

2009 Bologna Stocktaking findings on the Higher Education Quality Assurance

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Abstract

2009 Bologna Process Stocktaking was designed to measure progress and carry out qualitative analysis of the implementation of the main Bologna Process action lines, including quality assurance. It was based on the National Reports of the 46 countries. The country answers to the questions demonstrate that there has been progress in the implementation of the various aspects of quality assurance but that the progress has been uneven: generally the progress in external quality assurance seems to be faster than in internal quality assurance, and within internal quality assurance the greatest efforts are still needed in linking programmes with learning outcomes, but especially in designing the student assessment procedures to measure the achievement of the intended learning outcomes. Student participation in quality assurance has grown, but not all countries allow students to be full members of the assessment teams and take decisions. It is somewhat surprising that only one third of countries have assessed their quality assurance agencies. The general conclusion is that several aspects of quality assurance need more time for implementation and that the work will not be completed by 2010.

Some proposals are made regarding the areas implementation of which could benefit from inclusion of these areas in the internal and external quality reviews.

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Abbreviations

| | | | |
|-------------|---|------------|--|
| DS | Diploma Supplement | EUA | European University association |
| EFQM | European Foundation of Quality Management | HE | Higher Education |
| EHEA | European Higher Education Area | HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| ENQA | European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education | ISO | International organisation for Standardisation |
| EQAR | European Quality Assurance Register | NQF | National Qualifications Framework |
| ESG | European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA | QA | Quality Assurance |
| ESU | European Student Association | TQM | Total Quality management |

Bologna Process Stocktaking [1] is carried out every two years in order to measure progress in the implementation of the main Bologna Process action lines including quality assurance. Stocktaking is based on the biannual National Reports¹ of the 48 countries². Part of the questions in the template for National Reports allows quantifying the progress [1], pp. 98-122. More specific questions are aimed at gathering information for qualitative analysis.

Although usually prepared by a wider national working group, National Reports are submitted by the ministries of education of the Bologna countries and thus represent the views of the government side. For this reason the Stocktaking working group included members from the relevant stakeholder organisations to cross-check Stocktaking findings with the EUA Trends report [2], ESU Bologna with student eyes report [3] and with Eurydice Focus report [4].

The aim of this paper is to present the stocktaking results of the qualitative analysis with regard to implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) [5].

Evaluating national QA systems against ESG

Reviewing national QA systems against the ESG. The commitment to implement the ESG was declared already in 2005 [6] therefore it was surprising that just above half of the countries have reviewed their QA systems against the ESG and quite some either just give

¹ The 2009 national reports can be found at <http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/actionlines/stocktaking.htm>

² Strictly speaking – there were 48 reports of 46 countries participating in the Bologna Process, with two reports each for Belgium and the United Kingdom

a year in future when the review could take place or have no plans for such review (Table 1).

Table 1. Reviewing QA system against ESG (number of countries)

| QA system reviewed | QA agency only reviewed | Review planned (year given) | Review not planned |
|--------------------|-------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|
| 28 | 3 | 11 | 4 |

Just nine countries explicitly mention reviewing the internal QA inside HEIs against ESG, others possibly have left out review of internal QA against the Part I of the ESG.

After the review more than half of countries have carried out consultations with stakeholders and introduced financial incentives or other measures to improve QA processes, e.g. establishing internal quality units in HEIs.

Internal quality assurance inside HEIs

General issues of internal QA systems within HEIs.

Countries often mention that the requirement for HEIs to create internal QA systems has been embedded into national laws, regulations or codes of practice. However, answers of some countries suggest that they limit internal QA within HEIs to preparing self-assessment reports for external reviews.

Some countries inform that their HEIs have established a performance-based management system without reference to improvement-oriented and learning outcomes-based quality culture. While quality of teaching as such is often mentioned, there is no notion of learning and learning outcomes in the general descriptions of the internal QA systems. The above suggests there is a need to focus more on internal QA and accordingly to Part I of the ESG across the EHEA.

In some countries with binary HE systems the establishment of an internal QA within HEI may be required for the applied HE sector but not to universities. Another group of countries underline that universities are autonomous to chose what kind of internal QA system they establish.

Some countries indicated that the internal QA systems in their HEIs may be based on ISO, EFQM, various TQM-based quality management methodologies or self-developed ones.

Some aspects of internal QA within HEIs

Strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. Only one third of countries answered that all their HEIs have published strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality while in more than on third of countries quality strategies are published by just some HEIs or no HEIs (cf. Table 2). Several countries noted that HEIs are not obliged to publish their QA strategies, or stated that the quality issues are represented in the overall strategy of a HEI. Some countries referred to presence of quality aspects in the strategic plans which HEIs must prepare in accordance with the overall ministry strategy.

With over third of countries where QA strategies are published by just some or no HEIs and questions remaining whether the strategies specifically address implementation of ESG, the message is that HEIs should be encouraged to more actively engage in internal QA.

Table 2. Summary of answers on internal QA aspects
(number of countries giving each kind of answers)

| | All HEIs | Most HEIs | Some HEIs | No HEIs |
|--|----------|-----------|-----------|---------|
| Published strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality | 16 | 14 | 16 | 2 |
| Arrangements for internal approval and monitoring of programmes | 22 | 20 | 5 | 1 |
| Describing programmes in terms of learning outcomes | 12 | 15 | 19 | 2 |
| Student assessment procedures designed to measure achievement of learning outcomes | 6 | 17 | 18 | 7 |
| HEIs publishing information | 30 | 16 | 1 | 1 |

Arrangements at HEIs for approval and monitoring of programmes are present in all or most HEIs in vast majority of countries (Tab.2). The monitoring is done by programme committees including staff and students (and employers) in some countries, others organise it as internal audit and train teaching staff to act as auditors. Assessment can also be based on student questionnaires, feedback from alumni or both. In a number of countries internal QA is modelled on the external QA: using self-assessment reports of programmes and review by peers. The programme may be submitted to a HEI’s curriculum board or senate for approval. Several countries use EFQM screening for self-assessment of programmes. In some countries the internal procedures are carried out straight before the external accreditation.

There is however plenty of work needed to improve the methodologies and link them to learning outcomes, still internal approval and monitoring of programmes is one of the more developed directions in the internal QA.

Describing programmes in terms of learning outcomes. Even if twenty one countries confess that only some or no HEIs have described their programmes in terms of learning outcomes (Tab. 2) the answers seem too optimistic compared to the results of the Qualifications Frameworks Coordination group survey, which showed that the implementation of learning outcomes is still the greatest challenge [7].

Some countries indicate that there is a culture of learning outcomes at the applied higher education sector only; others underline the strong traditions of content-centred curricula and again they say that change will take time.

Countries themselves underline that HEIs still need to improve their capacity to formulate the learning outcomes and therefore it is important to assist HEI staff in understanding and formulating learning outcomes. Even more, some countries say that learning outcomes have been made an obligatory component of the programme description but also state that those learning outcomes “are not related to Dublin descriptors” or “not in the understanding of Tuning”.

Thus, the optimistic view of how far HEIs have progressed in using learning outcomes may be partly due to confusion between “learning outcomes” as statements of what the

learner will know, understand and be able to demonstrate after completion of a programme of learning (or individual subject/ course) and the overall aims or expected “outcomes” of programmes, which, of course, have always been defined for courses of study in higher education.

Student assessment. Introduction of student assessment procedures designed to measure achievement of the intended learning outcomes is slow: only one eighth of the countries answered that it is done in all HEIs (Table 2), but more than half the countries - that it is implemented in just some or no HEIs. Some countries have made outcomes-based student assessment compulsory and/or are including the learning outcomes and student assessment issues into external quality reviews.

A number of answers demonstrate that the very issue of student assessment based on learning outcomes continues to be unclear: in some answers it is understood as summative assessment; in others it is identified with general national grading scales with published criteria for each grade and in a couple of cases as teaching being assessed by students at the end of the course. The results clearly demonstrate one of the difficulties in implementation of the Bologna process – each new issue dealt with in the Bologna process is always completely unfamiliar to part of the countries and therefore outside a narrow group of specialists the new elements of jargon is often misunderstood in a smaller or larger group of countries. This is also an evidence that there is still a need disseminate, promote and clarify the more complicated issues.

HEIs publishing information. As HEIs normally publish information in order to attract students, it could be foreseen that nearly all countries have answered that either all or most HEIs publish up to date, impartial and objective about the programmes and awards. It was however not possible to verify whether the information about the programmes and awards is indeed always impartial, objective and whether it provides information on e.g. competences that the graduate will have.

External QA, student and international involvement in QA

General descriptions of the national systems of external QA. All but one countries have an external QA system operating at national level. Practically all countries answer that they follow the self-assessment/peer review/ publication of/ follow-up procedures pattern.

QA system often covers all higher education; however in five countries it does not cover either pre-Bologna degrees or short cycle programmes. In some cases the QA system operates in universities or professional HEIs only, or it covers both sectors, but the approach or the agencies in charge are different for different sectors of HE: and if so, audit of internal QA is used for universities while accreditation for applied HEIs. While most countries had established their external QA systems after the beginning of Bologna process, some did it already in early/mid-nineties and some have replaced their QA agencies after re-definition of QA principles. Some of the countries that have small HE systems use QA agencies of neighbouring countries and international peers instead of creating their own QA agency.

It should be noted that in several countries QA has been introduced as state control rather than in an improvement based way.

According to the above findings, it should be important that the QA agencies of all ‘Bologna’ countries are assessed against the ESG – both to ensure coherence across the EHEA and to make mapping of the national situations. Yet, by the end of March, 2009,

just one third of the countries had carried out an external review of their QA agencies. Another twenty-two countries just refer to a year when the review will take place.

Student involvement in quality assurance. Student participation (table 3) in expert teams is rather high although in a substantial number of countries just as observers. Yet, in 40% countries they are left out from decision making. In three quarters of the countries students seem to be involved in internal QA. However, the data do not allow judging whether it means full involvement or just the periodical student surveys are concerned.

Table 3. Student participation in QA

| Aspects: | Countries (out of 48) |
|--|--------------------------|
| Governance of QA agency | 31 |
| Review teams as full members | 26 |
| Review teams as observers | 16 |
| Decision making on the outcome of assessment | 29 |
| Consultations during the review | 38 |
| Procedures of internal QA | 37 |
| Drafting self-assessment report | 31 |
| In follow-up measures at HEI | 21 |

All-in-all, while the student involvement in QA has grown over the last years, one can observe that while most countries are fully open to student participation in HE, some others restrict student participation in some issues (governance of QA agency, decision-making) but a third group seem to be rather reluctant to student participation in general.

International participation in quality assurance. There has been some progress since 2007 especially in the participation in external review teams and membership of ENQA or other international QA networks, but more international involvement in QA is still needed. The level of international participation is highest in the expert teams. Less than half the countries have international participants in the governance of QA agencies which is often a legal problem, therefore in some cases international participants are invited to governance meetings as observers.

Table 4. International participation in QA

| Aspects: | Countries (out of 48) |
|---|--------------------------|
| Governance of QA agency | 23 |
| Assessment of national QA agency | 33 |
| Review teams | 38 |
| Full membership of national QA agency in ENQA | 22 |
| Associate membership of national QA agency ENQA | 11 |
| Membership of national QA agency in other QA networks | 33 |

It is striking that less than half of the national QA agencies are full members of ENQA. Criteria for full membership of ENQA require compliance of the national QA agency with the ESG; therefore the above finding suggests that in rather many national QA agencies ESG might not be fully implemented yet.

At the time of completion national reports for the 2009 Bologna Stocktaking the European QA Register (EQAR) had just started its work and still included only a small number of agencies, therefore it was not considered appropriate to use listing of the QA agency in EQAR for the analysis in 2009 stocktaking. In the future it is likely that inclusion of the national QA agency or agencies in the EQAR will be an important indicator of the credibility of a QA agency.

Stocktaking suggestions on less traditional areas to be covered by quality assurance

The Stocktaking analysis points at several areas in which the progress is hindered by a real or imaginary conflict between implementation of internationally agreed principles, the autonomy of HEIs and sometimes national legislation.

Below some areas are listed where the involvement of QA would be welcome and helpful. Some countries or some HEIs already apply quality assurance in those areas in one way or another and may be excellent in those areas, but it is not yet a widespread practice in the EHEA.

Quality of institutional procedures used for recognition of degrees and study credit points. The problem in this area is that while the Lisbon Recognition Convention, which is the main international legal document for academic recognition sets clear principles, the procedures and criteria used are much too different in the EHEA, between different HEIs of one country and indeed also between different departments inside one HEI. Some countries have included recognition of full qualifications and credits into the scope of both internal and external QA which assesses whether the criteria and procedures used inside a HEI are in line with the principles of the legal framework of the Lisbon Recognition Convention.

Quality of Diploma Supplements. 2009 Stocktaking as well as Bologna with Student Eyes and EUA Trends reports have demonstrated that while more and more HEIs issue Diploma Supplements to their graduates, the quality of the Diploma Supplements issued is diverse. There are cases where the EU/Council of Europe/UNESCO Diploma Supplement is used incorrectly, customized, in some cases distorting it completely. The European Standards and Guidelines on QA also cover the information that the HEIs send out. The Diploma Supplement in fact the most important information on the qualification for the graduates, employers, parents and others. Taking up the quality assessment of the Diploma Supplements at both internal and external assessments would help to improve the use of this important instrument.

Quality of lifelong learning. Since several years lifelong learning is among the important tasks of HEIs. At the same time 2009 Stocktaking demonstrated that regarding the flexible learning paths and the recognition of prior learning, especially informal and non-formal learning, there are just a handful of countries where these issues have become an active practice. Again, including those issues in internal and external quality assessments would stimulate action, improve quality locally but also help exchange experiences and share good practice nationally and internationally.

Quality assurance of joint degrees. The legal situation of joint degrees has improved in the recent years and joint degrees are explicitly mentioned in legislation in already thirty-seven countries. However, to fulfil the one of the main criteria for recognition of a joint degree - that all parts of the joint programme are quality assessed, requires joint action between the QA agencies of the participating countries.

Quality of internationalisation. With the strengthening of the global dimension of the Bologna process and international/ global cooperation as such the role of internationalisation of the HEIs is growing, in other words internationalisation of a HEI is a prerequisite of its sustainability. In such a way, QA and following enhancement of the internationalisation process within a HEI should become an important component of the overall quality

Summary of findings

1. When assessing the national QA systems against ESG, the main focus is on the external QA while as regards Part I of the ESG on internal quality assurance; it has not been considered part of the review in a number of countries.
2. Compared to the implementation of external QA, the development of internal QA systems at HEIs is progressing more slowly. In most countries HEIs have established internal QA procedures, although some are much stronger than others.
3. Internal approval of programmes and assuring staff quality in most countries in one way or other have been established long ago and therefore usually are better developed. Linking programmes with learning outcomes and designing assessment procedures to measure achievement of the intended learning outcomes are the most difficult parts and will take longer to implement.
4. A number of countries state that they do not prescribe particular mechanisms for internal QA in HEIs but rather require that HEIs create them as they see fit, on condition that the internal QA of each HEI is coherent, effective and fits its purposes.
5. All the 'Bologna' countries have introduced external QA systems including self-assessment and external review; nearly all publish assessment results and carry out follow-up measures.
6. The facts that less than one third of countries had organised assessment of their QA agency and that national QA agencies of more than half the 'Bologna' countries are not yet full members of ENQA suggests that there is a long way to go before there is clear evidence that all countries are working according to the ESG.
7. Overall, student participation in QA has progressed since 2007. However in a number of countries students do not participate in decision making after the review, they are not always involved in preparing self-assessment reports and they are seldom involved in follow-up measures.
8. There has been some progress towards achieving a greater level of international involvement in external review teams and membership of ENQA or other international QA networks but both should be increased

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Questions to be asked to lead the discussion

1. It seems that external QA systems are developing reasonably well. But what could be done to further promote the Standards and Guidelines concerning internal quality assurance within HEIs
2. Leadership of HEIs sometimes tend to establish top-down management systems rather than genuine quality culture. How can we make both ends meet?
3. HEIs have the final word on the recognition of foreign credentials. Experience shows that the procedures and criteria used in different countries and at different HEIs within one country are not always coherent. A way out could be including recognition procedures at a HEI into the aspects evaluated at internal and/or external QA. How could that work in practice?