

**Bologna Process Seminar on
“Cooperation between accreditation committees/agencies”, 14-16
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organized by Polish State Accreditation Committee and Ministry of
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Final Report

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Introduction

The Bologna Process has provided the major stimulus for higher education reform in Europe. The process started in 1999 when Ministers responsible for higher education signed the Bologna Declaration in which they agreed to create the European Higher Education Area. The main objectives of this process are to increase the mobility and employability of European higher education institutions graduates.

Mobility of graduates around the European Higher Education Area is only possible if recognition of degrees and studies is ensured. This should be done through the full transparency of educational systems and trust among those systems on international level that must be based upon quality assurance of programs and/or institutions. In such context the quality assessment of systems will become one of the main pillars in European Higher Educational Area.

The accreditation and quality assessment system is relatively new in Europe but increasingly gaining importance at least in all participating countries. To be sure, the primary responsibility in quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself but as a matter for real accountability and full transparency the national system of quality assurance is indispensable.

In the Prague conference in 2001 the ministers called for implementation of policies to evaluate quality in each country in order “to secure the mutual trust which is necessary to the validation of studies carried out in another country”. In Berlin in 2003 it was decided to make a start on introducing quality assurance systems by 2005. These policies should include: „ a definition of responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved; evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment and external review, participation of students and publication of results; a system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures; international participation, co-operations and networking” (Communiqué of the

Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, Berlin, 15 September 2003). Ministers call upon ENQA to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidance on quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies.

Responding to its mandate ENQA working through its members and other stakeholders in cooperation with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) has proposed Standards for Quality Assurance Agencies. Also, ENQA proposed to establish the European system of quality assessment for agencies.

The basic aim of Warsaw Seminar was to present and discuss different experiences of accreditation agencies of several countries and to highlight the major fields for mutual co-operation between agencies. The purpose of such co-operation is to help to develop the European Higher Education Area by mutual recognition of quality assessment systems and accreditation results. This report focuses on crucial issues raised by authors of presented papers and discussants and is intended to continue the ongoing debate on the possible form of future co-operation among accreditation agencies in Europe.

More than 50 participants from 21 countries who represented diverse stakeholders engaged in Bologna Process (EUA, ESIB, ECA, accreditation committees, ministries of higher education and higher education institutions involved in quality assurance) attended the meeting in Warsaw (see Appendix no 1 – list of participants). It is worth to highlight that there were represented countries with the large number of students (e.g. Germany, France, Poland and Spain) as well as countries with the smaller number of students (eg. Norway, Latvia), EU and non-EU countries. The seminar's agenda foresaw sessions' structure (Appendix no 2 – program of seminar) which were chaired by 2 persons and contributed by 11 speakers from various countries and institutions, who are as follows:

1. Frederiks Mark, the Netherlands, Netherlands – Flemish Accreditation Organization (NVAO)
2. Haugland Oddvar, Norway, Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT)
3. Jamiołkowski Andrzej, Poland, Polish State Accreditation Committee (PKA)
4. Marcellán Francisco, National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA)
5. Panayotov Ivan, Bulgaria, National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency

6. René-Paul Martin, France, C.T.I. Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur
7. Puirseil Séamus, Ireland, Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC)
8. Schade Angelika, Germany, Akkreditierungsrat
9. Sojka Milan, Czech Republic, Accreditation Commission
10. Westerheijden Don F., the Netherlands, Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente
11. de Vries Ruard Wallis, European Commission

Summary of the Seminar

During the seminar the presentations documented the development of quality assessment process and accreditation in a bulk of European countries (mainly in Bulgaria, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Ireland, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, and Spain). In many cases this process is relatively new or has been profoundly changed as a result of Bologna Declaration and follow up activities. It shows that during the last 5 years in many countries state accreditation institution at the national level has been established with the power of accreditation of all programs and higher education institutions operating in public and private sectors and in university and non-university sectors. In all cases the established agencies comply or nearly comply with proposed set of standards for quality assurance agencies. All agencies set their own detailed standards and assessment criteria for quality evaluation and accreditation of individual programs or higher education institutions. In most countries decisions of accreditation agencies on the program or institutions accreditations are based on a previously conducted quality evaluation (site visits including). The final results of the evaluation and accreditation process is available in some form to public, for example through publishing the final reports. Various forms of post-accreditation monitoring of evaluated programs and institutions have been developed. Accreditation agencies make their decisions independently of the ministers of education, higher education institutions and other state institutions. Discussants agreed that state/national accreditation contributes to the quality improvement, growing credibility and transparency of higher education institutions and programs through eliminating low quality programs and institutions and disseminating good practices and implementing international standards of excellences. Accreditation has become one of the main types of quality assurance of higher education in many countries. Each accreditation agency develops the international cooperation through participating in regional network of operating in Europe (NOQA, ENQA, and CEEN) or outside Europe (INQUAAHE, RIACES), bilateral agreements or participation in joint projects.

Warsaw Seminar identified not only commonalities but also many differences that exist with regards to quality evaluation and accreditation systems between various countries. During the last two or three decades higher education system has evolved dramatically in most European countries: the profound changes of institutional structure (especially the development of professionally oriented institutions), the development of private sector, the lifelong learning, the education based on two cycles, the quality assurance process, etc. it is just only to mention a few examples. All of these have increased the diversity of higher education within the various countries and in a cross-country dimension.

The entrance of Central and Eastern European countries as partners and participants in European Higher Education Area have added enormously to the diversity among national educational systems in Europe at large. It is safe to conclude that this diversity puts strains on the ways in which the mutual recognition of degrees and study can be put into practice. It is why the information about current development in national higher education sectors is necessary for building up mutual understanding and trust that should facilitate the recognition of studies, diplomas and degrees.

As a consequence a large variation in purposes, institutional design, procedures, ownership, and practice of the accreditation agencies exist. Some accreditation agencies in their activities focus on accreditation of programs (or clusters of programs) while the others concentrate on accreditation of institutions or even units (e.g. libraries in Spain). When in some countries the quality evaluation and accreditation covers all higher education institutions and programs at the same time in others it only complies with higher education institutions of public sector or newly established institutions and programs or even institutions who seek acknowledgments or financial support by the national government. Differences can be also distinguished in relation to programs' assessment because some agencies concentrate on accreditation of three levels of education (including doctoral studies) when in other countries the accreditation interest is showed in the first and second cycle. In individual countries dissimilarities can be also observed in relation to legal and real consequences of negative ratings of quality.

The seminar demonstrated that there is a great range of practical activities being undertaken by various accreditation agencies. Some accreditation agencies made use of numerous expert panels and assessed more than half of all programs while the others were satisfied with review and consultation of assessment results from internal quality assurance within higher education institutions. A growing number of countries declared that foreign

experts attended site visits conducted within the quality assessment but at the same time discussion revealed that very often national emigrants with knowledge of language are invited to take part in them. It is proved that the system of experts' participation in external expert groups and site visits is unsatisfactorily spread among accreditation institutions. Furthermore there is also diverse participation of major stakeholders (a.o. students, graduates, labour market representatives) in quality assurance and accreditation processes. Discussants highlighted the difficulties in converging very different quality assurance systems existing in over 40 countries participating in Bologna Process.

Thus the importance of creating a platform for dialogue between national accreditation agencies from which common solutions can be forged cannot be underestimated. Accreditation of higher education institutions and study programmes is an essential part of quality assurance systems. The two should be closely related and their complementarities encouraged. Apart from fulfilling the set of standards for quality assurance agencies established by ENQA it is extremely important to develop the close and systematic co-operation between national or regional agencies perhaps on a less formal basis. One of the most important aims of this co-operation should be the dissemination of information about national higher education systems including the quality assessment activities. It facilitates higher labour force mobility within Europe, Europe-wide transparency and mutual trust in educational systems.

The participants of the seminar were informed about the growing interests of the EU Commission in implementing the free choice of accreditation agency listed in the European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies. Conflicting opinions were presented in seminar's discussion in relation to full freedom of choice of accreditation agencies in European scale. Participants agreed that some diversity in national accreditation should be preserved in order to take into account existing differences in educational system, size and the structure of higher education sector, etc. Preferences should be given to accreditation committees or agencies established or recognized under the laws of the given country. However, a higher education institution may apply for accreditation to an accreditation body from outside the country. It was agreed that external quality evaluation (i.e. provide by foreign accreditation agency) can be accepted and recognized as long as it complies with the laws and regulations of the home (recipient) countries. The recognition of foreign agencies by the relevant national authorities should be the necessary condition for making use of services provided by them by higher education institutions.

An important scope for international co-operation is the mutual assistance in further development in the quality assessment process itself. The participation of foreign experts in external evaluation is strongly desirable. It is quite natural to expect that agencies should cooperate in assisting each other in identification appropriate available experts. However, the size of higher education on national level is very differentiated in Europe: there are countries with a couple of hundred thousand students while in other countries the number of students is around 2 million or even over 8 million (in Russia) with a very large number of institutions involved. It has raised immediately several questions. Should foreign experts participate in all external panels? Who is able to identify such a large number of experts? The process of identification of appropriate and available experts may be quite complicated and time consuming especially for smaller agencies. Another issue related to the accreditation process itself is the co-operation in training and instructing of experts. Discussants agreed that joint training seminars for experts and external evaluators developed by the group of agencies from different countries would increase the comparability of quality assessment process in European countries.

Finally, debaters paid attention to financial resources and funding scale of Bologna Process including cooperation between accreditation committees/agencies. In particular there were indicated insufficient funds which are earmarked for works taken within the framework of Bologna Process. It is important to answer how accreditation agencies will find the appropriate funding for foreign experts? Who should carry the costs of foreign experts? Hosting or sending agency should cover the travel costs of the foreign expert? In such case how to avoid overburdening some agencies?