

## **ECA Position Paper on the BFUG "Bologna Beyond 2010" Report**

### **1 Foreword: the mission and context of ECA**

The European Consortium for Accreditation ECA (<http://www.ecaconsortium.net>) was established as a project organization in 2003. ECA was set up to help further develop the European Higher Education Area by means of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among its members. Mutual recognition of accreditation decisions contributes to the recognition of qualifications and makes multiple accreditations of institutions and programmes operating across borders unnecessary.

In the London Communiqué of May 2007 the ministers “acknowledge the progress made with regard to mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions, and encourage continued international cooperation amongst quality assurance agencies”. The first mutual recognition agreements among ECA member organizations were signed in December 2007.

ECA is affiliated with ENQA since 2007. ECA fully endorses the “ENQA Position Paper on Quality Assurance in Europe in view of the Leuven meeting of ministers responsible for higher education in the Bologna Signatory Countries in April 2009”. For general comments, principles and priorities ECA therefore refers to the ENQA position paper.

The present ECA paper makes some specific comments based on the experience from its project work of the last 6 years and on its contributions to current and future goals of the Bologna process. The ECA member organizations are aware of the fact that quality assurance developments in the 46 Bologna signatory countries follow different pathways and speeds on account of different national backgrounds and purposes.<sup>1</sup> **The European dimension of quality assurance** is only at an initial phase of its development and far from mature. For the next decade, it **should therefore be taken into the focus of concrete action lines**. ECA’s views on the inclusion of quality assurance and accreditation in these action lines are presented in sections 3 and 4.

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<sup>1</sup> For an useful overview of quality assurance procedures across Europe see the ENQA report „Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey“: [http://www.enqa.eu/pubs\\_occasional.lasso](http://www.enqa.eu/pubs_occasional.lasso)

## 2 Specific comments on Quality Assurance

ECA fully acknowledges the danger of over-bureaucratization and the need to develop light but accountable approaches to external quality assurance. In that perspective ECA questions the added value of some newly created European quality labels, especially with respect to the sustainability of such labels. This is explained, in line with the BFUG report, in an ECA paper of 2007, which identifies – among other potential risks – the danger of confusing the public.

Furthermore, ECA agrees that **studying the impact of quality assurance on higher education** and measuring its influence on learning and teaching is important. Such impact studies should assess the value of both external and internal quality assurance measures, since the final goal of all quality assurance is to further develop and enhance the quality of teaching and research. Consequently, no quality assurance procedure should be an end in itself.

ECA is completely in line with the principle of recognising diversity in the approaches to quality assurance as one of the main shared principles of the European Standards and Guidelines. After years of intense activity, however, ECA has ascertained that there are more similarities than differences in the practical work of quality assurance and accreditation agencies. ECA members have learned to build on these similarities to pursue common goals. The **convergence of quality assurance methodologies based on common principles** will also be **the key for future constructive international cooperation and mutual recognition**.

## 3 Inclusion of quality assurance and accreditation in future Bologna action lines

### Recognition, quality and qualification frameworks

The Lisbon recognition convention is implemented in various ways in the European countries, and recognition barriers still exist. ECA believes that reliable information on the quality of institutions and programmes will help to substantially reduce these barriers and will lead to more automatic recognition of qualifications. Quality assurance agencies, and accreditation agencies in particular, play a central role in providing recognition authorities with independent information about the quality of institutions and programmes as well as on the stated and achieved learning outcomes. Learning outcomes are in the process of being linked to National Qualifications Frameworks, depending on the extent to which these have been implemented in the different countries. There is a clear triangular **link** between **recognition decisions, information on quality** and the **qualifications frameworks**. Quality assurance agencies should take the lead in creating the necessary tools and liaisons to make this "triangle" work. ECA made a first step in that direction by establishing mutual recognition agreements between accreditation agencies; by providing the formal platform Qrossroads<sup>2</sup> for the publication of accreditation decisions; and by creating links to the ENIC/NARICS<sup>3</sup>. In cooperation with national recognition authorities ECA will continue to concentrate its efforts on establishing links between the NQFs and accreditation.

In doing so, ECA is in line with the recommendation by the Council of the European Union and the European Parliament according to which the member states are asked to "promote cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust and the recognition of quality assurance and

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.qrossroads.eu>

<sup>3</sup> On 8 December 2005, ECA members and ENIC/NARICS signed the Joint declaration concerning the automatic recognition of qualifications: <http://www.eacaconsortium.net/>

accreditation assessments, thus contributing to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country”.

#### **Transparency and accountability**

Data collection and development of performance indicators should strictly adhere to the principles of transparency, readability and accountability of European higher education, thus allowing for measuring and comparing the strengths of institutions. The provision of reliable data must be an integral part of compatible quality assurance mechanisms in the whole of the EHEA. Crossroads, a tool developed by ECA, contributes to this goal by providing information on the quality of accredited study programmes and institutions in the ECA member countries to all interested stakeholders. In the future this web-based source of data will be extended to countries with accreditation-like procedures. By 2010 it will contain standardised information about accreditation results of 13 European countries.

Measuring the strengths of diverse institutions across borders will pose an entirely new challenge. To this end compatible instruments for both external institutional assessments and internal quality assurance systems will have to be designed.

#### **Employability and learning outcome oriented curricula**

The issues of employability and lifelong learning are closely linked to the design and implementation of learning outcome oriented study programmes. This does not only underscore the importance of a broad involvement of stakeholders but also implies that it is vital for future national quality assurance systems to focus on student learning outcomes and to assure compliance of national higher education institutions and study programmes with the NQFs. HEIs are obliged to qualify their students for future tasks and labour market demands which are not always known yet; curricula development must therefore be driven by the process of knowledge creation and not primarily by short-term employment criteria. In this context the specific functions of academic and professional recognition must also be clarified. Accreditation agencies can play an important role by bridging the academic overall aspects of quality with the more professional discipline oriented aspects of quality.

#### **Mobility and transnational education**

Enhancing the mobility of students and staff within the EHEA is a fundamental purpose of external quality assurance. Portable credentials depend on the provision of reliable information about the quality of programmes and institutions. Since the number of joint study programmes has substantially increased throughout Europe, a special effort is needed to put less tedious recognition procedures in place. As a first step to face this problem ECA members have adopted common “Principles for accreditation procedures regarding joint programmes”. In the future, mutual recognition agreements between agencies will make such accreditation/recognition procedures much easier because multiple accreditations by all national authorities will not be necessary. Indeed, one of the current aims of the Consortium is to enhance the conditions for mutual recognition agreements, particularly with regard to joint programmes. A challenging task is to deal with a mix of institutional and programme specific assessment procedures in accrediting joint programmes. The Consortium will therefore aim for a European “State of the Art” of institutional assessments by establishing a list of core elements and principles.

Mobility is linked to the increasing internationalisation of higher education. It rests on cooperation and partnership with other regions of the world. ECA is therefore extending its cooperation with accreditation agencies and quality assurance networks in other continents.

#### 4 Leuven Communiqué

The European ministers responsible for higher education stated in their Berlin Communiqué of September 2003 that the quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of setting up a European Higher Education Area. Hence, **quality assurance should continue to be given a key role for the next decade** and should be spelled out in specific action lines.

Therefore, ECA suggests that the following recommendations should be included in the principles guiding the Leuven Communiqué of 2009:

1. The overarching importance of quality assurance as an interlinking element for all action lines stated in the “Bologna Beyond 2010” report should be made explicit.
2. The need to further explore ways for and outcomes of mutual recognition of accreditation results, particularly with respect to transnational education and joint programmes, should be recognised.
3. The importance of strengthening the link between quality assurance agencies and recognition authorities by a common reference to the National Qualifications Frameworks, involving transparent information on learning outcomes, should be stressed.
4. The need for a robust and sustainable database providing reliable information about quality assured institutions and programmes should be emphasised.