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Quality Assurance and what students expect from it.

Introduction
I want to thank the organisers for inviting me to speak at this seminar. There are worse places you can be, around this time of year. Probably that's why at the moment half Europe is in Spain for holidays. Before starting my presentation on what students expect from Quality Assurance and Accreditation, how they wish comparable processes and compatible instruments for Quality Assurance to develop, a short introduction about the organisation I represent here might be useful.

ESIB is the umbrella organisation of National Unions of Students in Europe. Currently ESIB has 43 member organisations in 33 countries and via these member organisations it represents over 10 million students. Within ESIB there are a few committees that undertake the day to day work, one of which is the Bologna Process Committee, of which I am a member. But besides that, which I always find as important to mention, even more after having looked a bit around here, I am also a student. I study agricultural development economics in the Netherlands.

Quality Assurance has always been one of the core topics of ESIB's work, given the importance it has for students and their education. Our policy development on this has basically started in 2000 with a first policy paper. In 2003 the policy was updated following the Berlin Communiqué and again specified on a European level for the use in discussions between ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, the so called E4, on standards, procedures and guidelines of QA. This last policy, the basis for my presentation today, has been adopted by our highest decision making body-the Board Meeting-last April. The common work of ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESIB on developing these agreed standards, procedures and guidelines has started about half a year ago. We meet on a regular basis and the discussions take place on an equal foot between the different stakeholders.

For ESIB, it's important to focus on internal as well as external aspects of QA. At this moment, the situation of QA and Accreditation is still rather unclear, confusing and sometimes even, may I say, chaotic. This doesn't enhance mutual trust between Higher Education Institutions, nor Higher Education. Therefore we are a strong supporter of more comparability, compatibility and transparency on QA within Europe. This, however, does not mean uniformity. We value the European diversity highly, recognise and appreciate the variation that exists in the background of Higher Education and different approaches to QA on national levels. Nevertheless, there are general principles that could and should apply to all QA systems in order to make it work accurately.

In conferences and discussions about the Bologna Process, like this one in Santander, it often surprises me how strong the focus lies on the 'technical' action lines, like QA, ECTS, recognition tools and Qualification Frameworks. But what about the overarching action line of 'the social dimension' and what about 'student participation'? For students,

these elements are essential for Higher Education as well, within every action line, including Quality Assurance. As you will see in the rest of this presentation.

For now, I just want to mention that accessible Higher Education that is not of high quality is worthless and high quality education that is not widely accessible is meaningless.

Student expectations of QA

Before going into the question what students expect from Quality Assurance and Accreditation, I would like to tell you that this seminar really was an unusual, but very welcome break in my normal summer holiday routine. In the last years the months July and August always had two constant factors for me. The first one is the preparation for my exams at the end of August, which for some reason always seem to be much more difficult than the ones during the normal academic year. The second constant factor in my summer holidays is 'Le Tour de France'. I always try to follow this exciting yearly sports event as closely as possible. This year that was especially the case since I spent last week in the South of France, where features of 'le tour' are simply everywhere around you.

Probably because of this seminar approaching, I couldn't help myself constantly making comparisons between 'le tour de France' and Quality Assurance. When looking at the faces of the cyclists, it didn't seem they enjoyed themselves. They were struggling against wind, rain and burning sun, climbing steep mountains that have never been designed for bikes. And for what? For the cyclists to prove their quality? To show to everyone how good they are, what they are able to do (and what not). Was it really necessary to go through all of this hardship for three long, exhausting weeks?

Certainly, Lance Armstrong probably already new beforehand that he would be good enough to win again, and also for the public this didn't come as a big surprise. But the contest provided also a lot of new, unexpected information. For example that Germany has more good cyclists than only Jan Ullrich, that Spanish Mayo and Heras are not as good as expected (if only Beloki would have been there…), that nowadays even some Norwegians seem to know how to cycle fast. And the Dutch……well, they still have a lot to learn.

It's a bit like external assessments of Higher Education programmes and institutions. These assessments are a hell of a job, not very pleasant to do, and for Higher Education Institutes it often seems that these assessments only prove what they already knew. But it's simply necessary, it provides information and guarantees that cannot be obtained in any other way.

So, what do students expect from Quality Assurance and Accreditation? First and foremost students want to know how the quality of their education is, even more, if it fulfils certain guaranteed quality standards. Indeed, they very much like to have some sort of guarantee on this, before entering Higher Education, during enrolment and when

graduating. When implemented in the correct way, Accreditation could serve this goal, if it provides a public certification of acceptable minimal quality.

But this only works in that way if Accreditation involves a simple 'yes/no' decision. The quality of an institution or programme is either good enough or it is not. For students there is not any need nor benefit for ranking of programmes and institutions. Ranking is only confusing, highly subjective and doesn't serve any qualitative objective.

Students also expect QA to provide objective information about the quality of all other aspects related to learning, to the learning environment. For them this information is as relevant as information about the content of education and also plays an important role in decisions regarding mobility.

Lastly, students are also much concerned about ways in which the quality of their education may improve. Accurately functioning internal and external systems of Quality Assurance can trigger the enhancement and improvement of education, also when the quality is already of a high level.

We should never forget that………

Inside the institution

The core of Quality Assurance and Quality Enhancement should lie within the Higher Education Institutions themselves. The ultimate goal of Quality Assurance within the Institutions is to develop an internal Quality Culture. This should ensure that quality is a focus of the institution at all levels and enhancement of high quality education incorporated in the everyday work of the institutional management, academic and support staff as well as students and their representatives.

But as said before, there's also an important role for the external dimension of QA. Within the Bologna Process, especially in the Berlin Communiqué, this external dimension has already been well explained, the tools for it provided.

Berlin Communiqué

According to the Berlin Communiqué, Quality Assurance should consist the following aspects:

-Evaluation of programmes or institutions.
-Internal assessment + external review.
-Accreditation or certification

And not to forget:

-Participation of students
-Publication of results

-International participation and co-operation.

What does that mean in practise?

Procedures and principles of QA

The elements I just mentioned can easily and logically result in a complete system of Quality Assurance consisting of three essential steps.

Step 1 is the development of quality standards based on the views of external experts and the academic community. These standards will be used in the rest of the process.

Step 2 is an internal self-evaluation, resulting in a self-evaluation report.

The final step is an external Accreditation, resulting in an Accreditation report. Of course, during the external assessment there should also be attention for feedback and recommendations for improvement.

If this process is to carried out in a good way and the results of the Accreditation to be accepted by all parties concerned, the whole process must be completely transparent and the whole academic community should be involved.

This of course also means that students should be involved in all steps of the QA process. Not only in the internal quality assessment, but also as full members of the external review team and boards of QA and Accreditation agencies. Students have specific and, often, unique knowledge and expertise on essential elements of education and the learning process, which should be recognised.

Furthermore, for students, without any doubt, Quality Assessments on a programme level are of the greatest importance and need. For individual students, the quality of their own programme is what they are concerned about. About which they need information and some guarantees. And as every one of you who has dealt with programme evaluations will certainly know, within Universities standards and quality of different programmes may vary and thus programme evaluations can never be substituted via a purely institutional level approach.

Standards

Quality Assurance is an ongoing process that ensures the delivery of agreed standards. These agreed standards should make sure that every educational institution or programme of which the quality is assured, has the potential ability to achieve high quality. In ESIB's point of view, we should not try to develop European standards for Higher Education, at most European reference points and ways in which to develop standards on a national and institutional level.

We see two different sorts of standards, both as important for the enhancement of good quality education.

-The first type can be called 'Generic Standards', general competences students should gain for a specific level and profile of qualifications. For example general standards of a first or second cycle degree. These standards should be descriptive rather than prescriptive and its development should be done in line with the development of Qualification Frameworks. I can imagine that QA and Accreditation agencies play a role in this.

-The second type of standards we refer to as 'Specific Standards'. These are linked to the specific content of education programmes and function as reference points for them. It doesn't seem wise if these specific standards are developed by a QA or Accreditation agency, since it would make the workload for the agency unnecessarily bureaucratic and the standards static and inflexible. The specific content related standards could better be developed by experts from the scientific field for related programmes of different Higher Education Institutions.

Guidelines

And then, finally, some aspects of Higher Education that are important to include in internal and external assessments. Let's call them guidelines. On a European level it's not possible, nor desirable to formulate an extensive list of aspects of programmes and institutes that have influence on its quality and should be included in Quality Assurance. Nevertheless, I want to mention some guidelines we see as universally important for QA.

A first group of guidelines consists of aspects of Higher Education Institutes and programmes that come back in the 'minimalist' accreditation approach that exists in some countries, often referred to as assessment of 'processes and resources':

-Governance
-Use of funds
-Internal Quality Assurance processes
-Participation of students in decision making and evaluations

But the results of these exercises don't say much about the actual quality of education and about what students will probably learn. Therefore, also the following aspects have to be part of internal and external QA:

-Mission and goals of programmes and institutions
-Quality of content of education
-Quality of the education process
-Results for graduates (satisfaction is at least as important as employability).
-Relation between education and research.

As mentioned before, also the social dimension of education and learning is of utmost importance. This involves assessment of:

-Educational facilities
-Quality of the learning process
-Access to education
-Guidance (academic and welfare)
-Equality, taking the heterogeneity of the student population into account.

Final thoughts

I tried to explain what students expect from Quality Assurance and how this could be put in practise. Now I look back at my presentation, it might have been better if I had chosen a stronger title. Instead of asking what students expect to focus on what students count on. Because students don't only expect their education to be of good quality, they count on it. And they have every reason to do so.
Certainly, Higher Education in Europe is generally of very high quality, no doubt about that. But there are still too many dubious exceptions and even more room for improvements. An accurate system of Quality Assurance, in all countries within the European Higher Education Area, can and will make a positive difference. So let's go for that.

Thank you for your attention.