



The 6th International Conference Edu World 2014 “Education Facing Contemporary World Issues”, 7th - 9th November 2014

New Perspectives of Quality Assurance in European Higher Education

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Abstract

The concept of quality in higher education has become an increasingly important matter for institutions, as well as for public policy and debates on education. Quality assurance has been used for the overall improvement of institutions and their management. As the demand for higher education has increased, so has the demand for its accountability, reliability and value for money (Harvey and Askling 2003). Quality assurance agencies have the responsibility to institutions and the public to assure that the education and experience providers deliver is of a good standard, in order to maintain trust in the education system nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, quality assurance review mechanisms provide valuable recommendations to how institutions can enhance their provisions. Undoubtedly, quality assurance has seen many improvements since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. Given the new developments of quality assurance at European level the purpose of the present paper is to realize a comparative analysis between the new and the old ESG with a look on the impact that the policy document has on Romanian Higher Education.

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Peer-review under responsibility of The Association “Education for tomorrow” / [Asociatia “Educatie pentru maine”].

Keywords: quality assurance, european higher education, development.

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This work was supported by the project “Excellence academic routes in doctoral and postdoctoral research - READ” co-funded from the European Social Fund through the Development of Human Resources Operational Programme 2007-2013, contract no. POSDRU/159/1.5/S/137926

Nomenclature

A	EHEA – European Higher Education Area
B	BFUG - Bologna Follow-up Group
C	E4 – Policy making group composed of ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE
D	EUA – European University Association
E	ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
F	ESU – European Students’ Union
G	EURASHE - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
H	ESG – European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
I	MAP – ESG - Mapping the Implementation and Application of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
J	EQAR – European Quality Assurance Register
K	EI – Education International
L	QA – Quality Assurance
M	HE – Higher Education
N	HEI – Higher Education Institution

European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Basing itself on Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 (Council of Europe 2012), the 24th Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (Helsinki, 26 and 27 April 2013), on the theme of “Governance and quality education”(Council of Europe 2013), agreed that quality of education was closely linked to four inter-related purposes, namely:

- preparation for sustainable employment;
- preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- personal development; and
- the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base. (Bergan 2005)

In the same recommendation, Council of Europe places a strong emphasis on a broad understanding of quality, which encompasses system quality as well as institutional quality and underscores the social dimension of quality: an education system cannot be of high quality unless it provides adequate opportunities for all students. However there are many challenges still remaining as many external quality assurance mechanisms still do not manage to take a holistic view of quality.

1.1. ESG – adoption and revision

In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003 the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop ‘an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance’ and to ‘explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies’. “Quality assurance” is a generic term in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations: It is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances. Similarly, the word “standards” is employed in a variety of ways across Europe, ranging from statements of narrowly defined regulatory requirements to more generalized descriptions of good practice. The words also have very different meanings in the local contexts of national higher education systems.

Moreover, the drafting process itself has made evident that, within the quality assurance community itself, there are some quite fundamental differences of view of the appropriate relationship that should be established between higher education institutions and their external evaluators. Some, mainly from agencies which accredit programmes or institutions, take the view that external quality assurance is essentially a matter of “consumer protection”, requiring a clear distance to be established between the quality assurance agency and the higher education

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