

Quality Assurance of Higher Education in Europe: A Brief Overview¹

Tibor Szanto²

1. Bologna and after

The *Bologna Declaration* was signed by 29 countries, ministers responsible for higher education, in 1999. Following the *Sorbonne Declaration* signed by representatives of France, Germany, Italy, and the UK in the preceding year, this document set several ambitious objectives determining the major elements of the overall aim, the creation of the *European Higher Education Area* (EHEA) to be fully established by 2010. The Bologna Declaration listed six objectives:

- a system of easily readable and comparable degrees,
- introduction of two main cycles (Bachelor, Master),
- implementation of a system of credits (ECTS),
- promotion of mobility for both students and instructors,
- European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies,
- European dimensions in higher education.

Ministers in Bologna decided also to meet biannually, in every odd year until 2010 to monitor the progress towards the general aim, to evaluate the success of implementation of the various objectives in the signatory countries, and to set additional objectives if needed. Such ministerial meetings have been held in Prague (2001), Berlin (2003), Bergen (2005), and London (2007), while the next meeting will be held in April 2009 in Leuven. A closing two-day conference is scheduled for 2010 to be held jointly in Budapest and Vienna. As of the 2007 London meeting, the Bologna Declaration has been signed by altogether 46 countries.

Between ministerial meetings the *Bologna Follow-Up Group* (BFUG) is responsible for the steering of the Bologna Process and the preparation of the next ministerial meeting. BFUG members are the representatives of the signatory countries and the European Commission, with the Council of Europe, EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ENQA, and UNESCO/CEPES as consultative members.

The major steps of the Bologna Process as far as quality assurance is concerned are the following.

- QA as one of the six objectives (1999)
- QA as an intermediate priority (2003)
- *European Standards and Guidelines* (May 2005)
- Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council (February 2006)³
- European Register (of agencies), EQAR, established on 4 March 2008

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² Dr. Tibor Szanto is Secretary General of the Hungarian Accreditation Committee and Vice-President of ENQA, the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*. He took part on the conference and made the presentation in his latter capacity.

³ http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/oj/2006/l_064/l_06420060304en00600062.pdf

The *Berlin Communiqué* in 2003 determined quality assurance as one of three „intermediate priorities” as follows:

„The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. Ministers commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level. They stress the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance.”⁴

It is important to note that in Berlin quality assurance was not only emphasised but also, there was a focus shift since Bologna where in relation to QA the creation of *comparable criteria* was aimed at, while the Berlin Communiqué used a much stronger expression, *mutually shared criteria* were to be created in the EHEA.

The *Berlin Communiqué* went on saying:

„...Ministers call 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 assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies...”⁵

This was the mandate that led to the creation of the *European Standards and Guidelines* or ESG, for short.

2. The European Standards and Guidelines

The ESG can be regarded as a *possible route for confidence building* in higher education in Europe.

Based on the mandate cited above, the ESG was created building on contributions by many professionals and involving various consultation processes. The Board of ENQA created two working groups chaired by *Christian Thune*, then President of ENQA, and *Peter Williams*, then Vice-President of ENQA, respectively. Intensive work began also under the aegis of the other three organisations mentioned in the Berlin mandate, resulting in the creation of working groups, organisation of discussion meetings, and publishing of working documents and policy papers. Both EURASHE and ESIB adopted position papers. EUA, the *European University Association* published a position paper entitled “*EUA’s QA policy position in the context of the Berlin Communiqué*”.⁶

For co-operation and to harmonise the processes the so-called “quadripartite” or, as it was soon renamed, the E4 group was formed comprising of leading representatives of ENQA, ESU (at that time ESIB), EUA, and EURASHE. There was regular feedback provided to the BFUG on the progress made in the E4 group, such as e.g. the progress report by Christian Thune on 2 March 2004.⁷

⁴ “Realising the European Higher Education Area” Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education in Berlin on 19 September 2003

http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/MDC/Berlin_Communique1.pdf, p.3.

⁵ Ibid., underlining added.

⁶ http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/EUA1_documents/EUA_QA_policy_position_120404.pdf

⁷ A progress report by ENQA on work of the objectives on the Berlin mandate delegated to it by the ministers. http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/B/BFUG_Meetings/040309Dublin/BFUG2_9.PDF

As to ENQA, the various drafts of the documents produced by the two working groups were discussed by the Board of ENQA, the member agencies, and then also by the General Assembly. The Presidency of the Association worked very hard to finalise the document and to negotiate with the other E4 partners in order to reach the goal, to present a document accepted and supported by all E's to the Bergen ministerial meeting.

The efforts were successful and the final result was a joint document presented to the ministers and adopted by them in Bergen, 18-19 May 2005.⁸

The most important *principles* of the ESG are the following.

- They are *generic* standards and guidelines. They concentrate on the “*What?*” question that is, they provide reference points for the internal and external quality assurance of HEIs, and for the operation of QA agencies.
- They do not discuss or present actual quality assurance procedures. The “*How?*” of the implementation of the standards and guidelines is left in the national and institutional spheres of authority.
- The central values of the standards and guidelines are diversity, subsidiarity, and autonomy.

The ESG, as it is emphasised in the document, must be regarded only as a very first step in creating a common framework for quality assurance of higher education in the EHEA. As to its national, institutional and agency implementation, there is no royal way, no one and the same recipe for everyone. HEIs and agencies have to work out the actual implementation solutions that fit best to the national and regional context they operate in, and to their individual specificities, aims and objectives.

As to its *structure*, the ESG consist of three parts presenting standards and guidelines for the

1. Internal quality assurance of HEIs
2. External QA
3. Operation of QA agencies.

After each individual standard there are guidelines presented, providing additional information and details helping the interpretation of the standard.

It is important to emphasise that the ESG present only *standards and guidelines* and, in spite of the Berlin mandate, there are *no quality assurance procedures* proposed in the document. This is on intention, and the reason behind this feature lies in the principles discussed above. The ESG provides a framework for quality assurance in Europe, it gives reference points as to what should be attained, but it gives no instructions as to how these aims are to be attained. Actual procedures belong to the national and institutional implementation spheres.

The first part of the ESG presents the following standards for the *internal QA of HEIs*:

- 1.1 QA policy, strategy, procedures (defined by the respective HEI itself)
- 1.2 Programme approval, monitoring, and review
- 1.3 Assessment of students (consistency!)
- 1.4 QA of teaching staff (internal mechanisms!)
- 1.5 Learning resources and student support

⁸ *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*. Accessible e.g. at http://www.enqa.eu/files/ESG_v03.pdf

- 1.6 Internal information system
- 1.7 Public information on programmes and awards

The second part presents standards and guidelines for *external quality assurance* activities.

- 2.1 Use of internal QA procedures
- 2.2 Development of external procedures (aims, objectives, involvement of all stakeholders in developing the procedures, publication)
- 2.3 Criteria for decisions (they should be published and applied consistently)
- 2.4 Processes fit for purpose (the selection and training of experts, involvement of international experts, participation of students in the evaluations)
- 2.5 Reporting (reports should be published)
- 2.6 Follow-up procedures (in case of accreditation)
- 2.7 Periodicity of reviews
- 2.8 System-wide analyses (should be regularly published by the external evaluation agencies)

The third part presents standards and guidelines for external quality assurance *agencies*.

- 3.1 Use of external QA procedures
- 3.2 Official status, legal background
- 3.3 Regular QA activities (conducted on institutional or programme level)
- 3.4 Resources
- 3.5 Mission statement
- 3.6 Independence from HEIs and government
- 3.7 Published criteria and processes
- 3.8 Accountability (internal QA of agency)

For more detail please refer to the ESG itself.

3. The Implementation of the ESG

As it follows from the principles and basic values of the ESG discussed above, the implementation of the standards and guidelines is basically *national responsibility*. The autonomous higher education institutions, independent agencies, and national governments are expected to play their role in the implementation and act according to their local context. Their effective working together can best serve the aim of enhancing the quality of higher education in the particular country and thereby in Europe in general.

However, they are not left alone in this endeavour. There are various means and initiatives on the European level to **help the implementation** process of the ESG, and the Bologna process in general, in the signatory countries. To mention just a few of them:

- a) There are *Bologna seminars* organised both on the national and international levels. These seminars focus either on one or another objective or issue of the Bologna process, such as e.g. student mobility, the introduction of the credit system, qualification frameworks or, related to our subject, quality assurance, or aim at discussion, clarification and progress related to the process in general. The list of international Bologna seminars is available e.g. at the current official Bologna process website: www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars

- b) Another initiative on the European level is the appointment of the so-called *Bologna promoters* in the signatory countries and the creation of national and European networks of them. Bologna promoters are appointed nationally, under the aegis of a national co-ordinating organisation but the European Commission provides partial funding for running the national networks and organising various relevant events. The basic responsibility of the Bologna promoters in the given country is the dissemination of information related to the Bologna process and providing help to HEIs and other stakeholders in introducing the individual elements of the process, including QA and the ESG. (More information is available on the Bologna promoters at e.g. www.eua.be/index.php?id=177.)
- c) Last but not least there are various *projects* aiming at helping the attainment of the Bologna objectives in general and, among them, the implementation of the ESG in particular. (EC funding also available.) See more information on this on the official EC website: http://ec.europa.eu/education/index_en.htm

The **monitoring** of the Bologna process and, as part of it, the implementation of the ESG is accomplished by the following means and organisations.

- a) The *biannual ministerial meetings* are held in every odd year. The next one will be held in Leuven, Belgium, on 28-29 April 2009. (More information is accessible on this at www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference)
- b) Based on national reports by the signatory countries, the *Bologna Follow-up Group* prepares a comprehensive stocktaking report for every ministerial meeting on the actual state of the Bologna process and the progress made in attaining its objectives.⁹ For evaluating the latter the BFUG introduced the so-called *Bologna scorecard*, which contains various indicators and relevant criteria for them against which progress can be evaluated and graded in relation to the various Bologna objectives. As to QA, the Stocktaking Report 2007 listed and analysed the following *indicators*:
1. National implementation of ESG
 2. Stage of development of external quality assurance system
 3. Level of student participation
 4. Level of international participation

For the first indicator above, the following *criteria* were applied in the evaluation, country wise (grades and colour codes from worst to best are: 1 – red; 2 – orange; 3 – yellow; 4 – light green; 5 – green)

5 – A national QA system in line with the ESG is fully operational

4 – The process of implementing a national QA system in line with the ESG has started

3 – There are plans and established deadlines for amending the national QA system in line with the ESG

2 – National quality assurance system is under review in line with the ESG

1 – No arrangements to implement the ESG

⁹ See the *Stocktaking Report 2007* at www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/documents/WGR2007/Stocktaking_report2007.pdf

- c) There are also other initiatives for monitoring the Bologna process, such as e.g. the biannual *Trend Reports* commissioned and published by EUA (see them on EUA's website, www.eua.be, under Publications). The latest, *Trends V*, report devotes a separate chapter to the internal QA of HEIs, based essentially on the first part of the ESG.¹⁰

Among the **most recent developments** concerning the implementation of the ESG the establishment of the *European Register for Quality Assurance Agencies* (EQAR, for short) is outstanding. This initiative appeared formally in 2005, together with the ESG. Actually, in the ESG document there is a separate chapter on the peer review system for QA agencies, a section of which describes a possible structure for the register of external QA agencies operating in Europe. In the E4 discussion and negotiation process mentioned earlier in this paper, that original proposal was changed. Nevertheless, the European Register has been established as an international non-profit organisation under Belgian law in Brussels, on 4 March 2008. For the time being, this is the one and only international organisation with legal status growing out of the Bologna process.

The Founding Members of the EQAR Association are the E4 organisations, and there are Social Partner Members (currently *Business Europe* and *Education International*) and Governmental Members (currently 23) too. On the foundation meeting of the EQAR General Assembly the *Register Committee* (RC) was appointed consisting of 11 members. This committee will make the decisions on inclusion of the applicant agencies in the Register. Those agencies can be listed which substantially comply with the ESG and this compliance had been demonstrated through an independent external review.

The EQAR General Assembly had its first meeting in Sarajevo, on 25 June 2008. It discussed, among others, the procedures for inclusion in the Register, which are to be finalised by the RC in August this year.¹¹ The RC will be ready to receive applications after that. (More information on the Register is available at www.eqar.eu)

ENQA is also very active in helping the implementation of the ESG. It regularly organises *seminars and workshops* to discuss issues related to QA in the Bologna process. The most recent events have been the following:

- Workshop on “*Programme oriented and institutional oriented approaches to quality assurance: New developments and mixed approaches*” Berlin, 12-13 June 2008. (Organised in co-operation with the German Accreditation Council)
- Seminar on external review of agencies: “*First external evaluations of quality assurance agencies – lessons learned*” Paris, 10-11 July 2008. (Organised in co-operation with AERES, the French QA agency)

From the point of view of the implementation of the ESG, especially the latter seminar is worth noting. Staff from agencies having been undergone an external review, members of external review teams, ENQA Board and even EQAR representatives (three RC members and

¹⁰ D. Crosier, L. Purser, H. Smidt: *TrendsV: Universities Shaping the European Higher Education Area*. Brussels: European University Association, 2007.

http://www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/EUA_Trends_V_for_web.pdf

¹¹ As of the date of writing these lines (4 August 2008) the procedures are still not available on the EQAR website.

the Project Manager), together with other participants, discussed the most important issues related to the external evaluation of agencies, covering parts 2 and 3 of the ESG. All the presentations of this and other seminars and a summary of them are available on the ENQA website at www.enqa.eu under Events.

4. Bologna beyond 2010

The 2010 target date approaching, the higher education community in Europe is eager to see the final results of the Bologna Process. An independent assessment will have been conducted by 2010 reviewing the attainment of the objectives and policy goals. Moreover, the Bologna results will probably not be “final” because work has already been begun on drafting the priorities for the EHEA in the next decade.

A Bologna seminar was held in Ghent (Belgium), on 19-20 May 2008, with the title „*Bologna 2020: Unlocking Europe’s potential - Contributing to a better world*”, where around 200 participants from Europe and other continents discussed the future of the Bologna Process. Though the seminar was centred on open discussion and raising issues rather than offering solutions, participants agreed that while the first decade of the Bologna Process concentrated on structural changes, in the next decade more emphasis should be laid on the learning process itself. A question to be possibly considered can be how higher education can help European societies to develop, and Europe in general in attaining the rather ambitious Lisbon goal of becoming the most competitive region of the world. (See more details on, and the presentations and background documents of the seminar at www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/BolognaSeminars/Ghent2008.htm)

The BFUG is also active in summarising the results and drafting plans for the future. It has just released its draft report entitled “*Bologna beyond 2010*”.¹² The draft report takes stock of the progress made, including the publication and the implementation process of ESG and the establishment of EQAR. As to the future, it outlines several possible areas and issues which the Bologna Process could concentrate on in the next decade, including e.g. globalisation and competitiveness, demography, institutional diversity, and funding. The draft document has been sent to BFUG members (the Bologna signatory countries and EC) and the consultative members, among them ENQA, for discussion and making remarks and proposals as to its finalisation. The BFUG will discuss the document and feedback provided on its meeting in Paris, on 14-15 October 2008.

Another important all-European event coming up will be the *3rd European QA Forum*, organised jointly by the E4 organisations. The Forum will be held at Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary, on 20-22 November, 2008. (The previous two Forums were held in Munich, Germany, in 2006, and Rome, Italy, in 2007.¹³) The main theme of this year’s Forum will be “New forms of accountability”. About 400 participants are expected from all over Europe and the world. The Forum provides excellent opportunities for HEIs, QA agencies, and other stakeholders of higher education to discuss current QA issues and present various

¹² BFUG (FR) 14_9, issue date 24/07/2008

¹³ See the summary paper of the Rome Forum by Lee Harvey, „Using the European Standards and guidelines: Some concluding remarks”. In: *Implementing and Using Quality Assurance: Strategy and Practice*. A selection of papers from the 2nd European Quality Assurance Forum. Brussels: EUA, 2008. pp.80-85.
www.eua.be/fileadmin/user_upload/files/Publications/Implementing_and_Using_Quality_Assurance_final.pdf

solutions and good practices in internal institutional and external QA. Further information is available and registration for the Forum is possible at www.eua.be/index.php?id=694.

5. Convergence in Europe?

Finally, let us consider the question whether there is convergence in Europe as to quality assurance of higher education or not?

ENQA has already devoted *two projects* to analyse the situation and address this question. The first one, called *Quality Convergence Study Project* (QCS for short), was carried out in 2003-2004. With the participation of six European QA agencies and five external experts it investigated the similarities and differences of national QA solutions, and the possibilities for convergence of national QA systems. It also discussed the prerequisites of understanding convergence and divergence.¹⁴

A follow-up on this was the *second QCS project*, QCS II, carried out in 2006 by two ENQA member agencies (CNE [now: AERES] and QAA) and four external experts with academic background. This project aimed at understanding the values that underpin quality assurance. It focussed on four notions: independence, peer review, transparency, and results. In its final conclusion it underlined the importance of purpose in defining a national QA system and in possible harmonising efforts between various national systems.¹⁵

But, really, can we speak of a common European QA system for higher education? The answer is a clear no. No doubt, the subject matter is the same and moreover, problems are similar and, beside differences, there are many similarities in the European countries as to national QA systems and solutions. But still, we do not have a common European QA system. What we do have, is the *European Standards and Guidelines* as a *general common framework* for the Bologna signatory countries for quality assurance of higher education, the importance of which should be neither over- nor underestimated.

¹⁴ F. Crozier, B. Curvale, F. Hénard: *Quality Convergence Study*. Helsinki: ENQA, 2005. Occasional Papers 7 www.enqa.eu/files/Quality%20Convergence%20Study.pdf

¹⁵ F. Crozier, B. Curvale, F. Hénard: Promoting epistemological approaches to quality assurance. In: *Terminology of quality assurance: Towards shared European values?* Helsinki: ENQA, 2006. Occasional Papers No. 12. www.enqa.eu/files/terminology_v01.pdf