

## Working on the European Dimension of Quality



# **Working on the European Dimension of Quality**

*Report of the conference on quality assurance in  
higher education as part of the Bologna process,  
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# 1 Working on the European Dimension of Quality

Marlies Leegwater<sup>1</sup> & Noël Vercruyse<sup>2</sup>

## 1.1 Why a Conference 'Working on the European Dimension of Quality'?

In 1999, 31 ministers of Education or their representatives, speaking for 29 European countries, signed the Bologna Declaration. It aimed at promoting a structure of higher education based on two cycles, in order to create transparency for mobility and employability. Since then, throughout Europe, countries with various traditions of higher education have been transforming their system actively into a transparent two-cycle ('bachelor-master') structure.

In each country, the transformation is laid down in laws and regulations. On the one hand, legislation is very much a national process, connected with national education systems and legal and political environments. On the other hand, transparency concerning the quality of the various bachelor and master programmes requires international co-operation regarding criteria for quality.

In the Netherlands, at the moment of signing the Bologna Declaration, a system of quality assessment had been functioning for over 10 years. It consists of peer reviews of all higher education programmes and publication of the results (see e.g. Vroeijerstijn, 1995; Westerheijden, 1997). Complementing this system of quality assessment, independent accreditation will be introduced in 2003 to transform the situation in

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<sup>2</sup> Ministry of Education and Training, Flanders.

such a way that positive statements on proven quality can be given, at the same time opening up the system to all kinds of providers of higher education. In Flanders, where a similar system of quality assurance functions, such a transformation was likewise considered desirable in view of the emerging European higher education space. Therefore, further policy development on quality assurance in higher education has taken place in co-operation between the two governments.

When preparing the actual accreditation and descriptors for quality, which was done in co-operation between the Netherlands and Flanders, the question arose where to draw the line of positively judged bachelor and master programmes. This question was discussed with several other countries with comparable quality assurance systems. It resulted in attention for the issue of the quality of higher education at the ministerial meeting in Prague, May 2001, which focussed on the follow-up of the Bologna declaration. The Prague communiqué (2001) called upon various actors:

- to co-operate in quality assurance;
- to design scenarios for mutual acceptance of evaluation and accreditation/certification mechanisms;
- to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference;
- to disseminate best practice.

At the Prague meeting the ministers of Flanders and the Netherlands announced to organise a conference on the issue of quality assurance. In September 2001 the outcomes of the consultation of various countries was studied in a joint meeting in Maastricht. Representatives of quality assurance agencies and of governments agreed that common problems were faced, that cross border activities in perspective of quality assurance should be promoted and that an action programme was welcomed. Those present preferred action to words or paper. Progress was expected from pragmatic and practical projects designed on the principle of 'learning by doing'. A future agenda was to be drawn up and should exist of common projects that met the demands dictated by the needs of individual participants. At the same time it was considered important to be open about the actions to all parties involved in the Bologna process. That was the onset of the *Joint Quality Initiative*. Actions undertaken included a comparison of concepts of accreditation as operating or proposed in Europe, a review of examples of cross border quality

assessment of programmes, and comparison of existing and proposed descriptors, which resulted in a statement of shared descriptors for bachelor and master programmes. By focusing on what is shared, there appeared to be room for a common approach of the countries and agencies represented in the *Joint Quality Initiative*, with potential to grow into a European approach.

As announced during the ministerial meeting in Prague, the conference to focus on the internationalisation of quality assurance as part of the Bologna process was organised in Amsterdam, March 2002. The aim of the conference was to present various developments in quality assurance of higher education and its internationalisation in Europe, also in perspective of developments beyond the European higher education area. At the conference various actors gave an overview of a variety of activities at various levels. And room was provided to discuss these in the perspective of the chosen theme *working on the European dimension of quality*.

## 1.2 Brief Overview of This Volume

In this book, the contributions of the hosting ministers and of various distinguished guest speakers are brought together. After this preface on the background of the conference, the book starts with the introductory keynote of minister Vanderpoorten followed by a general overview of developments and a reflection from the USA. Then the shared descriptors for bachelor and masters as originating from the joint quality initiative are presented and an overview of how similar descriptors could be generated at the programme level in various fields of knowledge by higher education institutions co-operating internationally in the so-called *Tuning* project.

Next to these presentations there was room for reflection on the opportunities of quality assurance at the programme and institutional levels. The lively debate led to theses, described in the penultimate chapter. The book ends with the final keynote of Minister Hermans.

The book is both a report about the Amsterdam conference to the ministerial follow up meeting in the Bologna process, in Berlin, September 2003, and an invitation to join hands in pragmatic activities towards the goal of a transparent system of higher education of high quality throughout Europe.

## 2 Opening of the Conference 'Working on the European Dimension of Quality'

Marleen Vanderpoorten<sup>1</sup>

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to welcome you all, on behalf of the Dutch and Flemish Governments, to this international conference on the European dimension of quality in higher education. We are very happy indeed that such a large group of experts and delegates have answered our invitation and have come to the beautiful city of Amsterdam to discuss possible avenues of action in the field of international quality assurance and accreditation.

Let me first explain briefly the history of the Joint Quality Initiative, the project behind this conference. Almost three years have passed now since the Bologna Declaration was signed. Many countries are in the midst of implementing the Declaration into their national higher education systems and legislation. In the Netherlands, quite recently two important bills—on the bachelor–master degree structure and on accreditation—were approved in one chamber of the Parliament and are now under consideration in the Senate. In Flanders, a draft law is on the table of the government at the end of March 2002. We sincerely hope and expect that a joint Dutch-Flemish accreditation agency can start very soon.

However, legislation is one thing, shaping a true European space of higher education in practice is still another challenge. It is the richness of the Bologna Process that it is not only a matter of national legislation, but

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<sup>1</sup> Minister of Education and Training, Flemish Community, Belgium.

increasingly also about developing shared ideas and concepts, exchanging viewpoints and gradually building convergence.

From the beginning, my Dutch colleague, Minister Hermans, and myself have considered the quality issue as one of the main challenges in the Bologna Process. Implementing a common degree structure of course is important, but even more important is establishing a quality assurance system that can support the legitimacy and credibility of these degrees internationally, in Europe but also in the global context. In the perspective of our two, comparatively small countries, the international dimension is absolutely fundamental. Not only the Bologna Process as such, but also the more general process of globalisation forces us to step out of the relatively safe environment of the national frameworks and to engage without hesitation in a truly international approach of quality assurance and accreditation. National quality assurance systems, developed in the nineties, may have been sufficient for matters of national acceptance of degrees, but in the context of Bologna and globalisation a purely national approach to quality assurance no longer is the right answer to the challenges of international validity and credibility of degrees. That is why we have agreed to develop a Dutch-Flemish public accreditation agency, as a kind of nucleus that can be developed further in years to come.

Of course, many factors hinder the development of international quality assurance. The legitimacy of agencies is defined within the context of national legal and policy frameworks; many universities and higher education institutions look at national governments for funding and therefore feel accountable only to national authorities; often, we neither have the same definitions of quality, nor the same methodological approaches to quality assurance and accreditation, etc. Reflecting an old resistance in education to transfer policies to the transnational level in Europe, many still feel that education as a public responsibility is to be regulated at the national, even the regional and local policy-making levels and not at the transnational level. However, things have changed dramatically and the pace of change still will increase in the coming years. When I look at universities themselves, I see many signs that they increasingly consider themselves to be operating on an international scale, especially in research but increasingly also in teaching and learning activities. The professional world is internationalising also at a very fast pace. Bologna of course has accelerated the development of

internationalisation. The quality assurance field does not have the luxurious position to be able to afford to wait and see. The legitimacy and credibility of degrees, and the underlying quality of the work of higher education institutions will be evaluated by the international market and the globalising professions anyway. So, the issue of internationalising quality assurance and accreditation also has to do with upholding an academic approach and a 'public good'-approach to quality assurance in an internationalising environment.

The Joint Quality Initiative, for which the basis has been laid in the Maastricht seminar of 24–25 September 2001, is meant as a real project of collaboration and development in the field of international quality assurance and accreditation. I am very happy to see that in the past months several actions already have been set up. At this conference we will hear reports from the various meetings that have taken place in the context of this project and the Bologna Process in general. I sincerely believe that the issue of international quality assurance and accreditation can be promoted and developed best by collaborative in-depth work by experts of all parties involved, and that is precisely what has been done in the past months. During this conference, in the reports of the meeting and especially in the working groups we will have the opportunity to take this work further.

As one of the inviting ministers, I must stress that my colleague Hermans and myself, do not have a fixed agenda, and certainly not a 'hidden' one. We see various possible outcomes. We do not hide our ambition that we would welcome it very much when another country would decide to co-operate structurally in the establishment of a joint, transnational accreditation agency, but that is neither the overarching goal of the Joint Quality Initiative nor of the conference. We simply think that it is our responsibility within the Bologna Process to advance co-operation in the field of quality assurance and accreditation. Personally, I think that quality will come to the forefront of the Bologna Process in the period between Prague and Berlin. Whereas the introduction of the bachelor–master degree structure has attracted a lot of attention in the first years of the Bologna Process, quality assurance and accreditation definitely will come to the centre in the next phase. We see our work within the Joint Quality Initiative as a contribution to this and we hope that we can give an inspiring and challenging message to the whole of the Bologna community during the Berlin ministerial conference in

September 2003. This means that your work at this conference is very important. If we can make significant progress in the field of international quality assurance and accreditation, this will result in an important message to the rest of Europe.

Ladies and gentlemen, you see that we put a great deal of trust and expectation in you. The quality of the programme and, especially, the quality of our guests guarantee us the best possible outcomes. I am very interested in the results of these two days and I wish you all a very inspiring, creative and challenging conference. Thank you for your attention.

### **3 Movements towards a European Dimension in Quality Assurance and Accreditation**

**Don F. Westerheijden<sup>1</sup>**

#### **3.1 Introductory Remark**

Since the publication of the Sorbonne Declaration in 1998 and especially of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the previously rather sedate area of quality assessment seems to have entered a series of rapids, jolting it in different directions but within a strong general current of increasing European harmonisation. In that discussion, quality seems to take a central place, without having been mentioned extensively in the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations themselves. And without a definition of quality's 'European Dimension'. The current chapter is intended to indicate the context in which current European initiatives regarding quality assessment in higher education are operating.

#### **3.2 The Globalisation Challenge: The WTO Agenda**

The widest possible context for any phenomenon in higher education, and a buzzword at the same time, is provided by 'globalisation'. What meanings can be given to it, is a question leading to an almost endless academic debate, which I should like to cut short by focusing on one practical element of it, namely the policy developments around the World Trade Organisation, focusing on the negotiations around the

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General Agreement on Trade in Services. These are bound to have an impact on the way higher education will be behaving around the world in a few years from now—or sooner.

### 3.2.1 GATS: *General Agreement on Trade in Services*

The World Trade Organisation is discussing extending the 1994 General Agreement on Trade in Services to areas not yet brought under the regime of international trade regulation (Jouen, Fouilhoux, Fredriksson, & Baunay, 1999). The GATS agreement is an enlargement from the forerunner of the WTO, the GATT (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs), which heralded in the era of post-World War II free trade. The enlargement consists of the addition of *services* to *trade*, which apparently was focused more on the mid-twentieth-century industrial economy and its tangible goods. The two basic principles governing GATS are (Larsen, Morris, & Martin, 2001):

- the *national treatment principle*, which means that foreign service providers should be treated equal to national ones, and
- the *most-favoured nation principle*, meaning that discrimination between foreign service providers is prohibited.

The relevant question from our point of view then becomes: Is education a service? The answer that should be given to this question is of the ‘Yes, but...’ type—the ‘but’ being that it is debated whether education, and especially higher education, is a public good that should be exempted from trade perspectives. Various views on this issue are possible, in my opinion pivoting around whether the focus of the discourse is on ‘initial’ or on ‘post-initial’ higher education.

By ‘initial’ higher education I mean—as customary in Dutch higher education policy, but apparently not well known in other languages—the first programme entrants into the higher education system go through. The important distinction is that this first encounter with higher education indeed has characteristics of an ‘initiation’, especially for first-generation entrants in higher education.<sup>2</sup> It has what i.a. Harvey called a

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<sup>2</sup> First-generation entrants are numerous due to the rapid ‘democratisation’ or ‘massification’ of participation in higher education since some decades.

'transformation' function.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the USA delegation to the WTO targets 'post-initial' higher education as its proposals are focused on postgraduate 'job training'. It can well be maintained that one of the functions of 'initiation' in higher education is to make young adolescents for whom many, sometimes esoteric distinctions current in academe are meaningless, into well-informed consumers,<sup>4</sup> who know what the market of higher education programmes has to offer, where to get the best education. When they enter a second programme, they are much more aware of the 'service' they are 'purchasing'. At this level, then, service market mechanisms can be expected to function in a 'business as usual' manner. However, the distinction between initial and post-initial higher education is analytical. On the one hand, postgraduate programmes by definition are post-initial. On the other hand, programmes at undergraduate levels can be students' initial experiences in higher education, but they can equally be followed by students who re-enter higher education in life-long learning (broadening rather than deepening their knowledge). It all depends on the situation of the student, not on the definition of the programme.

### 3.2.2 *Who are the Actors?*

The WTO is an inter-governmental organisation; in that sense, the governments are the actors on the globalisation scene. More precisely, the governmental delegations, almost invariably made up of representatives from trade and economics ministries, are the actors—ministries of education until now were conspicuously absent in the GATS negotiations even if they included education. Which they were only rarely, as other service sectors are much more important for international trade. The

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<sup>3</sup> Harvey's 'transformation argument' (Harvey & Green, 1993; Harvey & Knight, 1996) holds that the aim of education is to 'transform' or 'empower' pupils and students, so that they will have different perspectives, including different preferences, after going through an (extended) educational programme.

<sup>4</sup> Invariably, students protest against being called 'consumers'. I should like to point out that by analysing the relation between providers of higher education and students *as if* they were suppliers and consumers, I am applying a partial, theoretical analysis. All theoretical analyses are of an *as if* nature (Friedman, 1953; Popper, 1980), and they do not imply a reductionist ontology that students would be nothing but consumers—on the contrary.

banking sector is the most obvious example. Nevertheless, education and especially higher education already are major export sectors for some countries, especially for the USA, the United Kingdom. In recent years, Australia has joined this category of large-scale higher education exporting countries (van Vught, van der Wende, & Westerheijden, 2002).

Governments interact in the WTO for a typical government responsibility, namely to regulate (international) markets. Governments as a rule are not active on the global higher education market themselves as providers. The real actors on the global higher education market are higher education institutions (public *and* private), and also the virtual or online universities that are appearing everywhere, the corporate ‘universities’, and especially—obfuscating any attempt at categorising—their hybrids, consortia, etc. (Westerheijden, 2000). It is important to observe that the actors, i.e. the higher education providers, decide autonomously to be ‘global players’, or not. Some higher education providers indeed are active as global players, others—including a good number of well-regarded public universities—find a decent way of survival as regional or national higher education institutions. I shall return to this in my *intermezzi*.

### 3.3 The Bologna Declaration, 1999

#### 3.3.1 *Rationales, and Role for Quality Assessment*

For the readers, it will hardly be necessary to explain the Bologna Declaration. In the light of my beginning with the globalisation context, let me remind the readers of the two main *rationales* for the Bologna Declaration (van Vught et al., 2002; van der Wende, 2000):

- To increase ‘the international competitiveness of the European system of higher education’ (*Bologna Declaration, 1999*) in the world market, after losing the leading position to the United States and seeing e.g. Australia and the United Kingdom<sup>5</sup> becoming main higher education exporters as well.

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<sup>5</sup> Interestingly, the UK is at the same time a ‘founding member’ of the Sorbonne and Bologna Declarations.

- To promote mobility within Europe ‘by overcoming obstacles’ both for the graduate labour market and for students during their studies.<sup>6</sup>

### Structural Reforms

The main mechanism to realise these objectives is a large-scale harmonisation of higher education systems across Europe to introduce ‘a system essentially based on two main cycles, undergraduate and graduate’. In popular parlance, a ‘bachelor’-‘master’ model.<sup>7</sup> In a number of countries, we observe that the signing of the Sorbonne and Bologna declarations has led to large-scale restructuring of the higher education system.

Among the signatories of the Sorbonne Declaration, France and the United Kingdom already had a higher education system based on two cycles (with the necessary complications), while the other two, Germany and Italy, saw international pressure as a major opportunity to restructure their higher education systems that were ridden with problems of long time to degree for students, high drop-out rates, and diminishing international attractiveness. This points to the main pattern visible: each country uses these international declarations for its own, internal higher education policy problems. Accordingly, they use them in different ways. One might even say that there are as many declarations as there are countries signing them. In a way, that is typical of diplomatic compromise decisions.

A second pattern arises if we look at large as against small countries. Broadly stated, large countries follow their internal agenda, while in small countries the issue of international compatibility is more important. Thus, the lack of structural change because of the Bologna Declaration in large countries like France and the United Kingdom. Similarly, Germany and Italy initiated change mainly for internal reasons. On the other hand, the restructuring of basically a single-cycle

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<sup>6</sup> That the petty obstacles of national regulations are among the most persistent problems in cross-border co-operation, was shown *inter alia* in a recent study involving the Netherlands, Flanders and parts of Germany (Westerheijden & Klemperer, 2002).

<sup>7</sup> As the Bologna Declaration puts it, ‘The second cycle should lead to the master and/or doctorate degree as in many European countries.’ In quite a few European countries, however, the doctorate degree is the third cycle, which seems to be unaffected—indeed, undiscussed—by the Bologna Process.

system in a small country like the Netherlands to two cycles is argued on grounds of compatibility and 'readability', even though within the country there was not much reason for such a radical change.

Third, the East–West continuum seems to be relevant here. On the whole, Western European higher education appears to be more self-assured, while in Central and Eastern Europe, the fall of the Wall in 1989 has led to a long period of transition and insecurity. Old-time, communist standards were abandoned, and new fixed points were sought as models for transformation. It was difficult for Western advisors to have to explain throughout the 1990s and throughout the region that, at least until now, *'the European standard'* for higher education did not exist. The Central and Eastern European countries, however had an advantage over the West, in that, since they were transforming anyway, they could also relatively easily transform their structure of higher education, so that 'bachelor' and 'master' level degrees were introduced in many of these countries *before* the Bologna Declaration.<sup>8</sup> Also, practically all Central and Eastern European countries in the 1990s introduced quality assessment and accreditation systems in the framework of their transition (Westerheijden, 2001).

At this point, it is interesting to contrast the Bologna approach with the WTO agenda (cf. also van Vught et al., 2002). The Bologna process is based on governmental reform of higher education systems—easily thought of as *public* higher education systems. The new diversification of providers, mentioned above, seems to remain out of view in this process. Moreover, by putting priority on governmental reforms, the (public) higher education institutions in the Bologna process are seen as instruments of government policy, not autonomous actors as in the WTO agenda.

The first main aim to be reached by this reform to mainly a two-cycle structure is to arrive at 'comparable degrees' across the European area of higher education. But what does 'comparable' mean? In a 'maximum interpretation', it could mean 'similar degrees', i.e. leading to graduates

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<sup>8</sup> To my impression, countries in Central and Eastern Europe found that their degree structures, changed after the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, did not need major adaptation as there were 'bachelor'-type and 'master'-type degrees, even if these were parallel tracks (often in separate higher education institutions), not consecutive cycles as suggested in the Bologna Declaration.

who are exchangeable on the labour market. In a 'minimum interpretation', it could mean no more than that degrees can be compared, e.g. by defining a number of dimensions or continua that can be used for their analysis. Perhaps there were diplomatic reasons, i.e. a degree of ambiguity, needed to attain the compromise of the Bologna Declaration. Yet it seems to me that to reach mobility without (too many) barriers, some degree of similarity must be aimed at in order to make the competencies of foreign graduates at least a partial substitute at any country's labour market, or in the selection process for admission to graduate studies.

Whatever the interpretation of 'comparable', a dramatic increase of international transparency is needed as a result of this aim in the Bologna Declaration. The role for quality assessment in this framework could well be defined as being the mechanism that could provide this much-needed transparency.<sup>9</sup> However, the Bologna Declaration is conspicuously vague about quality assurance. All it says is: 'Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to develop comparable criteria and methodologies'. Diplomatic ambiguity abounds in this statement, in almost every word if one looks for it, but especially in the final part beginning with 'with a view'. First, the 'view' may be close or remote; the final date for the Bologna Process is known to be 2010, but can Europe wait that long to begin developing 'comparable criteria and methodologies' if other aims of the Bologna Declaration are to be reached by that date? And in the last phrase, one can question the use of 'comparable' again, next to wondering whether the emphasis will be on 'criteria' (of what?) or on 'methodologies' (for what?). The first place to look for clarification is the follow-up conference held in Prague, May 2001.

### 3.3.2 *Follow-Up Conference: Prague, May 2001*

To begin with, it can be noticed that the communique from the Prague Conference carries no big changes from what was said in Bologna. It is

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<sup>9</sup> By way of quick definitions, I use 'quality assessment' to denote the (internal and/or external) judgement of quality. 'Quality assurance' is used then as the function of ascertaining to other actors that there is quality. The activities that higher education institutions perform for this assurance, I call 'quality management' (or 'quality work').

restated, more explicit than ever, that 'higher education is perceived as a *public good* and governments are the agents in society that are responsible for providing public goods' (*Prague Communiqué*, 2001, emphasis added—DFW).

With regard to quality assessment, the phrase is much longer than the one in Bologna:

Ministers recognized the vital role that quality assurance systems play in ensuring high quality standards and in facilitating the comparability of qualifications throughout Europe. They also encouraged closer cooperation between recognition and quality assurance networks. They emphasized the necessity of close European cooperation and mutual trust in and acceptance of national quality assurance systems. Further they encouraged universities and other higher education institutions to disseminate examples of best practice and to design scenarios for mutual acceptance of evaluation and accreditation/ certification mechanisms. Ministers called upon the universities and other higher education institutions, national agencies and the European Network of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in cooperation with corresponding bodies from countries which are not members of ENQA, to collaborate in establishing a common framework of reference and to disseminate best practice.

The link between recognition issues and quality issues on the international scene is recognised by the Ministers of Education, and they import from the recognition discussion the notions of mutual trust and acceptance—as if these were the same, *quod non*. Moreover, these terms are transposed from the individual degree holder level to the level of quality assurance systems. Which implies making a number of (heroic) assumptions, especially:

- quality assurance systems inform about the quality of degrees;
- graduates with a similar degree are comparable with each other;
- the information delivered by quality assurance systems is relevant to the labour market or to higher education institutions considering accepting candidates for further studies, e.g. bachelor degree-holders applying for master's studies.

Next, the Ministers twice invite the higher education institutions (once together with ENQA and others) to disseminate best practices, apparently

adding a ‘bottom–up’ approach to the governmental, ‘top–down’ reforms. Yet the main initiative seems to be the ‘top–down’ approach of co-operation to be co-ordinated by ENQA to establish ‘a common framework of reference’. Continuing the diplomatic phrasings, it is left in the dark *what* is to be referenced by this framework: criteria, methodologies (the options mentioned in Bologna), or something else? As will be shown below, the actors on the European scene are acting to clarify this spot of darkness. But first I should like to pause and reflect on what the developments mentioned until now imply for the design of a European dimension of quality assurance.

### 3.4 Intermezzo 1: Some Design Requirements for Quality Assessment After Bologna and WTO

With its stress on attracting students, and on mobility for students and degree holders, the Bologna Declaration implies at least two design requirements for quality assessment systems that could fulfil their role in this process (for a longer list, cf. Westerheijden & van der Wende, 2001).

1. The object of evaluation has to be the *degree*. While recognising that the quality management (or synonymously: quality assurance) by the higher education institution is an important factor in ascertaining quality education, the focus in the Bologna process—and the prime responsibility of governments as protectors of the citizens’ (including students’) interests—is on what students get out of the higher education system, i.e. on the degree.
2. Europe-wide *transparency*. The results of quality assessment processes need to be understood across the ‘Bologna Area’. While this already seems to be a challenge for the professionals involved in quality assessment or in recognition of degrees across Europe, transparency is even more difficult to attain in the eyes of the external stakeholders in education, such as employers of graduates and especially the (potential) students. As mentioned before, academic distinctions may be too esoteric for external stakeholders; robust knowledge, economical to acquire, must be aimed at.

In the light of the slow and cumbersome GATS negotiations of the WTO, it may be audacious to think of design requirements resulting from them. Yet, the following two basic principles underlying the general operation

of the WTO regime will have to be accommodated, whatever the final outcome of further GATS negotiations.

3. *Fair competition.* Quality assessment systems should not discriminate between national and foreign providers of higher education, nor between public and private ones.
4. *Consumer protection against substandard programmes.* In their role of guardians of the common weal, governments may feel that it is their responsibility to ascertain that their citizens (students) will not spend time, energy and money (from public funds) on 'rogue' higher education provision.

How do such design rules (or rather: boundary conditions), lead to a 'European dimension' in quality assessment? For instance, the international dimension of quality assessment systems can be sought in:

- applying internationally-agreed criteria,
- including internationalisation of the curriculum in the assessment criteria,
- using international units (programmes, institutions) as comparators,
- involving evaluators from international background.<sup>10</sup>

Rule 1, focusing on degrees, makes a methodological choice in that it is not the higher education institution that is being focused. The phrasing of 'degree' rather than 'programme' is intentional, because it implies a further focus on 'output quality' rather than 'input quality' or 'process quality', which are often at the centre of attention in current programme-oriented quality assessment systems. Politically, a focus on output quality at the degree level has the consequence that the quality assessment system is less directly bound to (national) regulatory frameworks than if input quality (funding, staffing, etc.) or process quality (curriculum matters) were being assessed. Loosening the tie between the object of evaluation and national institutional frameworks makes an international—e.g. a European—dimension in the quality assessment system more readily applicable by opening the door to application of internationally-agreed criteria.

Application of rule 2, calling for Europe-wide transparency, would go fairly directly in the direction of applying internationally-agreed criteria.

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<sup>10</sup> One could maintain that involving evaluators from foreign countries is a proxy to applying internationally-agreed criteria, but then without the need to make those criteria explicit—one of the strengths of peer review.

(Although a weaker form, in the ‘minimum interpretation’ of comparability, could be envisaged as well.)

Rule 3, on fair competition, would add a European dimension in the senses of promoting international comparators and of applying internationally-agreed criteria.

The final, fourth, rule about consumer protection is not about internationalisation or Europeanisation at all. I shall return to it in the next section.

Before going to that next section, let me summarise that adherence to the other three rules would result in quality assessment systems that were prone to have a strong international or European dimension in most meanings of the term: application of internationally-agreed criteria (to which, as mentioned in a footnote, involvement of international reviewers could be added), and using international comparators. It is not connected to assessing internationalisation of the curriculum.

### 3.5 Intermezzo 2: Some Dilemmas in Accreditation

For many decision-makers in European higher education, accreditation seemed to be *the* answer to the Bologna challenge, without—judging on the basis of its sudden popularity after June 1999—much of a survey of alternative policy options. Let me reassure them: even after looking further, accreditation does seem to be a major option. Amongst others, accreditation has the advantage, not just to higher education decision-makers but also to external stakeholders, of *prima facie* credibility, robustness and efficiency of information. That is due to the distinguishing characteristic of accreditation, viz. the fact that a judgement of quality is summarised in a single, simple statement, sometimes in the form of a grade (‘8 out of 10’) but more often as a binary (‘yes/no’) statement (Adelman, 1992; Sursock, 2001; Westerheijden, 2001; Young & associates, 1983).

Another arguments in favour of accreditation are that it gives more transparency, compared with the (formative) quality assessment that was *en vogue* during the 1990s. This too is due, in part, to the summary judgement, which often was lacking in Western European quality assessment practices (Brennan, El-Khawas, & Shah, 1994; Westerheijden, 1997). For another part it is due to the fact that as a rule accreditation judgements are made in the light of predefined, published criteria.

A final argument in favour of accreditation is that it gives better consumer protection than the traditional Western European quality assessment, because a fixed quality threshold is put in, under which accreditation is not given. Of course, it can be debated whether the threshold is sufficiently high, whether it is relevant, and whether the higher education provision most at risk will be covered by it. Here, however, we get to the negative aspects of accreditation.

Indeed, there are disadvantages to accreditation, which should not be brushed aside lightly. First, there are methodical disadvantages associated with the predefined criteria. They would lead to increasing homogeneity instead of the diversity of approaches and competencies needed in the present-day 'massified' higher education systems and in the emerging knowledge economy. Besides, adaptation of published criteria is a time-consuming process, so that accreditation continuously runs the risk of falling behind the state of the art. Then again, accreditation criteria tend to be a compromise among the participants in the decision-making process of the accreditation organisation, leading to the criteria being a *communis opinio*, but not being challenging for the development of the best programmes or units. Finally, as accreditation judgements are based on passing threshold criteria, they would tend to discourage innovation and quality improvement. Innovative approaches to accreditation criteria and processes can overcome such disadvantages at least partly, as shown, e.g., in current practices in European EQUIS ([www.efmd.be](http://www.efmd.be)), in American engineering accreditor ABET ([www.abet.org/eac/eac2000.htm](http://www.abet.org/eac/eac2000.htm)), as well as in US regional accreditor WASC ([www.wascweb.org](http://www.wascweb.org)).

I should like to focus, however, on two other disadvantages of accreditation. The first of these is expressed in the following dilemma: 'without the expectation of real consequences, the incentives to organise quality assessment are lacking; with the expectation of real consequences, quality assessment will turn into a power game' (Westerheijden, 1990, p. 206).<sup>11</sup> With the introduction of accreditation and the very real consequences often associated with it such as recognition of degrees and eligibility for funding, the stakes of the quality game

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<sup>11</sup> This is a consequence of Heisenberg's *uncertainty principle*, reputedly introduced in social science discourse first by Campbell (Campbell, 1975; for a more ironic application cf. Westerheijden, 1999).

become distinctly higher than before. Accordingly, the risk of strategic game behaviour rises considerably.

The other is that because of all of this, the dynamics of the evaluation process change. First, there is a change in the role of the self-evaluation of higher education institution. If in formative quality assessment a real self-evaluation is possible (which however is already doubtful, cf. Harvey & Knight, 1996; Verkleij & Westerheijden, forthcoming), in a strategic game to gain accreditation it tends to become pure 'self-selling' (Frazer, 1997). Weak points that could put accreditation in jeopardy would be hidden as far as possible.<sup>12</sup> By the same token, the role of external reviewers changes from peers (as equals in the disciplinary field) or consultants with whom quality problems and improvements can be discussed into experts who have superior knowledge of the accreditation criteria and who must act as judges in an inquisitive process to discover the reality behind the façade of what possibly is a 'self-selling' report. Consequently, I sincerely doubt the possibility of maintaining the quality improvement aspect of external quality assessment in an accreditation system, although that is the official goal in *inter alia* the Dutch accreditation organ to be introduced in 2003.

### 3.6 Intermezzo 3: Looking from a Different Angle: How Might the European Higher Education Area Work?

Until now, we have been looking from the 'supply side' mostly: how should quality assessment (or accreditation) in higher education be designed? The ultimate question, of course, is: What for? Is such an effort really needed in the future European higher education area, envisaged by the Bologna Declaration? My thesis is that the next steps in quality assessment, which we are now about to make in Europe, are necessitated only by the increasing internationalisation of European higher education

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<sup>12</sup> For some of the consequences of high-stakes quality assessment, see also the reactions to the Research Assessment Exercises in the UK (Curran, 2000; Elton, 2000; Henkel & Little, 1999; Mace, 2000; McNay, 1997, 1999; Talib Ameen, 2000, 2001; Thomas, 2001).

systems, in the sense that we are designing for students and graduates who will be more mobile across Europe.<sup>13</sup>

Accordingly, first I should like to take the perspective of prospective students. Let us focus on adolescents who just graduated from secondary school and who consider entering higher education. Will they take into consideration all programmes offered throughout Europe? I guess not. Common wisdom seems to be that the choice of the place where students first enter higher education in countries like the Netherlands can be explained from quality factors to a limited extent only (van Walsum, 2000). Most students opt for a convenient location within their own country. And probably, in the traditionally rather homogeneous Continental European higher education systems this is a rational choice. First of all, it still is somewhat complicated to take up studies in another country: what about study grants, living expenses, social security, etc.? And within each country, in our relatively well-regulated, public European higher education systems, quality differences for undergraduate programmes are not very large. At least, quality assessment mechanisms have not been able to show significant quality differences to the prospective students. Moreover, students right out of secondary education come to the colleges and universities for an 'initiation' into higher education, as stated before. Consequently, my expectation is that the student catch basin for undergraduate studies is mainly regional.

After acquiring their bachelor's degree, part of the students will enter the labour market. Others will continue their studies by entering a master's level programme. After their 'initiation' in undergraduate studies, they will now be 'informed consumers', with much more articulated ideas about the qualities they want in their studies: preparing them for the labour market or for a research career. At this level, then, I can see a higher degree of competition emerge at all geographical levels, from within the single institution to regional, national, European and world-wide. Competition, which may be coming from both sides: students competing for places in popular programmes, and programmes competing for the students who best fit their profiles.

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<sup>13</sup> I should like to leave out the issue of student mobility for part of their study programme. That is 'only' a matter of how students will be prepared for a more mobile career; that is just one way of internationalising the curriculum, for which ECTS is intended.

At the end of the master's phase, again a proportion of graduates—probably a quite large proportion—will enter the labour market. Others may continue to the doctoral level. The situation at the doctoral level will be similar to that at the master's level, I expect, so lie much of the discussion in Europe nowadays, I shall ignore this third level of degree programmes further on.

Something I certainly do not want to ignore is that students who enter the labour market are not lost to higher education forever. On the contrary, ideas of life-long learning increasingly seem to be taking root, and the adolescents right out of secondary education are a diminishing though still large proportion of all students in higher education. The life-long learners can be typified as 'informed consumers' to an even higher degree than those students who continue from undergraduate to graduate programmes. Indeed, the Bologna framework of two multi-year cycles may not be adequate for the needs of life-long learners, who often have a very specific demand for training in certain knowledge or skills. The British qualifications framework shows how a higher education system may struggle with this new market structure (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, 2001).

I use the market metaphor on purpose here, because life-long learners are willing to shop around in order to find a programme or module suiting their needs and tastes. And their employers often are willing to pay for such higher education provision. This is the area of higher education as a service industry ostensibly targeted by the US delegation in the GATS negotiations, mentioned before.

Another factor of importance when the labour market and life-long learning come into view is that well-educated people are increasingly willing to be internationally mobile for their careers. Accordingly, even if a higher education programme intended to cater for regional job training needs, still it would have to handle students entering the regional labour market with degrees and qualifications from different countries.

In Von Humboldt's time, around 1800, the labour market for graduates from higher education was mainly the state apparatus of a single state: higher education institutions themselves, the judiciary, and the government bureaucracy. Then, a neat correlation existed between degrees, titles and careers. Nowadays, in contrast, higher education graduates find employment mainly in the private economy. Now, therefore, we should be interested much more in the *effectus civilis* of a

higher education degree than on governmental regulations stating that such-and-such a bureaucratic post can only be occupied by someone carrying such-and-such a degree. The extent to which the *effectus civilis* depends on official regulations is different among our European countries. From my own observations, I would hypothesise that this dependence decreases if one travels from east to west. This would imply that official accreditation and recognition regulations are more important in the eastern half of Europe, while in the western half the question how to achieve trust in degrees from different study programmes may be much less dependent on quality assessment and accreditation. In short: what we are discussing at this conference may be of very limited interest to employers in multinational companies. In this part of Europe, the relevant question is how our state-sponsored quality assessment and accreditation help higher education institutions achieve their quality assurance.

### **3.7 National Responses to the Bologna Declaration Regarding Quality Assessment and Accreditation**

The end of the previous section brings me back to the question how the different countries in Europe design their quality assessment and accreditation mechanisms in response to the emerging European higher education area.

#### **3.7.1 Central and Eastern Europe**

I have argued elsewhere (Westerheijden, 2001), that the Central and Eastern European accreditation systems were introduced in reaction to a particular problem situation, namely the transformation of study programmes throughout the higher education system, and the simultaneous rise—sometimes ‘mushrooming’—of new providers of higher education. That is a different context than the one we are facing now, in the Bologna process. Accordingly, I argued that the Central and Eastern European experience of the early 1990s is of limited value for the design of new quality assessment and accreditation systems in the West, and, I should add, for the adaptation of Central and Eastern European systems to this new context. So, let us turn to some Western European countries.

### 3.7.2 Germany

Germany was the first country to start an accreditation council (*Akkreditierungsrat*) after the Sorbonne Declaration. Its main function is to recognise agencies that do the real accreditation, either on a regional or on a professional or disciplinary basis. More detail on this rapidly developing organisation can be found elsewhere ([www.akkreditierungsrat.de](http://www.akkreditierungsrat.de)). Let me highlight briefly that I think that this Council is interesting for an international audience particularly for three reasons:

- The Accreditation Council is not (so much) accrediting programmes by itself, but is limited mostly to recognising accreditation agencies. This shows a rather modest approach at the higher education system level: the Council does not try to do everything itself, but *trusts the experts*.
- The system is *open*: accreditation agencies are free to ask for recognition, without any limitation. The only limitations are, in principle, in assuring the credibility and independence of accreditation processes (see below, § 3.8.2).
- The Accreditation Council focuses on *programme accreditation*.

Admittedly, things are not all so rosy and simple (e.g. there is a focus now only on new programmes, what about re-accreditation?), but here I should like to focus just on the principles that could be seen internationally as good practice in the light of the design requirements set out above.

### 3.7.3 The Netherlands

The Netherlands introduces an accreditation system, instead of or on top of—experts are not in agreement—the quality assessment system existing since 1988, along the same principles as those in Germany (Commissie Accreditatie Hoger Onderwijs, 2001). Differences with Germany stem from the fact that all of Dutch higher education is going to be organised along the bachelor–master model shortly and the reform plans include that accreditation will be mandatory every five years for programmes:

- to award recognised bachelor and master degrees;
- to make their students eligible for study grants and loans;
- to get state funding (for public higher education institutions only).

Implicit in the above is that private higher education institutions will be included in this procedure on an equal footing with public ones, apart from the government funding. That is a way in which the Dutch higher education system will be opened up more than before for the globalisation forces.

A potential problem that comes out more clearly in the Dutch than in the German case is the question to what extent the official openness of the registry of the Accreditation Organ for foreign accreditation agencies will be realised. Will, for instance, American accreditation agencies be willing to bend their processes and standards to comply with rules of such a small country as the Netherlands?

#### 3.7.4 *Switzerland*

Next, I should like to turn to Switzerland. My reason for mentioning the recently installed Accreditation and Quality Organisation is that the Swiss chose a different approach than Germany and the Netherlands.

In the Bologna discussion, emphasis is laid on study programmes and degrees, as emphasised in the design rules, above. Such a programme or degree approach also is in line with a neo-liberal, distant position of the government—which is behind these national accreditation organs—in the higher education system, relying more on the self-organising capacity of the higher education system than on central steering and control models. It is up to the higher education institutions, in their own autonomy, to organise themselves to assure good educational ‘products’. The Swiss accreditation approach, in contrast, will be to evaluate and recognise institutional units as being of a sufficient level, especially regarding their quality management to guarantee good education. This could be interpreted as a welfare state argumentation: the state guarantees good provision. The liberal element in this arrangement is the freedom left to the student to make good use of this provision.

A question, however, is how the Swiss approach will fit in the emerging trend in Europe for degree or programme-level accreditation. The design requirements apart, will it be accepted by other ENQA-members when they make arrangements for mutual recognition of quality assessment and accreditation judgements?

### 3.7.5 *Flanders: Too Small for Own Accreditation?*

Finally in this short list, which I selected to highlight some options without making even an attempt at completeness, follows Flanders. This is the only higher education system that has had the courage to claim that is too small to maintain its own accreditation system. Rather, the Flemish decision-makers opt for co-operation with the Netherlands' Accreditation Organ. Simultaneously, this will mean that the Dutch National Accreditation Organ will not be a national organ at all, but an international one.

Considering that the Flemish community counts 6 to 7 million inhabitants, that it has 8 universities and close to 30 colleges, I wonder what would be the implications of the smallness argument for e.g. Sweden, Norway or Slovenia? Anyway, the Flemish case is mentioned here to show that a national approach is not the only option.

## 3.8 National Responses Considered

### 3.8.1 *Potential Problems*

In the previous section, I pointed to some interesting principles and different approaches, and to some potential problems inherent in these different approaches. Now I should like to address some elements of the question if national responses as such can be adequate at all in the light of the design requirements set out above.

The first question is whether national responses lead to more transparency and harmonisation in Europe, or will only the differences among national higher education systems stand out more clearly?

Earlier, I put the question what is meant by 'comparable degrees'. The answer one gives may have consequences for the answer one gives to the present question. The more one agrees with the 'minimum interpretation' that comparability means only to have dimensions of comparison, the more one may agree that articulating national frameworks for accreditation helps to make such transparency possible.

On the other hand, the more one follows the 'maximum interpretation' that sees comparability as similarity, the more one would tend to say that an agreed European framework is necessary for transparency, or harmonisation. If one takes the latter view, probably one finds that national responses will tend to bring out the national differences more

clearly, but do not solve the question whether a bachelor's degree from country *X* will be accepted by an higher education institution in country *Y* for entry into its master's programme.

Another potential problem of the development of national frameworks for judging study programmes may be that they form a pressure towards harmonisation within countries. And that at a time when—as stated before—it is claimed that diversity is needed more than ever.

### 3.8.2 *Open Accreditation Systems: Are They a Solution?*

Some of the disadvantages of accreditation, especially those connected with undue uniformity, could be evaded in what have variously been termed 'open' or 'multiple accreditation systems' (van Vught, 1994; Westerheijden & van der Wende, 2001). In an open accreditation system, study programmes (to remain close to the focus of the Bologna process) are free to choose an accreditation that suits their profile, e.g. research-oriented, or taught through PBL (Problem-Based Learning). At the same time, accreditors are free to offer their respective accreditations to the programmes. To prevent occurrence of a 'jungle of accreditations', a gatekeeper such as a national accreditation council could set methodical or similar barriers for market entry. Moreover, governments could set their own standards (preferably the same as those by the accreditation council<sup>14</sup>) before attaching their own consequences to accreditation decisions made within the system. The German and Dutch schemes mentioned above are examples of such open accreditation systems.

The freedom of accreditors to enter a higher education system in particular should ensure that for any study programme more than one option exists, so that there is not necessarily a uniformity of accreditation criteria, enabling the diversity desired in higher education systems. On the other hand, there seems to be an insurmountable tendency among higher education institution leaders to compare themselves with others along the same dimension; indicating high demand for standardisation and for single accreditation agencies per field of knowledge. The point in

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<sup>14</sup> In the USA, the umbrella organisation CHEA and the federal Department of Education use different standards for recognition, leading to slightly diverging lists of recognised accreditation agencies (Council for Higher Education Accreditation, 1999).

our proposal of an open accreditation system is that the authorities do not prescribe such standardisation, but leave it to the self-organisation of the higher education system to find its appropriate degree of diversity. If adopted in other countries too, the principle of open accreditation systems and the diversity they allow might become part of the 'European dimension' of quality assurance.

### **3.9 International Initiatives**

#### **3.9.1 *World-wide initiatives***

I should like to begin a brief account of international quality initiatives at the global level, like I did when sketching the context. Again I emphasise that this short overview aims to indicate a range of options, it is not intended as anything even approaching completeness.

First, there are review programmes aiming at international aspects of the higher education provision. One is the Internationalisation Quality Review (IQR), organised by the European University Association (EUA, previously known as CRE), in co-operation with OECD's IMHE and the Academic Co-operation Association (ACA) (cf. the EUA web site: [www.unige.ch/eua](http://www.unige.ch/eua)). The object of evaluation is the internationalisation policy of the higher education institution. In Europe, this could give special attention to the European dimension of education. Similarly, for some years the Global Alliance for Transnational Education (GATE) offered a review process to judge the provision of education of higher education institutions overseas (Lenn & Campos, 1998). The GATE reviews ended prematurely when the main sponsor of GATE decided to change the organisation's character in 1998.

A recent, more comprehensive initiative is phrased by (Van Damme, 2002). The world-wide quality label advocated by Van Damme is a token of quality for quality assessment and accreditation agencies operating internationally. It could be seen as a global version of an 'open' accreditation system, and is supported by the international network of quality assessment agencies (INQAAHE), by an international organisation of university presidents (IAUP), and by UNESCO (cf. Marshall, 2002).

A major premise of GATE before 1998 was that quality assurance needed to internationalise, because the labour markets and the fields of knowledge were internationalising, especially in the professions. Indeed, in some professions accreditation agencies have been or are becoming

active at an international level. Engineering would be the prime example, with the Washington Accord showing that an approach based on mutual recognition of accreditation judgements can work (*Recognition of equivalency of accredited engineering education programs leading to the engineering degree*, 1989). Business studies is another example, with both US-based AACSB and Europe-based EQUIS offering their 'kite marks' to higher education in business schools at a global scale. The EQUIS example shows that accreditation is not necessarily synonymous with US organisations. Indeed, the fear that 'the Americans are coming' does not seem to hold ground: there seems to be more international demand for accreditations from US accreditation bodies than they are willing to offer, although some are more willing to enter the international business of accreditation than others.

More or less similar to accreditation agencies, international consortia of higher education institutions function to facilitate movement of students among their member institutions, in this way setting some important first steps towards breaking down barriers for student mobility.

In all these initiatives, the higher education providers are present as the main stakeholders, or at least among the main stakeholders. Mostly this means public higher education institutions, as through EUA and IAUP; in GATE however private higher education providers were present as well (and after its change for-profit private institutions were the only ones). Quality assessment and accreditation agencies play a role in the world-wide quality label initiative. These agencies often are quasi-(non-)governmental. Governmental stakeholders are represented in some of these initiatives at some distance also through UNESCO and OECD. Almost absent, except perhaps in the professional accreditation agencies, are one category of customers, viz. employers. Worse, the other main category of customers, i.e. students, are completely absent from these initiatives.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> For higher education institutions as a whole, the EUA offers its institutional evaluation programme internationally (in co-operation with other rectors' conference organisations also outside Europe). As institutional quality assurance is not our primary focus in the present chapter, as it is not geared towards degrees or students, I shall not treat it as a part of the initiatives mentioned here.

### 3.9.2 *European Initiatives*

From the early 1990s onwards, quality assessment was a field in which developments towards a European dimension were hesitant and slow. Even in the European Union the axiom then was that higher education is a state prerogative. Even the 1992 Maastricht Treaty, in which higher education was first mentioned as an area of EU activity, did not change that. Which resulted in the inventory made for the European Commission (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1993) to be no more than an inventory; the formulation of a 'general model' induced from the inventory was left to the higher education research literature (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). Follow-up action by the EU did not come about until 1995, when its pilot project was implemented. It took the form of programme assessments in some areas of knowledge across all EU member countries and some EFTA participant countries as well. The EU pilot project's aims remained toned down to 'spreading the gospel' of quality assessment to participating countries not yet blessed with a national system and to comparing methods used (Management Group, 1995). Further action again took more than three years to bear fruit. The pilot project was not extended to other fields of knowledge; the comparison of methods theme was given permanence in the European Network of Quality assessment Agencies (ENQA), founded in 1999 (Kern, 1998).

In the couple of years since its formation, ENQA of course could not yet move mountains. Yet it is taking a central place in a number of European initiatives, *inter alia* in the Bologna process, as has been mentioned above. Thus for instance, ENQA together with EUA and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB) have embarked on a number of study projects, in fact forming a platform to discuss issues of quality assessment and quality assurance at the European level, as proposed in a CRE-led SOCRATES project (Sursock, 2001). Interestingly, in this initiative of ENQA, EUA and ESIB, students are represented; on the other hand, employers or professions are not. Getting together all types of stakeholders in a single platform apparently remains a daunting task. The theme of cross-border evaluation pilot projects was not new when the EU embarked on it in 1995. In fact, over the last decade, a series of such international projects have taken place, starting in *ca.* 1991 with a pilot project to develop a method for judging comparative quality of economics curricula in the Netherlands, Germany and the United

Kingdom (Brennan, Goedegebuure, Shah, Westerheijden, & Weusthof, 1992). To avoid the costly apparatus of many site visits in many countries, this project relied on an analysis of curricula, with a peer review team making judgements on the basis of written materials and meeting representatives of the study programmes involved in a single location. A major outcome of this project was, nevertheless, the clear distinction between the level of a British Bachelor in comparison with the German and Dutch first degrees. The latter were much more geared to (long) education in the Humboldtian philosophy educating specialists ready to enter working life, while the British bachelor was educated of much more briefly, in the Newmannian philosophy of forming individuals with generic capacities whose professional capacities mainly would have to be formed in on-the-job training. For judging the 'average' quality of higher education programmes across countries, the approach in the Brennan *et al.* project proved to be insufficiently robust. Equally, it fell short in credibility for judging the quality of the individual programmes involved. Most of the subsequent cross-border projects accordingly applied either Van Vught & Westerheijden's (1994) 'general model' with self-evaluation and peer review through site visits, or limited themselves to curriculum comparisons.

In the first strand, the International Program Review Electrical Engineering (IPR-EE) stands out for its application of relatively clearly defined standards, leading to a judgement for all participating programmes whether they merited awarding degrees equivalent to 'master of electrical engineering' (Vroeijenstijn, Waumans, & Wijmans, 1992). The twelve participating programmes were located in six Western-European countries. Interestingly, the two British programmes withdrew before the summary judgements were passed to avoid interference with their national accreditation.

Another early project in the same strand was the CHEPS/ABET study on the three fields of chemical, civil and mechanical engineering (Goedegebuure, Maassen, Phillips, & Smits, 1993). This one stood out for its scope, as it included three fields and twenty-one institutions in five Western-European countries. This study was instrumental in making the policy decision in the Netherlands to adjust the formal programme length of university engineering programmes from four to five years, as this reflected better international practice.

Sadly, more recent projects, such as the cross-border evaluation of physics programmes (*Evaluation-Report: Cross Border Quality Assessment in Physics*, 2001), do not show significant methodical advancements over the early ones.

In the second strand, I was involved in a comparison of technical programmes in higher education in the Netherlands and Flanders. This study (Westerheijden & Lugthart, 1999) introduced a method of two-dimensional graphical analyses of curricula, showing *inter alia* the different pedagogical approaches prevalent in the two higher education systems (more lecture-based in Flanders, more project-learning based in the Netherlands), the larger autonomy in educational matters in the Netherlands (shown in the higher dispersion of Dutch higher education institutions, while Flemish institutions tended to form tighter clusters), and the larger focus on research oriented subjects in the Flemish engineering programmes compared with their Dutch counterparts. Additionally, a panel of experts made a blind judgement of final thesis reports to reach relatively consensual but politically hotly debated conclusions on the professional and academic competencies of graduates from those programmes. The experts saw major parallels between Flemish and Dutch university engineers, and between Flemish and Dutch *hogeschool* engineers. The Flemish single-cycle *hogeschool* 'graduate' degrees were of a clearly different type and lower level. Among the engineers, Flemish graduates *grosso modo* showed more 'academic' interest than their more practically oriented Dutch counterparts.

The expert judgements of final level papers foreshadowed the current emphasis on competency approaches. The outstanding example of large-scale application of a competency approach at a European level is the *Tuning Project*, described later in this volume. Perhaps the major methodical outcome of the Tuning project is that academics reached a high level of agreement on the competencies expected from their graduates, while previous projects focusing more on input and process indicators—which can be expressed in more objective indicators—were markedly less successful. The competency approach seems to be promising for the European higher education area.

Equally based on a competency approach is the final initiative I should like to mention in this list, the Joint Quality Initiative, the framework for the present volume. At the higher education systems level, it mirrors the

*Tuning* project. Collected in the JQI are a growing number of (north-western) European countries' governments and public quality assessment agencies who share a particular approach to quality assessment. This is the focus on the programme level, and on output rather than input. Both choices are, in my opinion, in line with the intentions of the Bologna Declaration. Broader interest in the JQI's approach might therefore be expected in the coming years. Political questions to be solved in the near future include, accordingly, the following ones. Is JQI an exclusive club, or is it open to all in Bologna's 'European higher education area'? Will it strive for maximum consensus, or will it form an *avant garde* in Europe? Can the countries currently active in the informal JQI go ahead on the consensus of the methodological choices (programme level, output-oriented), or should considerations of high politics be taken into account to assure sufficient political clout so that this initiative will not be brushed aside for political considerations by the major European powers (Lieshout, 2001)? Maybe higher education is sufficiently insignificant to enjoy 'benign neglect' of high politics and power considerations, but any field of 'low politics' may be elevated to high politics status in the European political arena— as agriculture continues to show already since the 1960s.

Next to politics, there are of course many methodical questions that need to be solved to move forward, but the following contributions in this book will show that there is considerable progress in this respect and that here is another area potentially characteristic of a 'European dimension' to quality assurance.

## 4 Reflection from the Higher Education Institutions' Point of View

### *Accreditation and Quality Culture*

Andrée Sursock<sup>1</sup>

#### 4.1 If We All Think Alike, We Are Not Thinking

'If we all think alike, we are not thinking.' This quote, from a very unlikely source—none other than general Patton—will provide the theme for my intervention.

Most of the time, evaluation procedures are presented as promoting either accountability or improvement or both. While these two purposes are important, I would like to focus attention on the steering aspect of quality assurance. As we know, quality assurance mechanisms can be used by governments to put pressure on institutions to take account of political priorities. Similarly, quality assurance mechanisms can be used by universities themselves to steer internally the institution. If we agree with the steering function for quality assurance, then the key question becomes steering toward what? Do we have a clear idea of the kind of university we want for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and are quality assurance mechanisms adapted to that goal?

None of us has a crystal ball that would allow us to peer into the future, but we do know that, considering the long history of higher education, the discipline has been an organising feature of universities for only a relatively short time (mostly in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries). We

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also know that intellectual creativity requires a certain degree of interdisciplinarity and that this trend is increasing.

What kind of evaluation procedure would promote intellectual creativity and take into account the fact that universities are complex institutions that at the same time produce and disseminate knowledge? To answer this question it is important to raise first two key questions: Who are our students? What kinds of graduates do we want for the future?

Our students today come from a variety of backgrounds and have a variety of learning needs. They differ in terms of social class, educational attainment, age and goals for their education. This diversity needs to be embraced by institutions, across the whole of national systems and the European higher education area. Teachers need to be sensitive to the intellectual starting point of their students and build from there. We need a variety of teaching methods and teaching materials. We need to match the variety of learners with a corresponding variety of teachers. This diversity has been recognised by national quality assurance agencies in Europe that have adopted, by and large, a fitness for purpose approach.

Increased Europeanisation and internationalisation, however, could lead, if we are not careful, to standardisation in the name of transparency. I shall return to the challenge of Europeanisation and internationalisation later on. For now, I would like to stress that if we want a democratic system of higher education that ensures access for the greatest numbers, then whatever quality assurance system we develop for the future will need to be flexible and embrace this diversity. This does not mean 'dumbing down', but accepting that institutions will cater for different learners and will need to be judged on the basis of learning outcomes and the value-added dimension of education in the context of their specific student population.

We need, however, to approach the evaluation of teaching and learning with a certain degree of humility. In a seminal article, Professor Martin Trow, who has devoted his long and distinguished academic life to studying higher education policies, demonstrated the difficulties in assessing teaching and learning in higher education. He concluded that: 'The real and substantial effects of the experience of higher education extend over the whole lifetime of graduates, and are inextricably entwined with other forces and experiences beyond the walls and the

reach of universities' (Trow, 1996). Trow suggests that we focus instead on the capacity for institutions to change: 'How an institution responds to change points to deep-seated qualities of the unit which must also show up in its research and teaching.' (Trow, 1994)

Second, what kind of graduates do we want? We want them to have the flexibility to adapt, to learn in formal and non-formal situations—at work and in the classrooms—to be good problem solvers and to think creatively and imaginatively. A knowledge base, grounded in a discipline, is important to develop these capacities but it is not sufficient. Above all, our graduates need to learn how to think. This is how employers ultimately will judge them. 'If we all think alike, we are not thinking', but we all need to think well.

#### **4.2 Quality Culture: The Institution is Key**

None of this is new to any of us. How often, however, does the quality assurance debate focus on these fundamental considerations? The quality assurance debate, as amongst others John Brennan noted, is really about power. It is a question of how quality is defined and by whom. The question of purposes beyond considerations of accountability and improvement is rarely taken into account. Because it is about power, quality assurance procedures can induce distortions that are not necessarily in the best interests of students, graduates, employers or society at large.

If we want, as I hope we do, to promote a higher education system that is characterised by three V's—vibrancy, vitality, variety—are programme evaluations and subject reviews the best or only way forward? My answer will not surprise you. For me, methods organised along disciplinary lines are indicative that we are evaluating the university of the past rather than that of the future; that—by focusing on its constituent parts—we are not promoting the institution of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

An institution is not an aggregate of departments. It is really more than the sum of its parts. The best universities succeed because they provide students, teachers and researchers with an environment—an intellectual community—that promotes debate and critical thinking. In addition, these institutions consider the experience of students as a whole—inside and outside the classroom—and consider globally the

professional roles of academic staff rather than focus on this or that aspect.

If we want vibrancy, vitality and variety in our institutions, should we not take steps to ensure that our quality evaluation procedures match these aims? Should we not allow for a certain degree of chaos and interdisciplinarity to promote creativity and innovation? If we want vibrancy, vitality and variety among our teachers should we not consider their role globally in terms of its teaching, research and service dimensions rather than evaluate separately each aspect? If we want vibrancy and vitality for our diverse student population, should we not take account of their global experience and evaluate institutions as a whole rather than their constituent parts?

The *Tuning* project to be described in chapter 7 of this volume, along with similar exercises, is important in allowing academics to take stock of recent developments in their field, compare what they are doing and fine-tune their teaching. The *Tuning* project is also considering learning outcomes in terms of the question I raised at the start: What kind of graduates do we want? There is, however, a temptation that I would urge governments to resist: that the results of such discussions end up as a blueprint for evaluations. The attending risk is to prevent change in the name of standards and that, once these are codified, they will lag hopelessly behind state of the art knowledge.

Similarly, it is important to create a common structure for degrees and to define level indicators for the bachelor's and master's levels, but in a way that will not stifle learning, learners and teachers. Again, 'If we all think alike, we are not thinking'. I would argue that we need to create a 'constructive ambiguity' or, to quote Peter Williams, provide us with a map rather than a route.

I would also submit that we need to pause every now and then to examine the unintended consequences of our policies. For instance, is ECTS achieving the goal of increasing student mobility? It appears that in some circumstances it achieves the opposite result. If the combination of ECTS and the new bachelor's and master's structure is applied too rigidly, it can actually block rather than promote students' exchange. It is the same with quality procedures.

The recent UK developments have shown the limitations of an approach that was perceived as too intrusive. A quality assurance system that is perceived as creating work instead of creating quality will

not yield the anticipated results. It induces compliance and window dressing. One of the parting shots in the UK battle around quality assurance was an article that appeared in the *Guardian*, written by economists from Warwick University, who exposed frankly and clearly how they played around the evaluation procedures to get a perfect score. Ultimately, their compliance serves no one: not the students, not governments, and not the institutions themselves.

In addition, the analysis of the impact of quality assurance demonstrates that a subject or programme focus will generally reinforce power at the basic unit level—e.g., a highly evaluated department can use these results to consolidate its power within the institution in a way that could prevent a cohesive institutional strategy from developing. An institutional focus of evaluation, however, will tend to strengthen power at the institutional level, encourage institutions to develop an internal quality culture and meet better the goal of having a dynamic higher education sector (Brennan & Shah, 2000).

A key condition for achieving a ‘constructive ambiguity’ lies in preserving the autonomy of institutions. Simply put, for intellectual reasons, it would be best if we did not try to regulate all aspects of knowledge whether in its production or dissemination phase. Universities need to be responsible for what goes on inside their walls. They need to assure internally the quality of their activities and then be accountable for the mechanisms they have put in place to ensure that quality. In other words, institutional audits are the *reasonable* way in which we can assure *reasonable* accountability while maintaining *reasonable* institutional autonomy.

Subject and programme reviews reach deeply into the institutions, and, in addition, a national system of subject and programme reviews can be extremely costly—especially for large countries and for countries in economic difficulties. It is the university's responsibility to ensure that all of its core activities, all of its faculties, departments and programmes are of quality. This can be done rigorously and objectively with the help of external reviewers.

For institutional audits to be meaningful, however, universities must be encouraged to take responsibility for their quality. EUA will launch this year, with generous support and funding from the European Commission, a project to introduce and develop a quality culture in

institutions. The project will result in benchmarks of good practice in the area of internal quality.

The issue of quality is foremost on our agenda as evidenced by the fact that it constituted the topic of the first policy position of the new association and will be the topic of our first general assembly in April. We firmly believe that without internal quality processes, quality assurance can turn into a game of window dressing. Universities must take ownership of this process. It is only when they will, that the important role played by external quality agencies would be fulfilled. It is only then, that accountability can play fully its function.

### **4.3 Quality Assurance in the Run-Up to Berlin 2003**

I would like to return now to the issue of Europeanisation and internationalisation, which can constitute a challenge to quality assurance as we know it. The internationalisation issue was put forward in Europe by the then-CRE which presented a year ago the result of an exploratory project on accreditation as a way to deal with the internationalisation of higher education (Sursock, 2001). Many of you know that the project outcomes were challenged by a diversity of actors. One of the arguments that are often presented by both the academic and the quality assurance communities is that the effect of internationalisation is so weak at the moment that it does not require us to do anything new or different in quality assurance. Be this as it may, we are still left with an important driver for change—the Bologna process and the likely impact it will have on national quality assurance frameworks.

The message from Prague was clear: we need to find a solution to increase transparency, to facilitate the mobility of students, staff and professionals, and to promote the competitiveness of Europe. We have to find a solution before the next follow-up conference in Berlin—one that will be suitable to over thirty countries and a multiplicity of actors. This is a very short time for a very challenging problem; a challenging problem from both an academic and a policy point of view. Several solutions are being explored at the moment. We hope to continue to contribute to these discussions and it is in that spirit that I have given here an academic point of view.

Namely, because quality assurance has a steering effect at both system and institutional levels, we must carefully consider our options: institutional audits or subject/programme reviews? So far, this question was posed nationally. Now we must pose it in the context of the European higher education area. As I stated earlier, we believe that an institutional audit approach is the preferred course of action for five reasons:

- (i) for intellectual reasons,
- (ii) to respect the autonomy of institutions,
- (iii) to promote a dynamic higher education sector,
- (iv) to allow for greater efficiencies, and
- (v) to adopt a comprehensive point of view that takes into account the whole of the institution, the global experience of students and the full role of academic staff.

We realise fully well that, for governments, students and their parents, subject or programme reviews seem more concrete. What I wanted to do, however, is to present an option that would be less costly, more efficient and more respectful of the academic endeavour and the academic community.

I would like to conclude with Martin Trow's recommendation that we need to re-establish trust and confidence among us all, and shall end with his cautionary words, written seven years ago but still ringing true today:

A stress on trust as a key element in the relation of society to higher education in no way implies turning a blind eye on the shortcomings of academics and their institutions; it does center our attention on the question of who is responsible for what. There are of course in every country many pathologies of academic life... But this is a problem for a department or a university to deal with, monitored by external audits of its internal reviews... Trying to reach it from the outside may cause more problems than it cures. (Trow 1996)

## 5 A Perspective From The United States

Steven Crow<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1 Introduction

Over the last decade, the international gatherings of higher education quality assurance agencies have usually included at least one consistent disagreement. From the perspective of those of us in the United States, our European colleagues usually suggest strongly that accreditation as practiced by the regional institutional accrediting associations in the United States lacks the capacity to contribute much to enhancing the quality of higher education. Several significant criticisms of our work have been raised, but the most frequent are that we focus too much on minimal threshold measures, that we cloak our work in secrecy, and that we can too easily be co-opted by the colleges and universities that own us. The distinctions seem sharply enough defined that the use of language begins to reflect the difference: in the United States accreditation and quality assurance are used interchangeably while in international discussions the words have come to have different meanings. Knowing some of the strong reservations about how we do our work, I have some trepidations about offering any comments related to the myriad of issues shaping the discussions on higher education quality assurance in Europe. As might be surmised, it has taken U. S. accreditors, long focused entirely on higher education in the United States and highly confident of our work there, some time to move from

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defensiveness to engagement. The intent of this essay is to explore the potential U.S. contribution to that engagement.

## 5.2 Goals of Accreditation in the United States

In the United States voluntary institutional quality assurance in higher education has a long history. The Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools first extended accreditation to colleges and universities in 1913. The other regional association—now numbering eight associations in six regions—commenced higher education accreditation in the decades that followed, with all agencies providing it at least fifty years ago. If I understand the European scene accurately, several of the driving forces behind the emergence of higher education accreditation in the United States are similar to those shaping the current European discussions about higher education quality assurance and accreditation. While I do not presume enough knowledge to write about the complex nature of the European discussions, a better understanding of the goals of accreditation in the United States might be useful.

First of these is that *the higher education community in the United States sought to replace confusion with order*. In the United States, each state controls the higher education within that state. In the early part of the twentieth century, state agencies and bureaucracies did not exist, and all sorts of new institutions received charters or gained incorporation from local and state governments. Many private institutions emerged beside the new land grant universities and state normal (teacher training) schools. Eschewing federal control, leaders of higher education institutions sought to bring order into the myriad of organisations that claimed to be colleges and universities. They did so by establishing regional organisations that quite literally assumed self-regulatory authority. Over the years, each agency confronted the challenge of whether or not to include within its purview new types of institutions. Only in the mid-1970s, for example, did most agree that for-profit institutions could be considered eligible for regional accreditation. The agencies set standards; the agencies established quality assurance processes; and the agencies published their lists of accredited institutions that met the standards. Institutions excluded from regional accreditation started their own national accrediting organisations. Order still exists,

even if the multiple variations of institutional accreditation can be confusing to the uninitiated. Accreditation is the recognised stamp of quality used by students, parents, employers and others in sorting the good from the inadequate or bad.

A second goal is that *the higher education community wanted to create consistency in degree nomenclature*. A study of the archives of each regional association will unearth studies and papers related to defining the content of and the naming of degrees. We are just learning the language of 'qualifications framework,' but essentially that was what these discussions were about. Early in the last century other organisations—the National Education Association, the National Association of State Universities, and the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, to name the most obvious—played major roles in establishing the foundations for those discussions. By the time regional institutional accreditation was initiated, the credit hour and semester calendar, for example, were already established in higher education. But regional and program accrediting agencies, through their accrediting activities, have served as the primary creators and enforcers of consistency in degree nomenclature. As I propose later in this essay, it is not at all clear that the various agencies work closely enough to continue to play this role in any meaningful way. But our early histories cannot be separated from the efforts to standardise degree nomenclature.

Third, *the higher education community sought to enhance student mobility*. Originally created to ease the passage of graduates of secondary schools into post-secondary institutions, all of the regional agencies when they commenced higher education accreditation understood that their stamp of recognition would make degrees and credits credible among themselves and within the marketplace. If any of the agencies ever laid claim to testifying to actual equivalence of achieved learning among institutions, they quickly stepped away from it. Accreditation honoured institutional autonomy, and nothing seemed more basic to that autonomy than faculty decisions about awarding credits and vouching for the integrity of the degrees they agreed to confer. Nonetheless over the years regionally accredited institutions have come to rely on accreditation as a basic, but not always the sole, measure for their decisions on acceptance of degrees and transfer of credits. However, student mobility has not always been well-served by the increasing number of institutional and program accrediting agencies in the United

States, and I will suggest some of the challenges we now face in meeting this goal to the satisfaction of the broader public as well as of students.

In the fourth place, *the higher education community wanted to play a key role in establishing rules for professional competence and thereby enhancing the mobility of professionals*. In the history of voluntary accreditation within the United States, the medical profession actually made the initial move to establish standards for medical education that would be applied nationally. The licensing of physicians remained within the purview of each state, but in honouring the rigour of the enforcement of medical education standards by an external, non-governmental group, most states created reciprocity arrangements so licensed professionals could move with some ease among states. Other professions followed suit, some with a national qualifications exam open only to graduates of accredited programs. Regional accreditation did not attempt to duplicate these professional efforts; instead, regional standards usually reflected – and still reflect – an interest in an institution’s having achieved, if needed, appropriate professional accreditation for its programs. Moreover, most professional accrediting agencies, except for the oldest, will only accredit programs located within accredited institutions. These linkages, while always of some concern to major universities with many professional programs, seemed to serve well the goals for professional competence and mobility.

Finally, *the higher education community wanted to be self-regulating*. In the United States, federal and state governments today exercise considerable authority to protect higher education students from fraud and abuse, to provide those students access to academic programs relevant to the world of work and global economic competition, and to provide financial assistance to students. The multiple roles of governments in higher education have emerged over the past few decades as more and more investment from those governments went into higher education. Voluntary accreditation, however, continues to represent the interests of the higher education community in establishing and enforcing academic quality assurance standards that protect intellectual freedom and academic integrity of degrees. ‘The Triad’ is what we call our unique arrangement for shared responsibility. States give institutions the legal authority to operate and grant degrees; the federal government provides access to federal funds to students attending accredited institutions and programs, and voluntary accrediting agencies testify to the quality of the

education provided in those institutions. Admittedly, when state systems of higher education also want to determine the quality of any organisation that wants to provide education within the state, the various roles of the triad blur. Currently the federal government wants to protect its financial investment by trying to define academic quality. The balancing act is becoming increasingly delicate in this age of accountability, and the deference to self-regulation through independent, non-governmental bodies is questioned more than it ever has been.

### 5.3 Challenges to Accreditation

If the United States and Europe share some of the same driving forces toward creating new means of quality assurance, albeit several decades apart, we also share some of the same barriers to the creation of the most effective quality assurance programs for multiple states and multiple nations. This is where the U.S. system of quality assurance created largely in the first half of the twentieth century may prove not be the most effective system for a society marked by national agendas shaped by new global contexts. Unless I am badly mistaken, all who are busy with the task of creating European strategies for higher education confront many of the same challenges to your work. I suggest that in light of these changing agendas, the inadequacies of the U.S. system are not those usually laid at its feet. The actual insufficiencies are, rather, the following ones.

In the first place, *the higher education community expects quality assurance to honour and protect institutional autonomy*. The fundamental component of this autonomy is intellectual freedom and control by academics of the credentials awarded by the university. Faculties are loath to give this power to any group other than themselves. Within professional groupings, they may agree to let broad professional consensus influence some institutional decision-making, but faculties often question the role and motives of administrators and external quality assurance agencies that try to define how faculties must this work and what the product of it must look like. As our institutions establish accrediting standards, they set as foundational to the whole process the agreement that accreditation will honour unique institutional missions and honour the need for faculties to have primary authority over academic quality in that institution. In fact, until recently, one of the perceived purposes of

regional institutional accreditation was the protection of institutional autonomy from outside interference. Common standards consistently applied yet honouring institutional autonomy: this is a recipe for emphasis on thresholds. The writing of accrediting standards becomes an interesting exercise in balancing the need for cross-institutional standards against the concern that institutional autonomy might be abridged. One of the major grievances raised by some universities against program accrediting agencies is that they too frequently cross that thin line between applying appropriate standards and interfering with an institution's need to control its own operations.

Besides, *the higher education community prefers quality assurance programs that emphasise differences among institutions.* Although Europe is not marked by the same variety of colleges and universities as is the United States, it has its own ways of distinguishing among institutions. It might well be distinctly nervous about new types of institutions seeking to be part of the higher education options available to students. Within the United States the independent sector accounts for almost half of our colleges and universities even though most students attend public sector institutions. Within the public sector the education provided by two-year institutions is often perceived by public universities to be very different from what they provide. Both the independent and public sectors have yet to become comfortable with the growing for-profit sector. Nonetheless a few prominent institutions, both public and private, are spinning off for-profit wings. Moreover, for decades the United States has been marked by free-standing professional schools—law schools, medical schools, engineering schools—existing outside of university structures. Not only do all want standards that reflect and support the differences among them, they fret about standards that standardise. Honour the institutional mission by acknowledging and accepting significant institutional differences: this is considered by many to be axiomatic in accreditation. Unfortunately, despite the efforts to assist student mobility, too often U.S. colleges and universities use the yardstick of 'difference' as they evaluate students anxious to move their achieved learning among these varied institutions.

Thirdly, *the multiple accrediting agencies in the United States also often choose to emphasise their differences.* Many alternative institutional agencies emerged when regional institutional agencies excluded certain types of institutions from accreditation. Moreover, like-minded institutional

leaders who feared their interests would not be best served through regional accreditation created some other national agencies. The growth of specialised accrediting bodies reflects new professions and disputes within professions. We now have 19 federally recognised institutional accrediting bodies and approximately 62 specialised bodies, most recognised either by the Department of Education or the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA)—or both. When two groups offer accreditation to similar programs, differences of necessity become highlighted. Members of regional accrediting commissions historically have acted as though members of national accrediting bodies have less stature. But regional accrediting agencies also create standards and processes paying little attention to what other regionals are doing, resulting in the creation of some significant differences in what is weighed and valued in each regional association. The differences become institutionalised within our various organisations, and efforts to reach common ground founder on them. In fact, there exists an undercurrent of concern that if we can reach common ground too easily we may very well undercut the foundational rationale for the continued existence of regional bodies.

And in the last place, *the price of change is either too high to pay or it is unclear who should pay for it*. Discussions about new collaborations inevitably confront the barriers of time and money. Even small agencies create bureaucracies and processes that cannot shift quickly. Organisational cultures in accrediting agencies almost inevitably opt for minimum change, particularly when change will involve significant review and revision of their own activities. Change costs, either in new dollars invested or in time invested that might have been spent on other tasks. Return on investment simply does not seem obvious to many, so the investment is inadequately made or not made at all unless significant new sources of revenue are available to support the change. At least in the United States those new revenue sources are hard to find, and our colleges and universities see little that should require more investment from them.

Recently a private foundation invested several million dollars into restructuring projects advanced by some of the regional associations. New standards were written and new processes created. Now we wait to see if the organisations actually can create the new culture and support to maintain the change. The Higher Learning Commission was one of

those organisations that profited from this foundation's investment. It is just completing a three-year project to design and implement an alternative accreditation process based on quality improvement principles and practices. However, our Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) came into being thanks to \$1.5 million in support from the Pew Charitable Trusts. Our current project 'Restructuring Expectations: Accreditation 2004' involves rewriting our accreditation standards, and it will ultimately cost about \$125,000 drawn from our annual budget and reserves. We think we cannot afford much more change without new sources of support.

#### **5.4 Accreditation in an Internationalising Context**

But change we must, for quality assurance in higher education is now an issue of global importance. This new international context is beginning to make a difference to all of us in the United States. It is the context shaping much of your European initiatives as well. Public policy makers anxious to situate nations or groupings of nations within the new competitive global marketplace, expect higher education to support those ends. In these days, higher education is both a means to create a competitive workforce and a competitive global business in and of itself. While appreciating the unique nature of colleges and universities, public policy makers want responsive institutions, efficient in the business of providing quality education, and accountable for achieving the goals set by them and for them. If for-profit institutions can achieve those ends, then they must be welcomed to the marketplace and extended the quality assurance options that influence competition in that marketplace. If better service can be provided through consortia of institutions or through new types of national and international partnerships than through a single university, then the castle walls of the university better include wide and open bridges.

Beyond all this, competition in the new global economy calls for a better-educated populace. In the United States we have referred to this as 'democratisation.' Elsewhere in the world 'massification' appears to be the preferred term. This is more than just opening access to quality higher education to more people. It also is more than increasing the services and programs necessary for those people to succeed. Both, however, are critical to achieve the end. It is as well accepting the reality

that some quality higher education might be provided through very non-traditional providers and through new methods of delivery (e.g. e-Learning). The academy is being driven to create new educational pathways for millions of new students. We witness major efforts to get the education to the people through off-campus delivery, through partnerships to provide courses and program in the work place, and through use of the Internet as well as other distance education modalities.

Moreover, massification of learning requires rethinking the content of courses and programs. Meritocracy can no longer be the dominant paradigm in higher education. In the United States this translates into a proliferation of 'applied' degrees at all levels as well as the burgeoning growth of certificate programs at all levels. Advertisements for 'post baccalaureate certificate' programs fill the education sections of our newspapers. I can only assume that any European observer of the United States higher education scene will conclude that we have no 'qualifications framework' whatsoever. In our quality assurance role, U.S. regional institutional accrediting agencies are creating evaluation strategies for new certifications and degrees rather than forcing all of the new content into the old degree designations. Some visionaries claim that in the relatively near future, 'completers' at our institutions will not wave a degree and transcript, but instead will carry a small card on which are coded achieved, tested certifications.

## **5.5 An American View on Europe**

If Europe is experiencing the same kinds of change, then you are in the business of reinventing quality assurance in higher education right on the heels of its invention in national quality assurance agencies. While I think I see you in Europe wrestling with some of the same drivers and hurdles that have marked our accreditation efforts over the decades, I sense that whatever lessons we in the U.S. might provide are already very much out of date. Therefore, we have lessons to learn from each other about how to implement higher education quality assurance in this rapidly changing time.

Most national quality assurance efforts in European nations were created by governments to serve public purposes while U.S. regional accrediting associations were created by the academy to serve both the

academy and the public. Both, however, seem to be imperfect tools for translating public policy into the operations of a university. The academy cannot honour its intellectual freedom and defer to state control. Almost by definition, then, quality assurance in higher education, whether in Europe or in the United States, tries to strike the balance between regulation, improvement, and accommodation to change. We may disagree at times about where that balance should be and what tools best assure it, but all of us are engaged in establishing that balance in our standards and processes.

At least in the United States, this balancing act, once marked by significant privacy and confidentiality, is now shaped by a growing public demand that higher education and those that provide quality assurance for it be accountable for their activities. Access to billions of dollars of federal monies rests on institutional access to institutional or program accreditation recognised by the United States Department of Education to be valid and dependable. In the late 1980's significant fraud marked some parts of the multi-faceted higher education community, fraud that resulted in students defaulting on millions of dollars of student loans. Other scandals over use of federal grant monies filled the headlines. A movement toward stronger federal control of institutional and program accreditation resulted, and for much of the last fifteen years colleges and universities together with the regional accrediting agencies have been trying to regain public trust and hold federalisation at bay. We have done so by rising to meet some of the growing demands for accountability, and we have done so by breaching of the walls of secrecy around our work. But unlike our European counterparts, we have yet to make the important step of making the findings of our evaluation processes available to the public. In the light of the growing public pressure for disclosure, that important step inevitably will be taken in the next few years.

In the United States we have created a maze of agencies to provide quality assurance, such a maze that universities often decry the complexity of the system. But the system has also proven to be extraordinarily cost effective, for much of its work depends on volunteer labour from the academy. For example, 'peer review' in the Higher Learning Commission draws its capacity from a site visitor corps of almost 1000 academics who people our site teams and our review and decision-making structures. The Commission has a staff of 34 people to

oversee all the work that the \$6 million operation conducts, including comprehensive evaluations of approximately 1/10 of the 1000 institutional members each year. Moreover, we have processes to review substantive institutional changes between those comprehensive visits, meaning that in any given year we actually 'act' on about 1/4 of the membership. We do all of this by relying heavily on our 'volunteer labour.' The Commission is unique among the regionals in providing an honorarium for team members and team chairs. But that stipend does not make professional quality assurance agents out of the administrators and faculty who serve us. While I will argue that the ultimate decisions created from this system are consistent, fair, and objective, there is a marked unevenness in the written work from these teams and groups. It is not obvious to me that despite our best efforts at training, we will ever reach the level of consistent professionalism that might become necessary to respond to cries for accountability and public disclosure.

Consistent reporting is actually not the major challenge we face in our volunteer peer review processes. Informed judgement is central to our work, yet in this rapidly changing higher education environment, it is no longer clear that peer reviewers are prepared to evaluate some of the newest initiatives. We had to create on short notice a set of site visitors capable of understanding and evaluating new e-Learning initiatives, for example. Now we know that understanding the pedagogical capacity of this new medium is not the same as evaluating the new relationships created between institutions and private corporations that create the educational platforms and provide contracted services such as advising and tutoring. Nor does it prepare someone to evaluate the effectiveness of quality assurance in new multi-institutional collaboratives that create, mount, and service on-line degree programs offered by each of the participating institutions. It is also obvious that the assumptions that frame quality assurance in the United States often are incorrect assumptions in international settings. Medical accreditations long ago turned to the use of a cadre of hired professionals to do their site evaluations. If the demand for accountability rises much more, quality assurance will become a professional activity marked by significant new costs to our institutions. If the demand for a recognised international stamp of quality increases, we might all discover that only through a professional corps of evaluators can the goal be achieved.

It could be argued that regional accreditation in the United States and national quality assurance in Europe, no matter how old or new, confront the difficulty of fitting the international marketplace. National agencies have the authority of the government behind them; regional agencies in the United States do not. By long-standing tradition in the United States regional boundaries exist, boundaries already broached by national agencies, and boundaries that have little meaning in the international context. Competition in the accreditation business has come to mark at least three disciplines in the United States (e.g. business education, nursing education, and teacher education). In the age of e-Learning and globalisation, it lurks around the edges of regional accreditation as well. It has been a gentleman's agreement among the regional associations not to offer competitive quality assurance services within the United States. That agreement has yet to be tested either by an agency that decides to offer services nationally or by an institution wanting the option to be accredited by a regional association other than the one that 'serves' the state in which it is located.

## **5.6 Americans in Europe**

When we turn to the international scene, we find an agreement only on one aspect of the international higher education marketplace. U.S. accreditation extends into European settings through its reviews of U.S. degree programs offered in Europe (e.g. the University of Chicago Executive MBA program in Barcelona), branches of U.S. institutions (e.g. Webster University's campuses in Vienna, Geneva, London, and Leiden), and affiliations and shared degree programs between U.S. and European businesses and institutions (e.g. Andrews University and Newbold College, Harold Washington College and several British technical institutes, and University of Indianapolis and Intercollege). For the most part, U.S. regional agencies claim to be about the business of testifying to the quality of education offered by an accredited U.S. institution no matter where the program is delivered. Our evaluation teams come to Europe to evaluate these operations which we consider to be American even if located in foreign territory. By and large our gentlemen's agreement holds when it comes to our institutions that operate in international settings. When U.S. courses and programs compete with those offered by European colleges and universities, then to some extent

our quality assurance programs, at least as we currently operate them, might be said to compete with European quality assurance. It is important to know, however, that this is a by-product of the movement of educational offerings rather than a planned incursion of U.S. accreditation into Europe.

It is not at all clear who defines the rule for European institutions that might seek affiliation with a U.S. accreditation agency. One regional commission has been active in extending U.S. accreditation to European-based trade schools; others are extending U.S. affiliation to institutions that once were affiliated with a U.S. partner (e.g. American University in Bulgaria). The Middle States Association has long extended accreditation to institutions incorporated in New York, Delaware, or Washington, D.C., but operating solely in European settings (e.g. The American University of Paris and Richmond, The American International University in London). The Southern Association has focused on Latin and South America while our West Coast agencies turn toward the Pacific Rim. Other national accrediting association such as the Distance Education and Training Council (DETC) accredit European institution. Several program accrediting agencies have decided to extend accreditation to professional schools and programs in Europe while others establish programs of mutual recognition. The potential for international extension of U.S. accreditation is important enough that The Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) recently adopted an important set of principles: 'Principles for United States Accreditors Working Internationally: Accreditation of Non-United States Institutions and Programs.' ([http://www.chea.org/pdf/2001\\_intl\\_principles.pdf](http://www.chea.org/pdf/2001_intl_principles.pdf))

Conversations about extending U.S. accreditation to Europe occur frequently in no small part because there seems to be a demand for it. Institutions not eligible for some national quality assurance programs in Europe move among the various U.S. accrediting associations in search of one that will extend U.S. accreditation to them. Partnerships and articulation arrangements also often lead to conversations about participation in U.S. quality assurance programs. Currently there is conversation among regional associations about the wisdom of creating a separate agency to extend quality assurance to international institutions offering 'American style' education.

## 5.7 Concluding Remark

Anyone working on the European dimension of quality in higher education has to decide whether European quality assurance will be broad and inclusive enough to make a U.S. presence unnecessary. Perhaps the decision will be to invite the U.S. presence into a competitive market on quality assurance in higher education. Or we could engage in pilot project of sharing in quality assurance for institutions and programs that cross national boundaries. Alternatively, we all may find increasingly attractive the proposal for a new international seal of quality assurance. As you create a new order in higher education in Europe to enable mobility of students and their qualifications within Europe, your decisions about how best to provide European higher education quality assurance inevitably involve decisions about the role you intend to play in the global higher education marketplace: competitor, collaborator, or creator of a new international system.

## 6 Towards Shared Descriptors for Bachelor's and Master's

Nick Harris<sup>1</sup>

### 6.1 Background

The Bologna declaration and process propose the introduction, within a European higher education space, of a system of qualifications in higher (tertiary) education that is based on two cycles. The first (undergraduate) cycle culminates in the award of Bachelor's degrees. The second cycle of study seeks to build on those attributes gained during the first cycle, leading to (postgraduate) qualifications that include Master's degrees and doctorates. The Bologna process also seeks to encourage a nomenclature of awards that is comparable between countries and is easily readable, thus enhancing understanding of higher education qualifications and encouraging mobility of those studying within the European higher education space.

One aspect of the work under the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) has been to consider the development of descriptors for Bachelor's and Master's (BaMa descriptors) that might be shared within Europe and be available for a variety of purposes depending on particular national, regional or institutional contexts and requirements. A group with members from several national or region quality assurance organisations (see Annex II) has discussed the diverse requirements for, and

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characteristics of, such BaMa descriptors, and have developed descriptors that may now be tested and shared (see Annex I).

Several national and regional projects have sought, or are currently working, to identify the characteristics associated with particular higher education qualifications, and develop taxonomies and frameworks that clarify the relationships between qualifications. The work of the JQI group has included detailed consideration of such projects and has additionally drawn on the outcomes of discussions in Helsinki on common characteristics of Bachelor's. The Helsinki discussions characterised Bachelor's by the extent of study (years or ECTS); the work of the JQI group has been concerned with identifying the academic and other requirements that, as the outcomes of study, characterise and distinguish between Bachelor's and Master's.

A survey was carried out amongst participants in the JQI project in preparation for the discussions on the possible form, content and application of BaMa descriptors. Responses indicated a variety of needs and potential uses for such descriptors, and also the importance of having a shared understanding of the terms used both within the descriptors and to describe the context(s) in which they may be applied.

## 6.2 The Main Issues

All participants agreed that each descriptor should indicate an overarching summary of the outcomes of a whole programme of study. The descriptor should be concerned with the totality of the study, and a student's abilities and attributes that have resulted in the award of the qualification. The descriptor should not be limited to describing merely the outcomes of units of assessment at the level of the qualification. The group has thus sought to develop a shared *qualification descriptor*, not a shared *level descriptor*. It was however noted that within some national, regional and institutional contexts there might also be a requirement for the local development of level descriptors.

In focusing on qualifications, the descriptor would be oriented on the *output* of the higher education process rather than on the input (in terms of facilities, curricula, etc.).

The JQI group discussed the merits of seeking a single shared descriptor for Bachelor's and similarly one for Master's, as opposed to seeking a process to demonstrate 'compatibility' between descriptors

developed for national, regional or institutional purposes and that reflect the detail of local contexts. In line with the essence of Bologna the group concluded that it should seek a *single* generic descriptor for *all* Bachelor's degrees, and similarly a *single* generic descriptor for *all* Master's degrees. The group recognises that the development of these descriptors should not hinder any national, regional or local requirements for additional descriptors.

There are a wide variety of programmes leading to Bachelor's awards, differing in content, delivery and process, and nomenclature; for example, a number of countries discriminate between Professional Bachelor's and Academic Bachelor's awards. Similarly, there are a wide variety of programmes leading to different types of Master's degree. It was agreed that the value of the generic descriptors would be enhanced substantially if they could be cross-referenced to more detailed programme profiles or specifications.

A programme profile or specification would identify the particular components of the programme leading to the qualification; for example it might include prerequisites for entry to the programme, details of the components, their delivery and assessment, and any requirements relating to regulated professions. The form and components within the profile would reflect national, regional or institutional contexts and be related to the needs and responsibilities of those awarding or accrediting the particular programme.

In other words, the descriptors should be seen as guiding principles or *reference points* for programme profiles or specifications, not as a guarantee that every graduate of each programme possesses identified competences.

The JQI group considered that, in keeping with the Bologna process, the shared descriptors should be formulated in a language and style that is '*readable*' by *all* who would have an interest in them, in particular students, their sponsors, employers, higher education academics and their managers, and the general public. Annex I represents our proposals towards generic descriptors that may be useful as indicators or reference points to the abilities and qualities of holders of Bachelor's and Master's degrees awarded within the European higher education space.

The main developments expected from the Bachelor's qualifications to the Master's qualification can be paraphrased as follows:

- *knowledge and understanding*  
*from:* advanced textbook level,  
*to:* extended and/or enhanced knowledge and understanding that provide a basis or opportunity for originality in developing or applying ideas, often in a research context;
- *applying knowledge and understanding*  
*from:* a professional approach, devising and sustaining arguments,  
*to:* problem-solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts ;
- *making judgements*  
*from:* gathering and interpreting relevant data,  
*to:* having the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete data;
- *communication*  
*from:* can communicate information, ideas problems and solutions,  
*to:* can communicate conclusions and the underpinning knowledge and rationale;
- *learning skills*  
*from:* developed skills needed to study further with a high level of autonomy,  
*to:* studying in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

### 6.3 Testing the Shared Descriptors

Members of the group have initiated discussions about options for testing the BaMa descriptors in joint 'pilot studies' (in the *Transnational European Evaluation Project, TEEP*) that involve different approaches to quality assurance, ranging from regulation to quality assurance through audit, to accreditation. Such studies will seek to investigate the utility of the descriptors, and in particular their form, components and levels of expectations. In addition to contributing to transparency concerning the nature of Bachelors and Masters qualifications, it is anticipated that such transnational investigations will also contribute to enhancing the understanding and recognition of the various purposes and characteristics of different evaluation systems.

## **Annex I Shared descriptors for Bachelor's and Master's (The 'Dublin Descriptors')**

### *Bachelor's Degrees*

Bachelor's degrees are awarded to students who:

1. have demonstrated knowledge and understanding in a field of study that builds upon and supersedes their general secondary education, and is typically at a level that, whilst supported by advanced textbooks, includes some aspects that will be informed by knowledge of the forefront of their field of study;
2. can apply their knowledge and understanding in a manner that indicates a professional<sup>2</sup> approach to their work or vocation, and have competences<sup>3</sup> typically demonstrated through devising and sustaining arguments and solving problems within their field of study;
3. have the ability to gather and interpret relevant data (usually within their field of study) to inform judgements that include reflection on relevant social, scientific or ethical issues;
4. can communicate information, ideas, problems and solutions to both specialist and non-specialist audiences;
5. have developed those learning skills that are necessary for them to continue to undertake further study with a high degree of autonomy.

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<sup>2</sup> The word 'professional' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, relating to those attributes relevant to undertaking work or a vocation and that involves the application of some aspects of advanced learning. It is not used with regard to those specific requirements relating to regulated professions. The latter may be identified with the profile / specification.

<sup>3</sup> The word 'competence' is used in the descriptors in its broadest sense, allowing for gradation of abilities or skills. It is not used in the narrower sense identified solely on the basis of a 'yes/no' assessment.

### *Master's degrees*

Master's degrees<sup>4</sup> are awarded to students who:

1. have demonstrated knowledge and understanding that is founded upon and extends and/or enhances that typically associated with Bachelor's level, and that provides a basis or opportunity for originality in developing and/or applying ideas, often within a research<sup>5</sup> context;
2. can apply their knowledge and understanding, and problem solving abilities in new or unfamiliar environments within broader (or multidisciplinary) contexts related to their field of study;
3. have the ability to integrate knowledge and handle complexity, and formulate judgements with incomplete or limited information, but that include reflecting on social and ethical responsibilities linked to the application of their knowledge and judgements;
4. can communicate their conclusions, and the knowledge and rationale underpinning these, to specialist and non-specialist audiences clearly and unambiguously;
5. have the learning skills to allow them to continue to study in a manner that may be largely self-directed or autonomous.

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<sup>4</sup> Some JQI representatives suggested that MBA programmes should be specifically excluded; others consider that MBA programmes should reflect the attributes contained within the shared Masters descriptor.

<sup>5</sup> 'Research' is used to cover a wide variety of activities, with the context often related to a field of study; the term is used here to represent a careful study or investigation based on a systematic understanding and critical awareness of knowledge.

**Annex II Contributors to the discussions and drawing**

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## 7 Tuning Educational Structures in Europe

### *Opportunities, Possibilities and Obstacles*

Julia Gonzalez Ferreras & Robert Wagenaar<sup>1</sup>

#### 7.1 Introduction

What seemed to be wishful thinking some five years ago is at present not only a political reality, but—even more importantly—one of the main topics of discussion in the higher education world: the urge for compatibility, comparability and competitiveness of higher education in Europe.

As is understood by many nowadays, university authorities, university policy makers, teaching staff but above all students, higher education has developed from a local, regional and national issue to a

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Gonzalez (University of Deusto, Bilbao (ES)) and Robert Wagenaar (University of Groningen (NL)) are the overall co-ordinators of the project *Tuning*. This article could not have been written without the help of many of whom we mention in particular the members of the Management Committee: the higher education experts, Stephen Adam (UK), Volker Gehmlich (DE), Ann Katherine Isaacs (IT), Estela Pereira (PO), Maria Sticchi-Damiani (IT), Chantal Zoller (BE); the academic experts, Lupo Donà Dalle Rose (IT), Lars Gunnarsson (SE), Alan Hegarty (IE), Jean- Luc Lamboley (FR), Peder Ostergaard (DK), Paul Ryan (IE), Anthony Smith (FR); the project members, Hendrick Ferdinande (BE), Luc Lemaire (BE), Adolfo Quirós and the project assistants Robert Alcock, Almudena Garrido, and Ingrid van der Meer. Section 6 of this paper is partly based on a text prepared by Volker Gehmlich (Fachhochschule Osnabrück). Section 5 is based on the work of the Deusto team: Elena Auzmendi, Jon Paul Laka and Aurelio Villa.

European and a global issue. Young people are travelling all over the world to participate in education that fits best their abilities and objectives. They demand reliable and objective information about qualification programmes on offer. This information is not only of relevance for (future) students but also for (future) employers. Both groups of stakeholders demand certainty about what a qualification, a degree, stands for in practice. The European economic area also requires an integrated European higher education area.

Politics has taken its responsibility by initiating the Sorbonne-Bologna-Prague-Berlin process. A group of universities has taken up the challenge by initiating the project *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe*. While both the Sorbonne Declaration of 1998 and the Bologna Declaration of 1999 focus on higher education *systems*, the Tuning project focuses on educational *structures* and *content of studies*. Whereas educational systems are primarily the responsibility of governments, educational structures and content are in the ambit of higher education institutions.

*Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* is a very ambitious project. Its rationale is the implementation of the Bologna Declaration process at the university level by making use of the experiences gained in the ERASMUS and SOCRATES programmes since 1985. In particular the European Credit Transfer (and Accumulation) System, ECTS, is of major importance in this respect. The *Tuning* project focuses on generic and subject-specific competencies of first and second cycle graduates. In addition, it has a direct impact on academic recognition, quality assurance and control, compatibility of study programmes at the European level, distance learning and lifelong learning. In other words: all issues mentioned in the Prague Communiqué of June 2001 are addressed by *Tuning*. It is expected that the results of the project will effect most, if not all, European higher education institutions and programmes, and their educational structures and programmes in particular, in the intermediate and longer run.

Already one year after its initiation, initial conclusions can be offered about the project. These can be summarised as follows. First, *Tuning* shows that groups of academic experts working in a European context can establish reference points for the two cycles in their subject areas. Second, it identified common reference points using an approach based on subject-related and generic competencies. Third, the application of

*Tuning* techniques can be vital for the creation of the European higher education area. And last, *Tuning* gives a co-ordinated context for collaboration in the process of adjusting to Bologna indications. The initial outcomes of the *Tuning* project have been made public at its Closing meeting on 31 May 2002 in Brussels. The final results of the first phase of the project will be published in the autumn of 2002.

## 7.2 Background Information

*Tuning* was designed as an independent, university-driven project, co-ordinated by university staff members from different countries. The participating higher education institutions cover all EU and EFTA countries. The European Commission and the institutions involved fund the project. For phase one of the project an Inner Circle and an Outer Circle of institutions were established. The Inner Circle consisted of five so-called subject area groups, viz. Business Administration, Education Sciences, Geology, History and Mathematics, in total 76 higher education institutions. Two thematic networks, Physics and Chemistry, work closely together with the project as the groups six and seven, bringing the total to 105 institutions.

The project started officially in December 2000, but was actually launched on 4 May 2001. The time between December 2000 and May 2001 was mainly used to select the institutions that would participate directly in *Tuning* besides preparing the Launch meeting. The selection was made with support of the national Rectors' Conferences. During one year, five meetings of the subject area groups were held, including the Launch meeting and the Closing meeting.

The group of participants is not limited to the, in practice, seven Inner Circle groups, but also so-called Synergy Groups are involved in the programme: Languages, Humanitarian Development, Law, Medicine, Mechanical Engineering and Veterinary Sciences. The Synergy Groups have proven to be very important for the project because of their knowledge and expertise in co-operating in a European context.

Furthermore, the European University Association (EUA) and a number of national Rectors' Conferences played an active role in *Tuning*. In particular the Rectors' Conferences of Italy, Portugal and Spain organised activities on a national level involving as many higher education institutions in their countries as possible.

### 7.3 What the *Tuning* Project Is and What It Is Not: Main Objectives

*Tuning* seeks to 'tune' educational structures in Europe by opening a debate to identify and exchange information and to improve European co-operation and collaboration in the development of quality, effectiveness and transparency. *Tuning* does not seek to develop any sort of unified, prescriptive, or definitive European curricula, nor does it want to create any rigid set of subject specifications, to restrict or direct educational content and/or to end the rich diversity of European higher education. Furthermore, it does not want to restrict the independence of academics and subject specialists or to damage local and national autonomy.

When developing the project the following main objectives were identified:

- To bring about a high level of Europe-wide convergence in higher education in the five—later seven—subject areas (Business, Chemistry, Education Sciences, Geology, History, Mathematics and Physics) by defining commonly accepted professional and learning outcomes.
- To develop professional profiles and desired learning outcomes or competencies in terms of transferable skills and subject-related skills, knowledge and content in the seven subject areas.
- To facilitate transparency in the educational structures and to further innovation through communication of experience and identification of good practice.
- To create European networks able to present examples of good practice, encouraging innovation and quality in the joint reflection and exchange, also for disciplines not represented in *Tuning*.
- To develop and exchange information in relation to the development of curricula in the selected areas, and develop a model curriculum structure for each area, enhancing the recognition and European integration of diplomas.
- To build bridges between this network of universities and other appropriate qualified bodies in order to produce convergence in the selected subject areas.
- To elaborate a methodology for analysing common elements and areas of specificity and diversity, and how to tune them.
- To associate with other subject areas where a similar process may be incorporated through synergy.

- To act in a co-ordinated manner with all actors involved in the process of tuning educational structures, in particular the Bologna follow-up group, ministries of education, Conferences of Rectors (including eua), other associations (as eurashe), quality assurance organisations and accreditation bodies, as well as universities.

#### **7.4 The *Tuning* Methodology**

In the framework of the *Tuning* project a methodology has been designed to understand degrees by developing four lines of approach:

1. generic competencies,
2. subject-specific competencies (skills, knowledge and content),
3. the role of ECTS as an accumulation system and
4. the role of learning, teaching, assessment and performance in relation to quality assurance and control.

In the first phase of the *Tuning* project (2000–2002) the emphasis was on the first three lines. The fourth line received less attention due to time constraints, but will be central in the second phase of the project (2003–2004).

Each line, in turn, was developed according to a defined process. In all cases it was based on updated information about the state of the art at the European level. This information was then reflected upon and discussed by teams of experts in the seven subject areas. These teams were consisted of people from each of the EU and EFTA countries. It is the work in these teams, validated by related European networks, that provided understanding, context and conclusions, which could be valid at a European level.

#### **7.5 Competencies: Generic Competencies**

One of the key objectives of the *Tuning* project is to contribute to the development of easily readable and comparable degrees, and to the understanding 'from inside', in a joint European manner of the nature of each of the two cycles described in the Bologna declaration.

Searching for perspectives to facilitate mobility of professionals and degree holders in Europe, the project looked for European-wide consensus in understanding degrees by focusing on what degree holders

would *be able to perform*. In this respect, two choices marked the project from the start:

- The choice to reach common points of reference.
- The choice to use competencies and skills (always based on knowledge).

The choice to use common points of reference instead of degree definitions shows a clear positioning along three complementary lines. First, if professionals are to move and be employed in different countries of the European higher education area, their education needs to have certain *commonly agreed* landmarks, recognised from within in each of the subject-related areas.

Simultaneously, the use of reference points enables *diversity, freedom* and *autonomy*. Diversity, freedom and autonomy characterise the European identity and could never be left out in a truly European project. These values can be realised in several combinations of selections and combinations of crucial elements, in the complementary and alternative foreseen, in the roads followed, etc.

The provision of reference points also accommodates *dynamism*. The *Tuning* agreements are not chiselled in stone, but can develop with the European society whose changing needs and strengths they are called to serve.

Another significant feature of *Tuning* is the choice to look at degrees in terms of learning outcomes, particularly in relation to competencies. *Tuning* distinguishes two types of competencies: generic competencies (instrumental, interpersonal and systemic) and subject specific competencies (including skills, knowledge and content). First and second cycle have been described in terms of agreed and dynamic reference points: learning outcomes and competencies to be met. The advantage of (comparable) competencies and learning outcomes is that they allow flexibility and autonomy in the construction of curricula. At the same time, they form the basis to formulate common level indicators.

In this respect, while subject area related competencies are crucial for any degree and refer to the specific attributes of a field of study (line 2), generic competencies identify attributes pertaining to (almost) every degree: qualities like capacity to learn, decision-making capacity, project design and management, etc. In an evolving society, where demands tend to be in constant reformulation, generic competencies and skills are

of increasing importance. Furthermore, most competencies can be developed and nourished through appropriate learning and teaching methodologies or formats, while conversely, inappropriate teaching can do great harm to them.

The choice of competencies as dynamic reference points in *Tuning* has a number of advantageous consequences.

a) *Further transparency in academic and professional profiles in degrees and study programmes, and growing emphasis on outcomes.*

In the reflection on academic and professional profiles, competencies emerge as an important element to guide the selection of knowledge appropriate to particular ends. The concept of competencies contains an integrative capacity to choose what is appropriate from a wealth of possibilities.

The emphasis on students' obtaining a particular competency, or set of competencies, may also increase transparency of the objectives set for a particular educational programme, through implying certain (measurable!) indicators. Simultaneously, competency-related objectives would be dynamic, as they take into consideration needs of society and employment. The shift towards defining programme objectives in terms of competencies normally relates to shifts in educational approaches, teaching materials and a larger variety of educational situations, since it fosters systematic involvement of the learner with individual and group learning, exercising communication skills, organised feedback, etc.

Besides, the shift in emphasis from input to output is reflected in student assessment. Moving from knowledge as the dominant (or even the single) reference, new approaches would include assessment centred on competencies, capacities and processes closely related to work, to student development, all in relation to academic and professional profiles already defined. This implies a larger range of assessment strategies, such as portfolios, tutorial and course work, peer evaluations, as well as assessment of situational learning. The use of competencies and skills (together with knowledge) and the emphasis on outputs add an important dimension, to balance the weight routinely given in international comparisons to the length of study programmes.

The definition of academic and professional profiles in degrees is intimately linked with the identification and development of competencies and skills throughout the curriculum. To this end, the

work of isolated academics is not sufficient. It needs to be approached in a transversal way throughout the curriculum of a particular degree programme.

Transparency and quality in academic and professional profiles are major assets in relation to employability and citizenship. Therefore, the enhancement of quality and consistency as a joint effort should be a priority for the European higher education institutions. The definition of academic and professional profiles and the development of the fields of required competencies add quality in terms of focus and transparency, purpose, processes and outcomes.

*b) Development of the paradigm of primarily student-centred education and the need to focus on the management of knowledge.*

A change is taking place in the teaching and learning paradigm, where approaches centred on the learner are increasingly important. The need to recognise and value learning could also be seen as influencing qualifications and the building of educational programmes leading to degree qualifications. In this context, the consideration of competencies side by side with the consideration of knowledge offers a number of advantages in harmony with the demands emerging from the student-centred learning paradigm.

The interest in the development of competencies in educational programmes is in accordance with an approach to education as primarily centred on the students and their capacity to learn, demanding more protagonism and higher degrees of involvement. In this paradigm, students must develop their capacity to handle original information and access and evaluate information in a more varied form (library, teacher, internet, etc.).

This approach emphasises that the student, the learner is the focus. Consequently, the approach to educational activities and to organisation of learning shifts to being guided by what learners need to achieve. It also affects assessment in terms of shifting from input to output and to the processes and the contexts of the learner.

*c) The growing demands of lifelong learning society and more flexibility in the organisation of learning.*

The 'society of knowledge' is also a 'society of learning'. This idea is intimately linked with the understanding of education in a wider

context: the continuum of lifelong learning, where the individual needs to be able to handle knowledge, to update it, to select what is appropriate for a particular context, to learn permanently, and to adapt what is learned to new and rapidly changing situations.

The diversification of modes of participation in education (full-time, part-time, etc.), changing contexts and diversity also affect the pace at which individuals and groups can take part in the educational process. This, in turn, influences not only form and structure of programme delivery, but also the whole approach to the organisation of learning. It implies more focused programmes, more short courses, more flexible course structures, and more flexible delivery of teaching, with the provision of more guidance and support.

Employability, in the perspective of lifelong learning, is considered as best served by a diversity of approaches and course profiles, the flexibility of programmes with multiple entrance and exit points and the development of *generic competencies*.

*d) A consideration for highest levels of employability and citizenship*

In fact, the relationship between reflection and work on competencies and employment is a longstanding one. The search to find a better way to predict successful performance in the work place, moving beyond measurements of intelligence personality and knowledge is often regarded as the initial point. The emphasis on work performance continues to be vital. In the context of the Salamanca Convention, relevance relates particularly to employability, which needs to be reflected in different ways in the curriculum 'depending on whether the *competencies* acquired are for employment after the first or the second degree.'

From the perspective of the *Tuning* project, *learning outcomes* go beyond employment to contain also the demands and standards the academic community has set in relation to particular qualifications. Yet, employment is an important element. In this context competencies and skills can relate better and may help to prepare graduates for crucial problems at certain levels of employment, in a permanently changing economy. This needs to be one of the points of analysis in the creation of programmes and units through constant reflection and evolution.

The consideration of education for employment needs to parallel education for citizenship, the need for personal development and for taking social responsibilities. At the same time, according to the

Council's follow-up report to the Lisbon Convention, access of all to higher education needs to be facilitated.

*e) Enhancement of the European dimension of higher education*

In the creation of the European higher education area, the joint study of competencies and knowledge will contribute to the development of easily readable and comparable degrees, and of a system essentially based on two main cycles. Furthermore, the joint debate on the nucleus of competencies and the articulation of levels and programmes by European networks can clearly enrich the European dimension of higher education. It also enhances the consistency of accreditation systems by increasing information on learning outcomes. Furthermore, it contributes to the development of common frameworks of qualifications, hence promotes understanding, clarity and the attractiveness of the European higher education area. Besides, an increase in transparency of learning outcomes and processes definitely will be a further asset for the encouragement and enhancement of mobility.

In relation to the creation of the European higher education area, the joint reflection, debate and attempts to define competencies as dynamic reference points therefore would be of crucial importance for the development of easily readable and comparable degrees, for the adoption of a system essentially based on two main cycles and for the enhancement of mobility, not only of students, but particularly of graduates and professionals.

*f) The provision of a vocabulary more adequate for consultation with stakeholders.*

Change and variety of contexts necessitate a constant checking of social demands on professional and academic profiles. This underlines the need for consultation and for continuous revision of information on adequacy. The vocabulary of competencies, since it comes from outside higher education, could be considered more adequate for consultation and dialogue with groups not directly involved in academic life, and can contribute to the necessary reflection for the development of new degrees and for permanent systems of updating existing ones.

In *Tuning*, the need for consultation responded to:

- The wish to initiate a joint discussion on this field of competencies and skills at the European level, based on views of groups from outside academia (graduates and employers) as well on those of a broader base in relation to academics (i.e. beyond *Tuning* representatives from each of the subject areas involved).
- The attempt to gather updated information for reflection on possible trends and the degree of variety and change all over Europe.
- The desire to start from the experience and the reality in order to reach levels of diversity or commonality between the different countries, starting the debate from specific questions with concrete language.
- The importance of initiating the reflection and debate at three different levels: the *institutional level* (the basis and the first one to take place), the *subject area level* (a reference point for the higher education institutions) and the *aggregate level* (a second reference point in relation to the situation at European level).

The *Tuning* project consulted with graduates, employers and academics in seven subject areas (Business, Education Sciences, Geology, History, Mathematics, Physics and Chemistry), from 101 university departments in 16 European countries, by means of questionnaires, to which a total of 7,125 people responded (comprising 5,183 graduates, 944 employers and 998 academics). This is not to mention the informal teamwork, reflection and debate provoked at the level of departments, disciplines and countries. The objectives of this consultation were to initiate joint debate and reflection at institutional, subject area, and European levels, starting from a base of updated information reflecting the reality of the current situation. The consultation dealt with both generic and subject-specific skills and competencies.

Thirty generic competencies were selected from three categories: instrumental, interpersonal and systemic. Respondents were asked to rate both the importance and the level of achievement by educational programmes in each competency, and also to rank the five most important competencies. The questionnaires were translated into 11 languages and sent by each participating institution to 150 graduates and 30 employers of graduates in their subject area. The questionnaire for academics was prepared based on 17 competencies judged most important by graduates and employers. For each of the competencies, the respondents were asked to indicate: the *importance* of the skill or

competency for work in their profession and the level of *achievement* of the skill/competency that they estimate they have reached as a result of taking their degree programme.

One of the most striking conclusions is the remarkable correlation ( $r_s = 0.9730$ ; Spearman correlation) between the ratings given by employers and those given by graduates. Selecting only three aspects, the following conclusions can be drawn.

First, the two groups consider that the most *important* competencies to be developed are: capacity for analysis and synthesis, capacity to learn, problem solving, capacity for applying knowledge in practice, capacity to adapt to new situations concern for quality, information management skills, ability to work autonomously and teamwork.

At the lower end of the scale of importance appear: understanding of cultures and customs of other countries, appreciation of diversity and multiculturalism, ability to work in an international context, leadership, research skills, project design and management, and knowledge of a second language. One striking aspect is the concentration of the 'international' competencies in the lower part of the scale with respect to importance. This opens a number of questions for further analysis.

In relation to actual *achievement*, the items which appear highest in the scale in the opinion of the graduates are: capacity to learn, basic general knowledge, ability to work autonomously, capacity for analysis and synthesis, information management skills, research skills, problem solving, concern for quality and will to succeed. Six of these items coincide with those that graduates and employers considered highly important. The remaining items reflect the tasks that universities have been performing for centuries.

The least achieved competencies are: leadership, understanding of cultures and customs of other countries, knowledge of a second language, ability to communicate with experts in other fields, ability to work in an international context, and ability to work in an interdisciplinary team. It is remarkable that these competencies, with the exception of knowledge of a second language, also appear near the bottom of the scale for importance. This calls for further reflection.

As regards the variation of ranking and the impact by *country*, there are 13 items common to respondents from all countries. Among them are three competencies that appear at the top of the scales and two at the

bottom. Ten items show a very mild country effect while seven competencies show a significant country effect.

Further debate is required, but some provisional indicators of what is considered more or less important for some relevant groups are provisionally out for consideration and reference.

However, at the level of subject-related competencies *Tuning* makes perhaps its largest contribution, since those subject-related competencies are crucial for identification of degrees, for comparability and for the definition of first and second cycles. Each of the groups identified a list of competencies related to their subject and consulted with other academics to reflect on the relative importance of these competencies and their preferred location in either the first or the second cycle. Because of the close relationship between this reflection and knowledge, the analysis of their replies appears in line 2.

## 7.6 Subject-Specific Competencies (Line 2)

In addition to the more general competencies—which ought to be developed in all study programmes—each course of study will certainly seek to foster more specific subject competencies (skills and knowledge). The subject-related skills are the relevant methods and techniques pertaining to the various discipline areas, e.g. analysis of ancient scripts, chemical analyses, sampling techniques and so forth.

One of the objectives of *Tuning* has been to develop level qualifications for the first and second cycle. In the *Tuning* framework these qualifications are called learning outcomes. Learning outcomes can be defined as statements of what a learner is expected to know, understand and/or be able to demonstrate after completion of a learning programme. A distinction has to be made between shared descriptors for higher education qualifications in general and subject-related qualifications.

At first sight, it seems reasonable that the more general learning outcomes should be pursued in the first cycle. Some previous experience shows however that the ‘general’ learning outcomes are to an extent subject dependent. It is suggested by *Tuning* that, in general, at completion of the first cycle, the student should be able to:

- show familiarity with the foundation and history of his/her major (discipline);
- communicate obtained basic knowledge in a coherent way;

- place new information and interpretation in its context;
- show understanding of the overall structure of the discipline and the connection between its sub-disciplines;
- show understanding and implement the methods of critical analyses and development of theories;
- implement discipline-related methods and techniques accurately;
- show understanding of the quality of discipline-related research;
- show understanding of experimental and observational testing of scientific theories.

The completion of the first cycle functions as entry requirement for the second cycle. Usually, the second cycle is the phase of specialisation. The student who graduates from the second cycle must be able to execute independent (applied) research. It seems that, with regard to the learning outcomes of the second cycle the student should:

- have a good command of a specialised field within the discipline at an advanced level, which means in practice being acquainted with the newest theories, interpretations, methods and techniques;
- be able to follow critically and interpret the newest developments in theory and practice;
- have sufficient competency in the techniques of independent research and to be able to interpret the results at an advanced level;
- be able to make an original, albeit limited, contribution within the canons of the discipline, e.g. final thesis;
- show originality and creativity with regard to the handling of the discipline;
- have developed competency at a professional level.

Not all the mentioned learning outcomes or level indicators are of the same relevance for each discipline. Given this fact, the *Tuning* members nevertheless preferred these descriptors above those for bachelors and masters presented by the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI), reported in the previous chapter of the present volume. Besides smaller ones, the main criticism regarding the JQI proposal is that for the second cycle no final project or thesis is included as one of the preconditions for rewarding the degree.

It needs to be stressed here that the same learning objectives and competencies can be reached by using *different* types of teaching and

learning methods, techniques and formats. Examples of these are attending lectures, performing specific assignments,<sup>2</sup> practising technical skills, writing papers of increasing difficulty, reading papers, learning how to give constructive criticism on the work of others, chairing meetings (of seminar groups, for example), working under time pressure, co-producing papers, presenting papers, making précis or summaries, doing laboratory or practical exercises, fieldwork, individual study.

As part of *Tuning*, the seven subject area representatives engaged in intensive discussions to reach consensus on subject-related competencies for their discipline. Each of the groups wrote a report on its findings, which is included in the final report of the first phase of the *Tuning* project.<sup>3</sup> Although the approaches were very different, due to type of discipline, all groups followed more or less the same procedure. Four phases of development can be recognised.

In Phase 1 group members informed each other about the present situation in their institutions, the type of programmes being designed as well as future perspectives. The information was amended by the various synergy groups which contributed effectively. Phase 2 was characterised by intense discussions and exchange of opinions. This was also carried into the plenary sessions of the steering committee of the project. Then in Phase 3 the groups identified what was common, diverse and dynamic in their subject areas. They tried to find a common framework for those elements for which it was useful to have clear reference points. At the same time differences were highlighted and tested whether these were in fact useful divergences and as such an enrichment. Finally, in Phase 4, agreements were made and ideas outlined. It was the common feeling at that stage that it was really possible to take a big step forward. At the same time the rigidity of the project duration had to be accepted and therefore all groups were eager to present their results in a proper form. They worked very hard up to the last moment (and even longer than that) to present their ideas to a wider audience. It should be stressed that all the reports benefited from a

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<sup>2</sup> I.e. finding out about a specific topic and writing a report or an essay.

<sup>3</sup> Initial reports have been published on the web sites of the Tuning project: [www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm](http://www.relint.deusto.es/TuningProject/index.htm) and [www.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm](http://www.let.rug.nl/TuningProject/index.htm).

cross-fertilisation: from the other subject area groups, the synergy groups, the plenary sessions, in fact, from the platforms of academics from European member states which *Tuning* provided.

From the seven—very different—papers the following conclusions can be drawn:

- There is a *great willingness* and *openness* of academics to exchange their views on subject-related competencies and skills within their subject area.
- There is a *significant common line of understanding* of academics about subject-related competencies and skills within their subject area.
- There is an *identifiable common anxiety* of academics with regard to external pressure to harmonise contents of subject areas.
- There is a *clear orientation from subject input towards learning outcomes* in the design of study programmes across subject areas, in particular, at higher level.
- There is an *identifiable acceptance of the need of a quality assurance system* to guarantee recognition of academic achievements.

Besides these conclusions, the following can be learned from the papers.

First, a common framework in *first-cycle programmes* is possible and acceptable. To come to such a framework it may be necessary to:

- identify a *basic common core* which should be included in any programme of that respective subject area (Examples: Mathematics and Business group), or
- identify a *common study programme* across several partner institutions in various eu Member States or even in the whole of Europe which may lead to double / joint / common degrees (Example: Eurobachelor of the Chemistry group, the Physics group welcomes this too, examples also exist in the Business Area), or
- identify subject areas which *appear to be different* but are in fact very similar if they are looked at closely (Example: Education group), or
- identify a set of *learning outcomes* (Examples: Geology and History groups).

Second, a common framework in *second-cycle programmes* appears to be counter-productive (across all subject areas). However, this does not imply that it is not possible to form partnerships, for example strategic

alliances with the objective to develop Joint Master Degrees. In fact, these may be wanted by academics, students and/or the labour market). In one option, this might imply designing individual profiles at an identified level of second cycle, which could be based on:

1. widening and deepening vertical knowledge (specialisation of subject area), and/or
2. widening and deepening of horizontal knowledge (additional related subject areas), and/or
3. widening and deepening diverse knowledge (additional unrelated subject areas) to satisfy stakeholder demands and to stress the diversity within Europe (Example: Business Group).

Another approach is by *evaluating and accrediting* study programmes within the European education area, which may be based on *benchmarking* (Example: Mathematics Group).

Finally, across the cycles it appears that the more the study programme is geared towards a specified profession, the more likely an agreement on a common core may be reached, if the profession can be pursued across borders (Example: Education Group).

*Tuning* identified three major characteristics of subject areas within the European education area, which are *commonality*, *diversity* and *dynamism*. Commonality in terms of a common core in the first cycle can exist. Common core subjects mostly cover basics of a study programme and often include auxiliary subjects, which help to understand the basic subject matters (e.g. mathematics to explain business phenomena). Common core subjects can be taught at any institution—they are interchangeable. However, this does not mean that common core subjects are unchanging. On the contrary, continuous updates are essential.

Concerning specific subjects, the situation is different. They deliver the flavour of a given study programme and thus have to be taught where the specific competencies of an institution are. They should be nourished as they highlight the *diversity* that is an advantage within the European education area, and not a disadvantage, as long as transparency is guaranteed and mutual trust is based on adherence to quality criteria.

Whereas in the first stages of joint study programmes e.g. the idea was to harmonise curricula, today's objective of *Tuning*—and this has been confirmed— is that it is not wise to look only for identities in every

subject area but also to highlight the differences. On the other hand, evidently there is no standstill. What has been designed today may be obsolete tomorrow. Within the two years of the *Tuning* project it has become very obvious that a constant update is essential. This *dynamism* can be traced easily by skimming the various Meeting Documents (1–4) of the project.

It has to be concluded that the findings of *Tuning* concerning the understanding of curricula and concerning the identification of shared descriptors became possible only through the *subject area approach*. This methodology appears to be crucial for distinguishing clearly between first and second cycles and for describing the contents of the two levels. To understand what this means, it may be useful to analyse the various Bachelor-/Master descriptors or benchmarks that have been published of late as recommendations, discussion papers etc, in particular those by the Quality Assurance Agency, UK, by accreditation agencies and by the Joint Quality Initiative Informal Group.

It is obvious that within disciplines structures are identifiable to cluster subjects. In addition to subjects that aim at widening the knowledge of the learner, there are others that focus on deepening knowledge. This—in very broad terms—is reflected in the two cycles. *Tuning* emphasises a third cluster: knowledge access and transfer. Without this category knowledge acquisition is useless. Lines 1 and 2 of *Tuning* clearly demonstrate this. Line 2 has no impact unless it is opened by tools such as information technology, foreign language skills, or the ability to organise oneself. At the same time it is essential that this acquired knowledge can be transferred to other areas. This may refer to other disciplines, regions and/or professions.

Within a very short time, *Tuning* has shown that clear objectives in education can be achieved if an adequate platform is created. Such platforms at European level are a critical success factor to give academics the opportunity to exchange views, to discuss upcoming issues and to update constantly what is common, diverse and dynamic.

Probably the most important conclusion that can be drawn here is that only by relating knowledge and subject-related competencies to profiles of academic degrees and to those of professions, can transparency be created and coherence identified across Europe. It shows the importance of a project like *Tuning*.

### 7.7 ECTS as an Accumulation System (Line 3)

Credits play a major role in the comparability and compatibility of programmes of studies. Therefore, credits received a lot of attention in the project. Already in the Bologna Declaration their relevance was stressed:

Establishment of a system of credits—such as in the ECTS system—as a proper means of promoting the most widespread student mobility. Credits could also be acquired in non-higher education contexts, including lifelong learning, provided they are recognised by receiving Universities concerned.

Although this statement is not sufficiently specified—it mixes credits for mobility as well as accumulation—it was a first step. The Prague Communiqué showed the development of thinking:

Ministers emphasised that for greater flexibility in learning and qualification processes the adoption of common cornerstones of qualifications, supported by a credit system such as the ECTS or one that is ECTS-compatible, providing both transferability and accumulation functions, is necessary.

This is the logical outcome of the Salamanca Declaration of the Higher Education sector in which it is said that: 'Universities are convinced of the benefits of a credit accumulation and transfer system based on ECTS and on their basic right to decide on the acceptability of credits obtained elsewhere'.

In *Tuning* both the macro perspective and the micro perspective have been taken into account. Accordingly, two strategy papers were written. The first one focused on the necessity of setting up a pan-European credit accumulation framework. The second one showed the relationship between educational structures, learning outcomes, workload and the calculation of ECTS credits. Both papers made clear that without a reliable workload-based credit system, understood by all parties in the same way, the objectives of one European higher education area could not be reached.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The papers are included in the final report, but have been published separately on the web sites of the Tuning project too: Stephen, Adam, *Principles of a Pan-European Credit Accumulation Framework: Good Practice Guidelines* (2002); Robert Wagenaar,

Tuning is convinced that the only reasonable way forward is to accept ECTS as the only European credit system and to develop it further as both a transfer and an accumulation system. This requires not only a common understanding of its underlying principles but also a common methodology for measuring workload. Although ECTS is one of the cornerstones in the comparability and compatibility of periods of learning and recognised qualifications, one of the conclusions of *Tuning* is that credits as such are not a sufficient indication for the (level of) the learning achievements. Besides credits, learning outcomes and competencies are the other crucial elements. By defining learning outcomes, standards can be set with regard to the required level of discipline-related skills and general academic or transferable skills. ECTS credits are required as the building bricks for underpinning the learning outcomes.

As it would take too much space to discuss the mentioned strategic papers here, we will limit us to the conclusions that can be drawn from them as the result of line 3. For the sake of clarity, the conclusions have been arranged into four interrelated categories: educational structures, learning outcomes and competencies, a European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System and workload.

First, with regard to the issue of educational structures the following observations were made:

- Comparison requires not only comparable systems of higher education on a European level but also comparable structures and content of studies. The definition of learning outcomes / competencies and the use of ECTS as a transfer and an accumulation system can accommodate these objectives.
- There is a clear relationship between educational structures, learning outcomes, workload and the calculation of credits in particular within the context of the Bologna Process. These elements are very relevant in the world of today where traditional teaching is partly replaced by new types of teaching and learning.
- The regular teaching and learning periods (including examinations and excluding re-sits) in Europe vary far less between countries than expected.

- Comparability of structures and recognised degrees / qualifications in both a national and an international setting is critical for today's students. It implies that students will shop for study programmes that fit best their abilities.
- Recognition of degrees between countries will not be stimulated when the differences in length prove to be unbridgeable or incomparable in practice. It is therefore strongly recommend that the length of the first cycle has a student workload of 180 to 240 ECTS-credits and the second cycle a student workload of 90 to 120 (independent of the length of the first cycle).

Second, with respect to the topic of learning outcomes and competencies the following conclusions were drawn:

- Competitiveness requires the definition of learning outcomes / competencies to be transparent and requires a credit system which allows comparison. In this respect the ECTS methodology and tools (learning agreement, transcript of records and—in future—level and course descriptors), relevant for both mobile and non-mobile students, are of crucial importance.
- Credits as such are not a sufficient indication for the (level of) learning achievements. The only reliable way to compare pieces of learning and study programmes offered by (higher) education institutions is to look at learning outcomes / competencies.
- The definition of learning outcomes / competencies is a responsibility of the teaching staff. Only specialists of the same field will be able to formulate useful learning outcomes, although it is useful to consult other stakeholders in society.
- On the basis of defined learning outcomes / competencies credits are an important tool for designing curricula.
- Different pathways can lead to comparable learning outcomes. Therefore, the existing diversity in Europe can be fully maintained.
- Credit accumulation and transfer is facilitated by clearly defined learning outcomes.

The mentioned strategic papers come to the conclusion that there is an obvious need for a single European credit accumulation and transfer system, with clear rules:

- One European higher education area requires that Europe agree on one credit system that should be used for both transfer and accumulation purposes. ECTS is such a system.
- ECTS should be developed into an over-arching pan-European credit accumulation and transfer system.
- ECTS as a Europe-wide accumulation and transfer system is an essential tool for the development of other, more flexible kinds of higher education: part-time studies, recurrent study periods (lifelong learning).
- As part of a European accumulation and transfer system it is required to develop a system of level indicators and course type descriptors.
- When ECTS is accepted on national levels as the official transfer and accumulation system it follows that credits will lose their relative value and only have an absolute value.
- 60 ECTS credits measures the workload of a typical student during one academic year. The number of hours of student work (that is, of the typical student) required to achieve a given set of learning outcomes (on a given level) depends on student ability, teaching and learning methods, teaching and learning resources, curriculum design. These can differ between universities in a given country and between countries.
- A full calendar year programme (12 months programme of teaching, learning and examinations) can have a maximum load of 75 credits (which equals 46 to 50 weeks).
- Credits allow calculation of the necessary workload and impose a realistic limit on what can actually be put in the whole course or in each academic year.
- Credits are not interchangeable automatically from one context to another.

The major novelty here is the proposal to develop a European-wide system of level indicators, besides a system of course type descriptors as a precondition for the further development of a European credit accumulation system. We find it useful to give a more detailed explanation here. The following information is taken from one of the strategic papers.

While there is no suggestion within ECTS that credits measure level, it is apparent that, when credits are used within an accumulation system,

the rules relating to the awarding of a qualification generally specify not only the number of credits required for the specific qualification but also a set of sub-rules in relation to the level at which those credits must be obtained as well as the type of courses. This project has not endeavoured to tackle this issue, but it is evidently one which all those institutions implementing a credit accumulation system will need to address and which, if credits are to be transferable between institutions and between member states, will need to be addressed in a European perspective. Currently, such issues are resolved on an ad hoc basis, sometimes utilising the NARIC network, but if larger scale use of a European credit accumulation system is to be successful, there will need to be a European understanding—or even a European-wide system of *level indicators*. A system of *course type descriptors* will be required as well. Moreover, developing these further indications in conjunction with credits will be a critical factor in a system of accrediting prior learning or prior experience so that all concerned will understand, in a transparent way, the level at which the credits are being awarded. Similarly, as the pace of continuing professional development accelerates, the level at which credits are being allocated will need to be made clear.

A possible path forward could be to introduce additional descriptors, which go along with ECTS as an accumulation and transfer system. A pre-condition for such a Europe-wide system is that it should be transparent and easy to understand and to implement. The consequence is that credits will be distributed over levels and type of courses. If we talk about levels we may, as an example, distinguish the following ones:

- **B**asic level course (meant to give an introduction in a subject);
- **I**ntermediate level course (intended to deepen basic knowledge);
- **A**dvanced level course (intended to further strengthening of expertise);
- **S**pecialised level course (meant to build up knowledge and experience in a special field or discipline).

With regard to the type of courses the following ones could possibly be distinguished:

- **C**ore course (part of the core of a major programme of studies);
- **R**elated course (supporting course for the core);
- **M**inor course (optional course or subsidiary course).

The levels and types of courses offer us additional crucial descriptors. In order to make clear and immediately evident what learning experience the credits represent one can imagine that a *simple code system* could be introduced. This system would include not only the amount of work done by the student in terms of credits, but also descriptors which give an indication of the level and the type of course unit. To give an example: The code 5-I-R might tell us that the unit has a load of 5 credits, is offered on an intermediate level and is related to the core.<sup>5</sup> For courses taken outside the framework of a programme, for example in terms of lifelong learning, the last code letter would be superfluous.

One of the issues not solved yet is the calculation of student workload. In the framework of the *Tuning* project the problem has been discussed, and as a result the following main obstacles have been identified:

- Calculation of workload in terms of credits is to a large extent discipline related, and therefore is and always has to be determined by academic staff.
- The notional learning time of a student is influenced by at least the following elements: diversity of traditions, curriculum design and context, coherence of curriculum, teaching and learning methods, methods of assessment and performance, organisation of teaching, ability and diligence of the student and financial support by public or private funds. The notional learning time is the number of hours which it is expected a student (at a particular level) will need, on average, to achieve the specified learning outcomes at that level.

## 7.8 The Work Is Not Over Yet

Although much has been accomplished in the *Tuning* project, obviously much work still has to be done. In the first place it is required to disseminate the outcomes through different channels (one of which is this publication). Secondly, more in-depth studies are required as well as tests of the present results in other subject areas. Because of these reasons a *Tuning project phase II* has been developed which we expect will start in the first months of 2003 and will have a running period of two years, as *Tuning I* had.

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<sup>5</sup> This code system is based on a proposal of the EUPEN network.

The first aim of *Tuning II* is to develop further approaches regarding teaching, learning, assessment and performance and to link-up *Tuning* outcomes with quality assurance and assessment as well as with professional bodies. Furthermore, it is thought necessary that the methodology and results of the lines 1 to 3 be updated and refined. In addition, the outcomes should be made operational for distance learning and lifelong learning.

For the *Tuning* project phase I mainly universities in the traditional sense were selected. This was done for two reasons, viz. to match best the selected subject areas and to have a comparable type of institutions in the different countries. Well-mapped subject areas from five scientific fields were chosen to avoid further complication of the project. It was expected that the benchmarking of professional profiles and desired outcomes, in terms of knowledge, skills and competencies would be easier for this type of disciplines. Now this approach has proven to be successful, a new challenge is to apply the *Tuning* outcomes in different types of subject areas.

Therefore, the second major task of the proposed project should be the implementation of the *Tuning* methodology to two new subject areas: an interdisciplinary programme, for which European Studies has been proposed, and an applied science which is strongly regulated, for which Nursing has been selected. These two should serve as examples for comparable type of subject areas.

So far, only higher education institutions from EU and EFTA countries participate in the programme. A third important task will be to extend the project to the accession countries. Therefore, the existing Inner circle will be enlarged with another 30 institutions of which 15 will come from Central European countries. The existing institutions will continue to work on the methodology developed in phase I but they will concentrate on a number of specific problems that have remained.

Besides these three main purposes of the project, another achievement of phase I should be part of, and further developed in phase 2: the offering of a platform for the exchange of experience and knowledge between countries, higher education institutions and academic staff with regard to the implementation of the Bologna process on a Europe-wide level. This will include the further development and implementation of the European transfer and accumulation system ECTS on the basis of described competencies and learning outcomes.

## 7.9 Conclusion

This chapter has tried to make clear that the only reliable way to compare pieces of learning and study programmes offered by (higher) education institutions is to look at learning outcomes and competencies. By defining the right learning outcomes, standards can be set with regard to the required level of discipline related theoretical and/or experimental knowledge and content, academic and discipline-related skills, and general academic or transferable skills. With the exception of the latter, these will differ from discipline to discipline. To make programmes more transparent and comparable on a European level, it will be necessary to develop learning outcomes and competencies for each recognised qualification. These learning outcomes should be identifiable and assessable in the programme that opts for such a qualification. Learning outcomes should not only be defined on the level of formal qualifications such as degrees but also on the level of modules or courses. The inclusion of learning outcomes in the pieces and in the total of a curriculum stimulates its consistency. They make explicit what a student should learn. Obviously, credit accumulation and transfer are facilitated by clear learning outcomes. These will make it possible to indicate with precision the achievements for which credits have been awarded.

The definition of learning outcomes / competencies is a responsibility of the teaching staff. Only specialists of the field will be able to formulate useful learning outcomes, although it will be useful to consult other stakeholders in society. The fact that the higher education sector has been internationalised and that institutions and disciplines compete on a global level nowadays, makes it necessary for the more general learning outcomes for each discipline or field to be designed on a supranational level. By defining learning outcomes in this way, universal reference points will be developed, which should be the bases for internal, national and international quality assurance and assessment. One of the major tasks of the project *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe* was the development of the required methodology for defining learning outcomes / competencies. This methodology should offer the mechanism to cope with recent developments like the internationalisation of labour and education or the interruption of academic studies as an effect of the introduction of a two-cycle system and lifelong learning.

In the world of today, traditional teaching is partly replaced by new types of teaching and learning and traditional higher education institutions increasingly experience competition with comparable institutions and with non-traditional higher education providers offering novel, attractive opportunities for learners. It is in the interest of society as a whole that learners find their way in the global educational market-place. Transparency is not only the keyword for that market-place, but also for degree programmes. Quality assurance and accreditation are integral parts of this picture. Competitiveness requires the definition of learning outcomes / competencies to be transparent and requires a credit system that allows comparison. In this respect the ECTS methodology and tools (learning agreement, transcript of records and—in future—level and course descriptors), relevant for both mobile and non-mobile students, are crucial. The same is true for the Diploma Supplement. Employability in both national and international settings is critical for today's student. It implies that students will shop for study programmes that fit best their abilities. Comparison requires not only comparable systems of higher education on a European level but also comparable structures and content of studies. The definition of learning outcomes / competencies and the use of ECTS as a transfer and an accumulation system can accommodate these objectives.

## 8 Consensus, Issues and Questions

### *Some Results of the Conference*

Marijk van der Wende & Don Westerheijden<sup>1</sup>

#### 8.1 Introduction

The current chapter briefly describes the main issues that arose during the conference 'Working on the European Dimension of Quality', held in Amsterdam, 12–13.3.2002, organised by CHEPS on the initiative of the Ministries of Education of the Netherlands and Flanders as well as the Hochschulrektorenkonferenz of Germany. The conference was attended by over a hundred participants from most of the countries involved in the Bologna process, representing ministries of education, quality assessment and accreditation agencies, other buffer bodies, higher education institutions and students.

#### 8.2 Descriptors of Bachelor and Master Programmes at Different Levels

There is a widely-shared consensus that the 'Dublin Descriptors', defining key outcomes for Bachelors and Masters programmes in general (cf. chapter 5) are useful. These generic descriptors are complementary to the more specific outcomes of the *Tuning* project (cf. chapter 6), which have been developed at the level of areas of knowledge ('disciplines'). In other words, the 'Dublin Descriptors' need to be 'tuned'. Moreover, the

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<sup>1</sup> Both: Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS), University of Twente, the Netherlands.

Tuning project outcomes are not to be taken as prescriptive. In that respect, it should be remembered that outcomes do not define curricula.

Gains from the Tuning project further include that there is a broader than expected consensus among European higher education institutions on descriptors of their programmes, starting from outcomes rather than starting from curriculum inputs and elements. At the same time, there is less than expected diversity regarding length/credits of programmes in specific disciplines. The approach to quality building on a combination of the 'Dublin Descriptors' and Tuning project outcomes apply to 'traditional' delivery of higher education as well as to transnational education, distance education, etc.

### **8.3 Quality Assurance at Different Levels**

A discussion arose on the relative value of programme versus institutional approaches to quality assurance. Both are important, was the general view. The 'Dublin Descriptors' as well as the Tuning project outcomes are directed primarily at programme level approaches. Many, including expressly the student representatives, gave programme level quality assessment the priority for public policy, *inter alia* because this would give more direct assurance of quality ('consumer protection'). Institutional quality assurance was mostly seen as a responsibility of autonomous, well-managed higher education institutions, even though some participants voiced the opinion that with 'mass' or 'universal' higher education, and in the emerging network society, such coherent higher education institutions will become ever rarer.

### **8.4 Questions: What Needs to be Addressed in Next Steps?**

Capitalising on the broad consensus among the conference participants, next steps could be proposed, in which the following issues will need to be addressed.

#### *An application question*

1. What is the right balance between generic and specific descriptors for accreditation frameworks and criteria? Cross-border quality assessment

projects will play a role in the learning process to develop a common understanding at a European level.

### *Ownership and participation questions*

2. Who is involved in (a) developing criteria for accreditation/quality assessment, (b) updating criteria for accreditation/quality assessment and (c) applying criteria in actual accreditation/quality assessment?
3. What are the implications of answers to the previous question for acceptance by the higher education community and society of consequences of (non-)accreditation?

### *Implications for higher education institutions*

4. Higher education institutions have to develop their 'accreditation capacity': how to elicit all information necessary for different quality assessment or accreditation agencies?
5. How to maintain quality improvement in a context of increasing attention for accreditation? Could institutional evaluation be a major tool on that account?
6. What is or should be their involvement in the current quality initiatives? Involvement of the higher education institutions is needed on the one hand to develop curricula responding to the frameworks as part of their institutional autonomy, because frameworks couched in terms of outcomes do not define curricula in terms of content and instructional design.
7. An associated question of involvement regards the input higher education institutions can give into frameworks or criteria defined or handled by quality assessment agencies or accreditation agencies.

### *Transnational education*

8. The specific issue of quality assurance of transnational education, especially in the form of collaborative frameworks (commonly known as 'franchising' arrangements, but actually broader than that) was also dealt with in this conference.
9. The main question in this respect concerns the balance between responsibility for quality by 'sender' and by 'receiver'. Participants broadly agreed that the Code of Good Practice (developed by UNESCO and the Council of Europe) with its principle that both 'sender' and 'receiver' take responsibility is indeed a good practice.

## 9 Closing the Conference

L.M.L.H.A. Hermans<sup>1</sup>

### 9.1 Travellers, Backpackers and Higher Education

One of my friends recently asked me if I knew the difference between travellers and backpackers. Travellers, he said, choose the fastest way of getting from A to B, and get irritated if they are delayed. Backpackers drift, admire the scenery, stay where they please, and move on when they feel like it. During the debate with parliament on the bill to introduce the bachelor–master system and accreditation of programmes, I was suddenly struck by this comparison. The cities of Bologna, Prague, Berlin and Lisbon flashed through my mind. I saw the image of the traveller and the backpacker as a metaphor for the changes taking place in higher education

### 9.2 Points of Departure

I embarked on my journey from two points of departure: Bologna and Lisbon.

In *Bologna* I joined 28 of my fellow ministers in signing the declaration we hoped would help create a Europe of knowledge. We decided to make the structure of our higher education systems comparable by introducing bachelor's and master's programmes. And we decided to do

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so quickly – within ten years. We signed the Bologna Declaration in June 1999.

Now, only three years later, Parliament has passed the bill introducing the bachelor–master system in the Netherlands. Most of our universities will start working with the new structure in 2002–2003.

At my second point of departure, the *Lisbon* Summit of March 2000, we decided that the European Union should strive to become the most dynamic and competitive knowledge-based economy in the world. The Netherlands wants to be among the front runners. Quality is the key word. Because the knowledge economy needs high-quality education and research. To achieve both, we need reliable quality assurance and that is why we in the Netherlands have decided to introduce accreditation. Parliament has passed the relevant bill just before this conference, early in 2002.

The prospect is an open education system in Europe, in which students can move freely, driven by the content and quality of courses, and the reputations of universities for their teaching and research. This is a prospect I like. So I plan to trigger a kind of ‘Bologna process’ for senior secondary vocational education at the forthcoming meeting of Education ministers in Barcelona.

Investing in knowledge is even more important now that there are moves to liberalise the higher education market. The past few years have witnessed a growing pressure to apply the World Trade Organisation system to higher and adult education. Under the General Agreement on Trade in Services, members committed themselves to bringing more and more services into the system.

Now it could well be the turn of higher education. The question is whether we in Europe have anything to fear. In the Netherlands, we encourage students to opt for quality. So when review committees and students evaluate the quality of courses, we publish their findings. Accreditation makes the quality of courses more transparent. Here we are using the experience gained in America.

When it comes to introducing the bachelor–master structure, it is clear to me that we are travellers not backpackers. We know our destination, and we are heading straight for it. But now and then we need to make a stopover. That is what we agreed to do in the Bologna declaration, so that we could co-ordinate policy development. Co-ordination has to take place internationally. Because I do not think students’ choices should be

limited to their own country. That narrows down their options too much. I therefore allow Dutch students to use their grants to do part or even all of their courses abroad. I hope more countries will do the same.

Last year my Flemish colleague and I agreed to harmonise the standards to be met by our bachelor's and master's programmes. In a process in which our two countries and various others worked together from the bottom up, we formulated a joint quality initiative and a work programme. As part of the programme we explored which features are essential for and common to accreditation. The answer was independent quality assurance, on the basis of self evaluation and peer reviews. I hope to be able to found the Accrediting body in the Netherlands within a month's time.

We also started to develop a general definition of what European bachelor's and master's degrees should stand for. What standards should they meet and could these standards be defined in terms of results? In other words, what should graduates know and what skills should they have? The definition we agreed on will be tested in cross-border quality assurance projects. For the record, international quality assurance dovetails with what institutions are doing together, namely co-ordinating curricula through the *Tuning* project, thematic networks or other forms of permanent co-operation.

So we are working hard to internationalise quality assurance. That is what this conference was all about, and it is what we plan to achieve. In our own countries, and working together across our borders. That is what we agreed in Bologna, where our journey started, and reaffirmed in Prague, in May 2001.

### 9.3 Conclusion

To stay with the image of travel, soon Europe will have a rail network with the same gauge tracks throughout. The carriages are different, but we will standardise the undercarriages so that they can all run on the same tracks.

As this conference comes to a close, I would urge you all to continue 'working on the European dimension of quality', to intensify co-operation on standards and joint testing. Our aim is to bring quality assurance throughout Europe into line, and to present the results at the next follow-up conference in the Bologna process, in Berlin next year.

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