



Nathalie Costes, Achim Hopbach, Helka Kekäläinen, Robin van IJperen, Padraig Walsh

# Quality Assurance and Transparency Tools



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Education and Culture DG

## Lifelong Learning Programme

This project has been funded with support from the European Commission in the framework of the Lifelong Learning programme. This publication reflects the views of the authors only and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

ISBN 978-952-5539-53-0 (paperbound)

ISBN 978-952-5539-54-7 (pdf)

ISSN 1458-106X

The present report can be downloaded from the ENQA website at  
<http://www.enqa.eu/pubs.lasso>

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Cover design and page layout: Eija Vierimaa  
Edited by Nathalie Costes and Maria Stalter

Helsinki, Finland, 2010

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# Foreword

ENQA realises that there is a steadily growing interest among students and all stakeholders of Higher Education and the public at large in accessing detailed and reliable information on the quality of individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions. ENQA is aware that external quality assurance activities in higher education set up by quality assurance agencies are producing only part of the information. Besides quality assurance agencies that enshrine their activities in the ESG, there is a growing number of providers of information about higher education. The proliferation of ranking schemes and other transparency tools is one aspect of this increasing need for information about higher education institutions and their activities.

The relevance of ranking and other transparency tools has recently been echoed by the Leuven/Louvain-La-Neuve Communiqué of 2009. In the ongoing debate about purpose and relevance, about strengths and threats of rankings ENQA raised the concern that transparency tools could foil the enhancement-driven aspect of quality assurance in higher education by stifling self-critical reflection.

The purpose of this seminar was to discuss expectations from higher education institutions and other stakeholders concerning information on quality of higher education, and the contribution of quality assurance and transparency tools to meet these expectations. The outcome of the discussions is a position paper on information and transparency tools, which can be found in Part 2 of this report.

ACHIM HOPBACH

*President*

European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)

# Part 1 – Key messages

The main conclusions identified in the present report and during the discussions at the seminar are outlined here below.

## 1.1 Key messages from Session 1: Higher Education and Quality: Expectations, Quality Standards and Tools. What kind of information are we looking for? And for what purpose?

*Padraig Walsh, Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB)*

The European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the University of Bologna, the European Students' Union (ESU), BusinessEurope and the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) contributed to this session, chaired by Padraig Walsh. What messages are there for ENQA arising from the presentations in this session?

1. There has to be greater **linkage** between the **internal QA processes** and associated information provided by HEIs and the **external QA processes** and associated information provided by QA agencies. ENQA and its member agencies need to have positive interaction with HEIs to improve this linkage.
2. Currently, information on **external QA** (published reports etc.) is **better** (largely because it is the major product of QA agencies) than information on **internal QA** which is often **inaccessible** (because it is a by-product of the main “products” of HEIs: programmes and graduates).
3. **Transparency tools** are not the same as **rankings** but the phrase is being used synonymously. ENQA and member agencies should not use the phrase “transparency tools” as a form of polite evasion of using the phrase “rankings”.
4. **Transparency** and **quality assurance** are not synonymous either. **Transparency** should be a desirable **outcome** of good QA processes.
5. QA must be as much about **communication** as **information**. ENQA has a role to play in communicating to stakeholders where they can find the relevant information and how to interpret it. The level of communication needs to be increased rather than just providing more information.
6. **Students** need to be involved in the **development** of **internal and external QA** processes. They also need to be consulted as to what information (which must be **honest and true**) they need to make informed decisions as independent citizens. ENQA can assist by working with students to determine who can best provide this information (the balance between HEIs, QA agencies and other bodies) and how best to communicate the information.

7. Employers are interested in information about the **efficiency of HEIs** (graduation rates, drop-out rates, employability rates and about information on student learning outcomes. ENQA can assist by ensuring that **external QA processes** conducted by agencies **verify the data** arising from these input and output measures (ensure that ESG 2.1 verifies ESG 1.3 and 1.7).
8. People need information in the **reliability of QA agencies** and whether they are **functioning according to ESG**. ENQA needs to communicate the significance of full membership following robust external review. The credibility of ENQA and EQAR will be significantly enhanced only when full member agencies and listed agencies respectively encompass the vast majority of the 47 member countries of the EHQA (up from the present 53% and 19% respectively).

## 1.2 Key messages from Session 2:

### **Higher Education and Quality: Expectations, Quality Standards and Tools. What kind of information do we provide? And for what purpose?**

*Helka Kekäläinen, Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC)*

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC), the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council (FINHEEC) and the European University Association (EUA) contributed to this session, chaired by Patrick Van den Bosch, Flemish Interuniversity Council (VLIR). What messages are there for ENQA arising from the presentations in this session?

In the opening speech for the session Karl Dittrich, representing ENQA, called for even greater ambition to deliver demonstrable quality and to make this quality visible in an objective and independent manner. European Union's strategy has been to show the diversity that exists within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). ENQA is very much aware that the diversity between its member organisations is very large.

The most important role ENQA has to play in providing information on the quality of Higher Education lies with the membership of ENQA itself. By cyclical external evaluation against ESG, the membership organisations demonstrate that they meet the rules for organisation and work method: the criteria of independence, soundness, openness, transparency and effectiveness. In this way, they also give legitimacy to the assessments that they issue.

Is the information provided sufficient? The existing instruments such as the diploma supplement, the ECTS records and the learning outcomes are not yet sufficient. Moreover, there is increasing national and European political pressure to produce sharper pictures of the quality of institutions and programmes which are, for example, focused on "excellence" or on real content-based internationalisation.

There are a number of serious obstacles for better information:

1. Emphasis on accountability calls for a dichotomous assessment.
2. Usefulness for providing information suffers, when assessments must meet strict procedural and form requirements in order to avoid appeals or objections.
3. Higher education institutions are relatively hesitant to be tested in an independent manner.
4. A wide range of legal rules surrounding privacy hinder a free provision of information.

Dittrich concluded by saying that the establishment and existence of ENQA is having a legitimising effect on the system of external quality assurance. ENQA thus indirectly contributes to providing reliable information for the stakeholders. The quality and the content of this information are determined to a significant degree by the national laws and regulations, but also by the behaviour of the educational institutions themselves. ENQA is open to all suggestions for increasing the quality of the information provided for the benefit of the stakeholders.

Two agency perspectives were given by György Bazsa, HAC and Helka Kekäläinen, FINHEEC. Both presentations answered the questions: What kind of information do we provide? And for what purpose?

The functions of HAC in the Hungarian higher education quality system are external evaluations and accreditations. By law the HEIs operate internal QA systems. HEIs are obligated to prepare quality development schemes, which specify the processes of operation and assessment. The HEIs have to annually revise the implementation of the quality development schemes and revisit the action plans. Findings should be published on the website. HAC's resolutions are legally expert opinions. They have a yes or no outcome with argumentation. They are published on the website. Also the resolutions of the independent appeal board are public. The Hungarian higher education institutions carry out intensive, broad and competitive PR activity to attract new students.

Institutional accreditations address mission, management, research, facilities and internal QA systems and the information is mainly directed towards the institution and the larger society. Programme accreditations serve more students, staff and the labour market by looking at aim/mission, curriculum, study structure, teaching/learning methods, assessment of students, teaching staff, research and internal QA. The main purposes of HAC's activities are public transparency, confidence in Hungarian higher education system and ENQA membership.

The Finnish institutional Audit of QA System aims at evaluating what procedures and processes the HEI uses to maintain and develop the quality of its education and other activities; whether the HEI's quality assurance works as intended, whether the QA system produces useful and relevant information for the improvement of its operations, and whether it brings about effective improvement measures. The audit addresses the comprehensiveness, effectiveness and transparency of the QA system. In the Finnish Centres of Excellence in University Education –evaluation, the content areas and criteria are the mission of the unit, programme and course design, delivery of education, outputs and continual development.

FINHEEC's tools provide HEIs with QA system check, recommendations for improvements, good practises, benchmark opportunities and acknowledgement for excellence in education.

For policy-makers, FINHEEC offers evaluation of each HEI's QA system, thematic system-wide analysis and bases for granting performance based funding. Students may gain a guarantee that the institution has a functioning QA System and some knowledge about it, as well as, an idea of a department that has a strong emphasis on teaching and education (Centre of Excellence in Education). Employers and other business partners receive knowledge of each HEI's QA system, national system and Centres of Excellence in Education.



Tia Loukkola, EUA, answered the questions on behalf of the European universities. She began by saying that it is a challenging question since EUA has not done real research on the topic.

All universities provide some kind of marketing material, namely brochures of the programmes they offer for the large public, their partners and students. Universities need to meet the needs of other potential institutions/partners. Universities are reporting to their local governments and ministries on their activities following their national/regional schemes/instructions. They provide *ad hoc* information on their activities as well.

EUA has worked on promoting transparency and sharing information through projects. EUA has formulated several policies on quality and quality assurance: there should be a balance between accountability and enhancement. EUA is trying to encourage universities to be more open and communicate more with external stakeholders. Universities should have greater courage to express their diverse missions and goals, and to get tested in the light of these goals. Research universities seem to get more attention and prestige. Universities might be tempted to profile themselves as research institutions. Loukkola concluded by discussing some preliminary ideas from an ongoing project on quality culture within institutions.

### **1.3 Key messages from Session 3: Higher Education and Quality: Expectations, Quality Standards and Tools. What kind of information do we provide? And for what purpose?**

The European Commission, the classification project (CEIHE<sup>1</sup>) and the Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE) contributed to this session, chaired by Robin van IJperen.

#### **Introduction**

*Robin van IJperen, European Commission*

The title of the seminar, in particular on the link to institutional autonomy, is the core of the EU modernisation agenda for universities. An important message from this modernisation agenda, next to the call for more autonomy, is that institutions face increasing competition in this globalising higher education area. The Commission therefore thinks that institutions should develop a clearer profile on the basis of their strengths, where they can distinguish themselves. Within this profile institutions should seek for partners at national and international level (universities, enterprises) to further improve their strengths.

Institutions should communicate clearly to the different stakeholders on their profile and performances and this is, where also quality assurance comes in. As quality assurance evaluations give a wealth of information. However, the problem is that quality assurance is lacking transparency and comparability at the European level, as the Commission concludes in its recent Progress Report on Quality Assurance in Higher Education. This probably explains the current success of rankings, which can give a simplified comparative picture of quality, based on some indicators. This point has been recognised in one of the ENQA documents for this seminar, stating that there

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<sup>1</sup> Classifying European Institutions for Higher Education (CEIHE)

is a fear in the quality assurance community that rankings, the strive of institutions for a high position in the most famous rankings in particular, will replace their self-critical assessment and efforts towards quality enhancement.

The European Commission believes that a certain “rat race” for a high ranking position is unavoidable, but a high ranking position should not be the only goal for institutions. It is more important that institutions use rankings in a strategic way, in the sense that institutions analyse the qualitative background of their scores in order to indeed improve themselves and enhance their quality. In other words, rankings can give a simple comparative picture of the main differences in performances, which could be used as starting point for a deeper analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of an institution, for example by using information coming from quality assurance reviews.

The European Commission is aware of the main criticism on existing rankings, for example that they focus only on research performance and ignore performance in other areas, such as teaching quality. On the other hand, rankings are here to stay and feed the increasing need for transparency. The European Commission believes it is better to join the debate on transparency, and therefore supports the development of more sophisticated instruments, for example via the EU-supported feasibility study on the design of a multi-dimensional global ranking, which will be presented in this workshop.

Rather than fiercely going against any use of the ranking instrument, this workshop should focus on the challenge of how the strengths and weaknesses of both quality assurance instruments and rankings could be combined and/or complement each other.

### **What messages arose from the presentations in this session?**

*Nathalie Costes, ENQA Secretariat*

The key messages from this session were the following:

1. Higher education systems in Europe are characterised by diversity. Higher education institutions are diverse in their function and scope. Classifications describe horizontal diversity and provide institutional profiles while rankings assess vertical diversity within types of institutions and result in performance-based outcome. Classifications and rankings are complementary instruments of transparency to map diversity and to satisfy the wish, expressed at the political level, to increase ‘**transparency of diversity**’.
2. **Classifications** are instruments to group higher education institutions and to characterise similarities and differences based on actual conditions and activities of institutions, not on performance. Classifications are used as a **transparency tool for various stakeholders**: as an instrument for institutional strategies (i.e. to help institutions develop their mission, profile and association with partners); as a base for governmental policies better targeted to institutions; as a tool for research; and as an instrument for better ranking.
3. A common point between classification and quality assurance could be that, in both cases, institutions are looked at. Rankings are market oriented. Unlike quality assessment, rankings ignore the causes of programme/institutional weaknesses. They refer to a method, which consists in comparing and rating

institutions by numeric indicators, without analysing the processes.

4. In U-Map and U-Multirank projects, **classification** is a **precondition for ranking**. **Focused institutional rankings** compare the performance of institutions along one of the six dimensions of the classification (teaching and learning profile; student profile; research; knowledge exchange; internationalisation and regional engagement). **Field-based rankings** (i.e. rankings of study programmes) produce performance profiles of specific fields in institutions which have comparable profiles. Therefore, field-based rankings take into consideration the multi-dimensional classification of entire institutions.
5. There is **no one-size-fits-all-approach for rankings**. Rankings should have a **clear purpose and target group** (Berlin principles), with which indicators should be in line. Rankings should compare equivalent programmes and institutions in terms of mission and profile. International rankings should particularly care about **comparing comparable institutions**, but comparable data are not always available.
6. The significance of rankings depends on the way indicators are measured and higher education institutions compared. CHE offers an alternative approach to rankings. According to CHE, rankings should be **subject-specific** and not institution-based. They should be **multi-dimensional** and give a detailed analysis of each indicator in order to better differentiate the strengths and weaknesses of universities and to provide relevant information for specific target groups. Rankings should adopt a **group approach** (top group, middle group, bottom group) rather than listing institutions in single league tables.

# Part 2 – ENQA Position Paper on Transparency Tools

(Adopted on 4 March 2011)

## **Executive summary**

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face a steadily growing interest among students, all stakeholders and the public at large in accessing detailed and reliable information on individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions, and especially on quality at programme and at institutional levels.

A closer look at this steadily growing interest demonstrates that *the* interest covers a wide spectrum of specific interests which depend on the differing perspective of each and every stakeholder, students and public authorities in particular.

Consequently, it would be misleading to assume a shared view on what is relevant information about higher education and to assume a common understanding of role and meaning of ‘reliable information’ and ‘transparency’. Transparency cannot be considered mono-dimensional. The differentiation relates to the purpose for which the information is requested, which, consequently, determines the type of information needed. In principle, information is requested for the following purposes:

- to choose a programme;
- to choose an institution;
- to make strategic decisions at institutional and system levels;
- to provide confidence in the output of HEIs.

Therefore, the following types of information can be distinguished:

- Information about the profile and quality of programmes and qualifications;
- Information about the performance and potential of institutions;
- Information about the overall performance and potential of higher education systems.

In particular, the distinction between performance and potential as two features of *the* quality is relevant as regards the type and source of information.

## **Transparency tools and their contribution in informing about HE**

### **THE BOLOGNA TRANSPARENCY TOOLS**

It is noteworthy that *transparency* in higher education and tools for creating transparency are not new issues in the discussion about moving the Bologna Process further. Quite the contrary, the Bologna Process may even be named the most significant factor in striving for transparency in European higher education, in particular by introducing transparency tools such as Qualifications Frameworks, Diploma Supplement and ECTS.

### **RANKINGS**

Rankings list certain groups of HEIs that are ranked comparatively according to common numerical performance indicators. In doing so, rankings provide a

comparative view at the system level, which helps understanding the performance of a whole HE system and of single institutions compared to others.

The project called Classifying European Institutions for Higher Education (CEIHE) is developing a tool to describe the increasing diversity in European higher education. This tool will enable stakeholders to see the various missions and profiles of HEIs. The classification will be multi-dimensional, non-hierarchical and descriptive instead of prescriptive.

## **QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCEDURES**

External quality assurance procedures may cover a wide spectrum of processes designed to monitor, maintain and enhance quality. In principle, quality assurance serves two main purposes: enhancement and accountability. Two major features of the type of information provided by quality assurance are:

- The link between processes and performance/quality;
- The link between evaluation of quality and performance (including weaknesses and strengths) and recommendations for future actions.

Thus, quality assurance does provide comprehensive information about strengths and weaknesses and thus, a holistic view on the quality of a programme or an institution. It also draws attention to potential future enhancement.

## **CONCLUSION**

Bologna transparency tools, quality assurance and rankings/classifications serve different purposes, although they support each other to a certain extent. It is misleading to consider them as alternatives. From the view point of quality assurance and its two main purposes, accountability and enhancement, their relationship to other transparency tools looks as follows:

The Bologna transparency tools are important reference points for quality assurance. The qualification framework for the European Higher Education Area describes level and scope of qualifications graduates will have acquired by the time they graduate. The diploma supplement describes the profile of a qualification, and ECTS is an important tool to guarantee realistic curriculum design as regards student workload, and also fosters mobility.

Rankings and classifications, by putting performance of institutions in relation to criteria, contribute to the accountability function by informing the public, but they do not contribute directly to quality enhancement, the second function of quality assurance. Thus, rankings and classification tools should not be seen as quality assurance tools; in particular, they do not provide information about the potential for the future, although HEIs may draw conclusions from rankings. They might be seen rather as providers of a certain type of information that is useful for quality assurance. On the other hand, it is true that quality assurance may provide quantitative information on aspects of the performance of a programme or an institution for comparison purposes, although this is not the core purpose.

# ENQA Position Paper on Transparency Tools

## Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face a steadily growing interest among students, all stakeholders and the public at large in accessing detailed and reliable information on individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions, and especially on the quality at programme and at institutional levels.

Also, in the political arena, information on higher education has reached the top end of the agenda, not least triggered by the debate about whether rankings contribute to the public call for reliable information. Even within the frame of the Bologna process, the issue of rankings was taken up. However, in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve communiqué of 2009, the concept of transparency tools was introduced instead to avoid controversy. The purpose of this position paper is to examine the nature and purpose of such transparency tools and, in particular, their relationship to quality assurance. The paper is based on discussions during a workshop organised by ENQA and the Magna Charta Observatory in Bologna, Italy, to discuss the meaning of quality assurance and transparency tools among relevant stakeholders and actors in the fields of both quality assurance and transparency tools.

## 1. Information about higher education: Who asks for transparent information and what for?

Not surprisingly, a closer look to the steadily growing interest in detailed and reliable information on higher education demonstrates that the interest covers a wide spectrum of specific interests which depend on the specific perspective of each and every stakeholder. Consequently, deliberations about the request for “information” and how to respond to this request best need to start with answering the question: Who asks for transparent information and what for?

In the following, the typical interests of various stakeholders shall be summarised and represented pointedly for the sake of better understanding the different perspectives:

### 1.1 WHO ASKS FOR TRANSPARENT INFORMATION?

#### Students

In times of growing student mobility on the one hand, and of growing diversification of institutions and programmes on the other, students ask for reliable information to help them decide which programme meets their expectations best. In particular, students ask for information about the qualification level and profile of a certain programme, and information about learning conditions in a broad sense, which includes academic and social aspects. In addition, students are interested in reliable information about the quality of the programme and its recognition status.

### Higher education institutions

HEIs are becoming more and more autonomous as regards their own strategy, profile, and delivery of programmes. At the same time, institutions act in a more and more competitive world. Performance based funding schemes combined – in some countries – with shrinking HE investments, mobile students, and the growing expectations with regard to society, widening access etc. mean that HEIs compete for funding, students and not least reputation. Thus, HEIs seek reliable information on their performance in order to better inform their strategic and operational decisions concerning future developments.

### Employers

The employers' interest in reliable information is mainly twofold. On the one hand, they need reliable information about programmes and qualifications to better understand the skills and competencies obtained by graduates. On the other hand, they look for information about profile, experience, and reputation of institutions in the field of research and development, as well as in the field of education and training for choosing a partner for collaborative projects and strategic partnerships.

### Public authorities and political decision makers

By nature, public authorities and political decision makers have a very broad interest in reliable information about the whole higher education system. On the one hand, this serves as basis for better informed political decisions, and on the other, it is necessary to evaluate the information about whether the political aims, such as raising the level of skills and competencies, raising the quality, and consequently, the attractiveness of programmes and institutions for international students have been achieved. Political decision makers in many countries are particularly interested in institutional performance because a substantial part of institutional funding is allocated according to performance indicators.

## 1.2 What for?

### PURPOSE OF INFORMATION

This short overview clearly demonstrates that it would be misleading to assume a shared view on what is relevant information about higher education and to assume a common understanding of the role and meaning of 'reliable information' and 'transparency'. Transparency can't be considered mono-dimensional. The differentiation relates to the purpose for which the information is requested, which, consequently, determines the type of information.

In principle, information is requested for the following purposes:

- to choose a programme;
- to choose an institution;
- to make strategic decisions at institutional and system levels;
- to provide confidence in the output of HEIs.

Therefore, the following types of information can be distinguished:

- Information about the profile and quality of programmes and qualifications
- Information about the performance and potentials of institutions

- Information about the overall performance and potentials of higher education systems

In particular, the distinction between performance and potentials as two features of *the* quality is relevant as regards the type and source of information.

The different purposes of collecting reliable information are a consequence of three major, interrelated developmental trends in higher education : competition, diversification and autonomy.

### **COMPETITION**

Competition has become a major driving force in higher education. HEIs increasingly compete for funds, students and reputation.

Performance based funding schemes, increasing proportions of third party funding and increasing student mobility (especially at master and PhD level) mean that HEIs have to demonstrate performance and quality.

### **DIVERSIFICATION**

Diversification is threefold: Firstly, expectations from students change, simply because the student population is getting more and more diverse. The male, young, full-time student, coming directly from a local or national secondary education institution is no longer a typical student. Educational, social, cultural, linguistic and national backgrounds are getting more and more diverse, and so do the requests for appropriate study programmes, such as part-time programmes, E-learning programmes, programmes in the frame of lifelong learning, etc. Thus, the mode of provision changes in terms of organisation and structure.

Secondly, employers' expectations change: The qualifications, competencies and skills that are required of graduates by employers are developing and diversifying increasingly quickly. This also leads to conflicts with the educational mission of HEIs.

Thirdly, the expectations from society at large change. HEIs are not only requested to provide academic education to students and to carry out blue skies or applied research. They are also requested to contribute significantly to meeting the challenges of society and mankind, ranging from social and financial welfare and cultural development to ecological questions such as global warming.

These developments lead to the diversification of the mission, profile and strategy of HEIs, not forgetting their provision of teaching.

### **AUTONOMY OF HEIs**

The third major developmental trend, that is growing the autonomy of higher education institutions, is closely interrelated with completion and diversification. Alongside with substantial administrative reforms in all public sectors since the 1970s, higher education institutions were given more autonomy and responsibilities in terms of management of resources, personnel, and of academic decisions in teaching and research. However, the independence from state regulation went hand in hand with the necessity to account for the quality (i.e. the effectiveness and efficiency) of their services via reporting systems and quality assurance.

In a diversified and competitive higher education system with HEIs as autonomous actors, it is of utmost importance to have detailed and reliable information to help



make well-informed decisions, be it about the institution that a prospective student wants to enrol at, be it about funding according to performance indicators, or be it about a suitable partner for a joint research project. In principle, the purposes for providing information can be summarised under two headings:

### **INFORMATION FOR COMPARISON AS KEY FEATURE**

In fact, information about the quality of programmes and institutions serves more and more as a means of comparison of programmes, rather than a means of providing information about single programmes or institutions. Naturally, this has an impact on the type and scope of the information to be gathered. Currently, in order to compare information, one is often offered quantitative data.

### **INFORMATION FOR DEVELOPMENT AS KEY FEATURE**

In an increasingly competitive and diversified higher education system, the meaning and relevance of quality as such changes: Quality in higher education is not only the result of the intrinsic motivation of teachers and researchers, nor is it to be demonstrated as a matter of accountability. In a highly competitive field, quality in higher education has become a core success factor for the institutional success of HEIs. The indicators for the performance of HEIs in this respect are well known. They are, among others:

- Completion rates/placement success
- Research output
- Acquisition of third party funds
- Effectiveness/efficiency in financial terms
- Number of Nobel-prize winners/other awards.

Thus, information about the quality of programme and institutional levels has become a prime source for the management decisions at programme and at institutional level.

In conclusion, transparent and reliable information about the quality of programmes and institutions are preconditions for developing programmes and institutions, enhancing quality, and demonstrating accountability.

## **2. Information about higher education: which tools provide what kind of information?**

### **2.1 THE BOLOGNA TRANSPARENCY TOOLS**

It is noteworthy that transparency in higher education and tools for creating transparency are not new issues in the discussion about moving the Bologna Process further. Quite the contrary, the Bologna Process may even be named the most significant factor in striving for transparency in European higher education, right from the beginning and throughout the whole process:

The core aim of the Bologna process, as stipulated in the Bologna Declaration, demonstrates that the whole process aims at more transparency. European Ministers responsible for higher education agreed to strive for:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement.
- Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system – as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.

At the Berlin Ministerial conference in 2003, European Ministers responsible for higher education pointed to transparency as the core aim of the Bologna Process when they stated:

**Quote (Berlin Communiqué):**

*“Ministers welcome the various initiatives undertaken since the Prague Higher Education Summit to move towards more comparability and compatibility, to make higher education systems more transparent and to enhance the quality of European higher education at institutional and national levels.”*

In addition, the Ministers named four core transparency tools:

**Quote:**

*“Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. [...] They appeal to institutions and employers to make full use of the Diploma Supplement, so as to take advantage of the improved transparency and flexibility of the higher education degree systems, for fostering employability and facilitating academic recognition for further studies.”*

In Bergen, the Ministers highlighted transparency as one of two major underlying principles of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), next to quality:

**Quote (Bergen Communiqué):**

*“Building on the achievements so far in the Bologna Process, we wish to establish a European Higher Education Area based on the principles of quality and transparency.”*

In London, the Ministers stressed again the role of Qualifications Frameworks for creating transparency in the EHEA:

**Quote (London Communiqué):**

*“Easily readable and comparable degrees and accessible information on educational systems and qualifications frameworks are prerequisites for citizens’ mobility and ensuring the continuing attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. [...] Qualifications frameworks are important instruments in achieving comparability and transparency within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems. They should also help HEIs to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning.”*

In Leuven, the role of Diploma Supplement and ECTS as important transparency tools were reconfirmed:

**Quote (Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué):**

*“Moreover, the Bologna Process has promoted the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System to further increase transparency and recognition.”*

These tools provide information about the type and profile of a programme or a qualification. They help (prospective) students, employers and public at large to understand what can be expected from a graduate having obtained a certain qualification. This information may serve as a basis for the choice of a programme or in the recruitment processes. In addition, these tools foster transparency at a system level as far as comparison of certain higher education systems is concerned.

## **2.2 Rankings, classifications and transparency**

The current discussion in Europe about transparency tools is still basically a discussion about rankings. Apart from rankings, another initiative may be grouped under this term: the initiative towards “A Classification on Higher Education” in Europe, funded by the European Commission.

### **RANKINGS**

Rankings list certain groups of HEIs that are ranked comparatively according to common numerical performance indicators. A major feature of this way of describing (and comparing) the quality of an institution is the fact, that the information which the ranking provides is not generated by the institution, but rather, by statistical data. Rankings do not refer to and do not analyse institutional processes. So, they may ignore the causes for high or poor performance. Thus, rankings do not directly derive recommendations from their findings. The purpose of rankings may be described as follows:

Providing a comparative view at the system level helps to understand the performance of a whole higher education system and of single institutions compared to others. By doing so, rankings partly support the accountability function of HEIs, because they provide the public with information about aspects of quality of a programme or an institution. Not least because they are mainly organised and published by magazines that often serve as a guide to HEIs.

Although the scope of rankings may differ from national or regional to global scale, the methodologies are similar: Quantitative data on a set of indicators is collected by third parties, then scored as regards each indicator and finally weighed and aggregated. More recently, as a consequence of the critics, the emergence of multidimensional rankings, which use several types of indicators to demonstrate that the quality of a HEI has various dimensions depending on the viewpoint of the stakeholder.

Today, the so called “Berlin principles”, which were published in 2006 by CHE, UNESCO-CEPES and IHEP, form a consensus of underlying principles for the design of rankings. They comprise standards and principles for purpose and goals, design and weighting of indicators, collecting and processing data, and finally, presentation of ranking results. They specifically call for:

- Transparency and clarity in terms of purpose, context, and used data
- Multidimensional approaches
- Outcome orientation
- Quality assurance measures to ensure validity of data

## CLASSIFICATION

The project called Classifying European Institutions for Higher Education (CEIHE)<sup>2</sup>, carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, tries to develop a tool to describe the increasing diversity in European higher education. This tool shall enable stakeholders to see the various missions and profiles of HEIs.

The classification project uses empirical data as its main methodological feature, which distinguishes it from typologies that address conceptual entities. The classification shall be multi-dimensional, non-hierarchical and descriptive instead of prescriptive.

The information provided by rankings and the classification project relates to current performance concerning indicators and to the profile of an institution respectively. In other words, classifications describe horizontal diversity and provide institutional profiles while rankings assess vertical diversity within types of institutions and result in performance-based outcome. In doing so, these tools may provide relevant information for a better understanding of the very nature or the current state of a higher education system. This information may serve as a basis for the formulation of policies. In particular, rankings may also inform funding decisions as far as allocation of funds is performance driven.

## 2.3 Quality assurance and transparency

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

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

Quality assurance in higher education as such and the design of the procedures are based on the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG) which were developed by the E4 group. The main purpose of these standards and guidelines was to guarantee professionally conducted quality assurance procedures on a high quality level. The ESG prefer the generic principle to the specific requirement, focusing more on what should be done than how it should be achieved. The ESG combine two aspects in particular:

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.utwente.nl/mb/cheps/research/current\\_projects/Classifying%20European%20Institutions%20for%20higher%20education.doc/](http://www.utwente.nl/mb/cheps/research/current_projects/Classifying%20European%20Institutions%20for%20higher%20education.doc/)

- Common standards for professionalism in terms of procedures and agencies that are no longer shared only within Europe and the EHEA, but increasingly worldwide;
- The European notion of quality assurance is laid down in the following principles:
  - The primary responsibility for quality lies with the institutions.
  - Internal quality assurance forms the basis of the whole quality assurance system. External quality assurance has to take into account the results of the internal part.
  - Quality assurance processes, irrespective of the very nature and design of the chosen approach, have to serve the developmental function of quality assurance.
  - Involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including students and employers, in quality assurance processes and quality assurance agencies.

As a result of the application of the ESG in quality assurance systems and processes in the participating countries of the Bologna Process, quality assurance in the EHEA, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity, is based on a common ground of shared values and principles and is conducted in the specific European way of professionally sound processes with the participation of all stakeholders. The application of the ESG is a major achievement of the Bologna Process.

The purpose and role of quality assurance are affected by the growing competition and diversification in higher education. If quality in higher education is a core success factor for institutional success, the quality assurance processes should not be considered as something “extra” in addition to the other core processes in higher education, but should be integral. Guaranteeing a certain quality or enhancing the quality of a programme becomes an integral part of the regular management of a HEI. There is a trend of moving from quality assurance towards quality oriented higher education management, which means that former quality assurance processes get directly linked to core management processes.

Hence, quality assurance has to take these differences into account, and has to take as its point of departure the mission and the objectives of a specific institution and recommend improvement to achieve the set goals. This calls either for process designs which are generic in order to be able to be applied to HEIs of different profiles etc, or for the diversification of quality assurance processes in order to match the exact needs of the given HEI.

Two major features of the type of information that is provided by quality assurance are:

- The link between processes and performance/quality;
- The link between evaluation of quality and performance (including weaknesses and strengths) and recommendations for future actions.

One can say that quality assurance not only provides comprehensive information about strengths and weaknesses and thus a holistic view on the quality of a programme or an institution, it also draws the attention to potential future enhancement. By this means, quality assurance generates necessary information for the management of HEIs and for their further development. It is fair to say that the extent to which the outcomes of quality assurance relate to recommendations for the future depends on the type

of procedure. It may be higher in case of classical evaluations and lower in case of accreditation processes.

ENQA is well aware of the fact that currently, different actors and stakeholders in higher education weigh the two main purposes differently. The accountability dimension becomes prominent especially in times of financial constraints and a drift towards more autonomy for HEIs. However, rather than reducing quality assurance to one of the two, ENQA supports the development of quality assurance processes by maintaining a close link between both dimensions, which is clearly to the benefit of the HEI. There is a concern that if HEIs are forced to focus on rankings or transparency tools, they will gear their efforts to this end, rather than striving to build a true quality culture encompassing both assurance and enhancement.

### **3. Conclusion**

#### **TRANSPARENCY: DIFFERENT TYPES OF INFORMATION ARE NECESSARY FOR DIFFERENT PURPOSES**

In the current discussion about the relationship between rankings and quality assurance, the notion of “detailed and reliable information on the quality of individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions” claims that participants in the discussion talk about the same issue. Actually, this is not the case.

Firstly, what is quality in higher education? Do rankings and quality assurance really use the same concepts of quality for a programme or an institution?

Secondly, what is information? Is the type of information provided by rankings really the same as the type of information generated by quality assurance?

#### **ABOUT QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Rankings/classifications provide comparative performance information about certain aspects of a programme or an institution (i.e. completion rates of students and graduates, or number of Nobel prize-winners among staff). The information that is gathered through ranking contains rarely information about the quality of the programme or the institution. Depending on the type of ranking, various performances are weighed in order to draw a more comprehensive picture.

Quality assurance provides comprehensive information about the compliance of a programme or an institution with certain standards and about the strengths and weaknesses of the programme or the institution. Normally, quality assurance is not restricted to certain aspects but based on a holistic view.

Thus, the underlying concepts of quality in higher education differ a lot between rankings/classifications and quality assurance.

#### **ABOUT INFORMATION**

In the case of rankings/classifications, information consists of aggregated data, which may combine and weigh data referring to different aspects of performance of programmes or institutions at a certain point of time.

In the case of quality assurance, information consists of performance, internal processes, causes for strengths and weaknesses or compliance/non-compliance of a programme or an institution with certain standards, combined with recommendations for future developments. Thus, also regarding the production of information, quality assurance has to serve two functions: information for the sake of accountability and

development. ENQA members will, in line with the ESG, remain mindful that reports arising from quality reviews should be fit for purpose and be accessible to various audiences. Therefore, internal or external review reports should be supplemented by an executive summary to ensure that it is accessible to non specialist readers.

### ABOUT PRODUCING INFORMATION

When the requested information serves comparison purposes, it has an impact on the type and scope of information. Thus, in the case of rankings and classifications, information needs to be easily compared, which normally means quantitative data. One needs standardised information that can be equally accessed by all institutions.

When the requested information (also or partly) serves strategic and developmental needs of the institutions, as is the case in quality assurance, one needs information generated for the individual case. This goes beyond aggregating quantitative data and is normally done by a well-informed peer review.

In addition, the current discussion about the relationship between rankings and quality assurance does not take into account the role and meaning of transparency tools at the programme level, such as qualifications frameworks, diploma supplements and ECTS. These Bologna transparency tools play a crucial role as regards providing transparent and reliable information about single programmes.

### Conclusion:

**Bologna transparency tools, quality assurance and rankings/classifications serve different but partly overlapping purposes, use different methodologies, provide different types of information.**

Bologna transparency tools, quality assurance and rankings/classifications serve different purposes, although they support each other to a certain extent. It is misleading to consider them as alternatives.

From the view point of quality assurance and its two main purposes, accountability and enhancement, their relationship to other transparency tools looks as follows:

The Bologna transparency tools are important reference points for quality assurance. The qualification framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) describes the level and scope of qualifications that graduates shall have acquire by the time of graduation. The diploma supplement describes the profile of the qualification, and ECTS is an important tool to guarantee a realistic curriculum design as regards student workload, and it also fosters mobility.

By putting performance of institutions in relation to criteria, rankings and classifications contribute to the accountability function by informing the public, but they do not contribute to quality enhancement, the second function of quality assurance. Thus, ranking/classification tools are not to be seen as quality assurance tools; in particular, they do not provide information about potentials for the future. They might be seen rather as providers of a certain type of information that is useful for quality assurance. On the other hand, it is true that quality assurance does not necessarily provide quantitative information on aspects of the performance of a programme or an institution for comparison purposes.

ENQA wishes to assert that it is of utmost importance for the development of trust that all activities related to the production of information about higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have explicit goals and methodologies. These

must be communicated transparently in order to avoid misinterpretations of purposes and outcomes of the procedures. This should concern all types of providers, whatever their status is, and should notably be true with regard to:

- Information, recommendations or accreditation outcomes used by decision makers in charge of steering higher education policies;
- Information and guidance for students;
- Evaluations and recommendations devoted to help higher education institutions and programmes in their continuous improvement strategies and actions;
- Benchmarking or rankings developed for the purpose of external communication.

All activities related to quality assurance in higher education or production of information about the quality of higher education should respect the fitness for purpose principle. It is crucial that the purpose(s) should determine the types of scrutiny, methodology and procedures applied. Decisions on the type of scrutiny, methodology and procedures to be applied should be preceded by, and based on, the identification of purpose(s).

Therefore, the discussion about the pros and cons of quality assurance and transparency tools for better information of higher education institutions and stakeholders should not mix up both approaches, which, due to different purposes, methodologies and outcomes, do not compete with each other.

Rankings and classifications are restricted to the accountability function, whereas quality assurance will always serve, in different ways, both purposes. The two approaches overlap with the accountability function and may thus be complementary.



# Annex 1

## **ENQA seminar “Quality and Transparency in Higher Education: Expectations, Tools and the Link to Institutional Autonomy”**

17–18 May 2010

*Hosted by Magna Charta Observatory of Fundamental University Values and Rights*

### **Venue:**

Aula Giorgio Prodi  
San Giovanni in Monte  
Piazza San Giovanni in Monte 2  
40124 Bologna

## **PROGRAMME**

### **Monday 17 May 2010**

- 9.30 – 10.00 **Welcome statement and Setting the stage**  
*Achim Hopbach*, President of ENQA  
*Bastian Baumann*, Secretary General of the Magna Charta Observatory
- 10.00 – 12.00 **HE and Quality: Expectations, Quality Standards and Tools. What kind of information are we looking for? And for what purpose?**  
Inputs from:  
– HEIs: *Tia Loukkola*, EUA;  
*Stefan Delplace*, EURASHE;  
*Carla Salvaterra*, Vice Rector for International Relations, University of Bologna  
– Students: *Allan Päll*, ESU  
– Employers: *Marita Aho*, Business Europe  
– Policy-makers: *Andrejs Rauhvargers*, BFUG  
Discussion  
  
Chair: *Padraig Walsh*, IUQB
- 12.00 – 13.00 Lunch

**13.00 – 14.30 HE and Quality: Expectations, Quality Standards and Tools.  
What kind of information do we provide? And for what purpose?**

Inputs from:

- ENQA: *Karl Dittrich*, ENQA Board member
- QA agencies: *György Bazsa*, HAC and *Helka Kekäläinen*, FINHEEC
- EUA: *Tia Loukkola*

Chair: *Patrick Van den Bosch*, VLIR

14.30 – 15.00 Coffee Break

**15.00 – 17.00 HE and Quality: Expectations, Quality Standards and Tools.  
What kind of information do we provide? And for what purpose?**

Introduction by *Robin Van Ijperen*, European Commission

Inputs from:

- Classification project (CEIHE): *David Bohmert*
- Rankings: *Gero Federkeil*, CHE

Discussion

Chair: *Robin Van Ijperen*, European Commission

**17.00 – 17.30 Wrap-up of the First day, Radu Damian, ARACIS**

17.30 End of the first day

20.00 Dinner at restaurant Pappagallo  
Piazza della Mercanzia 3/c – 40125 Bologna

**Tuesday 18 May 2010**

**09.00 – 11.00** **Influence of rankings and other transparency tools on HEI autonomy**  
**University autonomy and accountability: where is the balance?**

Inputs from:

– *Hélène Lamicq*, Magna Charta Observatory

Responses

– *Janja Komljenovic*, BFUG

– *Achim Hopbach*, ENQA

– *Gero Federkeil*, CHE

Chair: *Bastian Baumann*, Magna Charta Observatory

11.00 – 11.30 Coffee break

**11.30 – 13.00** **Final discussion:**  
**Purpose and standards for information tools on quality in HE**

Input statements by all stakeholders

Chair: *Bastian Baumann*, Magna Charta Observatory

**13.00** **Conclusions**  
*Achim Hopbach*, ENQA

Lunch



**The present report** is based on the contents and results of an ENQA seminar on quality assurance and transparency tools, hosted by Magna Charta Observatory of Fundamental University Values and Rights on 17–18 May 2010 in Bologna, Italy. The purpose of this seminar was to discuss expectations from HEIs and other stakeholders concerning information on quality of HE and the contribution of quality assurance and transparency tools to meet these expectations.



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ISBN 978-952-5539-53-0 (Paperbound)

ISBN 978-952-5539-54-7 (PDF)

ISSN 1458-106X