The European Dimension of Quality Assurance

Report of the Conference 'Working on the European Dimension of Quality' of the <u>Joint Quality Initiative</u>, Amsterdam 12–13.3.2002

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Introduction

1.
The following text describes main issues that arose during the conference 'Working on the European Dimension of Quality', held in Amsterdam, 12-13.3.2002, organised by CHEPS on the initiative of the Ministries of Education of the Netherlands and Flanders. The conference was attended by over a hundred participants from most of the countries involved in the Bologna process, representing ministries of education, quality assessment and accreditation agencies, other buffer bodies, higher education institutions and students.

Descriptors of Bachelor and Master Programmes at Different Levels

2.
There is a widely-shared consensus that the 'Dublin Descriptors', defining key outcomes for Bachelors and Masters programmes in general (paper Towards shared descriptors for bachelors and Masters) are useful. They are complementary to the outcomes of the Tuning project, which are being developed at the level of areas of knowledge ('disciplines').

3.
From the discussions it appeared, however, that

- the 'Dublin Descriptors' need to be 'tuned', and

- the Tuning project outcomes are not to be taken as prescriptive. In that respect, it should be remembered that outcomes do not define curricula

4.
Gains from the Tuning project include that there is a broader than expected consensus among European higher education institutions on descriptors of their programmes, starting from outcomes rather than starting from curriculum inputs and elements. At the same time, there is less than expected diversity regarding length/credits of programmes

5.
Complementarity means a combination of generic elements (from the 'Dublin Descriptors') and specific elements (from outcomes of the Tuning project).

6.
The approach to quality building on such a combination of the 'Dublin Descriptors' and

Tuning project outcomes apply to 'traditional' delivery of higher education as well as to transnational education, distance education, etc.

7.
A discussion arose on the relative value of programme vs. institutional approaches to quality assurance. Both are important, was the general view. The 'Dublin Descriptors' as well as the Tuning project outcomes are directed primarily at programme level approaches. Many, including expressly the student representatives, gave programme level quality assessment the priority for public policy, inter alia because this gives more direct assurance of quality ('consumer protection'). Institutional quality assurance was mostly seen as a responsibility of autonomous, well-managed higher education institutions, even though some participants voiced the opinion that with 'mass' or 'universal' higher education, and in the emerging network society, such coherent higher education institutions will become ever rarer.

Questions: What needs to be addressed in next steps?

8.
Capitalising on the broad consensus among the conference participants, next steps could be proposed, during which the following issues will need to be addressed.

Application question

9.
What is the right balance between generic and specific for accreditation frameworks and criteria?

10.
Cross-border quality assessment projects will play a role in the learning process to develop a common understanding at a European level.

Ownership and participation questions

11.
Who is involved in developing criteria for accreditation/quality assessment?

12..
Who is involved in updating criteria for accreditation/quality assessment?

13.
Who is involved in applying criteria in actual accreditation/quality assessment?

14.
What are the implications of answers to the previous questions for acceptance of consequences of
(non-)accreditation?

Implications for higher education institutions?

15.
They have to develop their 'accreditation capacity': how to elicit all information necessary for different quality assessment or accreditation agencies?

16.
How to maintain quality improvement?

17.
What is/should be their involvement in the current quality initiatives? Involvement of the higher education institutions is needed on the one hand in developing curricula responding to the frameworks as part of their institutional autonomy, because frameworks couched in terms of outcomes do not define curricula in terms of content and instructional design.

18.
An associated question of involvement regards the input higher education institutions can give into frameworks or criteria defined or handled by quality assessment agencies or accreditation agencies.

Transnational education

19.
The specific issue of quality assurance of transnational education, especially in the form of collaborative frameworks (commonly known as 'franchising' arrangements, but actually broader than that) was introduced into the JQI discussions at this conference.

20.
The main question in this respect is that of the balance between responsibility for quality by 'sender' and by 'receiver'. Participants broadly agreed that the Code of Practice (Unesco/Council of Europe) with its principle that both 'sender' and 'receiver' take responsibility is indeed a good practice.