

Major European trends and issues affecting higher education and quality assurance in an international setting and their implications for colleges, universities and countries

I. Introduction

Higher education continues to change rapidly. Viewed from a European perspective, the massive structural reform (through the Bologna Process) of the first decade of the 21st century has been followed by the need to respond to the similarly massive challenges: of increasing global competition, aging populations and the impact of the present financial and economic crisis; a challenge faced by HE systems in many parts of the world. Not only are public budgets for HE and RES being cut - in Europe this affects particularly Southern and Eastern Europe, with the attendant risks of increasing fragmentation across the continent, at the same time accountability requirements are growing and change is also being driven by the impact of technological innovation.

On the positive side we have in Europe a more consolidated “European Higher Education Area” and an emerging European Research Area. Bologna continues to provide a structure for international exchange and cooperation, bringing together all partners together for the next three years – since the 2012 Ministerial meeting in Bucharest – under the banner of “providing quality higher education for all” in these difficult times. This means, at least, that efforts to improve teaching and learning at national level are nevertheless considered against a backdrop of voluntarily agreed, common European frameworks, in particular the European Qualifications Framework for Higher

Education and the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality in the EHEA. There is also an EU driven 'Modernisation Agenda for HE' that sets out common challenges for the sector.

This is also the context in which discussions on the EU budget 2014 – 2020 are taking place. There is awareness at European level that investing in knowledge, research, innovation and education is rightly at the heart of the Europe 2020 agenda, with massive increases planned in both the HE and the Research & Innovation budgets. However, the question is whether the Heads of State will agree given the different priorities of different member states and the importance, for them, of maintaining the budgets foreseen for agriculture and regional development. It is worth recalling that while the EU has a core competence for research and innovation, education is a member state responsibility.

The political consensus is that EU education budgets/added value should be reflected in policies for growth and fighting unemployment, especially youth unemployment across Europe. At European level this means programme proposals that focus on: skills' development and graduate employability, entrepreneurship and innovation; and pressure to improve access and to increase completion rates. An EU wide benchmark of 40% of the population, aged 30-34, with a tertiary education qualification has been set.

At national level the size and shape of national systems are changing. The trend is towards mergers and institutional consolidation, not to mention performance related funding, 'excellence initiatives' of different kinds, and

greater transparency through better data, reporting procedures, and an increased focus on metrics.

II. What is driving discussions on Quality (and Quality Assurance) in Europe

The main elements behind a growing focus on quality and quality assurance are, therefore, from a European perspective, and, I imagine, also from the perspective of many other developed and developing economies, twofold:

1 - The importance attached by governments and international bodies to improving access, completion and graduate employability, at a time of growing global competition requiring a more highly trained workforce, but also of reduced budgets due to the economic crisis.

These laudable goals are often equated with 'quality education for all' thus engendering much debate and discussion on what constitutes academic quality/quality teaching and learning, and how is/should the quality of teaching and learning be quality assured/accredited, by whom, and at what level.

In Europe this is also part of an ongoing reflection about

- The optimum shape and size of systems, from a national perspective, and about the incentives needed to enhance the output of HE systems and thus also national capacity, and
- The need for the further differentiation of some national systems to create a greater diversity of institutional types and hence a discussion on individual institutional missions, profiles and strategies. – And sometimes with the

perverse effect that even small systems with limited resources consider they should have a 'world class university' (more later on rankings)

2 - The growing importance of internationalisation – for universities and governments that brings with it from the perspective of both governments and institutions a focus on quality and the need to be able to demonstrate quality

Across Europe strategies for internationalisations are being developed at institutional, national and European level – as in the US or in Canada. Demonstrating quality becomes a key element in all internationalisation strategies, for example through managed mobility, joint master and doctoral programmes building on the experience of intra-European internationalisation over the last decades. One very good example of this is the massive change in doctoral education in recent years, through the creation of doctoral structured programmes and doctoral schools designed to improve the quality of the framework conditions for research available to young researchers.

We also have a relevant benchmark figure for mobility in Europe, this time of 20% mobility by 2020 as well as plans for opening up European programmes internationally, and increasing research collaborations both through a focus on excellence and greater involvement in joint research focused on the grand challenges.

However, it is worth pointing out that there is also a risk of tension between the different actors in terms of the interpretation of the goals and priorities set for internationalisation and what constitutes improving quality. Governments

and universities may, for example, seek to target different foreign student recruitments or have different research priorities.

Other factors:

3 - Strengthening the European internal market – improving the free movement not only of goods and services but also of labour

– This refers to the professional fields as studies have shown that mobility will increase in some fields in future, e.g. health professionals and teachers, and hence there is a need to ensure equivalent quality across the continent.

- There is a European Directive (law) on Professional Qualifications that defines a number of ‘regulated professions’, such as medicine, dentistry, nursing, architecture and sets out the conditions for the automatic recognition of qualifications in these professions, mainly using input indicators. This directive is being revised, with the goal of increasing the mobility of highly qualified professionals.

- An important element of this discussion is the gradual adaptation of the professional services directive to take account of the Bologna reforms, in particular credits, quality assurance and the use of learning outcomes.

III. How is quality assured/What are the main elements of the quality agenda?

There are many ways in which academic quality is assured. It is a multifaceted process. However many of the commonly used instruments and approaches build on the frameworks created through the Bologna Process and on considerations as to how to make them work better.

1 - Qualifications Frameworks

Qualifications Frameworks have been translated in national legislation nearly everywhere in the 47 Bologna countries– describing the three cycles, includes generic descriptors based on learning outcomes, credit ranges for the first and second cycles (sometimes also for the 3rd cycle)

- Given national diversity in Europe they are certainly one driver, if only indirectly, contributing to the improvement of the quality of higher education programmes offered by institutions.
- They are also helpful at the meta level to ensure system level compatibility and to facilitate mobility as they describe the different degree levels, their expected outcomes, and how they relate to each other.
- This in turn is important for quality assurance which is difficult to address if the overall structure of the HE system and degree levels are not clear (and even if in general qualification frameworks are not a major concern for individual institutions). The challenges for institutions lie in reforming curricula in line with the generic descriptors for the Bachelor and Master levels and in developing learning outcomes appropriate to specific programmes and overall institutional profiles.

2 - Greater focus on output based systems

In general there is a greater emphasis of output based systems, be it in relation to funding systems/incentives or the articulation of graduate learning outcomes or the focus on improving employability; or the links between the

two with the tendency of some systems to provide funding linked to the demonstration of achieved learning outcomes.

There are national differences across Europe in how learning outcomes are being implemented, often related to national tradition, the way in which the 3 cycle Bologna degree system has been implemented (i.e. the national Qualifications Framework) and the methodology/procedures adopted by national quality agencies, e.g. many countries that prior to Bologna had no Bachelor level introduced programme accreditation, at least initially, to validate the new study programmes, including their learning outcomes....

At the same time there have been European approaches such as the disciplinary standards developed through Tuning (originally based on QAA's subject benchmarks).

In Europe there has been little development of the kind of individual testing and assessment services so well known in the US...

Of particular importance in this context is the OECD's AHELO feasibility study, launched in 2008, and almost completed. The first volume of the results has just been published and is anything but conclusive in its findings (i.e. if the methodology is fit for purpose) , in setting objectives for the future - to provide voluntary benchmarking opportunity for HEIs so that they can improve their T&I, or for accountability purposes, or on if and how any further work would be funded. Concerns about the methodologies used and overall feasibility/desirability, in particular of the generic skills component have been voiced by EUA since 2008 and more recently reflected in a joint letter sent to

the OECD together with EUA's US and Canadian partner associations, ACE and the AUCC and which we feel is reflected in the overall tone of the report. Decisions on how the results of the feasibility study will be taken forward following a final conference to be held in Paris in March 2013.

More generally in Europe it remains to be seen whether the national approaches to learning outcomes or a European/international approach will prevail, and whether there will be further movement in some systems towards reducing quality to a narrow focus on learning outcomes that improve employability and demonstrate graduate competences but that disregard almost completely the broader institutional context and contribution.

3. - The importance of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESGs) for quality assurance in the EHEA adopted in 2005

The ESGs - a bottom-up initiative developed by the stakeholders working in partnership - include three interrelated sets of European standards and guidelines for quality assurance (ESGs): one that applies to internal quality assurance in higher education institutions, a second one referring to the external quality assurance of higher education institutions by agencies and a third set that concerns the quality assurance of quality assurance agencies themselves.

Analysis carried out by those using the ESGs shows that they have had a major impact on how quality assurance in the European higher education is understood and carried out, and that the guiding principles behind them are

widely shared by all stakeholders, and also that the specific standards and guidelines are adaptable to a variety of political, legal and cultural settings.

- They are able to encompass and respect both the system level and institutional diversity in their implementation, as they have been successfully applied both in institutions with different missions and profiles and by different agencies/systems, whatever their size and developmental context.

Now we are beginning to work together as stakeholders to update the ESGs taking account of developments since 2005, so this is an interesting and important process.

4. - The growing impact of **EQAR (driver – greater internationalisation and competition)**

The European register for quality assurance, established in 2008, is the only formal construction of the Bologna Process and its role is to manage a list of “trustworthy” agencies that have been reviewed on the basis of the ESGs. It is managed by the stakeholders and has as members European governments. So far there are 28 agencies from 16 countries listed.

The development of EQAR is now beginning to affect the relationship between national authorities, institutions and national agencies. Seven countries now allow their institutions to work with foreign, registered QA agencies for their regular external evaluation, audit or accreditation procedures. Two other countries recognise quality assurance decisions of all EQAR-registered agencies on joint programmes.

The first example of a university requesting accreditation - institutional audit - from an agency outside of its national boundaries is the University of Graz in Austria that is seeking 'accreditation' through an audit from the Finnish QA agency. One of the key aims of EQAR in future is to open up this process further. However, not all countries are in favour of opening up their markets and giving institutions the opportunity to take their own decisions on which QA arrangements are best suited to their own particular mission and profile. In the context of increased internationalisation it will be interesting to see how this develops, and there is also a commitment in the Bucharest Bologna Communiqué to move in this direction.

5. - The role of rankings:

University rankings are still an important issue for European universities at different levels, both for those who seek to consolidate their position in the top several hundred and also for those who wish to internationalise at different levels as a means of remaining competitive in difficult times.

There is still a debate on the need for 'world class universities', and how many Europe could/should Europe sustain and this is also one issues pushing system change at national level across Europe.

At the same time we now have the implementation phase of an EU funded multidimensional ranking for Europe that does not focus only on research output but takes account of the different elements of the university mission. The success of this initiative will, of course, ultimately depend upon the ability

and willingness of institutions to provide the necessary data (as well as on a sustainable funding source in future.

6. - Other initiatives intended to enhance quality

Finally, the following trends are also visible:

- the development of a range of 'quality' labels generally attributed by the EC: the European Commission recently funded the development of subject specific "quality labels" at European level, for example in music, engineering, chemistry and informatics. Labels are also attributed to universities that have implemented good practices in the use of specific Bologna tools such as the implementation of ECTS or the Diploma Supplement or have demonstrated good practice in language policy provision, or universities that have put in place exemplary HR policies to support young researchers.

- the importance of university networks bringing together similar types/profiles of institutions, often with a formal status as associations, to support or even manage joint programmes and other activities which often include informal benchmarking activities.

IV - Conclusions

- Growing awareness of the importance of quality and the need for quality assurance. In Europe this involves at national and European level complex

relationships between national authorities/European level structures, agencies, institutions, students and their representative bodies, and a range of open questions very similar to those being posed in the US context:

- How to safeguard institutional diversity
- How to maintain quality with less money and more students – there has as yet been no real debate on the MOOCs although EUA has addressed this issue in one of our recent meetings. Other than the UK (Future Learn) the only MOOC of which we are aware is one launched this week by the University of Amsterdam in the field of communications -
- How to address the politicians' agenda and concerns and safeguard quality education
- European versus national initiatives..

- For Europe the Bologna Process continues to provide an unprecedented forum for dialogue between governments, institutions, agencies and students at the European level.

- It has also facilitated the development of strong alliances among the stakeholders, in particular in relation to quality assurance. The different stakeholders (quality agencies, institutions, students) have increasingly been able to find common ground over the years, and are thus able to play a crucial role in driving the process, which is proving to be an important starting point for the working now beginning on the revision of the ESGs. We already notice that progress has been made compared to the first discussions in 2005 in terms of sharing the same principles of good practice among the stakeholders (including the business sector).

- The relations of trust that have been established are making it possible for stakeholders already working together on QA issues to develop common positions on some of the emerging issues, for example, by explaining the purposes of and differences between rankings, metrics and indicators and the importance of continuing to promote long term quality enhancement in an increasingly diverse sector - and perhaps in the coming years to develop and promote a coherent 'quality agenda' that is needed in the future in the context of the major challenges facing the sector in the years to come...

Conclusion – bundle some of the initiatives to form a more coherent quality agenda – with globalisation and the further development of internationalisation this is a global discussion

Lesley Wilson