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The European Dimension of Quality Assurance

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The Bologna Process: What it is? How it works?

- A non-EU process that involves 45 countries
- Voluntary, non legal => i.e., no formal powers
- A “bargaining” process that tries to produce win/win results => i.e., a European HE area but no erosion of national prerogatives
- A process that includes governments, HEIs, students and other stakeholders, including the EC
- A ministerial meeting every two years => a Communiqué that outlines progress to date and action plan for next two years

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The general European context: Bologna + Europe of Knowledge

HEIs recognised as **central actors** to reach the policy goals
=> **Modernisation agenda for universities**


QA - an essential tool:

- Because of the international competition
- Because of the Bologna process
- Because of the knowledge society (Lisbon) objectives

In other words, quality is important:

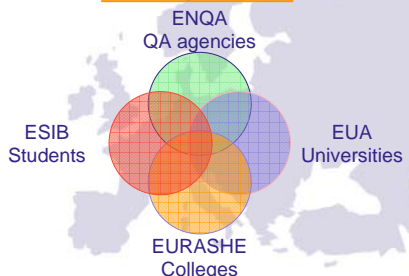
- For research and education
- For creativity and innovation

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The European QA discussions: Who’s involved?

The E4: 4 European associations




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Bergen (2005): Key decisions regarding QA

1. Adoption of **standards and guidelines**:
 - Internal quality processes in institutions
 - External quality processes of institutions
 - External quality processes of QA agencies
2. Acceptance of a **“Peer-review”** process that can be organised nationally
3. A request for further exploration of a **Register of QA agencies** operating in Europe

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Bergen agreement: The ESGs (1)

- European Standards and Guidelines for QA in higher education-ESGs: A generic set of principles and reference points
- **Risk:**
 - ✓ understanding the ESGs as prescriptive standards and a compliance list to be checked
 - OR
 - ✓ going too far in terms of local interpretations

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Bergen agreement: the QA of QA (2)

- Need to ensure the quality of the quality assurance procedures, i.e., the review of agencies
- The Bergen compromise:
 - ✓ To make it, in the first instance, a national process
 - ✓ To speak of it as a peer-review process
- **Risks:**
 - ✓ a soft instrument
 - ✓ controlled by the QA agencies

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The Register: EUA's principles

- **Principles:**
 - ✓ An exclusive register that filters out the poor agencies
 - ✓ A service to students, employers and HEIs
- => **Requirement:** An appropriate system of checks and balances
 - ✓ Although nationally organised, these reviews should be European
 - ✓ Stakeholders should be involved in the process (students, HEIs)

"... it is up to **those who are involved** in the systems to provide means of providing confidence."
(ENQA Convergence Study 2005)

Post-Bergen discussions: Two sets of issues

1. **Policy issues:**
 - What should be the appropriate role of ENQA in order to avoid a conflict of interest given that ENQA **reinforced its membership** process, now based on:
 - ✓ a new set of criteria
 - ✓ a review of member agencies every 5 years
 - What will be the degree of autonomy of the Register Committee vis-à-vis governments and to whom should it be accountable?
 - Where should the secretariat be located? Should it be a dedicated secretariat?

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Post-Bergen discussions: Two sets of issues

2. **Content issues:**
 - Will the Register include any and all QA/accreditation agencies and categorise them?
- OR
- Will it exclude some agencies for failing to comply with the European standards and guidelines?

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Answers to date (1)

1. **What is the Register?**
A reliable information tool about QA agencies working in Europe
2. **Structure: Register Committee** (legal status: Belgian not-for-profit association)
 - 8 members nominated by the E4
 - 4 external members (2 employers, 2 trade unions)
 - A few government representatives as observers

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Answers to date (2)

3. **Content issues:**
 - An exclusive register
 - Listing all agencies that «comply substantially» with the ESGs
 - No categories in order to minimize the number of decisions required
4. **Process:**
 - A national or ENQA review
 - A decision regarding this review process
 - A decision regarding inclusion in the Register
 - An appeals process
 - Users are free to use the information as they see fit

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Pending questions

- How to gain **political legitimacy** given that Europe does not have an education ministry and that Bologna includes more than the EU member states? i.e.,
 - ✓ Who will delegate to this association the power to decide on the quality of national QA agencies?
 - ✓ Who could take this power away?
- Where to locate the dedicated small **secretariat** that will staff the committee?

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Conclusions

- Key policy goals should be to ensure creative and innovative institutions
- European QA Framework should support higher education and promote its development by:
 - > Promoting creativity and avoiding overregulation
 - > Being aware of the correlation between strong institutions and autonomy
 - > Stressing the role of HEIs in a more diversified, more open and more internationalised HE system: i.e., the responsibility to set own missions, priorities and programmes

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