

Excellence in European Higher Education

Bologna, and Beyond?

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of quality and quality assurance in European higher education, both in the current Bologna process and in the further future. The tension between striving for excellence and achieving adequate, threshold levels of quality, is a major theme. It describes accreditation as a major form of quality assurance, spreading because of the Bologna process in Europe. Then, major policy developments up to the *European Standards and Guidelines* are sketched. A discussion follows of limitations quality assurance encounters in further fostering European harmonisation of higher education and of some other instruments (e.g. rankings). Finally, some major influences on the future European higher education landscape are sketched, leading to the conclusion that notwithstanding the advent of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), intra-European differences will remain important.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to explore the role of quality and quality assurance in European higher education, both in the current Bologna process and in the further future. Special emphasis will be given to quality in its traditional academic interpretation, i.e. as ‘excellence’, as showing outstanding results among the other higher education institutions. Excellence is a relative conception of quality, not absolute: what was excellent some decades ago is now commonplace or even outdated. Therefore, achieving excellence is a never-ending process of continuous improvement—though not necessarily improvement only in customers’ eyes; the audience deciding on excellence are the academic peers. In the quality assurance literature in higher education since the 1980s, excellence is noted as one of the possible conceptions of quality (Harvey & Green, 1993), but most attention—also in policy making—goes to other conceptions of quality. The most popular notion is quality as ‘fitness for purpose’, e.g. that teaching is adequate to convey the knowledge and competences that graduates from a study programme in law need to make a successful start in the typical careers for lawyers. Since the 1990s, quality assessment agencies in Europe have coupled ‘fitness of purpose’ to ‘fitness for purpose’: they wanted to have yardsticks whereby to judge if the right type of education was delivered from a macro-social point of view.¹ Although some dynamism is inherent in the fitness of/for purpose notions,

¹ Especially in the more liberal parts of US higher education, ‘fitness for purpose’ *without* ‘fitness of purpose’ had long been the leading conception especially in institutional accreditation to accommodate the wide range of purposes held by different higher education institutions (including top-prestigious institutions such as Harvard and Yale) and by different state legislatures (Crow, 2003).

namely when jobs and professions change, it has much more of a tendency to focus on achieving adequate levels, on satisficing (Simon, 1957) instead of maximising as for excellence. The tension between striving for excellence and achieving adequate, threshold levels of quality, will be a major theme throughout this paper.

2. Quality Took Centre Stage in the Bologna Process

When in 1999 the Bologna Declaration was signed by 29 European countries (European Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 1999) with the aim to establish a single European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010, policies of the signatories—if any action was taken at all—focused at first on realising the structural changes mentioned in the Declaration: establishment of a two-tier structure of undergraduate and graduate education,² and introduction of credit systems following the ECTS example. I maintain, though, that these changes were mainly implementing administrative harmonisation. Degree names were changed; new degrees were introduced (where previously there were only single-cycle long degrees);³ course modules were recalculated into x times $1/60^{\text{th}}$ of an academic year. However, such administrative changes did not immediately bring about the harmonisation of study programmes needed to make the EHEA and the European mobility it aimed at a reality. From the run-up to the Declaration, experts had been talking about the need to assure compatibility of study programmes, but as higher education and its quality were squarely within the national authority of nation states, and as at such moments these nation states remembered the importance of the content of education for their national culture, the phrase in the Bologna Declaration about quality assurance was rather bland.

Nevertheless, in a number of countries the experts' message had been heard and developments started to use quality assurance in the Bologna framework, i.e. with a view to achieving more transparency and compatibility on a European scale. Even more, although 'accreditation' was not mentioned in the Bologna Declaration, it soon became the buzzword for designers of quality assurance schemes. And as a result, in the second follow-up conference in which the signatory countries' ministers for higher education reconvened to maintain the reform speed for achieving the EHEA on time, in Berlin 2003, they stated that 'quality ... has proven to be at the heart' of the EHEA (Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education, 2003).

² Only later was the third cycle of Ph.D. degrees added to the Bologna process.

³ As the Bologna Declaration specified, undergraduate ('bachelor') study programmes should as a rule take at least three years full-time study, while graduate ('master') degree programmes as a rule would take at least one year.

A. How did Quality take Centre Stage in the Bologna Process?

Until the 2003 Berlin Follow-Up Conference

Quality assurance had been spreading through higher education systems before the Bologna Declaration (see Tab. 1).⁴ In Central & Eastern Europe the rise of quality assurance schemes was mostly driven by the radical transformation needed in many study programmes after the fall of communism in 1989-1990 (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004a). Additionally, the public higher education system was protected against the establishment of large numbers of small private higher education institutions in many countries—mostly staffed by professors from public higher education institutions in need of supplementing their meagre salaries. For both reasons, accreditation focusing on input factors (sufficient staff and facilities, or curriculum design) was the main way of external quality assurance.

Tab. 1 Years of spreading of external quality assessment and accreditation through 20 European countries (source: Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004)

| | External quality assessment | Accreditation |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|
| Practically none | 1983 | 1989 |
| Practically half the countries | 1992 | 1998 |
| Practically all countries | 2003 | 2003 |

In the Western half of Europe quality assurance had a slightly longer history: the advent of ‘New Public Management’ around 1980 stressed evaluation and control over processes, which in some countries already by the mid-1980s had led to the establishment of quality assurance schemes (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004a); most other Western European countries followed in the 1990s. Only a few countries did not have a quality assurance scheme by the time of the Bologna Declaration. However, in the light of New Public Management the aims of evaluation were different from those in Central and Eastern Europe and so was the form: several models of external quality assurance were experimented with in the 1980s and 1990s, but not accreditation.

The picture in Western Europe changed radically when the Bologna Declaration had been signed: suddenly the quality of higher education was not just a matter of national policy any more, but had to figure as well on the European, international scene. The core question became, one might say: ‘What is our higher education degree worth in the future EHEA?’⁵ This type of question was addressed very quickly in many countries through introduction of accreditation: a simple statement that degrees from

⁴ It should be realised that counting quality assurance schemes is not an exact science (hence ‘practically’ in the table’s text): especially regarding accreditation, there were some professional organisations in some countries that engaged in accreditation-like practices or formal accreditation before 1989, and even in 2003 there were countries with formal accreditation procedures for some parts of their higher education system but not all of it. Moreover, one country in the 20-country sample, Greece, until 2008 did not actually implement quality assessment or accreditation schemes although a legal provision had been promised in 2003 and was made in 2006.

⁵ In the second half of the 1990s, globalisation came high on the higher education agenda, leading to increased interest in accreditation as a policy instrument to control the quality of transnational education (Hämäläinen, Haakstad, Kangasniemi, Lindeberg, & Sjölund, 2001; Vlk, 2006).

an accredited programme or institution were ‘up to standard’. The first years after the Bologna Declaration saw a rapid spreading of accreditation and similar processes through Western European countries (Schwarz & Westerheijden, 2004b).

A question that was not addressed in the establishment of these national accreditation schemes (or in the continuation of those schemes in Central and Eastern Europe) was: what is the meaning in international eyes of being ‘up to standards’? This issue became central in the years to follow.

B. Working Towards European Standards Since 2003

The lack of European commonalities with regard to standards and procedures for quality assurance had been mentioned in the original Bologna Declaration, but as mentioned above it did not receive immediate attention. However, in some countries with an already well-developed quality assurance scheme attention shifted relatively early to the international aspects. A group of Western European countries founded the informal ‘Joint Quality Initiative’ (JQI) around 2000, which resulted in the developments of shared descriptors of bachelor and master graduates’ competencies. These shared standards were first presented at a major conference organised by the JQI in Amsterdam, in 2002, and the conference organisers dubbed them the ‘Dublin Descriptors’, after the place where they had been agreed (Westerheijden & Leegwater, 2003). The name stuck.

From the ministry-level JQI, the main activities then moved to different levels. On the one hand, newly-established accreditation agencies of (mainly) JQI countries formed a European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA), with as one of its main purposes reaching agreement on mutual recognition of accreditation decisions among agencies in the ECA, based on common standards as embodied in the Dublin Descriptors and on commonalities in quality assessment procedures. On the other hand, the action shifted to the higher level of the Bologna ministerial follow-up conference that on its next meeting after the publication of the Dublin Descriptors, in Berlin in 2003, felt encouraged to put a stronger focus on quality assurance. In particular, the demand was made to the all-EU network of quality assessment agencies, ENQA, to develop common European standards and guidelines for quality assurance by 2005.

ENQA succeeded in what might have seemed a ‘mission impossible’ and presented the ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area’, abbreviated to ‘European Standards & Guidelines’ or even to ‘ESG’ (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, 2005). Note that the ESG are confined to quality assurance; they do not define common standards or descriptors of educational levels as the Dublin Descriptors do.⁶

The ESG come in three chapters, one for internal quality assurance, one for external quality assurance and one for quality assessment agencies. The idea is that later chapters build upon the previous one. The internal quality assurance is therefore at the core of the ESG. However, this core remains rather undefined to avoid interference (2005, pp. 11-13):

⁶ On the content side, the Dublin Descriptors were incorporated into the European Qualification Framework, agreed by the EU in 2007. Note that a European qualifications framework may be very instrumental in achieving harmonisation among study programmes, but do not have a built-in drive for achieving more than the demanded qualifications for graduates, accordingly do not have a built-in drive for striving for excellence.

[I]t has not been considered appropriate to include detailed ‘procedures’ in the recommendations of this chapter of the report, since institutional and agency procedures are an important part of their autonomy. It will be for the institutions and agencies themselves, co-operating within their individual contexts, to decide the procedural consequences of adopting the standards contained in this report [...]

The purpose of these standards and guidelines is to provide a source of assistance and guidance ... as well as to contribute to a common frame of reference... It is not the intention that these standards and guidelines should dictate practice or be interpreted as prescriptive or unchangeable.

Thus the first ‘standard’ for internal quality assurance begins with: ‘Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards’ (2005, p. 15). There is no expectation of certain models being applied, nor do the ESG promote certain views on management of universities by defining who should be responsible for quality assurance. Most of the following standards should not come as a surprise to a well-organised university either. There may be a few standards, however, that are more controversial. For instance, standard 1.3 demands: ‘Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently’ (2005, p. 16). In traditional continental European views of academic freedom, this might be seen as intruding on the freedom of individual professors. In standards like this one, the ESG force upon the higher education institutions in Europe some principles of what is now seen as good governance, an update of centuries-old practices. One can hardly disagree with the issue at stake, but there is a question of principle involved, namely whether a European collective of policy-makers around higher education have the right to circumscribe individual countries’, institutions’ or academics’ rights to set levels of autonomy and freedom.

As mentioned before, the external quality assessment is regulated in the ESG in a similar way: a number of common-sense areas are defined that ought to be attended to, but there is no prescription of certain models or processes.

The most interesting part of the ESG is then part 3, which is about the quality assurance of quality assessment agencies. The agencies should swallow their own medicine: ‘Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability’ (standard 3.8, p. 26). A major incentive to do this is that membership of ENQA depends on an external review confirming the agency’s substantial compliance with the ESG. Since early 2008 also inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) is dependent on such a review.⁷

Ideas for a European forum or platform to exchange information on the credibility—as materialised now in the EQAR—have been around since the beginning of the Bologna process, but an early initiative in this direction in which I participated (Sursock, 2001) was cut short by the fear for anything ‘European’ among the conference of European universities’ rectors. At the time, though, I found the question of a more neutral observer much more difficult to reply to than the short-sightedness of a number of regional university rectors, namely: will it be possible for a European forum to refuse

⁷ The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) has been established in 2008 in the framework of the Bologna process to provide ‘clear and reliable information on the quality assurance agencies (QAAs) operating in Europe: this is a list of agencies that substantially comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG)’ (see <http://www.eqar.eu/>).

membership to an official national agency? The EQAR, established much on the principles advocated in the early expert report (Surssock, 2001), will have to answer that sensitive question now.

3. What are Shortcomings of Quality Assurance Practices in European Higher Education?

Major question at this point is whether the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) will be sufficient for the Bologna process to achieve its aims. The major emphasis of quality assurance in the Bologna framework, and of the EQAR as its 'apex organisation', to my mind is on facilitating intra-European student mobility for the purpose of obtaining a higher education degree in another Bologna country. This is obviously one of the main aims of the EHEA, and to that extent the conditions for success of the Bologna process have been set. It should not be forgotten, however, that the Bologna Declaration also was intended to be a response to the globalisation of higher education (Knight, 1999; Vlk, 2006; van Vught, van der Wende, & Westerheijden, 2002): it was meant to make European higher education more attractive to students from outside the European Union. For that aim, the major conditions would be that European higher education is internationally well-known and excellent.

Concerning excellence, my thesis is that external quality assurance and especially accreditation is about achieving threshold quality, about doing things 'good enough' to fulfil the accreditation criteria, but that it does not have a built-in drive for doing better than necessary, for aiming at excellence (Jeliaskova & Westerheijden, 2000). There are some ways in which this 'tendency towards the bottom' in accreditation can be counteracted.

For instance, some accreditation schemes give grades, so that it could be a challenge for continued improvement to achieve higher grades. After much discussion, such a graded system was not introduced in the Netherlands, mainly because it was not seen possible to have a meaningfully high threshold of quality as the minimum level and to have even higher levels that could be assessed sufficiently objectively for an accreditation procedure (which, eventually, would need to be defensible in court). After even more discussion, the Dutch accreditation scheme was adjusted to include giving out marks for 'special' qualities—this could be either 'excellence' on one of the normal accreditation standards,⁸ or a concrete proof of a special quality, distinguishing this programme from others but not claiming that 'special' is 'better'. This latter adjustment recognised the insight that quality is subjective (satisfying or delighting in the *customers*) and therefore multi-dimensional (some customers have special, individual, needs and wants). The first seven special qualities officially recognised included: sustainability in chemistry-related study programmes (3x), internationalisation (2x), and special curriculum elements (2x).

Another way in which accreditation schemes can build in some drive towards excellence is by concretely emphasising continuous quality improvement, for instance by examining closely if the higher education institution has effective internal quality assurance with instruments to stimulate improvement rather than compliance. The ABET 2000 criteria were probably the world's first example of such 'smart criteria'. The ESG in their chapter on internal quality assurance pay some lip service to

⁸ Achieving very high learning outcomes are two of the four first 'excellence' marks officially given out to two liberal arts & science programmes.

the idea of continuous quality improvement; it will depend on national quality assessment agencies to make that a reality.

A. Quality in European Curricula: The 'Tuning' project

A different approach to achieving international compatibility with a drive to excellence is to take this out of the official schemes of accreditation, but to assist the ones who actually make the curricula and who actually teach the students in this. The project 'Tuning educational structures in Europe', abbreviated to 'Tuning', is the major European project of this type (González & Wagenaar, 2003, cf. www.tuning.unideusto.org). Tuning consists of groups of voluntary cooperation of departments in specific fields across European universities. Its main output is the agreement on sets of discipline-specific competencies expected from graduates. In my view, Tuning is stronger organised to working towards harmonisation of graduate competencies (and to some extent curricula in higher education institutions) than to stimulating towards excellence. A drive towards excellence in Tuning should come from regular updating of the competency expectations to the best and up-to-date insights in the field, but that is not yet the stage that Tuning is in; for the moment establishing first sets of graduate competencies for ever more fields is enough of a task!

There is another aspect about the Tuning project worth mentioning. It shows the smart way in which the European Commission influences higher education even though it has practically no authority to set policies in this area. The authority over higher education remains in the hands of the EU member states, and all that the European Commission can do is subsidize special programmes to stimulate intra-European cooperation, such as the Erasmus mobility programme. Erasmus is a major part of the Socrates programme and in the 'fringe' of Socrates, the European Commission subsidises pilot initiatives emanating from the higher education community. Thus for instance when a group of higher education institutions wanted to establish credit transfer among them, the European Commission subsidised their pilot project and over the years this grew into the 'de facto standard' of ECTS. Tuning is a similar case: it started as a group of institutions with the desire to see how they could harmonise curricula, and now their efforts are taken as the main example, and they are more or less integrated into official policies of European states regarding qualification frameworks and quality assurance. The European Commission, by giving relatively little money but adding its prestige to individual initiatives, in this way has considerable influence on the future landscape of European higher education.

However, by 'officialising' such projects, instead of a small group who are into the spirit of the project, it has to be implemented by many other parties who just see this in the framework of compliance with policy from authorities. Thus instead of following all ECTS instruments to maximise mobility opportunities and to flexibilise curricula, many higher education institutions across Europe just introduce the calculation of credit points, without deeper changes, and then say that they 'implemented ECTS'. A question for the future is if Tuning will encounter the same fate, when it becomes more officialised.

My conclusion from this overview of major activities around quality assurance in Europe is that they have a common shortcoming: stress is put on achieving intra-European harmonisation, which is enough of a challenge, but which under-emphasises the striving for excellence beyond the minimum

standards. This is not to say that authorities over higher education do not want to stimulate excellence at all (I mentioned the Dutch special quality marks in accreditation; I could have added initiatives in other countries not related to quality assurance like the German university excellence campaign), but quality assurance at the European level is squarely focused at minimum standards.

B. Ranking and Typologies as Answers?

Are there other ways in which excellence in European universities is stimulated? Instruments attracting much attention in recent years are rankings and typologies. There are two main types of ‘rankings’.

The first type is a ranking of ‘top’ or ‘world class’ universities internationally. Famous examples are the Shanghai Jiao Tong University ranking, the one by the Times Higher Education Supplement, the Leiden ranking and, here in Taiwan, the ranking by the HEEACT. Most of these worldwide university rankings consist mostly of research output and impact indicators, so that for the happy few who are large and visible enough to be included in the 500 or so universities in the list, this may serve as an impetus to improve research quality (Dill & Soo, 2005; Marginson, 2006; Usher & Savino, 2006). And so it may for the hundreds more of universities that are hopeful of being included in these lists.

Another world ranking of universities, the one published in The Times Higher Education Supplement, also has research productivity indicators but is characterised mainly by relying for about half of its results on reputation of universities among peers. How reputation is related to excellence remains an unanswered question (Dassen, Cremonini, & Westerheijden, 2007); it seems to correlate with institutional age more than with anything else. Moreover, it remains unclear who are the ‘peers’ responding to the Times questionnaire; it has been shown that there is a great lack of in-depth knowledge of professors about peer institutions across national borders (Berghoff & Federkeil, 2006). Finally, it is said that the response rate to the Times questionnaire is dramatically low, which makes the question highly relevant if there is bias in this response. Anyway, if a university wants to increase its ranking in the Times Higher Education Supplement, the most efficient way would be to invest in worldwide marketing (visibility) rather than in excellence in research or education (Marginson & van der Wende, 2007, p. 55).⁹

These all-university rankings hardly address the question what users want. It seems that, just like in the early days of performance indicators, the idea that what is measurable must be measured overshadows the question of information relevance and needs. Who are their users, anyway? The purported users of rankings, almost every ranking states, are prospective students or current (undergraduate) students orienting themselves for the next level (postgraduate) studies. What students need, I maintain, is information on which study programme would suite them best for their purposes; it is about matching student needs (taking students as more or less informed customers) and what study programmes can offer to them. Accordingly, rankings that are relevant for students must focus at the level of study programmes, and must be able to give information targeting the needs of individual

⁹ I refrain from discussing the Webometrics ranking (www.webometrics.info), however valuable it is to promote web publication—as it says its aim is—because the link between web site size, visibility and content with excellence is even more remote than the one between reputation and excellence.

students. All-university rankings based on research productivity or impact do not do that. The link between research and teaching of individual staff members is part of the (Humboldtian) ideology of higher education, but has hardly been proven in reality (Bok, 2005). Much more pertinent for students, therefore, are ‘student information system’ like the German CHE-‘ranking’ (English version: www.daad.de/deutschland/hochschulen/hochschulranking/06543.en.html) and the Dutch Studiekeuze123-site (English version: www.studychoice123.nl). Setting the example made into a world-wide norm in the ‘Berlin principles’ for ranking (International Ranking Expert Group, 2006), these student information systems are not really rankings, but give users the opportunity to establish their own rankings according to a number of self-chosen criteria. Moreover, these websites give robust information (distinguishing only top – middle – bottom groups per indicator), not spuriously precise rankings.

Until recently, such student information systems had only been developed at the national level, but the European Commission is interested in establishing such student information for all Europe and supported a pilot project to link the German and Dutch student information systems in 2007-2008. Until now, this pilot has uncovered more problems than solutions regarding valid cross-national comparisons, e.g., different numerical means per country with probably the same meaning, different tendencies for extreme answers, and different expectation levels as to what ‘good’ higher education should ‘give’ to students (*The CHE Ranking of European Universities: A Pilot Study in Flanders and the Netherlands*, 2008; van Herk, Poortinga, & Verhallen, 2004). These impediments to validity have been neglected in other international rankings.

The final issue I should like to address in this regard, is programmes from which higher education institutions can be compared validly with each other. In the CHE ‘ranking’, programmes from universities and from ‘universities of applied sciences’ (comparable to what in the UK until 1992 were ‘polytechnics’) are presented to users separately. In the Dutch Studychoice123 users may choose to separate them or to put them together, to consider their choice of programmes across sectors of the higher education system. In an effort to make such choices less subjective, another pilot project supported by the European Commission concerns the development of a European typology of higher education institutions. As this project is still in progress, the details of the future typology of higher education institutions are not known by me. The challenge is to find meaningful distinctions that are independent from different national legal higher education categories. The direction of developments—that much is known—is not unlike the 2005 Carnegie classification in the USA (www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/), with multiple dimensions rather than a single ranking-like dimension.

The instruments of ranking and classification currently under development in Europe, like the quality assurance schemes, focus on providing transparency in aid of mobility. In combination with funding schemes that stimulate attracting more students and especially foreign students (e.g. by making non-EU students pay higher fees), all instruments that stimulate mobility provide very real incentives for higher education institutions to score better. As student information systems may be more geared towards attracting students from outside Europe than many of the quality assurance instruments (which I see playing more of a role in intra-European mobility), higher education institutions may want to score well in them. With the large amount of indicators used in such student information systems, it

will be hard for higher education institutions to ‘game the rankings’, and in that sense they may provide a (light) push towards achieving excellence in education.

4. After 2010: Elements of Scenarios for the Quality of Higher Education in the EHEA

After looking into quality assurance schemes as well as other ways to assure—and to some extent improve—the quality of higher education in Europe, I would now like to sketch some elements of what might be the developments of higher education after 2010, when the European Higher education Area (EHEA) is supposed to be established. I shall not go into the policy processes (will there be a ‘Bologna-II’ and who will coordinate that process?) but rather discuss three basic questions influencing the developments whatever the exact form of the policy process, and one question on what might be the results:

- Who dominates decision making about quality of education?
- What will be ‘education’?
- What will be the contribution of quality assurance?
- What will be the landscape look like?

Like all futures research (Masini, 1993), my discussion is tentative, even speculative. That is another reason to stay on the level of broad principles rather than going into details and scenarios. The questions nevertheless cover largely the same dimensions as the CHEPS scenario study for European higher education (Enders, File, Huisman, & Westerheijden, 2005).

A. *Who dominates decision making about quality of education?*

How the future of higher education in Europe will be shaped depends in the first place on who will shape that future. Obviously, this is not something to be decided by a single actor; the question is what will be the balance of power among the many different types of actors involved. It seems a given that higher education remains mainly a public good in European eyes, so that governmental authorities will retain a major position. More specifically, it looks like higher education will remain a policy field determined in the first place by (nation-)state¹⁰ governments. The extent to which nation-state governments will be open to employers and other interests representing the economy, to students and/or to the civil society, may depend on the political ‘colour’ of governments in combination with national institutional arrangements for articulation of common interests and for setting the political agenda (Hammond, 1986; Kingdon, 1984).

On the other side of nation-state, European-level actors influence the shape of higher education (Huisman, Maassen, & Neave, 2001; Huisman & van der Wende, 2004). This is not only the European Union through the collective ministers of education or through the European Commission (emphasised in the previous section), but also the association of quality assessment agencies, ENQA, and other actors such as the collective higher education institutions in the EUA and Eurashe, as well as the

¹⁰ In some European countries, the authority over higher education lies at the level of the nation state. In some, mainly large nation states, regional state governments are responsible for higher education (e.g. the UK, Germany, Spain, but also Switzerland and Belgium).

students in the European student union (ESU). To the extent that European-level actors become dominant, ‘compatibility’ of higher education systems may turn into ‘harmonisation’ or even ‘uniformity’. Yet the example of the ESG shows that inside European-level actors—in this case ENQA—national actors and interests remain dominant. European politics and policy making remain largely international as long as the EU has not been given formal rights in the higher education area (van Kersbergen, Lieshout, & Verbeek, 2000).

B. What Will Be ‘Education’?

At the moment it may still seem a minor addition to formal education to talk about life-long learning, but potentially this concept revolutionises our understanding of education: what we ‘deliver’ when and how to which learners/students. Policy-making attention has been focused in the Bologna process on formal, full-time education for ‘initial’ students (young adults coming more or less straight from secondary school, with no or little work experience). In that frame, most attention went to the development of Bachelor – Master – Ph.D. models. A large part of the discussion went into input factors, especially the time needed for the degrees. Most popular, though not officially adopted, is the ‘3 + 2 + 3’ formula. At the same time, the more sophisticated part of the discussion was in terms of expected outputs, i.e. graduates’ competencies (Dublin Descriptors, European and national qualification frameworks, Tuning). In state-oriented, bureaucratic environments, it may be very hard to let go of formulae like ‘3 + 2 + 3’ and shift completely to qualification frameworks and other competency-driven policies for higher education. The logical endpoint of such a shift, however, would be to let go of formal study programmes and let education become an individual ‘networked pathway’ of learning in higher education institutions, in training centres outside the formal higher education system, training on-the-job, etc.

A further consequence of such a networked education pathway may be that the structure of the higher education provider market changes. Just like wine shopping can take place in supermarkets and in exclusive *châteaux*, educational ‘shopping’ may combine large higher education institutions with small *niche* institutions or for-profit providers of special skills and knowledge. If the many efforts to facilitate intra-European student mobility bear fruit, a large and differentiated higher education space may come into being, where national borders may not be the most relevant distinction: mass higher education institutions will exist in many places in Europe; to find the exclusive *châteaux* of specialised knowledge students may be willing to travel across the whole continent.

C. What Will Be the Contribution of Quality Assurance?

In the previous section I argued that quality assurance is reaching its limits in the European landscape with regard to easing mobility and even more with regard to stimulating excellence. I also argued that even an accreditation scheme through ‘smart criteria’ might be able to avoid remaining for ever limited to minimal threshold quality. For quality assurance schemes not bound by the strict accountability and justification conditions of accreditation, it should be easier to adjust themselves to quality improvement and excellence, although the practice until now has not been very favourable to this conviction. In principle, then, quality assurance could play a role in stimulating excellence.

Who might take quality assurance forward on this path in Europe's Higher Education Area? Will the Register (EQAR) become the central player concerning European quality assurance? From the current conditions we can conclude that whatever will be the balance of power with regard to decision-making on higher education, the EQAR stands a good chance of becoming an authoritative source of legitimacy for quality assessment agencies that are not the country's own, public quality assessment agency. But the actual quality assessment activities will remain in the hands of the agencies that are entered in the register—and maybe others that have legitimacy in governments' eyes. In that constellation, the EQAR will not be in a position to force a certain (e.g. sophisticated, improvement-oriented) view on the quality assessment agencies. It is questionable, therefore, if quality assurance will get out of the threshold focus it now largely has. The major contribution will have to be expected in the direction of facilitating mobility within Europe, in combination with the European qualification framework and similar initiatives to harmonise the outcomes of higher education systems.

D. What Will the Landscape Look Like?

One important set of forces remains to be named in shaping the future landscape of higher education in Europe: path dependency in combination with levels of economic prosperity. While the accession to the European Union may have spectacular effects on nations' economic development and income, as exemplified by the rise of Ireland, this will be much more difficult for the countries from Central & Eastern Europe that joined the EU in 2004 and 2007. The funds available for 'catching up' with the general EU level are less generous and the gap between the Central and Eastern European countries and the European level is much larger than in the case of Ireland. Moreover, regarding higher education, the discourse about the possible role for higher education and its leadership are also much less developed than in e.g. the Irish case. Besides, the EHEA stretches much further than just the EU it also includes countries in South-Eastern Europe and the East that are not EU members and that partly have very little common policy and higher education traditions with the core of the EU. It seems inevitable, therefore, that the formal openness of the EHEA will play out in a European landscape with large differences in higher education. Although there are no insignificant differences between Western European countries (with the Humboldtian, Napoleonic and British traditions), the largest differences in the EHEA may well be those between the North-West on the one hand and the East and South-East on the other and they will not be overcome in the next decade or so.

These persisting differences will affect education, but also research. In education, differences of teaching 'philosophy' exist, with more competency-oriented education, taught through projects and similar methods in the North-West, against theoretically-driven, knowledge-oriented education taught typically through lectures in the East and South-East.

To what extent the differences in income levels will affect the affluence of higher education institutions, and through that the resources they can devote to high-quality education and research, remains to be seen. In the framework of the Lisbon agenda EU governments have pledged to give more emphasis to research and innovation; this might be realised and it might have spill-over effects to the whole of higher education institutions including their education.

As a consequence, it is not to be expected that student mobility will favour all parts of the EHEA equally: North-Western countries may remain more attractive to students seeking modern and relatively affluent higher education institutions.¹¹

5. Conclusion

Quality assurance has become a major instrument in Europe's higher education developments. It seems to be reaching its limits in the EHEA: without other policy instruments such as qualification frameworks and project like Tuning it cannot be very successful in stimulating mobility. Nevertheless, I have argued that quality assurance is more geared towards stimulating (intra-European) mobility than towards stimulating excellence in higher education. National differences are expected to remain important in shaping the future landscape of higher education in Europe. Especially the contrasts between North-Western and (South-)Eastern regions of Europe may prove to be persistent.

Few instruments were found that stimulate excellence of higher education. The most effective—or perhaps the least ineffective—ones may be the rankings: some rankings of 'world class' research universities may provide some incentive towards striving for excellent research; student information systems may help create competition for students and thus provide a little push towards excellence in education.

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¹¹ Some Southern European countries also attract many students. Possibly, consumption motives ('you will have a good time if you are studying in Spain') are more important in that choice than investment motives ('studying in Spain will give the best chance on a good career').

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