nick Harris, Director of the Development and Enhancement Group,  
Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA), UK*

## **Abstract**

The paper summarises the current balance of programme and institutional quality assurance in the UK higher education, and seeks to explain not only how this works but also how it has come about. The background of legal and pedagogical, and political, devolutionary and social contexts, and general expectations, are important to what and how quality assurance is done. Today's quality assurance is based on the various "quality assurance roads" that have been followed in the preceding decade. The paper also includes some brief reflections on past trends and future possibilities.

## **7.1 Introduction**

In describing the main elements of the current mix of quality assurance procedures in UK higher education, the paper draws on a brief history of what has gone (relatively recently) before and some of the main parameters that have shaped and continue to shape what has been and what is being done, and why. Various academic books and papers have been written about the quality assurance of UK higher education; this paper does not seek to emulate these but rather provide a straightforward, but perhaps not necessarily simple, account of a somewhat tortuous and sometimes complex path that has led to where things are today. It is selective rather than comprehensive in the topics and evidence presented, and any conclusions and predictions are those of the author alone.

The selected topics include: the legal context; the political context and the importance of devolution; changes in the procedures for and contexts of quality assurance linked to (different / changing) purposes; types of QA outcomes and the purposes they meet; recent trends and "buzz words"; and future "challenges".

## **7.2 The legal context is critical**

Higher education is different in the UK from almost everywhere else. Once an establishment (a HE institution) has the right to award degrees it has the legal right to decide what (academic) standard it will set for its awards, what content it will include in its programmes and how those programmes are delivered. Institutions award their own degrees and the state has no right of "interference". Traditionally universities have taught and researched across a range of academic disciplines, but in recent decades publicly funded mono-technics<sup>10</sup> and most recently private for-profit organisations have been granted degree awarding powers. Once powers have been granted there are no restrictions regarding subject areas, although there are currently two "levels" (taught degree awarding powers and research degree powers); there is soon to be a third "level", for Foundation degrees (two year work-related programmes).

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<sup>10</sup> A monotechnic institution offers instruction in a single scientific or technical subject.

There is no requirement for formal external accreditation of programmes except where the degree provides the holder with a “licence to practice” in an area regulated by a professional body. Some of these have legal authority through statutory or regulatory powers, other bodies mark out their territory often in terms of public interest. These professional body accreditations are separate from the national requirements for QA of higher education.

### **7.3 Size is important ... as well as national / regional politics**

The UK is made up of England, with 136 HEIs, Scotland, which has 19 HEIs, Wales, with 12, and Northern Ireland with two HEIs. As well as the UK (Westminster) government, Scotland and Wales both have their own governments (and funding councils) with powers over education – including higher education, and Northern Ireland has an Assembly with powers over, and a funding body for, education. England does not have its own separate national political body, but it does have a specific funding body for higher education. Interestingly some of the English metropolitan conurbations (London, and Greater Manchester and Merseyside for example) have more HEIs and HE students than any of the devolved nations, but without a separate “voice” in terms of HE or its quality assurance.

There are distinctive national (higher) educational policies in Scotland and in Wales. These policies are having a direct impact on the national contexts for higher education and its quality assurance. In Scotland the emphasis is on an “enhancement framework” with quality assurance built into this – the QA process is Enhancement Led Institutional Review (ELIR); in England the emphasis is on quality assurance that can also support enhancement – the QA process is Institutional Audit (which is also used in Northern Ireland). Although the procedures in Scotland and England are remarkably similar (and follow the ENQA four-stage model); they draw upon a shared set of standards and criteria (the Academic Infrastructure) and the judgments are exactly the same. It is the “contexts” in which QA is undertaken that are different – summed up perhaps in the choice of the terms “review” in Scotland, and “audit” in England. Wales shares the same standards and criteria, a similar procedure and judgments and the (“review”) context lies somewhere between Scotland and England.

### **7.4 History matters**

The UK no longer has a binary HE system – the polytechnic and university sectors were merged in 1992, and since then other changes mean that today smaller specialist institutions (public and private) can acquire their own degree awarding powers and university status. The organisation of external quality assurance of higher education has also changed, in terms of both organisations and the procedures used.

For a long time each UK HEI has relied on subject peer experts from other HEIs to advise on the academic standards of their programmes, on student’s achievements and the validity of the degrees awarded. Senior academics acting as external examiners provided quality assurance and comparability across a relatively small HE sector with an intake of 5 – 10% of the relevant age group; external examiner’s reports were private to the HEIs that employed them. The rapid expansion of higher education through the late 20th century brought not only more HEIs, dealing with many more students from a more diverse range of social backgrounds, but new sorts of HEIs offering new sorts of study programmes and importantly, new expectations about accountability for the

public money spent on higher education. Publicly available information on the quality of what was being provided was also needed.

Whilst external examiners continued their detailed but “private” work on an annual or more frequent basis, programme by programme, the expectation for “public” information about quality was met by the introduction of externally organised evaluations at both institutional and subject / programme level. Audit was the method chosen for institutional level, with subject review (initially called Teaching Quality Assessment [TQA]) at departmental/programme level. All led to public reports, the former written in a form and language often criticised as impenetrable to anyone other than those directly involved – but those involved did make changes and improvements as a result of the reports. The subject level reviews were however more “accessible” since they led to differentiated judgments, initially verbal but after a short while numerical with six categories each with a maximum score of four. Twenty four quickly became the quality assurance target irrespective of the fact that the categories were not of equal importance – the headline number ‘mattered’, in terms of programme prestige, promotion, newspaper league tables etc. Disproportionate amounts of effort and organisation were put in place in the quest for “24” – and the academic community felt the impact of the ‘quality assurance professionals’ who came from increasingly powerful central administrations. Although procedure’s details and names changed through the 1990s, departments were subject to this external scrutiny just once, but the term ‘quality wars’<sup>11</sup> came into being.

Part of the problems lay in “uncertainty”, particularly around subject evaluation but also to a less public extent around institutional audit, as there were no widely established and agreed, and published, criteria to act as a basis for quality assurance – the “connoisseur judgement” was paramount.

A very substantial public enquiry into higher education in the mid 1990s led to the Dearing report for the UK<sup>12</sup>, with the included Garrick report specifically covering Scotland. Amongst many far-reaching changes proposed were a number concerned with quality assurance. These provided for a rationalisation of the various, previously-separate bodies, that had been undertaking institutional and programme evaluations, into a single Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) covering all of the UK. Dearing also proposed a “blueprint” for a set of criteria that would act as a shared basis to underpin quality assurance and provide publicly available (detailed) information. Academic standards would be established at a generic level by a national framework for HE qualifications and exemplified in detail by subject benchmark statements, and each HE institution would then draw on these and other relevant information to provide a published “specification” for each of the programmes it offered. The underlying principles for institution’s own management of QA procedures, to ensure that students are treated fairly and reasonably, were to be set out in a Code of Practice.

Developed largely by the QAA between 1998 and 2002 (and under ongoing review and revision) these components have come to be regarded as an “Academic Infrastructure”<sup>13</sup>. The developments involved extensive open consultations and the Academic Infrastructure (AI) now provides a basis for the internal quality assurance

11 ‘Who killed what in the quality wars?’ Sir David Watson.

<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/enhancement/qualityMatters/QMDecember06.pdf>

12 for additional background and publications, see: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dearing\\_Report](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dearing_Report)

13 The UK Academic Infrastructure: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/academicinfrastructure/default.asp>



carried out within HEIs and also for the various procedures used in external evaluations. Within the UK legal context, the crucial point about the AI is that it is a set of “reference points” – it sets out what is widely agreed good practice but not absolute requirements. HE is provided in increasingly diverse ways and context is important in quality assurance; the AI is intended to support quality assurance by its application being adapted to educational context. This is not always straightforward in large institutions that deliver HE through a wide spectrum of contexts but also seek some internal organisations consistency.

## 7.5 Purposes, principles, criteria and procedures

The simple, but sometimes overlooked, starter question for QA is – what and who is the quality assurance really for? The answer should not be assumed, but be worked out and agreed by those being evaluated, those doing the evaluations and those (stakeholders) who should be interested in, and benefit from, the results. Currently, purposes for quality assurance of UK HE are:

- to secure academic standards of qualifications
- to secure quality of learning opportunities
- to provide accountability (including for public funding of HE)
- to provide information about quality and standards
- to enhance students’ learning opportunities and experience

and the QAA’s mission<sup>14</sup> is “to safeguard the public interest in sound standards of higher education qualifications and to inform and encourage continuous improvement in the management of the quality of higher education”.

Within the legal, historical and pedagogical contexts, a “simple” guide to main thrusts of UK quality assurance are:

- What do you do?
- Why do you do it?
- How do you do it?
- Why do you do it that way?
- How do you know it works?
- How do you make things better?

The principles and ensuing standards align very closely with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area<sup>15</sup>, and the criteria are derived from the reference points of the UK Academic Infrastructure. These provide a shared basis for a quality assurance framework that consists of a number of components:

- HE institutions are individually responsible for:
  - the **validation of programmes they propose to offer**; a form of ex ante / initial “self accreditation”. This “internal” work is done with “externality” i.e. input from external sources including academic, professional, and stakeholder interests.
  - the regular and routine **monitoring of the programmes they actually deliver**. Often done annually, but sometimes more frequently and with a major review each five years; done with significant external input including external

<sup>14</sup> For general information about the Quality Assurance Agency for (UK) higher education see: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/aboutus/>

<sup>15</sup> See: [http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG\\_v03.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf)

- examiners for each programme and, in many cases, the major programme components as well
- the **coordination of their QA activities**, that involve staff, students and stakeholders and **result in public information**
- the Quality Assurance Agency which regularly **audits institutions** individually and publicly reports on the way that each institution manages and coordinates its quality assurance
- **a national student survey** provides independent public information on the satisfaction of graduating students at programme / discipline level within each institution
- national coordination of **statistical data** returns covering many aspects of HE

The institutional audits (in England and Northern Ireland) or reviews (in Scotland and Wales) follow, with national variations in detail and emphasis, the typical “four stage” model of: those under scrutiny preparing a self-evaluation report; testing of that by a panel of experts, including through a site visit; a decision / judgement (with recommendations if relevant); and publication of a report.

The procedures in the UK involve panels of peers, rather than a professional inspectorate, and an approach that encourages discussion rather than confrontational questioning. The starting point for the discussion is, in general tone, “*confirm for us that you are doing things properly*” rather than “*you’ll be found guilty unless you can prove that you are innocent*”.

## 7.6 Outcomes that are fit for purpose

The obvious outcomes of quality assurance are the decisions – yes / no in some systems, usually at a specific time, with a period before another decision needs to be made. In the case of the UK, it is more complex but perhaps more useful. Institutional audits or reviews result in “judgements”, about the level of confidence that society can reasonably have; these are:

- “the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution’s present and likely future management of the academic standards of its awards”
- “the confidence that can reasonably be placed in the soundness of the institution’s present and likely future management of the quality of the learning opportunities available to students”

Judgements can be made in one of three levels:

- i. “confidence” – which is most common, and might reasonably be expected following nearly two decades of increasingly well organised institutional (and national) policies and practices;
- ii. “limited confidence” which is issued occasionally and does have serious repercussions and requires institutions to produce and plan activities to rectify the limitations; and
- iii. “no confidence” – which is used only rarely, and has very serious consequences.

As well as the judgements themselves there are summary reports designed to provide public information about the outcomes of the audits/reviews, and also detailed technical annexes which are for the “quality professionals”.

In addition to the summary judgements the team of peer reviewers can also identify:

- **features of good practice** - that, in the context of the institution, make a particularly positive contribution to the institution’s approach to the management of the security of academic standards and the quality of provision
- **recommendations.** Recommendations come at three levels:
  - essential – covering things currently putting quality and/or academic standards at risk, and requiring urgent corrective action;
  - advisable – for things that have the potential to put quality and/or academic standards at risk; these require preventative or corrective action;
  - desirable – relating to matters that have the potential to enhance quality of learning opportunities and/or further secure the academic standards of awards.

There is clearly a close correlation between the number and level of recommendations and whether there is an overall judgement of confidence or limited confidence – but it is not a simple “counting game”.

Are the outcomes fit for purpose? They certainly were when the audit method was initially established; they provided an assessment of how institutions manage and co-ordinate QA across the organisation, at a time when there was also independent information from peer review at programme level (from 1992). With the end of full programme review in England and Northern Ireland in 2001 (2002 in Scotland and Wales), there was a short 3 year audit cycle (2002 to 2005/6) that included some “discipline audit trails” (i.e. looking at how things are done at department/programme level). These were dropped as a six year audit cycle (from 2006) came in, coinciding with the start of the national student survey (covering institution’s programmes/disciplines depending on the number of students). Information about aspects of quality is thus publicly available at both institutional and subject level.

### **7.7 Discernable trends – and market forces: challenges and reconciliations**

The patterns and trends in UK HE quality assurance over the last 20 years are complicated in their detail but at a summary level quite straightforward:

- to 1990: institutions undertook their own QA at programme level using external examiners;
- from 1990: an external audit unit was established (by the UK ‘rectors’ conference equivalent);
- 1992: an independent unit was established to audit institutions, and the funding bodies started organising subject level assessments;
- 1997: the QAA was established and took over responsibilities for institutional audits (UK wide) and subject level assessments (except in Scotland);
- 1998: a new (“continuation”) audit method introduced in England and Northern Ireland;
- 2001: end of subject review in England and Northern Ireland;
- 2002: a new (“institutional”) audit method introduced – a 3 year cycle with discipline (subject) trails;
- 2006: a revised (institutional) audit method introduced – a 6 year cycle without discipline trails, but National Student Satisfaction Survey provides information at subject level.

The challenge for QA is to find an efficient way of providing relevant information for the purposes it is intended to support. The costs of a full round of programme evaluation is substantial, and not just in financial terms. Presented and applied in inappropriate ways can lead to “quality wars” - often between academics and administrators, and yet if quality assurance is to have any lasting purpose it must engage with the “improvement” (in the UK “enhancement”) agendas, and this can only be done effectively by active and positive collaboration between academics and administrators.

The public needs “accountability” assurance that their taxes are being spent wisely and that institutions are behaving responsibly (institutional audit can do this) and (prospective) students (and their funders) need reliable information about the nature and quality of programmes. Student surveys are championed by some and questioned by others. As students become viewed increasingly as “customers” so the quality assurance needs will change – a money back guarantee shouldn’t be the answer, but if regular and full rounds of programme evaluation are (too) expensive and increasingly less cost effective, what is the solution?

# Chapter 8: Conclusions

*Nathalie Costes, Project Manager, ENQA*

The articles presented in this report and the discussions at the workshop highlighted the diversity of the higher education sector and clearly demonstrated the wide variety in the approaches to quality assurance (QA). Programme and institutional-level procedures are often combined and there are other possible approaches, as well – such as QA at subject or theme level. According to the second survey on quality procedures<sup>16</sup> undertaken by ENQA in 2008, two-thirds of the respondent QA agencies use primarily programme-level procedures, while only 40 percent apply primarily institutional-level procedures.

One of the clear messages that emerged from the workshop was that this diversity of systems and approaches should be respected. It implies that a unique, ideal model and a one-dimensional definition of quality that would suit every national context are barely conceivable. Quality is contextual; the background of each HEI, as well as national and regional contexts – including legal, historical and political aspects – must be taken into account when defining quality. National and regional contexts are of crucial importance to understand the rationale behind each system because they influence the perception of external QA and, therefore, the choice of approach to it. In this respect, it was recognised that the merits of each approach should be examined before choosing the one that would best fit the national context. First, there is a need to have a clear vision on quality and on the most efficient methods to assure it. The approach should then be designed accordingly, with a view to attain the goals set nationally in the most efficient way possible.

This leads one to consider the question of fitness for purpose raised at the workshop. The fitness for purpose approach should be adapted to the culture of each country and Higher Education Institution (HEI). It is a current trend that QA agencies and internal quality of HEIs are mostly fixated on promoting managerial processes rather than purposes and values of QA, which should be clear and shared by agencies, HEIs and stakeholders. Fitness for purpose is not the prevailing focus in internal and external QA processes, and efforts should be made to reverse this trend. It was brought up that agencies should always bear the real purposes of QA in mind and ask themselves whether the outcomes of processes are fit for those purposes.

The questions of responsibility and trust were referred to at the workshop. It was remembered that HEIs are primarily responsible for the quality of the education, including the monitoring of all their study programmes and other activities, and the standards of qualifications they provide. This principle underpins the activities of some agencies, like the Irish HETAC and the German Accreditation Council. In the light of this principle, a balance between institutional autonomy and accountability should be struck and institutions should be trusted as to how they manage their own QA. As mentioned in the paper by Deirdre Lillis and Tara Ryan, “the ideal scenario is that institutional review focuses not on processes or outcomes but on the capacity of the

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<sup>16</sup> Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey, ENQA 2008, Helsinki

institution to review itself". The degree to which institutions can be effective is affected by the extent to which they are trusted by agencies and other stakeholders.

The participants of the workshop commonly acknowledged an observable shift across Europe in emphasis on QA responsibility. Because the ESG pinpointed the consideration of the existence and effectiveness of internal QA mechanisms as a cornerstone of any external QA procedures, internal QA is increasingly considered as a prime aspect of external QA. Institutions are more mature and in a better position to assume their own QA after having undergone many external evaluations. New systems, like the Swedish or the German models, have adopted a new strategy focusing more on HEIs' internal QA arrangements rather than external. Such systems bring about a simplified procedure and thus, reduction of efforts. Indeed, external evaluations of programmes or subjects do not need to be as extensive since evaluation/accreditation of internal QA procedures automatically results in the validation/accreditation of the study programmes or subjects.

Finally, quality enhancement of learning opportunities was recognised to be a key element to consider in order for QA to be sustainable. The improvement orientation should be part of external QA processes. The presentation by Clas-Uno Frykholm introduced two examples of quality enhancement measures and incentives: thematic evaluations/studies and recognition of excellence in teaching and learning through the Centres of Excellent Quality in Higher Education. The second survey on quality procedures<sup>17</sup> revealed that "quality improvement/enhancement" is currently one of the most important objectives of the respondent agencies' external quality procedures.

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

# Annex 1

## **ENQA Workshop**

“PROGRAMME ORIENTED AND INSTITUTIONAL ORIENTED APPROACHES TO QUALITY ASSURANCE: NEW DEVELOPMENTS AND MIXED APPROACHES”

**12-13 June 2008, Berlin, Germany**

Organised in cooperation with the German Accreditation Council

Venue: Monbijou Conference Centre, Berlin

### **Thursday, 12 June**

9:00 **Opening**

Reinhold Grimm, Chairman, German Accreditation Council

9:15 **Key note 1: three years after Bergen: Recent developments in external quality assurance (ESG and changes in QA)**

Peter Williams, Chief Executive, QAA; President of ENQA

10:00 Coffee break

10:30 **Stakeholder Panel: Demands on external quality assurance**

Padraig Walsh, IUQB; Anne Mikkola, ESU; Nina Gustafsson, EduInt

Chair: Kurt Sohm, FHR

12:00 Lunch

13:00 **Plenary session: 3 case studies**

From institutional to programme approach: Sweden

*Clas-Uno Frykholm, NAHE*

From programme to institutional approach: Germany

*Achim Hopbach, German Accreditation Council*

Parallel approaches: Norway

*Wenche Froestad, NOKUT*

14:30 Coffee break

15:00 **3 parallel working groups**

Each chaired by a facilitator (*Kurt Sohm, Rolf Heusser, Stefan Bienefeld*)

The facilitator will introduce by briefly commenting on the presentations and by developing the key issues to be discussed

- 16:30 **plenary session**  
De-briefing from working groups  
*Chair: Rafael Llavori, ANECA*
- 17:30 End of the first day
- 20:00 Dinner at restaurant Gerichtslaube

### **Friday, 13 June**

- 9:00 **Keynote 2: Combining programme and institutional aspects in QA: U.K.**  
*Nick Harris, QAA*
- 9:30 **3 parallel working groups**  
Each chaired by a facilitator (*Tine Holm, Rafael Llavori, Christoph Heumann*)
- 11:00 Coffee break
- 11:30 **Plenary session:**  
Combining institutional and programme approaches in quality assurance – Opportunities and threats  
(incl. reports from the working groups)  
*Chair: Tibor Szanto, HAC*
- 13:00 **Conclusions from the workshop by Achim Hopbach**
- 13:30 Lunch





**The present report** is the result of an ENQA workshop, hosted by the German Accreditation Council in Berlin in June 2008, which gave an opportunity to share experience of linking both programme-oriented and institutional-oriented approaches and to present different paths to a combined approach according to the different legal and political national backgrounds. The report brings together articles presenting national experiences and approaches to quality assurance in six European countries, and offers a range of various examples of quality assurance systems.



Workshop report 9

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