



COMMISSION OF THE EUROPEAN COMMUNITIES

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Proposal for a

**RECOMMENDATION OF THE COUNCIL AND OF THE EUROPEAN
PARLIAMENT**

on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education

(presented by the Commission)

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

1. INTRODUCTION

On the 24th of September 1998, the Council of Ministers adopted the Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education¹. The Recommendation calls upon Member States to support or establish quality assurance systems and to encourage higher education institutions and competent authorities to cooperate and exchange experience. It also asks the Commission to support such cooperation and to report on the implementation of the objectives of the Recommendation at European and Member State level.

The Commission Report demonstrates remarkable progress in establishing quality assurance systems and promoting cooperation. These developments are positive but not sufficient. More far reaching measures are needed in order to make European higher education perform better and become a more transparent and trustworthy brand for our own citizens and for students and scholars from other continents. Following the review of the implementation of the Recommendation, the Commission is therefore invited to adopt not just the Report but also a proposal for a new Council and European Parliament Recommendation.

Accordingly, the Commission would propose to the Council and to the European Parliament to adopt a new Recommendation, which would build on the Recommendation of 1998 and contribute in a concrete way to the aim of mutual recognition of quality assurance systems and assessments across Europe. The present Memorandum provides an explanation of the five steps outlined in the proposed Recommendation, quoted in italics.

2. FIVE STEPS TO ACHIEVE MUTUAL RECOGNITION

A. Internal quality assurance mechanisms

“require all higher education institutions active within their territory to introduce or develop rigorous internal quality assurance mechanisms.”

University associations and networks have taken several initiatives, with support of the Commission, to develop internal quality management (or "quality culture") within institutions, as described in section 3.3 of this report. The good practice of actively maintaining and developing quality management is, however, still thinly and unevenly spread in Europe. There is a need to spread this practice, which relates to issues of institutional staffing and governance, across a wider variety of institutions in Europe, as a complement to and a sound basis for external evaluation. The Commission will map the progress in this field and continue its support to quality management initiatives.

B. A common set of standards, procedures and guidelines

“require all quality assurance or accreditation agencies active within their territory to be independent in their assessments, to apply the features of quality assurance laid down in the Council Recommendation of September 1998 and to apply a common set of standards, procedures and guidelines, for assessment purposes.”

¹ Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (98/561/EC) OJ L 270/56 of 07.10.1998.

Ministers for Higher Education gathered in Berlin in September 2003 adopted a Mandate for ENQA, calling on it, through its members and in co-operation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop "an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance". ENQA has started to work on this mandate and will report back, through the Bologna Follow-up Group, to the next Ministerial meeting in Bergen, in May 2005. The Commission takes the following position on this part of the Mandate:

Standards, criteria or reference points

Standards in this context are criteria or reference points used by agencies when they evaluate or accredit institutions or programmes. Agreed set of standards should, however, not become straightjackets. Standards should be used as reference points, providing a common language to refer to. Agencies should identify and publish the standards which they apply and relate these to the common reference points. Reference points are expected to increase transparency and comparability in Europe. They would help to highlight similarities and differences between study programmes, without harmonising them. Universities and other higher education institutions should have the freedom to differ, to innovate and to go beyond what is described in the agreed set of standards.

Two new sets of standards are gaining importance: the existence of internal quality assurance mechanisms and the use of learning outcomes and competences. In order to be relevant, the reference points would need to be updated regularly and keep in pace with emerging new knowledge and changing needs of society. One way of organising the updating exercise would be to create Stakeholder Panels, involving university teachers, professionals and successful students/alumni active in the field; The Commission will take the initiative to convene a first series of Stakeholder Panels in the academic year 2004-2005.

Procedures

The ENQA survey² has demonstrated that the basic procedure set out in the Council Recommendation of 1998 has proven its worth and is by and large being applied in most evaluations. This procedure, recommended in an EU context, has been transferred to the broader Bologna context by the Ministers in Berlin. A desirable outcome of this part of the Mandate exercise would be an ENQA Handbook of Quality Assurance Procedures, containing a number of commonly accepted models or protocols, based on good practice in Member States. The Commission believed that publication of such a handbook would be desirable. In line with the Council Recommendation of 1998 and the 2003 Berlin Communiqué, the Commission would expect systematic international involvement in agency governance and evaluations.

Guidelines

Guidelines refer to principles that ought to be respected when carrying out external evaluations. An agreed set of guidelines or principles will be established through the ENQA mandate. Some of these principles can already be identified, such as university autonomy public accountability and independence of external agencies, proportionality and fairness. A desirable outcome of this part of the exercise would be the establishment of a Code of

² Quality Procedures in European Higher Education – An ENQA Survey, ENQA Occasional Papers 5, April 2003. <http://www.enqa.net/texts/procedures.pdf>

Principles for European quality assurance, to which all stakeholders could adhere and which would also be included in the ENQA Handbook.

C. A European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies

“encourage quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with organisations representing higher education, to set up a “European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies”, as described in the Annex, and to define the conditions for registration.”

External evaluations have more impact if the agency concerned fulfils the highest standards of independence and professionalism. For this reason, it is proposed that quality assurance agencies operating in Europe should be subject to regular review themselves. The results of these reviews should be published. Ministers in Berlin have asked ENQA and partners to "explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies". The review of agencies should lead to the establishment of a European Register (“List”, Clearing House) of Quality Assurance Agencies, covering public, private and professional agencies, operating or based within Europe whether on a regional, national, European or international basis. The publication of the Register on the web would contribute to the acceptance of evaluation and accreditation systems and assessments and would facilitate indirectly the recognition of qualifications within Europe and beyond.

Terms of reference, defining what makes a good agency, would need to be established as well as procedures and guidelines for this type of review. A review system would need to be worked out, with checks and balances between the various stakeholders: universities, students, social partners and professional bodies, governments and agencies.

The Register would mean that present and future ENQA members and other agencies operating in Europe would be subject to quality assurance and evaluation themselves. Most agencies would find no difficulty in adhering to the terms of reference and it would provide them with a quality label. Candidate members would be stimulated to raise the level of their operations, before being registered as full members. They would receive special help to assist them in their capacity building process.

D. University autonomy in choice of agency

“enable higher education institutions active within their territory to choose among quality assurance or accreditation agencies in the European Register, an agency which meets their needs and profile.”

Higher education institutions should be given the freedom to choose an agency which meets their needs, provided that this agency figures in the Register and is recognised by their country as being independent and trustworthy. This might be an agency in another European country. Universities should be encouraged to develop an accreditation strategy. Universities should manage their accreditation and consider which type of accreditation serves best their particular interests. On the basis of such a strategy, they may opt for regional, national or international accreditation.

E. Member State competence to accept assessments and draw consequences

“accept the assessments made by all quality assurance and accreditation agencies listed in the European Register as a basis for decisions on licensing or funding of higher education institutions, including as regards such matters as eligibility for student grants and loans.”

Member States are responsible for organising their national quality assurance systems. They define the national qualifications framework. They give higher education institutions the right to award degrees (licensing). Member States fund most of higher education as well as student loans and grants. Member States therefore decide on the type of quality assurance or accreditation they need in order to take positive or negative decisions on licensing and funding.

In carrying out these responsibilities, Member States rely more and more on the judgement of their national quality assurance agency or agencies. In a few cases³, Member States have decided to open the possibility of recognising the judgement of an agency of another European country as equivalent to the judgement of national agencies. It is indeed debatable whether it is really necessary for every country to set up its own quality assurance system. Cooperation could bring economies of scale and synergies through pooling of expertise, increased objectivity and credibility. Belgium (Flanders) and the Netherlands have even decided to set up one joint accreditation system. In those cases the judgement of an agency from abroad would replace the judgement of a national agency and subsequent decisions for licensing or funding would be based on that judgement.

The Commission believes that opening doors to agencies from other European countries is a positive development. The competition it creates would stimulate agencies to improve themselves and the services they offer, and would bring their evaluation and accreditation services to an international, European level. This in turn would contribute to increasing the quality of these outputs. It might also lead agencies to adopt specialisations. Some might opt for a regional, national or European role. Others might concentrate on institutional evaluation or on certain disciplines (for example, engineering) or groups of disciplines (such as humanities or social science). Enabling transnational quality assurance in this way would also be an effective support for mutual recognition of quality assurance systems, quality assurance or accreditation assessments, and therefore to the recognition of qualifications at a European scale and beyond, whilst leaving the initiative with universities and national authorities.

An alternative might be for Member States to retain institutional evaluation and accreditation in national hands and to allow universities to seek programme accreditation abroad on top of national institutional accreditation. Universities would do so, not to obtain direct access to state funding, but rather for reasons of branding, as is already happening in the fields of engineering and business studies.

Most evaluation and accreditation is carried out on a national or regional basis. It is expected that these local exercises will become more comparable and more European through the use of an "agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines" and through involvement of foreign experts. In a limited number of cases, there is scope for transnational evaluation and accreditation. In highly internationalised fields of study like business, medicine or engineering, universities or their sponsors (public or private) might find the emergence of

³ Denmark, Germany and The Netherlands

international labels useful for reasons of branding or consumer protection. Integrated study programmes, like joint masters, obviously require a collaborative effort from the respective quality assurance agencies.

The Commission supports the setting up and testing phase of transnational evaluation and accreditation of single and joint programmes of studies and stands ready to support proposals from subject specific professional organisations, setting up European accreditation in fields like medicine or engineering. As a first step, the Commission will support the launch of a limited number of Europe-wide accreditation initiatives in 2004-2005. Without European accreditation, universities, which perceive a need for an accreditation which goes beyond their own country, may be tempted to seek to obtain labels from outside Europe and notably from agencies in the United States.

3. CONCLUSION

These five steps would require decisive action at institutional, agency, national, and European level. Institutions must set up rigorous internal quality management and develop an “accreditation strategy”. Agencies should apply the 1998 Recommendation to the full and prepare themselves for severe scrutiny. Member States should support their universities and allow university autonomy, including in the choice of agency. Member States should also allow their agencies to operate independently and cross-border. They should be willing to accept the assessment of trustworthy agencies located in other European countries or operating on a European scale. European cooperation should lead to the setting up of a European “Register” (“list”, “clearing house”) of trustworthy quality assurance and accreditation agencies. In this way, the much debated “mutual recognition” can become a reality.

The new Council and European Recommendation would give a strong impulse to the establishment of a coherent European system of quality assurance in higher education, would enhance quality, facilitate recognition of qualifications and promote mobility.

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THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION AND THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and in particular Articles 149(4) and 150(4) thereof,

Having regard to the proposal of the European Commission,⁴

Having regard to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee⁵,

Having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions⁶,

Acting in accordance with the procedure laid down in Article 251 of the Treaty⁷,

Whereas:

- (1) although the implementation of the Council recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education has been a marked success as demonstrated in the report of the Commission of 2004, there is still a need to improve the performance of European higher education for it to become more transparent and trustworthy for European citizens and for students and scholars from other continents.
- (2) the Council Recommendation called for support to and, where necessary, the establishment of transparent quality assurance systems, and almost all Member States have set up national assurance systems and have initiated or enabled the establishment of one or more quality assurance or accreditation agencies.
- (3) the Council Recommendation called for quality assurance systems to be based on a series of essential features, including evaluation of programmes or institutions through internal assessment, external review, and involving the participation of students, publication of results and international participation.
- (4) these features have generally been implemented in all quality assurance systems and they have been affirmed by European Ministers of Education, gathered in Berlin, in

⁴ OJ C [...], [...], p. [...].

⁵ OJ C [...], [...], p. [...].

⁶ OJ C [...], [...], p. [...].

⁷ OJ C [...], [...], p. [...].

September 2003, in the context of the Bologna Process, working towards the realisation of a European Higher Education Area.

- (5) the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education ENQA was established in 2000 and has a growing membership of quality assurance or accreditation agencies in all Member States.
- (6) Ministers of education, gathered in Berlin, in September 2003, “called upon ENQA through its members, in co-operation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurances, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005”.
- (7) It is desirable to draw up a positive list or register of independent and trustworthy quality assurance agencies operating in Europe, be they regional or national, general or specialised, public or private, profit-making or not for profit, to support transparency in higher education and help the recognition of qualifications and periods of study abroad.
- (8) In the context of the Lisbon Strategy, the European Council, in Barcelona in March 2002, expressed their conclusion that European education and training systems should become a “*world quality reference*”⁸

HEREBY RECOMMEND THAT MEMBER STATES:

A. require all higher education institutions active within their territory to introduce or develop rigorous internal quality assurance mechanisms.

B. require all quality assurance or accreditation agencies active within their territory to be independent in their assessments, to apply the features of quality assurance laid down in the Council Recommendation of September 1998 and to apply a common set of standards, procedures and guidelines, for assessment purposes.

C. encourage quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with organisations representing higher education, to set up a “European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies”, as described in the Annex, and to define the conditions for registration.

D. enable higher education institutions active within their territory to choose among quality assurance or accreditation agencies in the European Register, an agency which meets their needs and profile.

E. accept the assessments made by all quality assurance and accreditation agencies listed in the European Register as a basis for decisions on licensing or funding of higher education institutions, including as regards such matters as eligibility for student grants and loans.

⁸ Barcelona European Council - Presidency
Conclusions.http://ue.eu.int/ueDocs/cms_Data/docs/pressData/en/ec/71025.pdf

II. INVITE THE COMMISSION :

A. to continue, in close cooperation with the Member States, its support for cooperation between higher education institutions, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, competent authorities and other bodies active in the field.

B. to present triennial reports to the European Parliament, the Council, the Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions on progress in the development of quality assurance systems in the various Member States and on cooperation activities at European level, including the progress achieved with respect to the objectives referred to above.

Done at Brussels,

For the Council

For the Parliament

The President

The President

ANNEX

“The European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies”.

The Register should provide a list of reliable agencies whose assessments Member States (and public authorities within Member States) can trust. It should be founded on the following main principles:

1. The list should be drawn up by representatives of quality assurance and accreditation agencies active in the Member States, together with representatives of the higher education sector (universities and non university higher education, students, university teachers and researchers) and social partners.
2. Conditions for registration of agencies should include:
 - The engagement of complete independence in reaching their judgement,
 - Recognition by one or more Member States (or public authorities within Member States),
 - Operation on the basis of the common set of standards, procedures and guidelines referred to in section 6 of this recommendation,
 - Regular external review by peers and other experts, including publication of the criteria, methodologies and results of such review.