

Common instruments for assessment and accreditation in Europe

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1. Introduction

The issue of quality assurance has risen very high on the Bologna agenda and is seen now as one of the key instruments to promote the attractiveness of European higher education. The Berlin Communiqué – while recognising the role of HEIs in promoting quality (this constitutes the first official acknowledgement in the context of the Bologna process) – invites the QA and HE communities to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance.

2. Common standards are not desirable

EUA strongly believes that it is important to articulate the Bologna Process with the Lisbon objectives. In this perspective, it is difficult to see how a broad use of “standards” that would be applied to higher education institutions would allow Europe to reach the objectives of becoming the most competitive knowledge society in the world. This ambitious objective requires a diverse and innovative HE sector across the continent, as the current national debates show (e.g., France, Germany, Ireland, UK). In risking to stifle diversity and innovation in the sector, standards would constitute a threat to reaching the Lisbon objectives.

3. Common standards are not feasible

The Institutional Evaluation Programme has given EUA a solid experience in transnational evaluation, one that is unmatched anywhere in Europe and the world. EUA has evaluated close to 120 universities in 35 different countries. This ten-year experience, combined with the outcomes of the Quality Culture project, points to the fact that it is impossible to reach agreement on quality standards when dealing with a diversity of institutions across a whole continent.

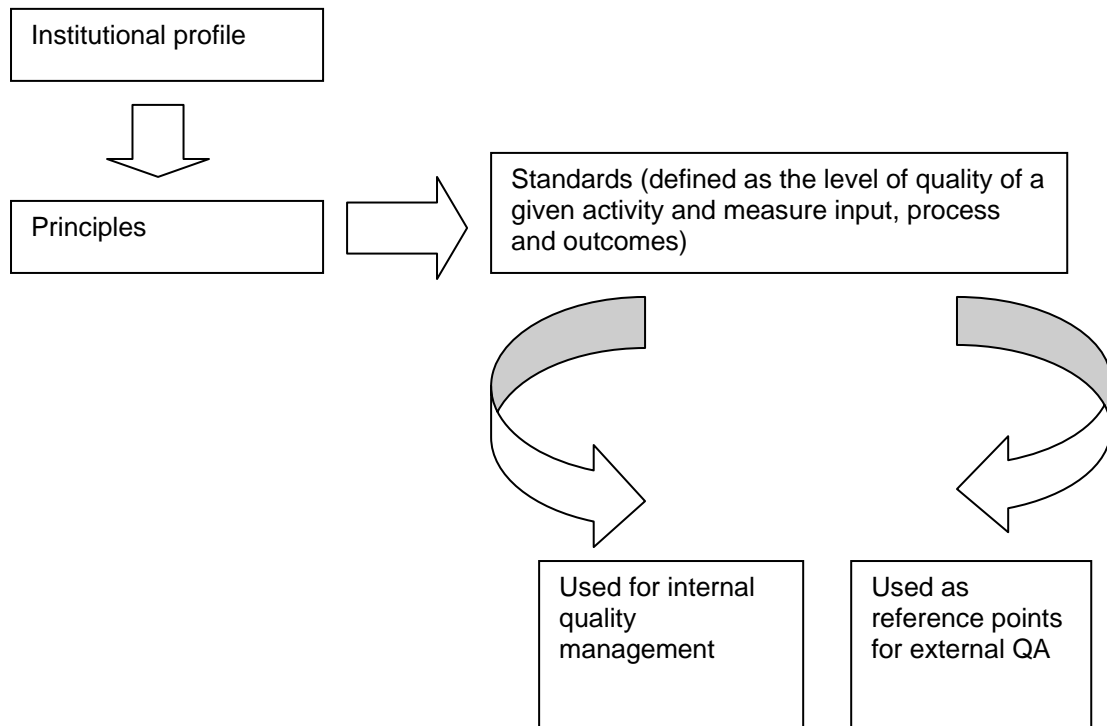
4. Limitations of evaluation in HE

Higher education institutions are characterised by a diffused and devolved power structure, complex and somewhat ambiguous goals, and outcomes that are difficult to measure or quantify. In this respect, we may well ponder the astute observation of Martin Trow, a distinguished professor of education at the University of California (Berkeley), who noted that “The real and substantial effects of the experience of higher education extend over the whole lifetime of graduates, and are inextricably entwined with other forces and experiences beyond the walls and the reach of universities” (Trow 1996). Martin Trow recommends that evaluations focus on the capacity for higher education institutions to change: “How an institution responds to change points to deep-seated qualities of the unit which must also show up in its research and teaching.” (Trow 1994)¹.

This observation suggests that:

¹ Trow, Martin, 1994, “Academic reviews and the culture of excellence, 1994, reprinted in *Quality Management in Higher Education Institutions*, Lemma Publisher, Utrecht, The Netherlands, 1999. Trow, Martin, 1996, “Trust, Markets and Accountability in Higher Education: A Comprehensive Perspective”, in SRHE, *The 30th Anniversary seminars*.

- Evaluation approaches that are based on standards, quantitative methods, sets of criteria, or checklists will not improve quality meaningfully and may not even control it significantly because they will not capture the complexity of the educational enterprise.
- Autonomy is a precondition for a capacity to respond to change. Thus, university autonomy requires that each institution decides on its standards in the context of its mission and goals. As the following graph illustrates²:



5. Policy goals ³

As discussed at the EUA Graz Convention (May 2003), the **policy goals** for an appropriate European QA dimension are:

- *Achieve greater compatibility while managing diversity of QA & A procedures:*
There is a great diversity of national procedures in Europe that needs to be accepted as this diversity reflects specific national circumstances that each national QA framework tries to address. Upholding a widely shared set of principles in the QA area would ensure compatibility while minimising intrusiveness in national frameworks.
- *Achieve trust:*
It is evident from discussions with various key actors, that some believe that trust across Europe can be achieved only if all QA & A agencies follow similar procedures and guidelines. EUA contends that trust emanates from the way in which and the spirit with which QA procedures and guidelines are carried out rather than simply in

² Frans Van Vught, presentation at the EUA Seminar on the QA lines of the Berlin Communiqué, University of Zurich, 26 February 2004.

³ EUA position paper on Standards, Procedures and Guidelines:
http://www.eua.be/eua/jsp/en/upload/EUA_QA_policy_postion.1081955225903.pdf

having a similar protocol of procedures or set of guidelines. In other words, trust is based on professionalism, grounded in a set of standards.

- *Preserve and extend institutional autonomy while meeting the demands for accountability:*

It is essential that the development of a European QA dimension accompanies and extends institutional autonomy in order to ensure that QA & A is not merely window-dressing and a compliance exercise. The Berlin Communiqué acknowledges the central role that institutions must play in this respect.

- *Avoid a big bureaucracy, burdensome QA & A mechanisms and promote cost-effective QA & A procedures.*

Care must be taken that funds are not wasted on complex bureaucratic arrangements or on QA & A procedures that put an undue drain on human and financial resources.

- *Ensure the role of the HE sector in any future monitoring scheme:*

Given the emphasis placed by the Berlin Communiqué regarding the role of higher education institutions in promoting quality, it is essential that the sector plays a role in any future monitoring scheme in order to guarantee that academic core values are upheld and, most importantly, to ensure the adhesion of the academic community.

- *Promote innovative and dynamic institutions in a context characterised by diversity of missions, goals and curricula:*

The Berlin Communiqué refers to “standards of QA procedures”. EUA’s proposes a set of six standards that are applicable to QA & A (as indicated by the wording of the Berlin Communiqué) and include:

- QA & A procedures will promote institutional autonomy and diversity and foster innovation by evaluating institutions against their mission and strategic plans.
- QA & A procedures will promote organisational quality
- QA & A procedures will be geared at enhancement, which means that they will prompt institutions to develop internal quality measures and will emphasise self-evaluation as a key step in the procedure.
- QA & A procedures will assure public accountability by including stakeholders in the process, communicating the results to the public and be independent, in terms of their outcomes, of governments, interest groups and individual higher education institutions.
- QA & A procedures will follow guidelines that are transparent to the public and higher education institutions and will have specified and fair appeals procedures.
- QA & A agencies, where they exist, will have internal quality processes in place and be evaluated themselves, on a cyclical basis, in terms of the adequacy of their resources and their impact on institutions.

6. Conclusion

There are two observations that need to be made regarding the current status of the Bologna process:

- Whether we are talking of long-term vision or more narrowly of instruments, we should not forget that Bologna includes now 40 widely differing countries. Therefore, the risk of failure in creating EHEA is great. We must simplify our thinking and set transparency (rather than commonality) as our primary goal. In this respect, we must remember that the Lisbon Convention speaks of comparability rather than similarity.

All the discussions that led to the Lisbon Convention examined the possibility of commonality and equivalency: these were dropped because they would have undermined any future agreement.

- The focus on instruments such as QA, QF, learning outcomes, etc. may lead us to overlook the need to develop a vision for our higher education systems and focus on the principles and the values upon which they must be based.

At the European level, these values can be summarised in two principles as far as QA instruments are concerned:

- be forward looking
- respect the diversity of institutional missions

This will ensure that we promote a diversified higher education system that addresses multiple needs: different types of research, service to society in widely different environments, and access to the greater number of students. Quality assurance systems need to be flexible and embrace this diversity in order to ensure that higher education serves effectively society.