

## The Cornerstones of Quality Assurance at European Level

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*“It is not the strongest species that survives, not the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change” – Charles Darwin*

### INTRODUCTION

I was struck by the title of the presentation – I like the notion of construction and of many parties collaborating to build a shared vision. Cornerstones are in essence the foundation stones which will support further constructions. One could continue with this image and note how the process is supervised by a Project Leader whose specific task is to ensure that all participants are clear on their roles, material is delivered on time and that the project is completed on time and to the satisfaction of those commissioning and paying for the construction. I should stop there, as I am now surfacing issues such as ownership and policy leaders within the Bologna Process.

During the course of researching for this presentation, I also came across an alternative title which I have to credit to Peter Williams, President of ENQA – *So, how are we getting on?* Such a title would suit the Irish approach – discursive, at times long-winded but genuine in our attempts to realise the vision. I often think many take a similar view of the Bologna Process – we will get there in the end, but we to work very hard at it. It is not as though we will all wake up in a magical land called the European Higher Education Area where each of the 10 action lines will have been implemented consistently throughout all 45 participating members. Needless to say, this is slightly removed from reality. As one who was deeply involved in the first stocktaking report on the Bologna Process, I do not think that I will shatter any illusions by saying that this project will not finish by 1<sup>st</sup> January or indeed, 31<sup>st</sup> December 2010. This, however, should not depress us – there is much to acknowledge. The fact that 45 participating countries, along with key stakeholders are pushing forward a series of reforms on a dynamic and voluntary basis reform is remarkable in itself. Leaders in higher education institutions have embraced to varying degrees the Bologna agenda and are leading their institutions through reform programmes. I also think it is noteworthy that a quiet revolution has taken place – common approaches and understandings are emerging and this is very evident in quality assurance.

This paper explores the evolution of quality assurance in the Bologna context. It will also identify external influences which will assist its construction, but also run the risk of compromising the voluntary dynamic associated with the Bologna process. Finally, some thoughts are offered on the value of the common standards articulated by ENQA in assisting participating members to embed quality assurance in higher education.

### WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

When we look at the Sorbonne Joint Declaration of May 1998, the Ministers of France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom, there was no reference to quality assurance. Notwithstanding this, the document remains critical to the shaping of the Bologna Process – some of the key objectives were established. The concepts of mobility, recognition of qualifications, emergence of two-cycles, impact of the ever changing landscape in higher education and the need to collaborate were articulated and in effect, the future agenda was set. As we know, the following year in Bologna, these four countries were joined by 25 other European countries, which resulted in the Bologna Declaration. We now see reference to quality assurance – it spoke of the promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance *“with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies.”* Needless to say, there was no explanation of precisely what this means. Two years later in Prague, the Ministers provided to a certain degree the clarity required to facilitate progress in this area. They noted the critical role played by quality assurance in facilitating the pursuit of high standards, and the promotion of comparability of qualifications across Europe. More importantly, there was recognition of the role to be played key stakeholders in this area – universities, other higher education institutions national agencies and ENQA, and Ministers urged that they collaborate in the establishment of *“a common framework of reference.”*<sup>ii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Joint Declaration of the European Ministers of Education, Bologna 19<sup>th</sup> June 1999.

<sup>ii</sup> Prague Communiqué, Towards the European Higher Education Area, Prague, 19<sup>th</sup> May 2001

For me, the Berlin communiqué was seminal for a number of reasons. It has, I believe, set the tone for participating members in the Bologna Process. On previous occasions, I have spoken about ‘Bologna Lethargy’. Now, Ministers wanted action and evidence of the impact of the process. In other words, the process is not just about a Ministerial high level meeting every two years, littered with a series of meetings in between.

In the Communiqué<sup>iii</sup>, the Ministers envisioned that quality assurance systems would include:

- “ *A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.*
- *Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.*
- *A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.*
- *International participation, co-operation and networking.”*

Again, there is a very explicit recognition of the central role of higher education institutions, in line with the principle of institutional autonomy, which “*provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework.*” Also, reflecting the mature evolution of ENQA, it was charged with responsibility “*to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005.*”

In Bergen in 2005, Ministers<sup>iv</sup> adopted the standards promulgated by ENQA, and accepted the principle of peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis. Whilst accepting the concept of a European Register of Quality Assurance, it called for further development work on the ‘*practicalities of implementation*’. The Ministers also noted that almost all countries have made provision for a quality assurance system based on the Berlin Communiqué.

#### **AND SO, WHERE ARE WE?**

It is fair to say that all of us have been exercised by the ENQA standards. The Bologna Process Stocktaking Report<sup>v</sup> noted that even in 2005, more than half of the participating countries had quality assurance procedures in place, based on the key elements identified in the Berlin Communiqué. However, it did also raise concern on two levels. In the first instance, it referred to the weakness of systems when it came to student involvement and while a number of institutions may remark on the difficulty of securing student participation, it behoves all of us to recognise the important contribution they can offer in this area.

However, the report reminded us all not to lose sight of the true objective of this movement, and highlighted the risk of us blindly assuming that progress on the adoption of common quality assurance is the end result – clearly, it is not. It stated:

*“The ultimate success of this objective relies on the willingness of institutions, their staff and their students to embrace systematic quality assurance as central to their respective roles in the delivery of higher education.”*

The message mirrors a similar message in Trends IV Report<sup>vi</sup> which noted:

*“...it was felt that improvements in quality had not been considered strategically or in central policy-making, but has rather been dominated by structural discussions concerning course units to offer at what level”*

In this respect, it may be that the optimism of the Bergen Stocktaking has masked a serious dilemma or struggle within the Bologna Process – the extent to which a voluntary movement of 45 diverse participating members can genuinely achieve the desired result within the timescales required.

#### **WHAT ARE THE KEY INFLUENCES IN THIS DIRECTION?**

I have previously alluded to some of the key drivers which are determining our commitment to the construction of a genuine quality movement – the communiqués have advanced the impact of quality assurance in terms of mobility

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<sup>iii</sup> Berlin Communiqué “Realising the European Higher Education Area” September 2003

<sup>iv</sup> Bergen Communiqué “the European Higher Education Area – Achieving the Goals” May 2005

<sup>v</sup> <http://www.dfes.gov.uk/bologna/uploads/documents/BPStocktaking9May2005.pdf>

<sup>vi</sup> Trends IV: European Universities Implementing Bologna EUA Publication April 2005

and improving the prospects of recognition of qualifications. I would also cite the key influence of the EU Commission. As far back as 1998, there was a Council Recommendation<sup>vii</sup> on quality assurance in higher education, which cited key economic influences on the development of transparent and comparable quality assurance systems. Whilst recognising national competency in higher education, it emphasised the challenges facing higher education institutions in addressing the “*education and social requirements of a world-wide ‘knowledge society’ and the resulting developments*”<sup>viii</sup>. The increased massification of higher education and the desire to promote mobility in the context of the research programmes were also cited. The Recommendation could be described as the ‘velvet touch’ – the elaboration of a series of features which should be central to the development of quality assurance in European higher education institutions, with strong political support from the European Council.

The 1998 recommendation was followed up in 2006. The new recommendation acknowledged the solid progress made. Citing the Lisbon strategy, it encouraged its members to move quickly on the adoption of the standards promoted by ENQA in the context of the Bologna Process and called for the establishment of the European Register, which in the first instance, would underpin the national quality assurance process, but also more controversially, “*enable higher education institutions active within their territory to choose among quality assurance or accreditation agencies in the European Register and agency that meets their needs and profile.*”<sup>ix</sup> This is now signalling a transnational in quality assurance, which may well be a trend for the future.

### WHAT ELSE DRIVES US?

The need for moving to certain standards comes through in other ways. The most notable of these is the Qualifications Framework movement. This has been gathering momentum, in particular since the Bergen Communiqué. Two countries – Ireland and Scotland – has participated in a pilot project, in which the national frameworks are mapped onto the overarching framework for the European Higher Education Area – the so-called Bologna Framework. Given the vanguard nature of the exercise, quite an amount of thought was given to the rigour and nature of the criteria which would determine the verification process. All participants in this exercise emphasised the need to factor quality assurance systems into their deliberations. Accordingly, one criteria was set for verification to be that national systems for higher education must be consistent with the quality assurance standards articulated in the Berlin Communiqué.

Similarly, quality assurance is playing a role in the framework discussions at EU level. In advancing the case for its introduction, the EU Commission noted that “*Europe is characterised by a great diversity of education and training institutions and systems. This mirrors a widespread and strong consensus that education and training should reflect and respond to learning needs at local, regional and national level.*”<sup>x</sup> It continued “*A situation where education and training systems and institutions operate in isolation from each other could lead to fragmentation and hinder rather enable citizens to develop their knowledge, skills and competences.*” The proposal argues that inherent in the proposed ‘filter’ or EQF is an explicit commitment to quality assurance.

### WHAT’S HAPPENING ON THE GROUND?

Moving from the international level, we must recognise the centrality of higher education institutions. Both the Berlin and Bergen Communiqués quite rightly recognised that the primary responsibility for quality assurance rested with the higher education institutions themselves. Again, we can rely on the ENQA standards as a source of guidance. However, this is perhaps one of the main battlegrounds of quality assurance, and as previously noted in its Trends IV Report, the EUA acknowledged this challenge. It emphasised the need for the discussion to move from the process to genuine implementation. This message is repeated in its Report on the Three Rounds of the Quality Culture Project 2002 – 2006<sup>xi</sup>. While the report cites the need for financial support to promote quality within higher education institutions, it addresses the institutional leaders. The report noted “*Success factors for effectively embedding a quality culture include the capacity of the institutional leadership to provide room for grass-roots approach to quality (wide consultation and discussion) and to avoid the risk of over-bureaucraticisation.*” This is a theme I would like to return to.

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<sup>vii</sup> Council Recommendation (98/561/EC) 24<sup>th</sup> September 1998

<sup>viii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>ix</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>x</sup> Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the Establishment of the EQF for Lifelong Learning (5<sup>th</sup> September 2006)

<sup>xi</sup> Quality Culture in European Universities: A Bottom-up Approach (EUA Publications 2006)

### WHAT'S HAPPENING ELSEWHERE?

Clearly, within a short timeframe, it is impossible for me to do justice to global trends. The Bergen Communiqué recognised the need for the Bologna Process to look outward beyond its immediate remit. Julie Bishop, the Australian Minister for Education, Science and Training said that “*The Bologna Process ... is likely to influence developments in higher education in many parts of the world including our region.*”<sup>xiii</sup> For example, my organisation, HETAC is collaborating with ACQIUN and the Australian Universities Quality Association to reflect on the experience of external evaluations, with the ENQA standards serving as the benchmark. Minister Bishop is also mindful of the potential of the Asian countries to view European higher education institutions becoming more attractive as a location for their student body. In effect, there is a clear acknowledgement of the success of the Bologna Process and the vision it represents.

It is also worth noting the thrust of the recent Spelling Report<sup>xiii</sup> in the US. The Commission Report refers to the crisis in the US higher education system, and its failings across a series of issues including access and participation, literacy amongst graduates and its tardiness in responding to the challenges which lie ahead for the US economy. It is possible to map many of its proposed responses onto the Bologna action lines. For example, it talks of, inter alia, the need to establish a workable credits system, increased transparency in qualifications, increased use of learning outcomes. In the midst of these, the Commission recommends that US higher education institutions ‘*embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement ...*’<sup>xiv</sup>

### SO, PULL THE THREADS TOGETHER

At the outset, I would propose that we celebrate where we are now. As far back as 1998, in Sorbonne, Ministers identified the importance of higher education, and the vitality it brings to European social, economic and cultural fabric. The Bologna Process has grown from 29 to 45 participating countries, each committed to the implementation of 10 action lines. This strength of this voluntary, dynamic structure is acknowledged, not only by the European political structures such as the EU Commission, but it is also acknowledged on the global stage. More importantly, the philosophy of quality assurance permeates throughout this process. In this respect, we have laid the cornerstones for the ‘temple of quality assurance’.

But do we generate risks in the construction of this temple? I fear we do for a number of reasons. Let me first refer to the famous European Register. We must heed the warning signs. Both the first Bologna Stocktaking and the Trends IV reports refer to the need to view the ENQA standards as just that - standards. They are part of a process, but not the end result. Since Bergen, the E4 Group has battled with the issue of the Register, and to my knowledge, while progress has been made, no decision has yet emerged from this forum. Whether it can be resolved in advance of London remains to be seen. If we were afforded the luxury of going back in time to 2003 or 2004, would we start here? I would ask the question ‘What is the added value?’ and I sense this is missing from the debate. Perhaps, it would also be worth stepping back and asking what value does it bring to the learner, as they strive for their qualification. The Register may be perceived as either an endorsement of some kind or an information tool. The EU Commission see it as a means of encouraging competition. Is it not possible to fulfil these ambitions through other means without the creation of another layer of bureaucracy, potentially being the source of legal argument and conflict? I spoke earlier on of the trust being built, and yet potentially, here we are creating the opposite. The fact is that it must be within the realm and imagination of quality assurance agencies, and indeed higher education institutions to build the required trust and exchanges without recourse to a register. As more agencies undergo an external quality assurance in line in ENQA membership requirements, and as more European higher education institutions engage in collaboration through joint degrees and research programmes, the mutuality, information and respect is being built. Is it not time to ask what more do we want, and is a new agency overseeing an European register the only way of solving it?

I would now like to look at the institutions. While for many of our institutional leaders, it is an exciting time of change, it is also an incredibly crowded agenda. Our institutions are being pulled in many directions and being

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<sup>xii</sup> The Bologna Process and Australia: Next Steps (DoEST, April 2006)

<sup>xiii</sup> A Test of Leadership – Charting the Future of US Higher Education Report of Commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings

<sup>xiv</sup> *ibid*

asked to respond to many policy demands. They are regularly challenged by sometimes competing demands. We must give our institutions space, but equally, leaders of higher education institutions must respect the right of those beyond the academic walls to input and shape their activity. I am loathe to think of Government and higher education institutions as two different sides, though often it appears so. Internal competition and rivalry distracts us all, whether within national boundaries or on the European stage. In Ireland, after many years of 'loud speaker' talks, there is now more coherence and a sense of unity of mission. The fact is that Government and higher education institutions have responsibilities and are accountable. Both are accountable to the citizens and tax payers, many of whom will not see the inside of the institutions that their taxes fund. Quality assurance is a key element of the fulfilment of this accountability.

Finally, I will turn to ENQA – it has emerged as a key player in this arena, but I would urge two things. As the volume of reports increase, it is vital that each are treated consistently to build trust in its procedures. It would be preferable that each report is assessed by a consistent group of its Board. Secondly, we must all recognise that quality assurance is a journey for agencies and higher education institutions. We cannot stand still. Mechanisms must be built for review of the standards and the promotion of best practice. The risk in opting for minimum standards or the lowest common denominator is exactly that. Standards should represent a challenge for us all, irrespective of the age or history of institution or agency. We can no longer rely on reputation and history. Institutions are not about buildings, but about helping a diverse group of persons to fulfil ambitions. Such aspirations change, and organisations like ENQA have a duty to encourage and exhort similar change amongst its members, and ultimately, the higher education institutions.

Finally, let me finish with a quote from Winston Churchill

*“Every day you may make progress. Every step may be fruitful. Yet there will stretch out before you an ever-lengthening, ever-ascending, ever-improving path. You know you will never get to the end of the journey. But this, so far from discouraging, only adds to the joy and glory of the climb”.*

Let us all continue the climb, let us keep a strong focus on the construction of the temple of genuine quality assurance and not become distracted by processes and bureaucracy.