

ECA's response to the reports of the European Commission on progress in quality assurance in higher education and the Bucharest Communique

1. Introduction

In a series of recent strategy papers the European Commission has highlighted the challenges of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the role quality assurance plays in it. In 2009 and 2014 two reports on the progress in quality assurance in higher education have been released that demonstrate positive QA developments in the EHEA but also reveal existing gaps in internal and external quality assurance in Europe. The Bucharest Communique also relates to such challenges in QA. These reports serve the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education (ECA) as important navigation instruments and provide valuable guidance for the planning of the network's activities.

In the following policy paper we recapitulate some of the most pertinent recommendations and statements of the European Commission in the latest report regarding QA in the Bologna process, and we report on how ECA is responding to these QA challenges. Most of the activities of ECA are related with the role of QA in the promotion of study mobility and internationalisation (point 2.4 of the EC progress report), although there is some contribution regarding the influence of QA in providing students with high quality and relevant skills (point 2.3 of the EC progress report).

2. Mobility and recognition

EU/Bologna Process position

In their progress reports the European Commission point to the still existing barriers in cross-border recognition of qualifications and to the important role of QA in facilitating academic and professional mobility within and outside of Europe. The Commission's reports and the Bucharest Communique deplore existing problems in the accreditation of joint programmes and the lack of cross-border activities of QA agencies.

Consequently, they promote QA activities outside of national territories and they ask QA agencies to seek recognition of their decisions in other countries. Mutual trust has been recognised as basis for transparency and credibility within the EHEA. Trust-based agreements of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions between QA agencies have been supported. Furthermore, an inter-twinning of the existing mobility and transparency tools in the EHEA is emphasised in order to facilitate cross-border recognition of degrees. The European Commission has followed a policy of stressing the importance of developing new transparency tools, especially ones that are able to provide a comparative view on HEIs. In this context projects have also been supported to establish domain-specific European Quality Labels.

In the 2014 progress report the Commission states that the obstacles regarding the accreditation of joint programmes could be resolved by a European approach and the projects of ECA.

ECA's response

ECA agrees with these opinions about the key role of QA for the establishment and control of cross-border education and its great potential in enhancing mobility within the EHEA. We strongly believe that quality assurance is essential for building mutual trust and that mutual recognition agreements in QA can facilitate cross-border recognition of qualifications. For the purpose of reaching mutual recognition of accreditation decisions, ECA has been established in 2003. Based on intensive cooperation between the members of ECA, mutual recognition agreements have been reached. A new multilateral agreement was established in 2010 which served as a basis to simplify accreditation of joint programmes, removing the heavy burden for HEIs and their joint programmes to undergo multiple accreditation procedures in all of the countries concerned.

The same trust-building model could be applied for questions around cross-border recognition of qualifications. There is now a need for national governments and for the credential evaluators to exploit the outcomes of mutual recognition agreements between QA agencies and to use these results as a basis to simplify recognition decisions, particularly with respect to transnational higher education and joint programmes. In accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention and its subsidiary texts, accreditation decisions should be incorporated into the national recognition procedures of degrees and qualifications in the domain of higher education. Governments of Bologna signatory states should recognise the accreditation decisions in all member states where an evidence-based agreement on common QA practices and standards exists. Such a practice would lead to more automatic recognition of comparable degrees and would therefore enhance academic mobility within the EHEA. In this context, the accreditation decision from an agency present in EQAR should lead to the recognition of the academic degree and their implications in a country member, without additional paperwork, based on the confidence provided for the EQAR agencies.

ECA agrees that the provision of transparent and reliable information about HE and QA are indispensable for promoting high quality mobility inside and outside the EHEA. In this context it seems important to interconnect national accreditation databases and to provide standardized information about QA to HE stakeholders in a user-friendly way. Publicly accessible tools must be established that provide easy readable information on the quality of accredited study programmes and institutions throughout Europe. A first step has been made by the online database "Qrossroads" of ECA (a EU funded project). ECA is open about the existence of new transparency tools such as U-Multirank and specific quality seals. Many ECA member agencies show readiness to combine national accreditation procedures with other types of quality assessments, in order to reduce bureaucracy of the involved HEIs. ECA itself has developed a quality seal which will be delivered to those HEIs and study programmes which have successfully integrated international and intercultural competences and vision into their educational provision (Internationalisation certificate, 2014).

ECA agrees with the Commission that synergies of the different European transparency, quality assurance and recognition tools should be created in order to achieve the desired European area of skills and qualifications.

ECA achievements

- ECA member agencies have signed bilateral mutual recognition agreements in 2007. These agreements were based on mutual trust gained by systematic QA comparisons, mutual observations and commonly agreed tools. Although these agreements do not mean automatic recognition of the degrees awarded, it is clear that they could speed up the process.
- ECA has cooperated with ENIC-NARICs to enhance the connections between accreditation and recognition of qualifications. In the document “Vienna Sententia” the QA agencies and ENIC-NARICs of six countries agreed in 2005 on conditions for automatic recognition of qualifications based on mutual recognition agreements in QA.
- In 2010 a multinational mutual recognition agreement (MULTRA) has been launched by ECA, this agreement focuses on the application of mutual recognition principles for joint programme accreditations. The signing of MULTRA is also open to QA agencies outside of ECA and also outside of Europe.
- In the framework of the EU funded JOQAR project a European framework for single accreditation of joint programmes was established and successfully applied for Erasmus Mundus joint Master programmes; an assessment framework and evaluation report have been published (2013).
- In the framework of the JOQAR project and in close cooperation with the national recognition bodies (ENIC-NARICs) a framework for fair recognition of joint programmes was developed, including guidelines for good practices in awarding joint degrees (2013).
- ECA has developed the website Qrossroads. This database driven website contributes to the aim of transparency by providing standardized information on the quality of accredited study programmes and institutions. The information is most reliable as it receives the data directly from the source (QA agencies). The focus of Qrossroads now shifts to further expansion of the database and to inclusion of specific information on joint programmes in Europe.
- ECA has built up ECAspedia as a special part of the ECA website. The ECAspedia is a wikipedia styled database which contains bottom up produced background information on joint programmes, the training of experts and on QA resources. More portals with specific topics will be developed if needed.
- ECA is currently working on a European coordination point for joint programmes, dealing with all operational questions around the organisation, accreditation and recognition of such study programmes.

3. Internationalisation

EU position

The European Commission believes, as expressed in e.g. its 2009 progress report, that intra-European and international cooperation of QA agencies is essential and contributes to mutual trust among HEIs across borders. In the 2014 progress report

cooperation on QA at international level and between education sectors (e.g. HE and VET) is promoted through continuous dialogue between key players.

An increased focus of QA agencies and networks as ENQA and EQAR on the quality of cross-border cooperation is also encouraged.

In the 2009 progress report the Commission suggested to integrate international panel members into national QA procedures as this would add an international dimension to QA and help to prevent suspicions that vested interests could distort accreditation decisions. In the 2014 progress report it is noted that significant progress has been made in this area.

ECA's response

ECA agrees with the importance of internationalisation for the implementation of the EHEA and for HE reforms. The facilitation of internationalisation of institutions and students is one of the three main goals of ECA.

ECA agrees that the international cooperation of QA agencies helps to establish trust in HEIs across borders. Cross-border cooperation in QA is perceived to be especially essential for the regulation of provision of cross-border higher education. Intensive cross-border cooperation is also seen as the right basis for the elaboration of accreditation of joint programmes (single accreditation procedures of joint programmes and mutual recognition of accreditation of joint programmes). Such joint efforts clearly reduce bureaucracy of all involved HEIs (see also section 1).

Among ECA member agencies the inclusion of international experts in assessment panels has become a regularity. We believe that this measure enhances the international credibility for national QA decisions. Specific European training programs for experts and staff members of QA agencies have been developed by ECA in the framework of the EU funded E-TRAIN project. On this basis, a shared pool of international experts has been created. In addition, new training projects for international experts have been launched by ECA.

ECA is currently establishing, with EU financial support, the European framework for the delivery of a European certificate on Internationalisation. Higher education institutions can ask ECA member agencies to assess their internationalisation policy and activities. The internationalisation certificate can be awarded to both programmes and institutions. The focus is on quality enhancement, and the project is innovative as it is centred on excellence rather than on the fulfilment of minimal standards of quality.

ECA's achievements

- ECA is affiliated with ENQA and has signed cooperation agreements with the network of Central and Eastern European Quality Assurance agencies (CEENQA), the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE) and the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN).
- In 2014 ECA has signed an agreement with the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN) specifically aiming at regular staff exchange, in order to promote mutual learning.

- In the year 2012 ECA has completed an EU funded project for training European QA experts and staff members (E-TRAIN). Subsequently guidelines and good practices for trainings have been published.
- A European pool of trained international experts has been created by ECA (EEEP). The pool of experts is also accessible for QA partners outside ECA.
- In 2012 ECA started the EU funded project CeQuInt, which aims at the development of a European certificate for internationalisation in higher education. The focus on excellent performances will strengthen institutional partnerships and the competitiveness of European HEIs in the international higher education market. The principles underlying the creation of this new European label have been published. ECA will provide the certificate as a service for interested HEIs.
- In 2014 ECA has launched specific training programmes aiming at experts who participate in single accreditation procedures or in assessments for the internationalisation certificate of ECA.

4. Promoting quality learning

EU position

In the 2014 EU progress report the importance to enhance employability of graduates to serve Europe's needs is stressed. The European Commission points to the necessity to involve employers and alumni into the development and revision of the curricula in order to ensure that graduates have the right skills for the labour market. It is recommended to track graduate employment and to establish knowledge alliances with the employers. The Commission also believes that learning outcome oriented QA systems could further stimulate and enhance the employability of graduates.

With regard to benefits for users the European Commission suggests that QA has provided only limited support to HEIs and their stakeholders to reach their quality goals. To bridge these gaps the Commission is asking QA to become more efficient and transparent for users and to link QA efforts to wider HE priorities. QA would need to broaden the scope of its procedures and engage with all activities of institutions in order to keep track with the dynamic changes in the HE sector (e.g. assure QA of all forms of distance education, guarantee fair access to HE, support lifelong learning, internationalisation, etc.).

ECA's response

ECA agrees with the importance to systematically track alumni and to maintain regular contact with employers in order to improve the educational provisions and enhance employability of graduates. Monitoring and tracking alumni's employment has become a fixed quality standard in many accreditation frameworks of ECA member agencies. The integration of employers into review panels is recommended for both programme accreditations and institutional reviews in ECA's Principles for the Selection of Experts. Furthermore, ECA agrees that the development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of QA and many other Bologna tools (ECTS, Diploma supplement, recognition tools, etc.).

With regard to the benefit of QA for users ECA agrees that accreditation procedures and institutional reviews should support HEIs in reaching their purposes and objectives. ECA agrees that QA must remain flexible and has to adopt current developments in HEIs, including online learning, in order to make sure that HE systems are fit for their purposes. ECA likewise agrees that external QA should involve all members of the academic community. ECA agrees with the European Commission about the importance of learning outcome centred QA, as this would facilitate cross-border recognition of qualifications.

ECA achievements

- In the past years discussions and sharing of experiences and good practices have contributed to the ongoing process of establishing intended learning outcomes and assessing achieved learning outcomes as integral parts of accreditation systems in ECA member countries.
- In 2009 ECA has developed European principles for the inclusion of learning outcomes in accreditation procedures.
- In 2013 a report has been released which includes recommendations and a number of best practice examples about the use of learning outcomes in accreditation procedures.
- In 2014 a project for developing a “**Meta-Assessment Framework on Learning Outcomes**” (METALO) has been proposed for EU funding.
- In 2013 ECA organised a seminar on MOOCs, thereby raising awareness on the importance of new types of online learning and the consequences for QA.
- In 2014 ECA commenced activities to look at the significance of QA in relationship to new forms of educational provisions, life-long learning, the existing European quality labels and to new models for accreditation (risk based approach, etc.).

5. Conclusion

Quality assurance continues to be a key element for the successful implementation of the EHEA. The importance is rooted in the close intertwining of QA and other important concepts of the common higher education area, such as mobility, transparency and employability. The past and present work of ECA uses the progress reports of the European Commission and the latest Ministerial Communique as political reference points for its work and activities. ECA agrees with the analysis of the European Commission with regard to the achievements and gaps in European QA. ECA is convinced that it is essential to maintain flexibility of the various QA systems in order to enable them to keep up with new developments in higher education. In its progress reports on QA, the European Commission presented possible ways to deal with the current problems in European QA. Since its existence, ECA was actively contributing to these solutions and it helped to modernize the higher education agenda. ECA will be pleased to continue - in close partnership with the European Commission and other stakeholders - its efforts towards the establishment of a trust-based EHEA that makes sure that European HE systems are fit for their purposes.