# Further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education

2004/0239(COD) - 12/10/2004 - Legislative proposal

PURPOSE : to build upon and improve European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education

PROPOSED ACT: Recommendation of the Council and the European Parliament.

CONTENT: in 1998 the Council of Ministers adopted a Recommendation on European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education. The Recommendation requires Member States to support or establish quality assurance systems and to encourage higher education institutions to co-operate. Since 1998 much has been done to realise the objectives set out in the Recommendation. Nevertheless, more needs be done to make higher education in Europe a trustworthier brand, not only for European students but also for students from other continents seeking a higher education in Europe. To achieve this goal the Commission is proposing an updated Recommendation to encourage and facilitate the concept of "mutual recognition" in higher education. In addition, the Recommendation should act as a tool, which encourages the creation of European quality assurance systems and assessments. Five key steps have been identified for the realisation of the Recommendation's main objectives:

1) The establishment of an internal quality assurance mechanisms, which would require all higher education institutions active within their territory to introduce or develop rigorous internal quality assurance mechanisms. This step is being proposed in a bid to improve and strengthen internal quality management - or a culture of quality.

2) The establishment of a common set of standards, procedures and guidelines, requiring all quality assurance or accreditation agencies active within their territory to act independently, to apply features of quality assurance laid down in the 1998 Recommendation and to apply a common set of standards, procedures and guidelines, for assessment purposes. By standards, the Commission does not propose a set of straightjackets. Rather, standards should act as reference points, providing a common language. Such "reference points" should be updated regularly and keep pace with emerging new knowledge. By procedures the Commission proposes the publication of an ENQA Handbook of Quality Assurance Procedures. This handbook would contain a number of commonly accepted models or protocols based on good practice in Member States. Lastly, by guidelines, the Commission suggests a set of principles that ought to be respected when carrying out external evaluations. An agreed set of guidelines or principles could be established through he ENQA mandate. In addition the ENQA could help pave the way for a "Code of Principles for European Quality Assurance".

3) The establishment of a "European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies", to encourage quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with organisation representing higher education. Under this step the Commission proposes that independent quality assurance agencies themselves become subject to regular review. Regular review of agencies should lead to the setting up of a European Register/List or Clearing House of Quality Assurance Agencies, covering public, private and professional agencies, operating or based within Europe. The List would cover regional, national, European or international agencies.

4) Universities would be given the freedom to choose their own agency according to their needs and profile. This might be an agency in another European country - but which would be subject to EU quality controls and should be registered on the recognised EU List outlined above.

5) Member States should accept the assessments made by all quality assurance and accreditation agencies listed in the European Register (regardless of whether they are based in their home territory or not) when making decisions regarding licensing or funding. The Commission recognises that it is the Member States who are responsible for organising their national quality systems. In some cases, however, Member States have decided to open the possibility of recognising the judgement of an agency in another European country as equivalent to the judgement of national agencies. For example, Flanders in Belgium and the Netherlands have decided to set up one joint accreditation system. This, the Commission suggests, is a positive development. It stimulates competition amongst the agencies and forces them to improve their services. Further, it would bring their evaluation and accreditation services to an international, European level. It might also lead agencies to adopt specialisations - such as engineering, medicine or humanities. Trans-national quality assurance would act as an effective tool for mutual recognition of quality assurance systems, quality assurance or accreditation assessment. Such a development could, ultimately, lead to the recognition of qualifications at a European scale, whilst leaving the initiative with universities and national authorities. Alternatively, for reasons of branding, Member States may retain national evaluations, whilst at the same time allowing higher education institutions to seek programme accreditation abroad. Without a European wide accreditation scheme in place, universities may seek to obtain labels from outside Europe including the US.

To conclude, the Commission urges an early adaptation of the proposed Recommendation. Not only would early implementation of the Recommendation give a strong impulse to the establishment of a coherent European system of quality assurance in higher education, it would also enhance quality, facilitate recognition of qualifications and promote student mobility.