

- I. EHEA (Sorbonne, Bologna, Prague etc.)**
- II. Quality as the heart of setting up of EHEA (Berlin Communiqué)**
- III. Evaluation and accreditation; aims of accreditation; involvement of state**
- IV. Increasing autonomy of HEI, primary responsibility for quality lies with HEI; double legitimation for accreditation**
- V. Recognition for academic purposes; mutual and cross-border recognition through accreditation**
- VI. Mutual trust; regional alliances; common guidelines**
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VIII. Workshop
Common instruments and criteria for accreditation
by
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I.

By signing the Bologna declaration in June 1999 29 European ministers have committed their governments and their countries to create a **European Higher Education Area**. At the Prague meeting on May 19th 2001, 32 Ministers “reaffirmed their commitment to the objective of establishing the European Higher Education Area by 2010.” If you keep in mind “that Europe is not only that of the Euro, of the banks and the economy ... we must strengthen and build upon the intellectual, cultural, social and technical dimensions of our continent. These have to a large extent been shaped by its universities“ as it is said in the Joint Sorbonne Declaration (1998). Living in a period of continuously changing education and working conditions the European Higher Education Area will meet the challenge of offering students and society a higher education system, which opens access to the labour market and fosters and supports the development and existence of areas of excellence in science and humanities.

II.

Having in Prague “particularly stressed that the quality of higher education and research is and should be an important determinant of Europe’s international attractiveness and competitiveness” the Berlin Communiqué says: “**The quality of higher education has proven to be the heart of the setting up a European Higher Education Area**”. The Graz Declaration of EUA and the Council of Europe also underline the crucial importance of high academic quality and the necessity “to foster the highest level of quality”. And indeed this is obvious if you want to promote the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area and make Europe “the most competitive and dynamic knowledge based economy in the world” – as the heads of state and government of the European Union have declared in Lisbon and Barcelona.

But quality of higher education in Europe as well as in every country participating in the Bologna-Process is rather different. To improve and to guarantee quality in most of the participating countries systems of quality assurance have been established. The

ministers commit themselves in the Berlin Communiqué “**to support the further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level.**”

III.

Among the tools of quality assurance are **evaluation and accreditation** which today are seen as equal components. Practically all countries in Europe have meanwhile established national quality assurance systems and accreditation has become the most important method for external quality assurance. **Accreditation** means according to the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) a formal decision concerning the quality of a programme or an institution expressed by a recognized body taking the decision following predetermined standards (benchmarks). Accreditation is achieved through a multi-phased process (self-documentation, external assessment by independent experts and decision by an independent commission). The process is initiated once an application to the accreditation institution has been submitted or an accreditation body has decided to start an accreditation procedure. The decision on accreditation depends on a quality assessment based on internationally accepted standards. The decision finishing the accreditation procedure is authoritative, has been organized externally and comes to a yes or no judgment – in some countries it can be “yes but” or “not yet” – and the validity of the judgement is continuously reviewed. Accreditation procedures contribute to the continued quality development of the accredited entity.

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Accreditation is aiming at protection of students and employers guaranteeing a certain standard of quality defined in cooperation by the scientific community and representatives of the labour market. The **state is involved** in defining these standards, as a rule by setting the structural frame of the programs offered in higher education. Beyond that accreditation is contributing to transparency and accountability especially with regard to those who are funding higher education. Finally accreditation can open access to a profession.

IV.

Corresponding to the **increasing autonomy of public institutions of higher education** in Europe – a process that has begun in all countries but has not yet come to a satisfactory end in most countries - a change of paradigm has taken place determined by the idea, that quality assurance is or should be an essential part of the responsibility of a university. So the EUA Graz Declaration claims that “the

universities are responsible for developing internal quality culture” and the Berlin Communiqué says that “the **primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with the institution itself** and this provides the basis for the real accountability of the academic system within the national quality network.” Licensing and certification is now at least looked at as a shared responsibility of the state and the scientific community. So in Europe corresponding to the role of the state and the role higher education institutions have to play in the Bologna process there is a **double legitimation for accreditation: It is with the responsibility of higher education institutions and of the state.**

V.

Being aware not only of the richness of diversity but also of the different quality of higher education and research in Europe as well as of the institutions of higher education in each country participating in the Bologna-Process and being aware of the fact that **recognition for academic purposes** is within the responsibility of the universities and other institutions of higher education to promote cross-border mobility it is necessary to ensure comparable quality of courses, course units and degrees and to make this transparent in order to encourage and promote the development of mutual trust. Following this concept in Prague the ministers “recognized the vital role that quality assurance systems play in ensuring high quality standards and in facilitating the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe.” Accreditation as an important component of quality assurance does not only meet national needs but can be rather **effective in enhancing mutual and cross-border recognition of courses and degrees** if decisions are taken following comparable quality standards. Therefore it is worthwhile to work - as is already said in the Sorbonne Joint Declaration - on a “common frame of reference”. The Berlin Communiqué declares it necessary “to have, by 2005, **agreed sets of standards, procedures and guidelines** for external evaluations carried out by quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies.” It is a big step forward if - as it is said in the Berlin Communiqué – “ministers encourage the member states to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems” and that “ministers also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area”.

VI.

As **cross-border recognition of results of national accreditation systems** is dependent on **mutual trust** and to create it - and following the recommendations of the Prague communiqué - multilateral and continuing information about accreditation

systems and a constant exchange of views, concepts and ideas is necessary. To stimulate this, it will be necessary to work on a European platform that supports the process of multilateral information, the exchange of experiences and ideas and the development of principles of good practise. As is said in Trends 2003 (p. 12): “The ultimate challenge for quality assurance in Europe consists in creating transparency, exchange of good practice and enough common criteria to allow for mutual recognition of each others’ procedures, without mainstreaming the system and undermining its positive forces for diversity and competition”. There are different proposals to achieve these aims. In order to facilitate international acceptance of degrees, it will be necessary that future accreditation decisions in one country will also be recognized in another country. This goal is being realized by **regional alliances** (e.g. the D-A-CH-Netzwerk), as well as by the “European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education“ (ECA), which was founded in November 2003. Twelve founding members have signed an ad-hoc cooperation agreement which aims at achieving “mutual recognition of accreditation decisions within member states“ no later than 2007. Expectations are that this goal may be achieved even earlier among smaller, regional federations. One first step toward this goal is to draft **common guidelines and criteria for accreditation (e.g. the code of good practice, selection criteria for experts, joint evaluation criteria and a publication format)**.

VII.

Recognition of credits and degrees awarded by another university for academic purposes is part of the autonomy of the universities or their faculties, where it often takes place on a case-by-case basis. On the other hand in many European countries the state has at least an overall responsibility in the field of higher education. Therefore in addition to the Lisbon Convention and to the ENIC/NARIC networks it could be desirable to recognise the results of national accreditation procedures in a **multilateral agreement** like the Bologna Declaration. Signatories should be the Member States of the Bologna Process, the EUA, EURASHE and the Accreditation Organisations of the member states. This agreement should be open to join for all institutions of higher education concerned.