

Towards Accreditation Schemes for Higher Education in Europe?

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Conclusions

The following conclusions were conveyed to the Salamanca Convention of European Higher Education Institutions. They do not represent any formal decision but rather the synthesis of very lively and rich discussions held in plenary and working group sessions.

During the Lisbon/Oeiras seminar organised by CRE in collaboration with the Universidade Técnica de Lisboa, representatives of higher education institutions, as well as student organisations, quality assurance agencies, national higher education authorities and intergovernmental bodies discussed accreditation as a possible option for higher education in Europe, particularly as a contribution to the completion of the European higher education area called for in the Bologna Declaration.

The meeting showed converging views on the usefulness and the necessity of effective and compatible quality assurance mechanisms within Europe. It was acknowledged that there are several quality assurance systems already in existence, mainly at national level, but that there was a need for a trans-European quality assurance framework which would ensure the international visibility, compatibility and credibility of European higher education degrees.

It was felt that such an explicit and agreed framework in Europe organised by the universities in co-operation with other stakeholders would promote the transparency, the visibility and the ongoing quality enhancement of European higher education, thus contributing to a more compatible and comparable qualification framework and to the employability of European graduates. Internationalisation of quality assurance was seen as a necessary and logical response of European higher education to current globalisation trends as well as to the challenges of building a European higher education area.

The discussion in Lisbon/Oeiras focused on how far accreditation could represent a substantial option for achieving an effective and transparent European co-operation in quality assurance. In operational terms, this could mean a European validation scheme for quality assurance and accreditation procedures, rather than a European accreditation system as such.

It was stressed that accreditation was not an end in itself, but rather represented an important component of quality assurance. When examining accreditation for Europe, the participants debated such issues as: accreditation of degrees/programmes and/or of whole institutions, accreditation as a minimal quality filter or as promotion of excellence, the possible division of tasks, etc. Approaches based on the promotion of mutual recognition of existing national or regional quality assurance and accreditation outcomes, as well as those based on close inter-institutional co-operation, were also considered. The relationship and balance between national, regional and European quality assurance activities has to be clarified.

The higher education leaders present in Lisbon/Oeiras wished to advance the discussion on the design of viable schemes of quality assurance for Europe, including validation of accreditation procedures, along the following lines:

- add value for institutions of higher education to existing schemes, especially in terms of an "International dimension", with a view to the emerging European higher education area,
- base new developments on voluntary participation and on the self-regulation of the higher education community,
- co-operate closely with partners such as students and academics, quality assurance and accreditation agencies and networks, professional organisations, recognition centres, as well as with national and regional higher education authorities,
- give due regard to academic values, to diversity and to institutional autonomy,
- build, as far as possible, on existing mechanisms and experiences, and illuminate examples of good practise,
- stress the supportive elements of evaluation and accreditation,
- cover all modes and types of higher education,
- keep to reasonable deadlines in moving forward towards operational models.

Participants emphasised the needs to define criteria and mechanisms in a careful fashion and to identify good practice at European level, while using available and additional analysis. To this end, it was recommended that a common working platform of higher education institutions be established in Europe, involving also the above-mentioned partners. This platform would clarify the concepts, perform a more systematic and explicit analysis of the needs, and test the feasibility of possible approaches and mechanisms - for instance to European validation of accreditation and quality assurance procedures - possibly through pilot projects.

It was emphasised that activities fostering the convergence of practices and procedures in Europe should avoid at all costs the establishment of a new and unnecessary layer of bureaucratic control across the European higher education domain.

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