

COUNCIL OF EUROPE HIGHER EDUCATION FORUM

The Legitimacy of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: The Role of Public Authorities and Institutions

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Council of Europe Higher Education Forum on *The Legitimacy of Quality Assurance in Higher Education: the Role of Public Authorities and Institutions*, held in Strasbourg on 19 – 20 September 2006 with the cooperation of ENQA and the EUA, focused on the relationship between quality assurance, the public responsibility for higher education and research and higher education governance.

The Forum took as its starting point the premise that striving to achieve high quality underlies higher education and research, and that achievement of quality is a joint responsibility of all partners in higher education. Institutions, staff and students as well as public authorities should continue to see quality improvement as an essential goal of their learning, teaching and research.

Quality in higher education should be considered in the light of the requirements of the academic community and disciplines as well as the broader needs and expectations of society, of which higher education and research are a part. This should include considerations of ethics and opportunities for personal development as well as of the extent to which institutions provide equal opportunities for learners and the extent to which they stimulate innovation.

Public authorities should, in cooperation and consultation with higher education institutions, staff, students and other stakeholders, develop visions and goals for the higher education systems for which they are responsible and provide the framework for their implementation. They should seek to develop mutual trust within the European Higher Education Area.

Higher education institutions should make explicit their mission and aims, which should then form the basis for the development and assessment of the quality of the institution.

The definition, development and assessment of quality are complementary aspects of the quest for quality in higher education and research. Quality assurance, therefore, is linked to an ongoing debate on the goals of higher education and research as well as continuous work to improve the ability of institutions, staff and students to meet those goals.

Public authorities as well as institutions and quality assurance agencies should recognize that different stages of development of institutions and higher education systems may require different approaches and methodologies. These may include the use of quantitative and qualitative indicators and criteria, which may vary according to the stage of development of the system. The balance between methodologies may change over time and will tend to shift from quantitative towards qualitative approaches in line with the increasing maturity of the systems.

The development and maintenance of good quality higher education and research are contingent on attractive working conditions for staff and students as well as on the framework laid down by public authorities

The Forum expressed support for the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area adopted by Ministers in Bergen in May 2005.

Since, as stated by Ministers in their Berlin Communiqué, the main responsibility for quality development and quality assurance in higher education rests with the institutions, higher education governance and management must have the continuous development of quality as one of its main goals. Public authorities should encourage and ensure monitoring of quality assurance and quality enhancement activities.

Quality enhancement should be a continuous concern of, and mobilize, higher education institutions and all their members individually. Institutions should also seek input from and cooperation with external stakeholders.

External quality assurance, carried out through mandates given by competent public authorities, constitutes an important complement to the quality culture of higher education institutions. The resources and efforts spent on external quality assurance should be commensurate with the benefits derived from it and should be no more than necessary to achieve these benefits. This is particularly important when considering the range and scope of quality assurance and accreditation activities.

While reports from internal and external quality assessment exercise play an important role in maintaining and improving the quality of higher education, the most critical phase in this work is the follow-up given to these reports, which should be seen as a main responsibility of the higher education institutions themselves. Quality assurance and enhancement exercises should therefore be focused on the future, should include leadership and management, and should in particular concentrate on the capacity of institutions for effective change, supported by quality culture and adequate resources.

All European countries should be seeking to place their systems in a broader European and international context. In particular in the case of smaller higher education systems, regional cooperation could be sought in quality assurance.

Adequate and understandable information in respect of the outcomes of quality reviews should be made widely accessible.

Quality assurance should contribute to enhancing fair recognition of qualifications across the European Higher Education Area, which requires adequate information on the quality of education provision and outcomes as well as closer cooperation between recognition and quality assurance agencies.

The Council of Europe and its Steering Committee for Higher Education and Research (CDESR) should use its position as a pan-European platform anchored in an organization of values to ensure that the core values of universities are embedded in the European Higher Education Area and help find adequate ways to nurture these as our societies change.