

**The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher
Education (ENQA) – General Assembly**

***The European agenda in quality
assurance in higher education***

Speech of Dr Frank Vandenbroucke

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Ladies and gentlemen,

Good afternoon to you all and thank you for inviting me to address you today.

[The evolution of quality assurance and the development of the Dutch-Flemish model of programme accreditation]

Over the past fifteen years the higher education sector, all over the world, has taken the quality issue on board and has succeeded in establishing an educational quality culture. That on its own has been a major achievement. Evaluation of higher education now has become a global phenomenon. As a consequence of this process higher education systems have realised a major quality improvement, a shift towards more public accountability and an increase in innovation. Some national evaluation systems now feel the urge to make the move towards new methodologies, because the current ones show some deficiencies. This

process of change causes tensions and raises an issue of trust between the public higher education sector and society at large.

In the early 1990s Flanders introduced the legal basis and obligation for its higher education institutions to organise an internal and external quality assurance system. All programmes had to be assessed by a panel of peers. The main focus of the assessment system was on improving quality. Far less attention was then paid to accountability. After approximately ten years, this peer review system of quality assessment showed some deficiencies. More pressure towards public accountability, a need for clearer outcomes of evaluation and a call for more stringent consequences contributed to a political drive for change. The Bologna Declaration and the desire for a quality assurance that would strengthen the international recognition of the new bachelor and master degrees, were the trigger for a rather radical move towards programme accreditation. As the Netherlands and Flanders had developed similar mechanisms for quality assurance, both countries decided to introduce an common accreditation system on top of the existing assessment system. The binational Dutch–Flemish Accreditation Organisation (NVAO) was founded and is now in full operation.

The Netherlands and Flanders have made a deliberate choice for programme accreditation because of the following arguments: 1) the programme is the organisational unit for which a student enrolls and which is registered by the government, 2) due to the assessment system, the higher education system of both countries are already used to programmes being assessed, and 3) students and the labour market are able to recognise programmes. The assessments of programmes is

conducted by the quality assessment agencies of the sector itself (in Flanders the Flemish Interuniversity Council – VLIR - and the Flemish Council for ‘hogescholen’ – VLHORA). Based on a report produced by a visiting panel of peers a programme requests accreditation. The NVAO accredits a programme when it meets the basic quality requirements. The NVAO can only decide whether a programme is accredited or not. The joint Dutch-Flemish system of programme accreditation is a rather heavy, but powerful and persuasive quality assurance model. The political world, the students and the general public have huge expectations; they want the system to provide guarantees that basic quality standards are met and that the institutions develop a critical process of quality improvement.

[The Bologna agenda in quality assurance]

The European Association of Quality Assurance in higher education is a powerful partner in the European process of convergence initiated by the Bologna Declaration. Especially since the Berlin and Bergen ministerial meetings, an ambitious working programme was assigned to ENQA. Following up on the Berlin meeting, ENQA has proposed a set of standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. These standards and guidelines were approved by the ministers and are now implemented in the work of the Network. In workshops and seminars the various items, such as ‘independence of panels’ and ‘publication of reports’ are explored and further elaborated in their operational consequences. And, more important even, ENQA is now engaging in a process of international external evaluation of quality assurance agencies. Our own NVAO will be in such an external

assessment in 2007 and I'm very much looking forward to the results of this evaluation.

In Bergen, we – I mean the ministers – also agreed on the principle of the European register of quality assurance agencies. The register should list the agencies that meet the standards and guidelines. Thus, higher education institutions assessed, evaluated or accredited by a registered agency can be sure that they're evaluated according to agreed standards and, furthermore, that their evaluation will be considered as valid by similar agencies. This would constitute an important step towards the mutual and multilateral recognition of evaluations/accreditations and thus, indirectly, to the recognition of qualifications themselves. As you know, the ministers expect a more detailed proposal at the London meeting in spring next year.

The emphasis on quality assurance in the Berlin and Bergen meetings was no coincidence. Many observers of the Bologna Process agree that substantial progress in the field of quality assurance is the critical prerequisite for real steps forward towards that far more important objective of recognition of qualifications. Convergence in quality assurance is not a goal in itself, but it is conditional for what in my view is the ultimate objective of the Bologna Process, namely a European higher education area with automatic recognition of qualifications. This may be a dream still far away, but we should remain focused on this objective while working on the conditions and instruments.

I would like to congratulate ENQA on the work done so far and the achievements realised. I know that all this was not easy for an inclusive network aiming at cooperation. It necessitated a transformation of the

network itself into an association that's using the standards as membership criteria. As an active member of the group of ministers, I want to express my sincere appreciation for this.

[Outlooks for the future of quality assurance]

The next questions then are: what will be the next steps and what is the future of quality assurance in a further developing European higher education area? Of course, these questions are linked to the future of the Bologna Process and the post-Bologna agenda themselves. And on the background there are the changes in the higher education institutions and systems. Let me try to bring to your attention a few observations on these difficult issues at the end of my speech.

Quality assurance systems experience the changes affecting higher education institutions and have to adapt to ever new realities. Thus, programme accreditation is a model which is linked to a reality of public regulation and relative standardisation of programmes. It contributes to guaranteeing basic quality standards and promoting transparency in programmes and degrees. I personally do believe that in a publicly financed higher education system regulation of the supply side and transparency are necessary to guarantee external efficiency and informed decisions of students and stakeholders. In our system accreditation helps to avoid over-supply and unnecessary proliferation of programmes.

However, we also observe symptoms of a new reality. There is an increasing diversity of institutions, with varying functions, strengths and weaknesses. The quasi-market of higher education tends to foster

heterogeneity, for example in master degrees, in the research-intensiveness of institutions, in student intake, etc. Institutions try to escape regulatory confinements and seek more freedom. As a result of this, they are looking for lighter systems of quality assurance.

In the Dutch-Flemish system, as in other countries, the debate on the burden of quality assurance clearly has started. Different issues come together in this debate: the external and internal cost of quality assurance and accreditation, the heavy workload associated with it and the bureaucracy which is perceived to be an inevitable consequence of it. The arguments in this debate often are very narrow and one-sided. I do not believe that the burden of quality assurance and accreditation in our system is higher than in other relevant, comparable professional public sectors. There is much need for nuance and hygiene in this debate.

Still, we should be prepared to consider further developments. Our Dutch colleagues already have formulated proposals to shift from a system of programme accreditation to institutional accreditation. According to a recent White Paper presented in Parliament, the new system should be in place by 2010 after finishing the current cycle of programme accreditation. In the near future we are going to discuss this matter with our Dutch colleagues.

The shift from programme accreditation to institutional accreditation, or a system of institutional 'audits', has far-reaching consequences. Institutional audits is a challenging concept in various ways. It attaches a great importance to the very concept of the institution in higher education. And, of course, it demands for very powerful internal quality assurance procedures and cultures. I'm not yet convinced that our

universities already have the institutional capacity for this. Secondly, institutional audits draw our attention to various leadership issues in higher education. A new leadership style is essential in order to manage for quality, to create a culture in which all staff in an institution feel empowered instead of a culture of complacency. We need to consult all parties concerned and then look to how we can design an appropriate structure for rewards, incentives and opportunities for further professional development within our universities and institutions

Processes of differentiation and destandardisation also affect institutions internally. Institutions try to compensate for this by developing strategic behaviour, new concepts of management and leadership. By doing this, they want to be better prepared for a perceived global higher education market. Quality assurance and accreditation systems should take into account these changes and ambitions. However, they also have a public responsibility which goes beyond the mere interests of the institutions. They have to remain the critical component of the higher education system as a whole, by disclose actual instead of proclaimed or perceived quality, by providing the state and the general public with real observations and assessments and thus promoting transparency and informed decisions and serving the interests of wider community of stakeholders.

Therefore, I do not believe in a strategy of weakening quality assurance in the future. In my view institutions make a mistake when expecting the move towards institutional audit to be synonymous with a lighter quality assurance system. Diversity and market regulation need more, not less critical quality assurance systems. In order to perform its functions, quality assurance must further develop into a professional activity.

Professionalisation of quality assurance – something to which ENQA continues to contribute to a very large extent – thus remains of vital importance. And so will the ‘quality of quality assurance’: meta-evaluation of agencies based on clear and ambitious standards and guidelines of quality assurance, will even become more important in a diversifying world of higher education.

[Conclusion]

To conclude I support ENQA’s concern that if Europe is to achieve its aspiration to be the most dynamic and knowledgebased economy in the world, then European higher education will need to demonstrate that it takes the quality of its education and qualifications seriously and is willing to put into place the means of assuring and demonstrating that quality

Flanders and the Netherlands have successfully established a common accreditation system. Other countries have opted for different models. We can learn from each other’s experiences, something to which the work of ENQA is of enormous value. But in the end, the diversity of quality assurance models is not the fundamental issue. What is important is to build further on a shared meaning of quality and provide means for an interactive professionalism. This is exactly what ENQA is working on.

I hope this conference will offer us some constructive ideas and I hope you enjoy your stay in Flanders.

Thank you.