

## **ENQA Working Group:** **Quality Assurance in Life-long Learning**

Over the past years and due to demographic change, technical progress and globalisation of markets, the working environment has undergone significant changes. In today's knowledge-based society employees are confronted with new challenges time and again. For those who want to keep up with the time, a steady refresh of their knowledge and competencies through further education is crucial. The knowledge and competencies acquired at school or university is no longer a guarantee for a long-term employment; it is "just" a requirement for the first career entry. Further education increases significantly the chances on the labour market and it is an inevitable necessity for all of those who want to stay competitive in the future. This development has also a significant impact on higher education market and even demands a rethinking of the existing strategies and practices.

Business and academic representatives agree about the significance and the necessity of life-long learning (LLL): it is indispensable for the European knowledge society. It is the only way to overcome the skills shortage, to improve competitiveness and to assure employability. Despite this consensus between the business and the academic world and the increase of LLL provisions in the last years this field is still in development.

In order to improve more transparency and comparability in the field of LLL a quality assurance system, i.e. analogue to programme accreditation, is needed. Adjustment of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in terms of LLL is the first move to make. It would support providers of LLL to improve the quality of their courses and be beneficial to the consumer as well.

### **I- Purpose and Tasks of the Working Group**

Based on the findings of the ENQA workshop, held in Bonn on 16-17 May 2011, a need for adjustments and further development on quality assurance in LLL was identified. A working group (WG) was established in order to identify and discuss the main European challenges and their implications in this field and to promote transparency and comparability for all stakeholders through defining a quality assurance framework, analogue to the well-proven programme accreditation. To this effect the working group has revised the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in order to adapt the existing quality standards to the exigencies of LLL or even to develop new ones.

The WG on quality assurance in LLL counts 15 members from 9 different countries (see attachment, list of working group members). So far, three workshops have been organised: the first kick-off meeting took place on September 18<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at the ENQA Secretariat in Brussels, Belgium (participation quota = 73.3 %) and the second meeting was held on November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012 at the FIBAA office in Bonn, Germany (participation quota = 53.3 %). The third workshop took place on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2013 in Vienna, Austria, hosted by AQ Austria (participation quota = 46.6 %).

The WG argue for mobility and promotion of the LLL at higher education level. The group is of the mind that:

- Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) should consider LLL as one of their core areas,
- Other non-academic providers of further education shouldn't be excluded from the discussion about quality assurance in LLL,
- The access to higher education should be widened in order to increase mobility for students from a diverse range of backgrounds to benefit from higher education and
- Methods of acceptance and recognition of prior learning should be improved.

## II- Challenges in the field of LLL

One of the major identified problems in the field of LLL is the lack of transparency and quality assurance. Various providers, HEIs as well as other non-academic providers operate in this market, and the range of offered courses differs a lot in terms of structure and quality. This generates disorientation of the consumers of LLL as well as other stakeholders.

On providers side one of the biggest challenges is to cope with the heterogeneity of the consumers of LLL. They are confronted with a “new” type of students, including post secondary students, adult learners, professionals who seek to up-grade their skills for a better career, etc. Therefore, the LLL-providers have to adapt their study paths to ensure that they are designed to widen participation and to respond to the needs of the ‘non-traditional’ learners. Along with diversification of student population the need for developing innovative learning and teaching methods, designing flexible study paths and providing appropriate guidance and counselling services arises. Furthermore, the new trends on the employment market demand different concepts of LLL (i.e. E-Learning), which enable employees to integrate without any difficulty further/continuing education courses in their workaday life.

The fact that LLL offerings take place in various forms and places makes the recognition of prior learning especially by HEIs inevitable. For doing so HEIs need clear quality standards and benchmarks, in order to be able to evaluate and recognised the acquired knowledge within the scope of LLL.

The ENQA working group is of the opinion that non-academic providers should also take part in the debate on quality assurance of LLL. These stakeholders assume a significant role in this market and should be in terms of quality assurance of LLL considered as equal to HEIs.

## III- Quality Assurance in LLL

In order to secure transparency and comparability of the LLL offerings at national as well as at international level, to improve their quality at higher education level and to facilitate employability, a stringent quality assurance system is needed. In term of study programmes the established system of quality assurance (programme accreditation) has proven its worth.

There are two complimentary parts of ensuring quality: internal and external quality assurance.

- Internal quality assurance:

A quality assurance framework for LLL can achieve the expected results only if HEIs and other non-academic providers incorporate LLL into their strategy and internal quality culture. They should reanalyse their understanding of quality and specify which tools are needed in order to achieve qualification goals of the offered LLL courses.

The results of the internal quality assurance should lead to a continuing development and enhancement of the LLL courses. They also form the basis for external quality assurance activities. Internal quality assurance should consider all components of the course (i.e. designing of the course, teaching staff, course participants, alumni, infrastructure, learning outcomes, assessment results etc.).

In order to ensure that the offered courses correspond to the current standards and quality expectations, they should be regularly assessed. The results of the assessments (by course participants, alumni, teaching staff, employers, etc.) should flow back into the (re-)designing of the courses and the responsibilities for implementations of the obtained results should be clearly defined.

- External quality assurance:

External quality assurance shouldn't only concern study programmes (programme accreditation), it should also include LLL offerings and take its specifications (i.e. didactic concept, target group, financing, etc.) into account.

External quality assurance for LLL intends, on the basis of the Bologna Process (i.e. modularisation, award of credit points), to improve transparency and comparability on the LLL market and to confirm the academic level of the offered courses according to the European Qualification Framework (level 5 to 8).

A further advantage lies in the fact that a common external quality assurance system facilitates the process of recognition of the acquired knowledge within the scope of LLL nationally as well as internationally.

In order to develop and implement a common external quality assurance system in the field of the life-long learning the ENQA working group recommends adjustments of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) as follow (see amendments in red):

## BASIC PRINCIPLES

The standards and guidelines are based on a number of basic principles about quality assurance, both internal in and external to higher education in the EHEA. These include:

- providers of higher education have the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision (referring to academic programmes and other programmes in terms of lifelong learning)<sup>1</sup> and its assurance;
- the interests of society in the quality and standards of higher education need to be safeguarded;
- the quality of programmes need to be developed and improved for students (referring to students of academic programmes and participants of other programmes in terms of lifelong learning)<sup>2</sup> and other beneficiaries of higher education across the EHEA;
- there need to be efficient and effective organisational structures within which those programmes can be provided and supported;
- transparency and the use of external expertise in quality assurance processes are important;
- there should be encouragement of a culture of quality within higher education institutions and other providers;
- processes should be developed through which higher education institutions and other providers can demonstrate their accountability, including accountability for the investment of public and private money;
- quality assurance for accountability purposes is fully compatible with quality assurance for enhancement purposes;
- institutions should be able to demonstrate their quality at home and internationally;
- processes used should not stifle diversity and innovation.

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<sup>1</sup> In the following: programmes.

<sup>2</sup> In the following: students.

## Part 1: European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions

### 1.1 Policy and procedures for quality assurance

#### STANDARD:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality.

The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

#### GUIDELINES:

Formal policies and procedures provide a framework within which higher education institutions **and other providers** can develop and monitor the effectiveness of their quality assurance systems. They also help to provide public confidence in institutional autonomy. Policies contain the statements of intentions and the principal means by which these will be achieved. Procedural guidance can give more detailed information about the ways in which the policy is implemented and provides a useful reference point for those who need to know about the practical aspects of carrying out the procedures.

The policy statement is expected to include:

- the relationship between teaching and research in the institution;
- the institution's strategy for quality and standards;
- the organisation of the quality assurance system;
- the responsibilities of departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units and individuals for the assurance of quality;
- the involvement of students in quality assurance;
- the ways in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised.

The realisation of the EHEA depends crucially on a commitment at all levels of an institution to ensuring that its programmes have clear and explicit intended outcomes; that its staff are ready, willing and able to provide teaching and learner support that will help its students achieve those outcomes; and that there is full, timely and tangible recognition of the contribution to its work by those of its staff who demonstrate particular excellence, expertise and dedication. All higher education institutions **and other providers** should aspire to improve and enhance the education they offer their students.

### 1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards

#### STANDARD:

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.

#### GUIDELINES:

The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.

The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include:

- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes;
- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content;
- specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full time, part-time, distance learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional);
- availability of appropriate learning resources;

- formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme;
- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students;
- regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members);
- regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations;
- participation of students in quality assurance activities.

### **1.3 Assessment of students**

#### **STANDARD:**

Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

#### **GUIDELINES:**

The assessment of students is one of the most important elements of higher education.

The outcomes of assessment have a profound effect on students' future careers. It is therefore important that assessment is carried out professionally at all times and that it takes into account the extensive knowledge which exists about testing and examination processes. Assessment also provides valuable information for institutions about the effectiveness of teaching and learners' support.

Student assessment procedures are expected to:

- be designed to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes and other programme objectives;
- be appropriate for their purpose, whether diagnostic, formative or summative;
- have clear and published criteria for marking;
- be undertaken by people who understand the role of assessment in the progression of students towards the achievement of the knowledge and skills associated with their intended qualification;
- where possible, not rely on the judgements of single examiners;
- take account of all the possible consequences of examination regulations;
- have clear regulations covering student absence, illness and other mitigating circumstances;
- ensure that assessments are conducted securely in accordance with the institution's stated procedures;
- be subject to administrative verification checks to ensure the accuracy of the procedures.

In addition, students should be clearly informed about the assessment strategy being used for their programme, what examinations or other assessment methods they will be subject to, what will be expected of them, and the criteria that will be applied to the assessment of their performance.

**Furthermore, criteria and procedures for the recognition of prior learning should be defined and become transparent for students.**

### **1.4 Quality assurance of teaching staff**

#### **STANDARD:**

Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved with the teaching of students is qualified and competent to do so. They should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.

#### **GUIDELINES:**

Teachers are the single most important learning resource available to most students.

It is important that those who teach have a full knowledge and understanding of the subject they are teaching, have the necessary skills and experience to transmit their knowledge and understanding effectively to students in a range of teaching contexts, and can access feedback on their own performance. Institutions should ensure that their staff recruitment and appointment procedures include a means of making certain that all new staff have at least the minimum

necessary level of competence. Teaching staff should be given opportunities to develop and extend their teaching capacity and should be encouraged to value their skills. Institutions should provide poor teachers with opportunities to improve their skills to an acceptable level and should have the means to remove them from their teaching duties if they continue to be demonstrably ineffective.

### **1.5 Learning resources and student support**

#### **STANDARD:**

Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

#### **GUIDELINES:**

In addition to their teachers, students rely on a range of resources to assist their learning. These vary from physical resources such as libraries or computing facilities to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors, and other advisers. Learning resources and other support mechanisms should be readily accessible to students, designed with their **diverse** needs in mind and responsive to feedback from those who use the services provided. Institutions should routinely monitor, review and improve the effectiveness of the support services available to their students.

### **1.6 Information systems**

#### **STANDARD:**

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.

#### **GUIDELINES:**

Institutional self-knowledge is the starting point for effective quality assurance. It is important that institutions have the means of collecting and analysing information about their own activities. Without this they will not know what is working well and what needs attention, or the results of innovatory practices.

The quality-related information systems required by individual institutions will depend to some extent on local circumstances, but it is at least expected to cover:

- student progression and success rates;
- employability of graduates;
- students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- effectiveness of teachers;
- profile of the student population;
- learning resources available and their costs;
- the institution's own key performance indicators.

There is also value in institutions comparing themselves with other similar organisations within the EHEA and beyond. This allows them to extend the range of their self-knowledge and to access possible ways of improving their own performance.

### **1.7 Public information**

#### **STANDARD:**

Institutions should regularly publish up to date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

#### **GUIDELINES:**

In fulfilment of their public role, higher education institutions **and other providers** have a responsibility to provide information about the programmes they are offering, the intended learning outcomes of these, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, and the learning opportunities available to their students. Published information might also include the views and employment destinations of past students and the profile of the current student population. This information should be accurate, impartial, objective and readily

accessible and should not be used simply as a marketing opportunity. The institution should verify that it meets its own expectations in respect of impartiality and objectivity.

## Part 2: European standards and guidelines for the external quality assurance of higher education

### 2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures

#### STANDARD:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

#### GUIDELINES:

The standards for internal quality assurance contained in Part 1 provide a valuable basis for the external quality assessment process. It is important that the institutions' own internal policies and procedures are carefully evaluated in the course of external procedures, to determine the extent to which the standards are being met.

If higher education institutions **and other providers** are to be able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards, then external processes might be less intensive than otherwise.

### 2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes

#### STANDARD:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions **and other providers**) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

#### GUIDELINES:

In order to ensure clarity of purpose and transparency of procedures, external quality assurance methods should be designed and developed through a process involving key stakeholders, including higher education institutions **and other providers**. The procedures that are finally agreed should be published and should contain explicit statements of the aims and objectives of the processes as well as a description of the procedures to be used.

As external quality assurance makes demands on the institutions involved, a preliminary impact assessment should be undertaken to ensure that the procedures to be adopted are appropriate and do not interfere more than necessary with the normal work of higher education institutions **and other providers**.

### 2.3 Criteria for decisions

#### STANDARD:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

#### GUIDELINES:

Formal decisions made by quality assurance agencies have a significant impact on the institutions and programmes that are judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, decisions should be based on published criteria and interpreted in a consistent manner. Conclusions should be based on recorded evidence and agencies should have in place ways of moderating conclusions, if necessary.

## **2.4 Processes fit for purpose**

### **STANDARD:**

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

### **GUIDELINES:**

Quality assurance agencies within the EHEA undertake different external processes for different purposes and in different ways. It is of the first importance that agencies should operate procedures which are fit for their own defined and published purposes.

Experience has shown, however, that there are some widely-used elements of external review processes which not only help to ensure their validity, reliability and usefulness, but also provide a basis for the European dimension to quality assurance.

Amongst these elements the following are particularly noteworthy:

- insistence that the experts undertaking the external quality assurance activity have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- the exercise of care in the selection of experts;
- the provision of appropriate briefing or training for experts;
- the use of international experts;
- participation of students;
- ensuring that the review procedures used are sufficient to provide adequate evidence to support the findings and conclusions reached;
- the use of the self-evaluation/site visit/draft report/published report/follow-up
- model of review;
- recognition of the importance of institutional improvement and enhancement
- policies as a fundamental element in the assurance of quality.

## **2.5 Reporting**

### **STANDARD:**

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

### **GUIDELINES:**

In order to ensure maximum benefit from external quality assurance processes, it is important that reports should meet the identified needs of the intended readership.

Reports are sometimes intended for different readership groups and this will require careful attention to structure, content, style and tone.

In general, reports should be structured to cover description, analysis (including relevant evidence), conclusions, commendations, and recommendations. There should be sufficient preliminary explanation to enable a lay reader to understand the purposes of the review, its form, and the criteria used in making decisions. Key findings, conclusions and recommendations should be easily locatable by readers.

Reports should be published in a readily accessible form and there should be opportunities for readers and users of the reports (both within the relevant institution and outside it) to comment on their usefulness.



## **2.6 Follow-up procedures**

### **STANDARD:**

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

### **GUIDELINES:**

Quality assurance is not principally about individual external scrutiny events: It should be about continuously trying to do a better job. External quality assurance does not end with the publication of the report and should include a structured follow-up procedure to ensure that recommendations are dealt with appropriately and any required action plans drawn up and implemented. This may involve further meetings with institutional or programme representatives. The objective is to ensure that areas identified for improvement are dealt with speedily and that further enhancement is encouraged.

## **2.7 Periodic reviews**

### **STANDARD:**

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

### **GUIDELINES:**

Quality assurance is not a static but a dynamic process. It should be continuous and not “once in a lifetime”. It does not end with the first review or with the completion of the formal follow-up procedure. It has to be periodically renewed. Subsequent external reviews should take into account progress that has been made since the previous event. The process to be used in all external reviews should be clearly defined by the external quality assurance agency and its demands on institutions should not be greater than are necessary for the achievement of its objectives.

## **2.8 System-wide analyses**

### **STANDARD:**

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments, etc.

### **GUIDELINES:**

All external quality assurance agencies collect a wealth of information about individual programmes and/or institutions and this provides material for structured analyses across whole higher education systems. Such analyses can provide very useful information about developments, trends, emerging good practice and areas of persistent difficulty or weakness and can become useful tools for policy development and quality enhancement. Agencies should consider including a research and development function within their activities, to help them extract maximum benefit from their work.

## **Part 3: European standards and guidelines for external quality assurance agencies**

**No amendments.**

## Attachment

### List of Working Group Members

	<b>Name</b>	<b>Organisation</b>	<b>Country</b>
1	Birke, Barbara	AQ Austria	Austria
2	Heath, Simon	EAALS	France
3	Kaja, Anduela	PAAHE	Albania
4	Karafistan, Aysel	YÖDAK	Cyprus
5	Karakhanyan, Susanna	ANQA	Armenia
6	Kettenhofen, Claudia	ACQUIN	Germany
7	Korn, Annette	FIBAA	Germany
8	Lauk, Petra	OAQ	Switzerland
9	Lugano, Nathalie	ENQA	Belgium
10	Mitchell, Jayne	AQA	UK
11	Motoki, Daisuke (Chair)	FIBAA	Germany
12	Möhren, Jana	ASIIN	Germany
13	Pernot, François	AERES	France
14	See, Wolf	EMTRAIN	Austria
15	Topchyan, Ruben	ANQA	Armenia