Further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education

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The Commission presents a report on progress in quality assurance (QA) in higher education.

Objectives of the report: the present report follows the first published in 20095, responding to the invitation from the European Parliament and Council in 2006 to report on progress in quality assurance (*for the results of the 2009 report, please refer to the summary dated 21/09/2009, in this procedure file*). The 2009 report identified the need to make **QA more efficient and transparent for users**; to link it overtly to wider higher education priorities; and to develop cross-border cooperation to improve quality – and drawing on a wide range of sources. It also highlighted the potential for quality assurance to play a more active role in supporting reform at system and institutional levels and proposes EU actions to support institutions and Member States.

Synergy between QA and HEIs: the report stresses that QA that is tailored to each higher education institution's (HEI) vision and priorities will encourage greater diversity and specialisation of HEIs and promote wider engagement with and accountability to stakeholders. The report shows that change is taking place. The remit of some QAAs is being extended to review broader higher education objectives such as **widening access, lifelong learning, internationalisation**, etc.

The large majority (69%) of QA systems now focus on a combination of institutional evaluation and programme accreditation and a growing minority have shifted to exclusively institutional evaluation. This is promising for the future direction of QA – **institutional evaluation empowers academics and HEIs to build curricula and to ensure their quality**, avoiding the need for formal, external accreditation of each individual programme and allowing them to adapt provision rapidly to changing labour market needs and to changes in the make-up of the student population.

Main findings of the report: this report demonstrates some progress since 2009, but also reveals **gaps** in how QA supports higher education reforms such as widening access, improving employability and internationalisation, or improving doctoral training and human resources strategies.

To bridge these gaps, QA has to become a support to creating an **internal quality culture rather than a tick-box procedure**. It needs to engage with all areas of an institution's activities, to keep up with change in how higher education is designed and delivered, and involve the entire institution in creating a **quality culture** that underpins teaching and learning.

The report also focuses on:

- the move between systems – both in the traditional initial education pathway and to upgrade and widen knowledge and skills throughout citizens' lives;
- the need for a sector-based approach to quality assurance and on whether it is possible to identify some basic principles and guidelines valid across sectors and applicable to all qualifications.

To address such challenges, it would be valuable to discuss QA in higher education within a comprehensive context of all instruments for transparency and quality assurance.

In that light the Commission plans to undertake the following actions towards better European cooperation in quality assurance for **lifelong learning**:

- **dialogue**: it is proposed to consult stakeholders on the findings of this report and on the need for and feasibility of improving coherence between quality assurance in different education sub-sectors;
- **reform of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)**: a thorough-going revision of the ESG is needed that lays emphasis on raising quality standards rather than on procedural approaches;
- **synergies between existing tools**: it is proposed to continue to improve the articulation of European transparency tools that support quality assurance, such as Europass;
- **cooperation and internationalisation**: it is suggested to continue to promote cooperation on QA at international level, through policy dialogue with key international partners and as a basis for partnerships with HEIs around the world (in this regard, specific actions have also been proposed in the framework of the new Erasmus+ programme).