

EUA policy position on Quality

1. Background

Since its creation, EUA has been very active in the field of quality, both in contributing to policy development at European level and to the development of quality cultures in universities through projects and other types of activities. The following outlines the position that EUA adopted since its foundation in 2001.

2. Starting points

EUA's work in the quality assurance area has been carried out while taking into consideration a number of requirements.

First, because of its European scope, EUA has been intensely aware of the diversity of the higher education sector – diversity of institutional missions and profiles, legal frameworks, etc. This implies that it is difficult to come to a one dimensional definition of quality for the purposes of quality assurance. Quality is contextual: its definition must take into account the specific institution and the national context of which it is part.

Second, Europe has the legitimate ambition to strengthen its higher education institutions, which are seen as central to the development of European society. If the goal is to ensure the vitality and creativity of research and education, this aspiration has a wide range of implications, particularly on institutional governance and quality assurance.

Third, EUA's concrete experience in quality, through the Quality Culture Project and the Institutional Evaluation Programme, has shown the inextricable link between institutional autonomy and accountability: the greater the institutional autonomy, the more robust are the internal quality processes and vice versa.

3. EUA's position on quality

EUA's position has been endorsed repeatedly by its members through the three bi-annual conventions held so far (Salamanca in 2001, Graz in 2003 and Glasgow in 2005).

3.1 Internal quality processes must be characterised by the following principles:

- Promote shared values and attitudes about quality rather than simply managerial processes and ensure that the internal evaluation processes develop professional attitudes and competence thus fostering creativity and innovation.
- Be fit for their purposes. While there is no single way to set up these processes, the cycles and scope of internal evaluations should be linked in a pragmatic and cost-effective way and attention should be paid to the global picture that emerges through the internal evaluation of the different activities.
- The role of leadership consists in communicating the need for these processes, framing them in consultation with the campus community – students, alumni, academic and administrative staff – and using their results in the strategic cycle.
- Ensure central data collection and analysis to measure institutional performance.
- Quality units are now standard in many institutions. It is important to ensure their appropriate leadership and staffing in order to avoid over-bureaucratisation.
- The link between autonomy and internal quality is fundamental: the greater the institutional autonomy, the more robust are the internal quality processes. In this

context, the national conferences of rectors must play an important role in negotiating with the national authorities and QA agencies the scope of the internal and external evaluations and of institutional autonomy.

3.2 The principles for external QA processes that should avoid undue bureaucratic processes include:

- Seek a balance between autonomy and accountability by promoting institutional audits based on an evaluation of internal quality processes
- A fitness for purpose approach, culturally adapted to countries and institutions
- An improvement orientation that stresses the self-evaluation phase and confidentiality of parts of the process

4. European Discussions

EUA has been an active contributor to the European quality debate since the Prague meeting in 2001, which marked the creation of the E4 Group (ENQA, ESIB, EUA and EURASHE). This group sent to the Bergen ministerial meeting the text entitled "European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance".

In the Bergen Communiqué, the Ministers asked ENQA together with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB to prepare a report exploring the practicalities of the European Register of QA agencies. The EUA proposals are as follows:

- The Register should be an unbiased, objective and reliable information tool about the quality of quality assurance agencies.
- The Register should be exclusive, that is, restricted to applicants that comply substantially with the criteria based on the European Standards and Guidelines.
- The Register Committee would use the results of the ENQA or nationally organised reviews of QA agencies, presuming they meet certain criteria (objective, unbiased, all partners in the evaluation teams) and provide all the necessary information. If information is missing, the Register Committee would reserve the right to ask for additional information.
- The Register Committee should include all major stakeholders (institutions, students, agencies, governments) because only a system of checks and balances would ensure trust and transparency.
- The operational cost and the secretariat supporting the Register will be light and minimal.

In conclusion, EUA supports the Register because it will be a reliable and useful information tool for the higher education institutions, provided it is managed in partnership with the higher education sector and other stakeholders.