Quality assurance in higher education: European cooperation

1997/0121(SYN) - 30/09/2004 - Follow-up document

The Commission presented a report on the implementation of Council Recommendation 98/561/EC on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education. The implementation of this Recommendation had been a marked success according to the report. The work on quality assurance had obviously received extra momentum from the central position given to quality issues in the Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy and had been acknowledged as an essential component of the emerging ‘European Qualifications Framework’. Important efforts had been made at bilateral and regional level to create a climate of confidence that would facilitate the mutual recognition of quality assurance systems and assessments. The Commission therefore considered that the moment had come to take specific and decisive steps and that progress could and had to be made in this important field.

This report consisted of two parts. Part One concentrated on the establishment of quality assurance systems in Member States. Almost all Member States and other European countries had set up quality assurance systems or were about to do so. Most Member States had created one or more quality assurance agencies, aiming at quality improvement through external evaluation. Higher education institutions had been encouraged to set up their own internal quality assurance mechanisms, not least to provide a basis for external evaluation. The experience had varied in duration and intensity but all regarded quality assurance as an essential feature of their higher education systems. The systems in operation were working along the lines set out in the 1998 Council Recommendation.

Part Two of the report covered cooperation activities at European and international level: most countries were involved, in varying degrees, in bilateral, multilateral, European and global cooperation on quality assurance and accreditation. These transnational initiatives had similar objectives: identifying comparable criteria and methodologies and fostering the correct functioning of quality agencies in order to achieve more transparency and, ultimately, the mutual recognition of quality assurance systems and assessments.

The report also addressed the ‘Berlin Mandate’ given to ENQA by the Ministers of the Bologna Signatory States. ENQA (European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) was created as a direct result of the 1998 Council Recommendation and could therefore be considered both as its most concrete outcome at European level and as a starting point and key actor for future developments. In September 2003, Ministers of Higher Education of 40 Bologna Signatory States had gathered in Berlin and called upon ENQA to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies, and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005.