

ENQA Position Paper on Transparency Tools

(Adopted on 4 March 2011)

Executive summary

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face a steadily growing interest among students, all stakeholders and the public at large in accessing detailed and reliable information on individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions, and especially on quality at programme and at institutional levels.

A closer look at this steadily growing interest demonstrates that *the* interest covers a wide spectrum of specific interests which depend on the differing perspective of each and every stakeholder, in particular students and public authorities.

Consequently, it would be misleading to assume a shared view on what is relevant information about higher education and to assume a common understanding of role and meaning of 'reliable information' and 'transparency'. Transparency cannot be considered mono-dimensional. The differentiation relates to the purpose for which the information is requested, which, consequently, determines the type of information needed. In principle, information is requested for the following purposes:

- to choose a programme;
- to choose an institution;
- to make strategic decisions at institutional and system levels;
- to provide confidence in the output of HEIs.

Therefore, the following types of information can be distinguished:

- Information about the profile and quality of programmes and qualifications;
- Information about the performance and potential of institutions;
- Information about the overall performance and potential of higher education systems.

In particular the distinction between performance and potential as two features of *the* quality is relevant as regards the type and source of information.

Transparency tools and their contribution in informing about HE

The Bologna transparency tools

It is noteworthy that *transparency* in higher education and tools for creating transparency are not new issues in the discussion about moving the Bologna Process further. Quite the contrary, the Bologna Process may even be named the most significant factor in striving for transparency in European higher education, in particular by introducing transparency tools such as Qualifications Frameworks, Diploma Supplement and ECTS.



Rankings

Rankings list certain groups of HEIs that are ranked comparatively according to common numerical performance indicators. In doing so, rankings provide a comparative view at the system level, which helps understanding the performance of a whole HE system and of single institutions compared to others.

The project called Classifying European Institutions for Higher Education (CEIHE) is developing a tool to describe the increasing diversity in European higher education. This tool will enable stakeholders to see the various missions and profiles of HEIs. The classification will be multi-dimensional, non-hierarchical and descriptive instead of prescriptive.

Quality assurance procedures

External quality assurance procedures may cover a wide spectrum of processes designed to monitor, maintain and enhance quality. In principle, quality assurance serves two main purposes: enhancement and accountability. Two major features of the type of information provided by quality assurance are:

- The link between processes and performance/quality;
- The link between evaluation of quality and performance (including weaknesses and strengths) and recommendations for future actions.

Thus, quality assurance does provide comprehensive information about strengths and weaknesses and thus, a holistic view on the quality of a programme or an institution. It also draws attention to potential future enhancement.

Conclusion

Bologna transparency tools, quality assurance and rankings/classifications serve different purposes, although they support each other to a certain extent. It is misleading to consider them as alternatives. From the view point of quality assurance and its two main purposes, accountability and enhancement, their relationship to other transparency tools looks as follows:

The Bologna transparency tools are important reference points for quality assurance. The qualification framework for the European Higher Education Area describes level and scope of qualifications graduates will have acquired by the time they graduate. The diploma supplement describes the profile of a qualification, and ECTS is an important tool to guarantee realistic curriculum design as regards student workload, and also fosters mobility.

Rankings and classifications, by putting performance of institutions in relation to criteria, contribute to the accountability function by informing the public, but they do not contribute directly to quality enhancement, the second function of quality assurance. Thus, rankings and classification tools should not be seen as quality assurance tools; in particular, they do not provide information about the potential for the future, although HEIs may draw conclusions from rankings. They might be seen rather as providers of a certain type of information that is useful for quality assurance. On the other hand, it is true that quality assurance may provide quantitative information on aspects of the performance of a programme or an institution for comparison purposes, although this is not the core purpose.



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Introduction

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) face a steadily growing interest among students, all stakeholders and the public at large in accessing detailed and reliable information on individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions, and especially on the quality at programme and at institutional levels.

Also, in the political arena, information on higher education has reached the top end of the agenda, not least triggered by the debate about whether rankings contribute to the public call for reliable information. Even within the frame of the Bologna process, the issue of rankings was taken up. However, in the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve communiqué in 2009, the concept of transparency tools was introduced instead to avoid controversy. The purpose of this position paper is to examine the nature and purpose of such transparency tools, and in particular, their relationship to quality assurance. The paper is based on discussions during a workshop organised by ENQA and the Magna Charta Observatory in Bologna, Italy, to discuss the meaning of quality assurance and transparency tools among relevant stakeholders and actors in the fields of both quality assurance and transparency tools.

1. Information about higher education: Who asks for transparent information and what for?

Not surprisingly, a closer look to the steadily growing interest in detailed and reliable information on higher education demonstrates that the interest covers a wide spectrum of specific interests which depend on the specific perspective of each and every stakeholder. Consequently, deliberations about the request for “information” and how to respond to this request best need to start with answering the question: Who asks for transparent information and what for? In the following, the typical interests of various stakeholders shall be summarised and represented pointedly for the sake of better understanding the different perspectives:

1.1 Who asks for transparent information?

Students

In times of growing student mobility on the one hand, and of growing diversification of institutions and programmes on the other, students ask for reliable information to help them decide which programme meets their expectations best. In particular, students ask for information about the qualification level and profile of a certain programme, and information about learning conditions in a broad sense, which includes academic and social aspects. In addition, students are interested in reliable information about the quality of the programme and its recognition status.



Higher education institutions

HEIs are becoming more and more autonomous as regards their own strategy, profile, and delivery of programmes. At the same time, institutions act in a more and more competitive world. Performance based funding schemes combined – in some countries – with shrinking HE investments, mobile students, and the growing expectations with regard to society, widening access etc. mean that HEIs compete for funding, students and not least reputation. Thus, HEIs seek reliable information on their performance in order to better inform their strategic and operational decisions concerning future developments.

Employers

The employers' interest in reliable information is mainly twofold. On the one hand, they need reliable information about programmes and qualifications to better understand the skills and competencies obtained by graduates. On the other hand, they look for information about profile, experience, and reputation of institutions in the field of research and development, as well as in the field of education and training for choosing a partner for collaborative projects and strategic partnerships.

Public authorities and political decision makers

By nature, public authorities and political decision makers have a very broad interest in reliable information about the whole higher education system. On the one hand, this serves as basis for better informed political decisions, and on the other, it is necessary to evaluate the information about whether the political aims, such as raising the level of skills and competencies, raising the quality, and consequently, the attractiveness of programmes and institutions for international students have been achieved. Political decision makers in many countries are particularly interested in institutional performance because a substantial part of institutional funding is allocated according to performance indicators.

1.2 What for?

Purpose of information

This short overview clearly demonstrates that it would be misleading to assume a shared view on what is relevant information about higher education and to assume a common understanding of role and meaning of 'reliable information' and of 'transparency'. The transparency can't be considered mono-dimensional. The differentiation relates to the purpose for which the information is requested, which, consequently, determines the type of information.

In principle, information is requested for the following purposes:

- to choose a programme;
- to choose an institution;
- to make strategic decisions at institutional and system levels
- to provide confidence in the output of HEIs.

Therefore, the following types of information can be distinguished:

- Information about the profile and quality of programmes and qualifications



- Information about the performance and potentials of institutions
- Information about the overall performance and potentials of higher education systems

In particular, the distinction between performance and potentials as two features of *the* quality is relevant as regards the type and source of information.

The different purposes of collecting reliable information are a consequence of three major, interrelated developmental trends in higher education : competition, diversification and autonomy.

Competition

Competition has become a major driving force in higher education. HEIs increasingly compete for funds, students and reputation.

Performance based funding schemes, increasing proportions of third party funding and increasing student mobility (especially at master and PhD level) mean that HEIs have to demonstrate performance and quality.

Diversification

Diversification is threefold: Expectations from students change, simply because the student population is getting more and more diverse. The male, young, full-time student, coming directly from a local or national secondary education institution is no longer a typical student. Educational, social, cultural, linguistic and national backgrounds are getting more and more diverse, and so do the requests for appropriate study programmes, such as part-time programmes, E-learning programmes, programmes in the frame of lifelong learning, etc. Thus, the mode of provision changes in terms of organisation and structure.

Secondly, the expectations from employers change: The qualifications, competencies and skills that are required of graduates by employers are developing and diversifying increasingly quickly. This also leads to conflicts with the educational mission of HEIs.

Thirdly, the expectations from society at large change. HEIs are not only requested to provide academic education to students and to carry out blue skies or applied research. They are also requested to contribute significantly to meeting the challenges of society and mankind, ranging from social and financial welfare and cultural development to ecological questions such as global warming. These developments lead to the diversification of the mission, profile and strategy of HEIs, not forgetting their provision of teaching.

Autonomy of HEIs

The third major developmental trend, that is growing the autonomy of higher education institutions, is closely interrelated with completion and diversification. Alongside with substantial administrative reforms in all public sectors since the 1970s, higher education institutions were given more autonomy and responsibilities in terms of management of resources, personnel, and of academic decisions in teaching and research. However, the independence from state regulation went hand in hand with the necessity to account for the quality (i.e. the effectiveness and efficiency) of their services via reporting systems and quality assurance.



In a diversified and competitive higher education system with HEIs as autonomous actors, it is of utmost importance to have detailed and reliable information to help make well-informed decisions, be it about the institution that a prospective student wants to enrol at, be it about funding according to performance indicators, or be it about a suitable partner for a joint research project. In principle, the purposes for providing information can be summarised under two headings:

Information for comparison as key feature

In fact, information about the quality of programmes and institutions serves more and more as a means of comparison of programmes, rather than a means of providing information about single programmes or institutions. Naturally this has an impact on the type and scope of the information to be gathered. Currently, in order to compare information, one is often offered quantitative data.

Information for development as key feature

In an increasingly competitive and diversified higher education system, the meaning and relevance of quality as such changes: Quality in higher education is not only the result of the intrinsic motivation of teachers and researchers, nor is it to be demonstrated as a matter of accountability. In a highly competitive field, quality in higher education has become a core success factor for the institutional success of HEIs. The indicators for the performance of HEIs in this respect are well known. They are, among others:

- Completion rates/placement success
- Research output
- Acquisition of third party funds
- Effectiveness/efficiency in financial terms
- Number of Nobel-prize winners/other awards.

Thus, information about the quality of programme and institutional levels has become a prime source for the management decisions at programme and at institutional level.

In conclusion, transparent and reliable information about the quality of programmes and institutions are preconditions for developing programmes and institutions, for enhancing quality, and also, for demonstrating accountability.

2. Information about higher education: which tools provide what kind of information?

2.1 The Bologna transparency tools

It is noteworthy that transparency in higher education and tools for creating transparency are not new issues in the discussion about moving the Bologna Process further. Quite the contrary, the Bologna Process may even be named the most significant factor in striving for transparency in European higher education, right from the beginning and throughout the whole process:



The core aim of the Bologna process, as stipulated in the Bologna Declaration, demonstrates that the whole process aims at more transparency. European Ministers responsible for higher education agreed in striving for:

- Adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees, also through the implementation of the Diploma Supplement.
- Establishment of a system of credits - such as in the ECTS system - as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility.

At the Berlin Ministerial conference in 2003, European Ministers responsible for higher education pointed to transparency as the core aim of the Bologna Process when they stated:

Quote:

“Ministers welcome the various initiatives undertaken since the Prague Higher Education Summit to move towards more comparability and compatibility, to make higher education systems more transparent and to enhance the quality of European higher education at institutional and national levels.”

In addition, the Ministers named four core transparency tools:

Quote:

“Ministers encourage the member States to elaborate a framework of comparable and compatible qualifications for their higher education systems, which should seek to describe qualifications in terms of workload, level, learning outcomes, competences and profile. They also undertake to elaborate an overarching framework of qualifications for the European Higher Education Area. [...] They appeal to institutions and employers to make full use of the Diploma Supplement, so as to take advantage of the improved transparency and flexibility of the higher education degree systems, for fostering employability and facilitating academic recognition for further studies.”

In Bergen, the Ministers highlighted transparency as one of two major underlying principles of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), next to quality:

Quote:

“Building on the achievements so far in the Bologna Process, we wish to establish a European Higher Education Area based on the principles of quality and transparency.”

In London, the Ministers stressed again the role of Qualifications Frameworks for creating transparency in the EHEA:

Quote:

“Easily readable and comparable degrees and accessible information on educational systems and qualifications frameworks are prerequisites for citizens’ mobility and ensuring the continuing attractiveness and competitiveness of the EHEA. [...] Qualifications frameworks are important instruments in achieving comparability and transparency



within the EHEA and facilitating the movement of learners within, as well as between, higher education systems. They should also help HEIs to develop modules and study programmes based on learning outcomes and credits, and improve the recognition of qualifications as well as all forms of prior learning.”

In Leuven, the role of Diploma Supplement and ECTS as important transparency tools were reconfirmed:

Quote:

“Moreover, the Bologna Process has promoted the Diploma Supplement and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System to further increase transparency and recognition.”

These tools provide information about the type and profile of a programme or a qualification. They help (prospective) students, employers and public at large to understand what can be expected from a graduate having obtained a certain qualification. This information may serve as a basis for the choice of a programme or in the recruitment processes. In addition, these tools foster transparency at a system level as far as comparison of certain higher education systems is concerned.

2.2 Rankings, classifications and transparency

The current discussion in Europe about transparency tools is still basically a discussion about rankings. Apart from rankings, another initiative may be grouped under this term: the initiative towards “A Classification on Higher Education” in Europe, funded by the European Commission.

Rankings

Rankings list certain groups of HEIs that are ranked comparatively according to common numerical performance indicators. A major feature of this way of describing (and comparing) the quality of an institution is the fact, that the information which the ranking provides is not generated by the institution, but rather, by statistical data. Rankings do not refer to and do not analyse institutional processes. So, they may ignore the causes for high or poor performance. Thus, rankings do not directly derive recommendations from their findings. The purpose of rankings may be described as follows: To provide a comparative view at the system level, which helps to understand the performance of a whole higher education system and of single institutions compared to others. By doing so, rankings partly support the accountability function of HEIs, because they provide the public with information about aspects of quality of a programme or an institution. Not least because they are mainly organised and published by magazines that often serve as a guide to HEIs. Although the scope of rankings may differ from national or regional to global scale, the methodologies are similar: Quantitative data on a set of indicators is collected by third parties, then scored as regards each indicator and finally weighed and aggregated. More recently, as a consequence of the critics, the emergence of multidimensional rankings, which use several types of indicators to



demonstrate that the quality of a HEI has various dimensions depending on the viewpoint of the stakeholder.

Today, the so called “Berlin principles”, which were published in 2006 by CHE, UNESCO-CEPES and IHEP, form a consensus of underlying principles for the design of rankings. They comprise standards and principles for purpose and goals, design and weighting of indicators, collecting and processing data, and finally, presentation of ranking results. They specifically call for:

- Transparency and clarity in terms of purpose, context, and used data
- Multidimensional approaches
- Outcome orientation
- Quality assurance measures to ensure validity of data

Classification

The project called Classifying European Institutions for Higher Education (CEIHE)¹, carried out by the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS) at the University of Twente, tries to develop a tool to describe the increasing diversity in European higher education. This tool shall enable stakeholders to see the various missions and profiles of HEIs.

The classification project uses empirical data as main methodological feature, which distinguishes it from typologies which address conceptual entities. The classification shall be multi-dimensional, non-hierarchical and descriptive instead of prescriptive.

The information provided by rankings and the classification project relates to current performance concerning indicators and to the profile of an institution respectively. In other words, classifications describe horizontal diversity and provide institutional profiles while rankings assess vertical diversity within types of institutions and result in performance-based outcome. In doing so, these tools may provide relevant information for a better understanding of the very nature or the current state of a higher education system. This information may serve as a basis for the formulation of policies. In particular, rankings may also inform funding decisions as far as allocation of funds is performance driven.

2.3 Quality assurance and transparency

External quality assurance procedures may cover a wide spectrum of processes designed to monitor, maintain and enhance quality. These are basically evaluations, audits and accreditations at programme and institutional levels. In principle, quality assurance serves two main purposes: enhancement and accountability. Internal quality assurance naturally focuses on the enhancement of quality in teaching and learning, while external quality assurance, at its best, both serves the needs for accountability of institutions to stakeholders and the wider public, and plays a developmental role for enhancing quality in institutions. This understanding is based on the core principle of quality assurance in the

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http://www.utwente.nl/mb/cheps/research/current_projects/Classifying%20European%20Institutions%20for%20higher%20education.doc/

EHEA, whereby the primary responsibility for quality rests with the Higher Education Institutions.

Quality assurance in higher education as such and the design of the procedures are based on the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) which were developed by the E4 group. The main purpose of these standards and guidelines was to guarantee professionally conducted quality assurance procedures on a high quality level. The ESG prefer the generic principle to the specific requirement, focusing more on what should be done than how it should be achieved. The ESG combine two aspects in particular:

- Common standards for professionalism in terms of procedures and agencies which nowadays are not only shared within Europe and the EHEA but increasingly worldwide;
- The European notion of quality assurance which is in the first instance laid down in the following principles:
 - o The primary responsibility for quality lies with the institutions.
 - o Internal quality assurance forms the basis of the whole quality assurance system. External quality assurance has to take into account the results of the internal part.
 - o Quality assurance processes, irrespective of the very nature and design of the chosen approach, have to serve the developmental function of quality assurance.
 - o Involvement of all relevant stakeholders, including students and employers, in quality assurance processes and quality assurance agencies.

As a result of the application of the ESG in quality assurance systems and processes in the participating countries of the Bologna Process, quality assurance in the EHEA, while respecting the principle of subsidiarity, is based on a common ground of shared values and principles and is conducted in the specific European way of professionally sound processes with the participation of all stakeholders. The application of the ESG is a major achievement of the Bologna Process. The purpose and role of quality assurance are affected by the growing competition and diversification in higher education. If quality in higher education is a core success factor for institutional success, the quality assurance processes should not be considered as something "extra" in addition to the other core processes in higher education, but should be integral. Guaranteeing a certain quality or enhancing the quality of a programme becomes an integral part of the regular management of a HEI. There is a trend of moving from quality assurance towards quality oriented higher education management, which means that former quality assurance processes get directly linked to core management processes.

Hence, quality assurance has to take these differences into account, and has to take as its point of departure the mission and the objectives of a specific institution and recommend improvement to achieve the set goals. This calls either for process designs which are generic in order to be able to be applied to HEIs of different profiles etc, or for the diversification of quality assurance processes in order to match the exact needs of the given HEI.

Two major features of the type of information that is provided by quality assurance are:



- The link between processes and performance/quality;
- The link between evaluation of quality and performance (including weaknesses and strengths) and recommendations for future actions.

One can say that quality assurance not only provides comprehensive information about strengths and weaknesses and thus a holistic view on the quality of a programme or an institution. It also draws the attention to potential future enhancement. By this means, quality assurance generates necessary information for the management of HEIs and for their further development. It is fair to say that the extent to which the outcomes of quality assurance relate to recommendations for the future depends on the type of procedure. It may be higher in case of classical evaluations and lower in case of accreditation processes.

ENQA is well aware of the fact that currently, different actors and stakeholders in higher education weigh the two main purposes differently. The accountability dimension becomes prominent especially in times of financial constraints and a drift towards more autonomy for HEIs. However, rather than reducing quality assurance to one of the two, ENQA supports the development of quality assurance processes by maintaining a close link between both dimensions, which is clearly to the benefit of the HEI. There is a concern that if HEIs are forced to focus on rankings or transparency tools, they will gear their efforts to this end, rather than striving to build a true quality culture encompassing both assurance and enhancement.

3. Conclusion

Transparency: Different types of information are necessary for different purposes

In the current discussion about the relationship between rankings and quality assurance, the notion of “detailed and reliable information on the quality of individual study programmes, faculties and higher education institutions” claims that participants in the discussion talk about the same issue. Actually, this is not the case.

Firstly, what is quality in higher education? Do rankings and quality assurance really use the same concepts of quality for a programme or an institution?

Secondly, what is information? Is the type of information provided by rankings really the same as the type of information generated by quality assurance?

About quality in higher education

Rankings/classifications provide comparative information about performance in certain aspects of a programme or an institution (i.e. completion rates of students and graduates, or number of Nobel prize-winners among staff). The information that is gathered through ranking contains rarely information about the quality of the programme or the institution. Depending on the type of ranking, it weighs various performances in order to draw a more comprehensive picture.

Quality assurance provides comprehensive information about the compliance of a programme or an institution with certain standards and about the strengths and



weaknesses of the programme or the institution. Normally, quality assurance is not restricted to certain aspects but based on a holistic view. Thus, the underlying concepts of quality in higher education differ a lot between rankings/classifications and quality assurance.

About information

In the case of rankings/classifications, information consists of aggregated data, which may combine and weigh data referring to different aspects of performance of programmes or institutions at a certain point of time.

In the case of quality assurance, information consists of performance, internal processes, causes for strengths and weaknesses or compliance/non-compliance of a programme or an institution with certain standards, combined with recommendations for future developments. Thus, also regarding the production of information, quality assurance has to serve two functions: information for the sake of accountability and for the sake of development. ENQA members will, in line with the ESG, remain mindful that reports arising from quality reviews should be fit for purpose and be accessible to various audiences. Therefore, internal or external review reports should be supplemented by an executive summary to ensure it is accessible to non specialist readers.

About producing information

When the requested information serves comparison purposes, it has an impact on the type and scope of information. Thus, in the case of rankings and classifications, information needs to be easily compared, which normally means quantitative data. One needs standardised information that can be equally accessed by all institutions.

When the requested information (also or partly) serves strategic and developmental needs of the institutions, as is the case in quality assurance, one needs information generated for the individual case. This goes beyond aggregating quantitative data and is normally done by a well-informed peer review.

In addition, the current discussion about the relationship between rankings and quality assurance does not take into account the role and meaning of transparency tools at the programme level, such as qualifications frameworks, diploma supplements and ECTS. These Bologna transparency tools play a crucial role as regards providing transparent and reliable information about single programmes.

Conclusion

Bologna transparency tools, Quality assurance and rankings/classifications serve different but partly overlapping purposes, use different methodologies, provide different types of information.

Bologna transparency tools, quality assurance and rankings/classifications serve different purposes, although they support each other to a certain extent. It is misleading to consider them as alternatives.

From the view point of quality assurance and its two main purposes, accountability and enhancement, their relationship to other transparency tools



looks as follows:

The Bologna transparency tools are important reference points for quality assurance. The qualification framework for the European Higher Education Area describes level and scope of qualifications graduates shall have acquired by the time of graduation. The diploma supplement describes the profile of a qualification, and ECTS is an important tool to guarantee realistic curriculum design as regards student workload, and also fosters mobility. Rankings and classifications, by putting performance of institutions in relation to criteria, contribute to the accountability function by informing the public, but they do not contribute to quality enhancement, the second function of quality assurance. Thus, ranking/classification tools are not to be seen as quality assurance tools; in particular, they do not provide information about potentials for the future. They might be seen rather as providers of a certain type of information that is useful for quality assurance. On the other hand, it is true that quality assurance does not necessarily provide quantitative information on aspects of the performance of a programme or an institution for comparison purposes.

ENQA wishes to assert that it is of utmost importance for the development of trust that all activities related to the production of information about higher education in the European higher education area (EHEA) have explicit goals and methodologies. These must be communicated transparently in order to avoid misinterpretations of purposes and outcomes of the procedures. This should concern all types of providers, whatever their status is, and should notably be true with regard to:

- Information, recommendations or accreditation outcomes used by decision-makers in charge of steering higher education policies;
- Information and guidance for students;
- Evaluations and recommendations devoted to help higher education institutions and programmes in their continuous improvement strategies and actions;
- Benchmarking or rankings developed for the purpose of external communication.

All activities related to quality assurance in higher education or production of information about the quality of higher education should respect the fitness for purpose principle. It is crucial that the purpose(s) should determine the types of scrutiny, methodology and procedures applied. Decisions on the type of scrutiny, methodology and procedures to be applied should be preceded by, and based on, the identification of purpose(s).

Therefore, the discussion about the pros and cons of quality assurance and transparency tools for better information of higher education institutions and stakeholders should not mix up both approaches, which, due to different purposes, methodologies and outcomes, do not compete with each other. Rankings and classifications are restricted to the accountability function, whereas quality assurance will always serve, in different ways, both purposes. The two approaches overlap with the accountability function and thus may be complementary.

