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SESSION I: QUALITY ASSURANCE AND CROSS-BORDER HIGHER EDUCATION

Quality assurance is essential to efforts to build coherence, attractiveness and trust in higher education, in line with the objectives of the EU modernisation agenda for higher education and the Bologna Process. The latter aims to promote European cooperation in quality assurance of higher education with a view to developing shared criteria and methodologies. Moreover, the development of a knowledge- and information-based society, globalisation, economic integration and increased academic and professional mobility make cross-border quality assurance increasingly important.

In this context, there has been a growing interest in quality assurance in higher education during the last decade, not only in Europe but also worldwide. In 2000, the European Commission supported the creation of the European Association for Quality Assurance (ENQA). In 2005, the European Ministers of Education adopted the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)”. The influence of the ESG on quality assurance in higher education is spreading and they are gaining acceptance as a shared reference point for all actors in European higher education. The third decisive step took place in 2008, when the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) was set up with the support of the Commission. The Register is open to agencies operating in the EHEA on the condition that they demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

The main responsibility for delivering quality in higher education rests with Member States and higher education institutions. In fact, in order to accomplish quality assurance at national level, a number of countries in Europe have established quality assurance agencies based on the ESG and accredited by EQAR. Independent quality assurance agencies carry out external quality assurance with the aim of informing stakeholders in a transparent and accountable way. Higher education institutions have also sought to establish internal quality assurance systems in order to monitor and enhance quality and develop a real “quality culture”.

Delivery and cooperation in higher education across national borders is challenging current quality assurance systems and practices, which are generally national in scope. In that framework, there is a need to clarify the portability of national accreditation within the EHEA and the issues of quality assurance for cross-border higher education within the EHEA, and to promote a stronger European dimension in quality assurance through

encouraging national quality assurance agencies to develop activities outside their borders and to seek recognition of their decisions in other countries.

The Bologna Ministerial Communiqué agreed in Bucharest includes a commitment to “allow EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements”, which aims, in particular, to “recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes”.

The Bucharest Communiqué also commits Bologna members and relevant stakeholders to preparing “a proposal for a revised version of the ESG for adoption” at the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan in 2015. This opens the way for a high-quality, ambitious revision of the ESG as a means to improve cross-border functioning of quality assurance and to mitigate the risk of “quality assurance fatigue”, whereby some higher education institutions feel that quality assurance is more of a bureaucratic process than a means to develop quality. Additionally, stakeholders need to transform the ESG into an effective tool in order to improve trust among countries and recognise the assessments of foreign quality assurance agencies.

Another challenge for quality assurance in the EHEA is related to educational franchising. Despite the fact that educational franchising has developed comparatively recently in Europe, it will probably develop more and more in the future as it is becoming relatively cheaper to move courses rather than students. Therefore, one of the most important issues is how students can be guaranteed adequate quality standards of both study programmes and degrees awarded through franchising. Clear principles should be set up so as to provide a general framework for quality assurance of franchised and validated programmes.

Proposal of some questions for discussion

- What steps could be taken by countries in order to open up assessment of national degrees by foreign quality assurance agencies?
- How could the ESG be developed so as to act as an effective tool to improve trust among countries and recognise the assessments of foreign quality assurance agencies?
- How should the increasing diversity across higher education (diversity of pedagogies, institutions, students, expectations and missions) and across national quality assurance settings be handled?