

WCLTA 2013

## Quality Assurance In The European Higher Education Area

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### Abstract

The concepts of quality and quality assurance day by day gain importance and become more popular in the world especially in developed countries about products and services. Bologna process aims to set up European Higher Education Area and one of the most important goals of this process is to make European Higher Education competitive, transparent, diversified and leader in the world by having high quality higher education which produce sustainable socio-economic developments in the area and in the world. It is certain that developing a good working Quality Assurance system in the European Higher Education Area will make European Higher Education more competitive and strong in the world because Quality Assurance provides and guarantees high quality in teaching & learning, research etc. and it also leads to increase of student mobility by mutual degrees recognition and comparability thus it is obvious that Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education is a must and it should not be performed just as a mandatory technical work to comply with the resolutions of the Area. This study first of all will look into the concepts of quality and quality assurance then it will provide necessary and deeper understanding and information on quality assurance in European Higher Education Area and will talk about how to develop quality assurance system and effects of quality assurance on European Higher Education Area.

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Selection and peer-review under responsibility of the Organizing Committee of WCLTA 2013.

*Keywords:* Quality, Quality Assurance, Accreditation, EHEA ( European Higher Education Area) , Bologna Process;

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### Introduction

The concepts of quality and quality assurance day by day gain importance and become more popular in the world especially in developed countries about products and services. Quality assurance in Higher Education is also gaining

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importance very fast for instance if we consider the Sorbonne Joint Declaration –May 1998, there was not any plan or decision about it, in addition quality assurance was not a major part of the Bologna Process during the start of the process on June 1999 and during the Prague Conference in 2001 there was no action plan, decision or collaboration between the member states of European Higher Education Area but this picture has changed during the Berlin Conference in 2003 and quality assurance in European Higher Education Area appeared on the agenda as a very important issue . It would not be wrong to say that quality assurance is now one of the most important elements of Bologna Process which aims to set up European Higher Education Area.

Now there is a consensus among the forty-five member states of European Higher Education Area that quality assurance is important and there is a need for common understanding ,policy and culture of quality assurance because the member states believe that only structural changes are not enough for European Higher Education there is also need for quality and quality assurance (Veronique , C. , 2004).Thus quality assurance in European Higher Education became one of the most important part of the Bologna Process and agencies, higher education institutions and governments in European Higher Education Area started to thinking and studying for necessary actions, plans, policies and structures for quality assurance in higher education to structure their own quality assurance system. This study first of all will look into the concepts of quality and quality assurance then it will provide necessary and deeper understanding and information on quality assurance in European Higher Education Area and will talk about how to develop quality assurance system and effects of quality assurance on European Higher Education Area.

## **1. Quality and Quality Assurance**

The phenomenon of Quality appeared during the industrial age especially after the second world war , the first usage of the term was to describe industrial products whether they are good, bad, average or excellent ,whether do they have the necessary features or not and in which level. To make an exact and common definition of quality is hard because it can have several different meanings and can have different usages and meanings in different cultures, fields and countries.

Although the concept of quality seems simple even its exact definition is not so easy, there are many different ideas and definitions on it and sometimes people are unable to explain its meaning when you ask “what is quality?” but generally people use this term to express something with good features or standards, the tendency is to use this term with a positive meaning and attitude, but in fact the case is not always the same when we evaluate it academically. Quality can be defined as a degree or worth of something such as a product or service, it is seeking the best and a continuing process for evaluation of products or services in relation with their degree of satisfaction to fulfil required or desired issues.

If we try to define quality assurance; it is whole determined and systematic actions & implementations to provide trust-confidence about supplying high quality of a product, service, institution etc. Quality assurance is consisting of steps to provide good quality; it guarantees that the product, service or institution will have necessary requirements – standards to meet desired quality. Quality assurance includes technical requirements and studies to provide quality and confidence to quality. Quality assurance is a tool to ensure mutual confidence & trust about having and performing high quality and every year it becomes more and more important and popular in the world, higher education is one of the big fields in the world market which applies quality assurance to get mutual trust & confidence in higher education (Westerheijden , D. F. , 2007).

## **2. Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area**

Bologna process aims to set up European Higher Education Area and one of the most important goals of this process is to make European Higher Education competitive, transparent, diversified and leader in the world by having high quality higher education which produce sustainable socio-economic developments in the area and in the world (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998). Currently there are forty-five members in this prospective higher education area and by the Berlin Conference -2003 the issue of Quality Assurance in European Higher Education became one of the top subjects of the Bologna Process and its importance is still growing among the members because there is a common belief that quality assurance is necessary for the development of higher education and mutual trust and confidence thus member states started working on quality assurance but of course its speed and way is different in each country, some countries started working on it simultaneously and some started late, in addition all countries don't have

necessary background because the terms such as quality assurance and accreditation are very new to them, for instance these issues are new in Germany, Austria, Turkey on the other hand The United Kingdom and The Netherlands are more experienced and developed about it, however the main source of Quality Assurance and accreditation is The United States (Veronique , C. , 2004). It is possible to say that American Quality Assurance is an example and guide for the European Higher Education Area.

Quality Assurance in European Higher Education is import element of Bologna Process and currently studies on establishing necessary quality assurance structures, policies and systems are still going on in the member states. The countries are trying to be compatible with quality assurance standards especially on teaching and research. In order to help, provide and develop quality assurance in European Higher Education Area, ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Assurance) was founded. This foundation is a guide for Higher Education Quality Assurance and covers The European Standards and Guidelines. Major principles of the European Standards and Guidelines in Higher Education are; Good Quality Higher Education which considers interests of students, employers and the society. The other principle is institutional autonomy and the last one is Correct External Quality Assurance for the goals of the institution.

Member states developed and some of them are still developing Quality Assurance policies according to national or local requirements and conditions, economy and politics are also playing role for shaping policies. It is obviously seen that almost all the studies on Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area are at national level right now currently many countries in Europe use multi-stage assessment as their Quality Assurance method which means firstly making internal self-assessment of the Higher Education Institutions and figuring out weaknesses and strengths and this one is only at national level, and in my point of view policies, structures, standards and all the other matters concerning Quality Assurance in European Higher Education should be at international level because European Higher Education Area is an international large area which covers many different countries, cultures, structures ,thousands of higher education institutions and millions of students, etc. (Kells , H.R. , 1992).

Thus international level for the Quality Assurance policies, systems and standards most probably the best one to get a non-problematic, sustainable and fruitful Quality Assurance but of course it is not so easy to establish it and to implement it, it can take very long time and effort.

However, The European Union did not provide higher education policy on Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area because higher education is a national matter and The European Union has no right to interfere national higher education of a country thus it is seen that achievement of international policies, structures, standards and the rest are depend on consensus and collaboration among members because no one can force the other to do or not to do something about national higher education. But if there is a consensus and effective collaboration then Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area can be successful and compatible internationally.

One important point and maybe the deficiency of Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area is about developing quality in higher education and developing administration & management of higher education institutions because there is no visible –strong plan, study or policy on it, and evaluation of research and administration is not widespread and developed although they are important parts of quality of Higher Education Institutions (HRK German Rector's Conference, 2007).

However it is obvious that accreditation which is inevitable part of Quality Assurance in Higher Education became popular among member states. It is possible to say that accreditation is a type of Quality Assurance and it is gaining importance day by day. Accreditation is a written formal statement which proves a higher education institution or a program is compatible with the required standards, it is a kind of quality evaluation process of higher education and necessary for accountability.

### **3. How to Develop Quality Assurance System in European Higher Education Area**

It is very obvious that the European Higher Education Area needs to develop a very effective, fruitful and sustainable Quality Assurance system as soon as possible because prospective European Higher Education Area is planning to be established that means there is no long time left to complete all the requirements for establishment of the desired area.

The first step to develop Quality Assurance in European Higher Education is to make Higher Education Institutions

strong, effective and self-responsible for the Quality Assurance processes, providing Quality Assurance themselves should be one of the major goals of the Higher Education Institutions in the Area this means that each member national state is responsible for establishing its own Quality Assurance system in Higher Education because Higher Education issue is under responsibility and authority of the State- government thus each member state should guarantee high quality in Higher Education system in their own countries especially on teaching & learning, administration, assessment and research (Berlin Communiqué, 2003).

Higher Education is a public service in almost all members of the European Higher Education Area thus first there is a need for formal national Quality Assurance system for Higher Education in each member country and then there is also need for international system for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area because this area is not a national area. It is seen that first steps have to be taken by national governments / states in order to ensure high quality in Higher Education and of course national needs of Higher Education should be considered as well.

In order to develop Quality Assurance system in European Higher Education Area first there is a need for international consensus, collaboration and effective networking among all member countries, then common standards and procedures for Quality and Accreditation, well organized internal assessment, external assessment and peer review are required but every country has to consider its own domestic needs and socio-economic position too while developing this system. There are many and different members in the Area in the field of Higher Education so it is one of the biggest problems of the European Higher Education to establish a quick – common Quality Assurance system in Higher Education.

Another way to develop Quality Assurance in Higher Education is to carry out and to improve European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and peer reviewing, it is obvious that common standards and guidelines are required which ratified by all member states for development of Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area. Quality Assurance agencies should not work different from each other at national or international level (Veronique, C., 2004).

Within the framework of the internal quality assurance, higher education institutions should have a clear policy, written rules and quality standards for the assurance. In addition there is a need for Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions and they should be aware of the importance of the issue and they should work on it willingly and of course in order to get it Higher Education Institutions need a quality strategy. Besides these institutions should have a good working official mechanism to control and approve its programs. Evaluation of students should have a written format which explains the criteria of evaluation/grading and so on. Teaching staff should be well qualified, they should be open to innovations, changes & new developments, criticism and evaluation (Westerheijden, D. F., 2007).

Higher Education Institutions should also provide necessary teaching-learning equipment and nice environment for teaching- learning (high quality classes-labs-buildings etc.) Higher Education Institutions should also be transparent and they should provide information about studies, changes, opportunities and so on. Administration of the Higher Education Institutions play important role implementing and arranging a good and effective Quality Assurance system especially at national level thus administration should be a willing and active part of the Quality Assurance system.

It is very clear that internal Quality Assurance assessment, external Quality Assurance assessment and peer review are all targeting developing standards and quality of Higher Education Institutions, they are trying to help to reach the best in teaching & learning –research and they are major elements of the Quality Assurance system in European Higher Education Area.

In order to develop a good system all these evaluations should be made professionally and evaluation reports should not contain only negative comments on deficiencies, because the aim of the evaluations is not criticize the current situation negatively, these evaluations and evaluation reports are useful when they offer advises and when they show the right way to reach the objectives otherwise they have no meaning because only showing or writing deficiencies cannot help an institution to improve itself about quality and standards, thus all these forms of evaluations must be made professionally with the aim of improving current quality and standards in Higher Education institutions according to their current position and conditions in the market first at national level and then international level. In addition all these assessments should have written clear, rational and meaningful criteria with the aim of contribution to improvement of quality and standards considering the goals of the Higher Education Institutions.

All the Higher Education institutions in European Higher Education Area should know their own position at national level, at European level and at international level for example in comparison to The USA, Australia, Africa, to develop a good Quality Assurance system because trying to provide it without knowing anything is almost

impossible and not rational. Thus in addition to mention evaluations it would be very useful to have international assessment for Quality Assurance in Higher Education among member states.

### **Conclusion**

World is globalizing and we can see its effects almost in every field including Higher Education. Quality Assurance in Higher Education is also affected by globalization; in addition some other factors such as competition in Higher Education and financial factors are affecting Quality Assurance. However it is possible to say that all these effects have positive results on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area because when we consider the recent position of Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area it is clearly seen that almost in all member countries there are efforts to provide required and desired Higher Education quality and standards, although they are only at national level it is a good improvement and important step to get a common Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area.

Quality Assurance in European Higher Education is still one of the incomplete goals of Bologna Process because many of the member states handle this issue in different way and still there is no well-organized or systematically working International Quality Assurance system in the European Higher Education Area although it is an international area.

It is certain that developing a good working Quality Assurance system in the European Higher Education Area will make European Higher Education more competitive and strong in the world because Quality Assurance provides and guarantees high quality in teaching & learning, research etc. and it also leads to increase of student mobility by mutual degrees recognition and comparability thus it is obvious that Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education is a must and it should not be performed just as a mandatory technical work to comply with the resolutions of the Area.

Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area is for the benefit of each member state by aiming to improve the quality and standards of Higher Education (student admission, student assessment, student mobility, curriculum, teaching & learning, research etc.) and providing mutual recognition because there is a need for mutual trust – confidence.

Thus there is a need for International Quality Assurance network which works with the basis of consensus and common quality standards and international quality assessment which will help to reach desired goals of Bologna Process about Higher Education

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The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

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