

HIGHER EDUCATION AND QUALITY: WHAT KIND OF INFORMATION DO WE PROVIDE? THE ENQA POINT OF VIEW

Notitie

My dear colleagues,

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Higher Education is one of the most important resources we have in Europe, if not the most crucial. Higher Education leads to economic growth, it leads to social stability, to an enormous increase in knowledge and, of course, it leads to the personal development of the individual. Each of these results is important and, when taken together, it becomes apparent that the significance of Higher Education can hardly be overrated. Of course, the education provided should be of good quality. It is therefore logical that the government ministers who are responsible for Higher Education have tried to strengthen the Bologna objectives by placing considerable emphasis on the importance of independent external quality assurance. The 47 ministers who are currently responsible for Higher Education in Europe have also wanted to assume their responsibility at the national level. However, the call to deliver demonstrable quality and to make this quality visible in an objective and independent manner should be backed up by even greater ambitions. I can hardly believe, for example, that ministers would be satisfied with an average quality of Higher Education in Europe, as important as it is to guarantee, in any case, that all forms of higher education meet the basic requirements that are set for Bachelor's and Master's programmes. Increasing attention seems to be given, after all, to demonstrating the differences between programmes – though perhaps not initially on the basis of quality, but rather on the basis of content, orientation, educational models and on the basis of ambition. In my view, that is also the card that the European Union has convincingly drawn: above all, show the diversity that exists within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), thus enabling students to make better choices, promoting mobility and enabling

pagina 2 van 6 employers to try and obtain a good mix and quality of staff. Of course, European Higher Education is already very diverse. And I am revealing no secret when I say that it is a piece of fiction to assert that the standard of Bachelor's and Master's programmes is the same throughout Europe. The difference in quality level is understandable, because the various European countries are all in different phases of development. And I am not even counting all the problems caused by the very serious financial and economic crisis which has gradually overwhelmed us. It is not surprising then that, in parts of Europe, Higher Education is primarily aimed at developing a generation of young people, as soon as possible, that is willing to take their country down the road of development on the basis of current political realities. A great many nations still need to work on developing and maintaining democracy, on narrowing the insanely large differences between the rich and poor, on bringing primary facilities such as housing, infrastructure, health care and education to an acceptable level, on championing basic rights such as the freedom of expression, combating discrimination and safeguarding the right to protect one's life, home and security. Even this short step makes it clear that Europe will, for the present, have to accept large differences in ambition and mission between institutions of education, not to mention adopt a policy that leads to greater diversity in quality.

ENQA is positioned on this playing field, in this political reality and within a Europe that is currently still divided. From my story up to now, it can be justifiably concluded that ENQA is well aware of its special and delicate position. ENQA should, in any case, try to obtain members from all Bologna countries and that means taking into consideration a wide range of different wishes, ambitions and realities. This does not mean, however, that ENQA will have no role to play in providing information about the quality of Higher Education in Europe. Yet it does mean that ENQA is very much aware that the diversity between its member organisations is very large and that excessively grand ambitions will lead to dissatisfaction among one group of its members, while excessively modest ambitions will lead to dissatisfaction among another group of members.

ENQA

The most important role ENQA has to play in providing information on the quality of Higher Education lies with the membership of ENQA itself. Once every five years, the members must demonstrate that they meet the European Standards and

pagina 3 van 6 Guidelines. That means that they must meet the criteria of independence, soundness, openness, transparency and effectiveness. So membership in ENQA already serves as a guarantee for quality, which is then given by the member organisations within the national systems. This information establishes a vital quality foundation in the system of external quality assurance in Europe because it thus ensures that the quality assurance agency, which is a member of ENQA, in principle issues independent and reliable assessments on the institutions and programmes that are assessed by the agency. This guarantee leads therefore to trust: trust in the quality of the assessing agencies, and trust in the quality of the institutions and programmes that are assessed by these agencies. As a matter of fact, the European EQAR register provides additional assurance because only organisations that meet all European conditions for recognition are placed on this Register. This thus creates an extra instrument for those countries that are willing to open their external assessment systems to non-national quality assurance agencies. Germany, Switzerland and Austria, in particular, appear to be taking this route.

ENQA has not only a passive role. An important part of ENQA activities is also focused on both increasing and transferring knowledge: by exchanging information and good practices, by training the assessing experts and by giving seminars on work methods that promote quality, ENQA raises the quality of its member organisations and the candidate members to a higher level. Perhaps even more important than this role in increasing knowledge is the attention that the member organisations of ENQA must give to the development of the internal quality assurance systems of the institutions and programmes that have to be assessed. Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines is focused, after all, on the manner in which the national assessment systems should give attention to the structural development of quality within institutions and study programmes. Coupled with the obvious responsibility the institutions bear for their own quality, emphasis is being placed here on the continuing attention given to quality assurance as one of the instruments used for guaranteeing, monitoring and improving the quality of education. These activities also lead to the perpetuation of trust in the quality of European Higher Education.

ENQA is well aware of the fact that within Europe there are increasing numbers of quality assurance agencies that either are not or are not purely based on national

pagina 4 van 6 laws and regulations: I am referring here to the so-called Quality Labels, but also to organisations such as EQUIS, AACSB, AMBA and the EAEVE (the accreditation organisation for veterinary medicine programmes), which are focused on particular disciplines. ENQA accepts and appreciates this development as a contribution to the sought-after diversity in European Higher Education and, from this perspective, will give attention in the coming years to the possibilities for bringing these organisations under the ENQA banner if they so wish.

The member organisations

I have already indicated that membership in ENQA sends an important and confidence-building message to national and European stakeholders. The assessing organisations thereby demonstrate that they meet the rules for organisation and work method. In this way, they also give legitimacy to the assessments that they issue. Two other speakers will shortly discuss this further, but, generally speaking, the member organisations of ENQA can at least point to the following informative results:

- a legitimate, independent and expert assessment that can lead to establishing trust in the assessed institution or programme;
- a public report or at least an open and therefore informative report on the results of the assessments;
- information on the quality achieved in the institutions and programmes.

It is legitimate to ask whether the information provided is sufficient. Students, the labour market and institutions of higher education regularly say, after all, that they would like to have more and better information available. The students do this in order to be able to make the best possible choice of institution and study programme, the employers do it in order to gain the sharpest possible picture of the graduates' competencies, and the institutions themselves do it in order to obtain the best possible information on the quality of fellow institutions (in the context of forming a network, for instance) and information on the students at these institutions. Apparently, the existing instruments such as the diploma supplement, the ECTS records and the learning outcomes are not yet sufficient. Moreover, there is increasing national and European political pressure to produce sharper pictures of the quality of institutions and programmes which are, for example, focused on "excellence" or on real content-based internationalisation.

pagina 5 van 6 **Obstacles**

As understandable as these issues are, I have also discovered that there are a number of serious obstacles that will not make it any easier for quality assurance agencies to respond. In the interest of discussion later on, I will name four of them:

1. many governments take the standpoint that external quality assurance should be primarily focused on providing accountability. This calls for a dichotomous assessment: a programme or an institution either meets or does not meet the generic quality, possibly under certain conditions. Subsequently, however, they are hesitant to introduce distinctions in the positive assessments, something the Dutch government plans to do in the new accreditation system;
2. because the assessments of quality assurance agencies are open nearly everywhere to administrative objection and appeal, these assessments must meet strict procedural and form requirements, which make the reports and assessments difficult to understand and read. Their usefulness for providing information suffers as a result;
3. higher education institutions are also relatively hesitant: on paper they claim that they want to be "excellent in education" for instance, but they are not willing to have this ambition tested in an independent manner;
4. a wide range of legal rules surrounding privacy hinder a free provision of information in a large number of countries, especially when the information pertains to negative assessments.

I would therefore like to argue for greater courage on the part of both governments and the institutions themselves: greater courage to show that there are differences. Not in order to issue a moral judgement on the quality sought-after and realised, but rather to do justice to that which has already begun to take shape in practice and that is inescapable: namely, greater profiling, more ambition, greater attention for one's own role, greater difference in quality!

Conclusion

Colleagues, I would like to conclude by saying that the establishment and existence of ENQA, in my opinion, is having a legitimising effect on the system of external quality assurance. Assessments issued by the member organisations of ENQA can be considered to meet the quality criteria propagated by the European Standards and Guidelines. ENQA thus indirectly contributes to providing reliable information for

pagina 6 van 6 the stakeholders. The quality and the content of this information are determined to a significant degree by the national laws and regulations, but also by the behaviour of the educational institutions themselves. If the stakeholders have any real need for increased, better, reliable and more encompassing information, then many obstacles still have to be overcome. This is the first thing we must work towards. Yet ENQA is open to all suggestions for increasing the quality of the information provided for the benefit of the stakeholders. Let us at least discuss here today, in all openness, the opportunities there are for achieving this and the obstacles we encounter in the attempt.

Thank you for your attention.