

BOLOGNA MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE 2010

DEGREE AND CURRICULUM REFORM

Comments by Achim Hopbach, ENQA

Besides the set-up of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), the most significant achievement of the Bologna process, without doubt, are the “The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area” (ESG), as adopted in Bergen 2005.

We sometimes tend to underestimate the outstanding meaning of this achievement, we underestimate that it is a real challenge to implement the ESG in all the Bologna countries, because the EHEA and its 47 states are characterized by diversity in terms of educational traditions, legal frameworks, cultural traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations.

The ESG are a major achievement, because they make us share the same values and principles, make us share a common understanding of quality assurance. Experience clearly shows: They can and should be applied in different national settings by respecting the diversity in European higher education which is a heritage and an asset of Europe. This does not mean that there is no need for changes on the national level. On the contrary: We are aware of cases where there is a gap between signing up to ESG on the European level and taking the necessary consequences on national level, especially when it comes to the independence of agencies. Thus more efforts are necessary in some countries to strengthen and guarantee the independence of agencies which is one precondition for mutual trust.

The ESG are a major achievement because by implementing them we have made significant progress in developing the European dimension of quality assurance, its main features being:

- HEIs bear the prime responsibility for quality in higher education
Consequently: Internal quality assurance is the core element of quality assurance
Internal and external quality assurance processes are interrelated
- All kinds of quality assurance processes shall be enhancement oriented
- Diversity of approaches is respected as long as they apply the shared principles
- Stakeholders and especially students are involved in the processes and bodies of quality assurance
- Quality assurance agencies are independent

What do we learn for developing quality assurance in the EHEA in the future?

Cooperation in quality assurance and applying the ESG is the basis for mutual recognition of degrees, and thus plays a crucial role for student mobility. However, the lesson from 10 years of cooperation in quality assurance indicates that, although approaches and methodology converge to a certain extent, this will not, due to national context, lead to a uniform European quality assurance system. And we shouldn't aim at that. We shouldn't aim at one-size-fits-all approaches which tend to turn into strait jackets and thus are inadequate for the Bologna Process. Instead we should rather follow the approach of mutual trust on basis of common principles.

Besides the fact that, as the independent assessment report points out, we haven't reached the envisaged level of the implementation of internal and external quality assurance in some countries, more challenges are lying ahead, of which I want to name only one:

There is a danger that transparency tools, such as rankings or classifications, could foil the enhancement-driven aspect of quality assurance in higher education by stifling self-critical reflection. ENQA will continue to support the development of quality assurance processes that reflect the close link between enhancement and accountability.

Coming to the end I'd like to quote one of my predecessors as President of ENQA: Quality is not a destination, it's a journey! Today, in launching the European Higher Education Area, we can claim that we have made considerable steps on this journey, although further steps have to follow. I'm convinced that,

- by respecting the prime responsibility of HEIs for quality,
- by guaranteeing the independence of quality assurance agencies
- by involving stakeholders and
- by respecting diversity

we as members of the Bologna Process as well as consultative partners of the process will fulfill our aim of fostering the quality of teaching and learning to the benefit of the students and society at large, and we will jointly develop further the European dimension of quality assurance.