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Fiona Crozier, Bruno Curvale, Rachel Dearlove, Emmi Helle, Fabrice Hénard

# Terminology of quality assurance: towards shared European values?





Education and Culture

## DG Education and Culture

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# Foreword

In this publication ENQA has taken the opportunity to bring together two distinct but related reports.

**Part 1** examines the language of European quality assurance. It grew out of the debates and discussions at an ENQA workshop in Warwick in June 2006. The success of the workshop highlighted the support needed by all agencies as they deal with the linguistic challenges involved in creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

**Part 2** contains the findings of the second Quality Convergence Study (QCS II). The first Quality Convergence Study (QCS) examined why national quality assurance systems operate in different, yet commonly identifiable, ways in particular national contexts. Building on this, QCSII has sought to go beyond the technical language of quality assurance and provide an opportunity for agencies to reflect on the values that underpin their quality assurance systems.

Both of these reports aim to contribute to promoting understanding of the multiple layers of meaning which become apparent when we attempt to understand quality assurance across borders, and across languages. They do not offer a conclusion, but a point of departure for further research and reflection. I hope that ENQA members and other stakeholders will find the points they raise both informative and thought-provoking.

PETER WILLIAMS  
*President,*  
ENQA

# Introduction

With the process of rapid change in the field of European quality assurance over the last decade, and in particular with the increase in speed since the start of the Bologna process, a great deal of research has been conducted on all areas of the field. Whilst useful in itself, much of this research has demonstrated the need for further work, especially in the field of communication.

A wide range of actors, from independent research agencies, to academics, to stakeholders large and small, have endeavoured to contribute to the discussion and add evidence to the debate. The breadth of the research conducted and the information now available to all players can only help further the goal of creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

The majority of research has, however, taken an approach which, perhaps, has had to bypass some of the underlying issues present when dialogue is established across national, language and even individual agencies' boundaries.

An acknowledgement of the existence of personal subjectivity and the social construction of ideas in our understanding of European quality assurance may, to some, be seen as a distraction from the concrete work of bringing about the EHEA. This would, however, be a counter-productive position to hold. Quality assurance is carried out by individuals and groups of individuals that are situated in cultural and linguistic systems which have an impact on everything they do. An understanding of these sub contexts is vital for the successful creation of the EHEA at a more profound level.

In 2006 ENQA began to address the challenges of communication and language in quality assurance in two ways. This publication brings together two separate reports that both, in their own particular ways, aim to contribute to deepening the discussion in European quality assurance.

The first, the report of an ENQA workshop, deals with the language and terminology that we use everyday in national quality assurance contexts, some of which has been incorporated into European level documents such as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). What do these terms 'mean' across different linguistic and national contexts? The majority of people working with the European quality assurance are not working in their native language, but in English. In addition, there is no guarantee that those who are native English speakers necessarily always mean the same things by the same terms.

The second, the report of the Quality Convergence Study II (QCS II), builds on this understanding to look at the terms in use which go beyond the "technical" language of quality assurance, and actually refer to deep rooted notions which are often taken for granted. The QCS II project sought to dig deeper and examine the values that underpin the terms we use, often implicitly, and what these say about the entire undertaking of the quality assurance of higher education.

In the context of this work on matters to do with intercultural communication, the QCS II report was designed, written and approved simultaneously in English and French. The publication of both versions allows the bilingual reader to experience in a concrete way the inherent difficulties of working in a multicultural context and of providing an accurate translation. It also highlights the richness that such a way of working can bring to a project of this type.

## Part 1.

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# The Language of European Quality Assurance – report from the ENQA workshop of 29–30 June 2006

*Rachel Dearlove, QAA*

*Emmi Helle, ENQA*

## **1. Introduction**

The ENQA workshop on the language of European quality assurance, hosted by the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA, UK) in Warwick, revealed a wide range of points of interest, discussion and challenge for all those attempting to work across language boundaries to translate, understand and implement quality assurance ideas, processes and procedures.

The workshop brought together representatives from a wide range of agencies, representing 16 different countries and at least 12 different languages. The discussion focused predominantly on the use of English as a ‘mediating’ language for the European quality assurance community and the impact that this has on the clarity of communication. The intent of the workshop was not to produce a ‘glossary’ of quality assurance words but to open up the debate on language and raise awareness of the problems and pitfalls of working across language boundaries.

## **2. Word clusters**

The discussions were structured around four groups or ‘clusters’ of words.

### **2.1 CLUSTER A: QUALITY, STANDARDS, QUALITY ASSURANCE, QUALITY CONTROL, ACCOUNTABILITY, ENHANCEMENT, IMPROVEMENT**

The word ‘quality’ was universally felt to lie at the heart of the work of all the participants, and indeed featured heavily in the names of the agencies they represented. By its very nature, however, it was felt to be very hard to pin down to a definition in any language. A distinction was made between the absolute definition of quality – which would allow ranking of outcomes on a scale – and the relative definition of quality which involves judgement against a set standard. In many cases it was not clear if this distinction was made within languages let alone between languages.

It emerged that the use of the word ‘standard’ was open to a wide range of interpretations across languages. In the UK the word refers to a level of achievement measured against a reference point. In France and Germany its translation is used to indicate an average or norm. The word ‘criterion’ was suggested as analogous to standard although it was clear that this was not universally accepted. In relation to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) the word had been interpreted by the authors as meaning ‘principles’ to adhere to rather than something to be measured against.

‘Quality assurance’ is a term imported into higher education from the world of business (and predominantly from the sector of manufacturing) as is the related term



‘quality control’. In France ‘quality management’ has been used often in place of ‘quality assurance’ in the translation of the ESG, with the intention of instilling a sense of responsibility to the academics to manage quality for themselves. An interesting point was raised by a Russian delegate indicating that in their system the term following ‘quality’ depended on the audience addressed i.e. quality assurance for broader society, quality control for regulators and quality enhancement for the higher education sector.

The discussion concerning ‘accountability’ showed that the definition of the word is dependent on the outcome of the question ‘accountable to whom?’ A higher education institution is accountable financially to its sources of funding, to students and the general public as ‘consumers’ of higher education and its products (graduates), the government who are often commissioners (and sponsors), and the academic community. The term has both economic and ethical interpretations. However, in Finland and Russia, for example, the economic connotation of ‘accountability’ is weaker, and it could be replaced by ‘responsibility’. UK participants also described the range of interpretations of the word in terms of the level of accountability, ranging from: ‘tell us what you do’ to ‘explain what you do’ to ‘justify what you do’ – showing the range of meaning that ‘accountability’ can have. The term also implies that there is an external party to whom one is accountable.

‘Enhancement’ and ‘improvement’ have very similar dictionary definitions in English as well as in other European languages and are often used interchangeably as synonyms. Among the participants, however, there was evidence of a definite preference for the use of the word ‘enhancement’ (and its translations) or ‘quality development’. ‘Improvement’ was felt to be more connected to advertisement and was perceived as more an aggressive term than that of ‘enhancement’.

## **2.2 CLUSTER B: PRINCIPLES, VALUES, INDEPENDENCE, AUTONOMY, ACADEMIC FREEDOM, COMPLIANCE, CONFORMITY, ADHERENCE, CONVERGENCE, HARMONISATION, STANDARDISATION**

Principles, values, independence, autonomy and academic freedom all arise from ethical discourse. In particular principles/values were felt to imply a general moral obligation or duty. From an English definition point of view, there are subtle differences between the understanding of ‘independence’ and ‘autonomy’ but these differences were not reflected clearly in the understanding of the words by participants. As with ‘accountability’, the word was felt to be defined by the relationship it implies between actors i.e. independence from what, autonomy in relation to whom? It was asked whether an agency was independent if it received funding from, or its staff members were appointed by, the governments or HEIs. It was felt, however, that the most important thing for the QA agencies was to be operationally independent, so that no external party could influence their decisions. It was questioned whether institutional autonomy, in any real sense, is compatible with external quality assurance.

Academic freedom is, of course, a term that exists almost exclusively in a higher education context and usually stands for freedom from external control and influence. It is also understood as freedom of students and of the teaching staff to pursue their academic activities. Four pairs of concepts were suggested to help circumscribe its meaning:

- Self-regulation vs. external inspection
- Academic community vs. corporate business enterprise
- Deliberative debates vs. executive decision
- Academic democracy vs. managerialism

It was suggested that ‘peer review’ might be a negotiated balance between external regulation and academic freedom.

UK participants explained the subtle distinction between the use of the terms ‘compliance’, ‘conformity’ and ‘adherence’ (although this was not fully accepted by all native English speaking participants):

- Compliance – connotations of external control/compulsion
- Conformity – following normative expectations
- Adherence – polite phrase to soften the blow

Similar issues of the ‘acceptability’ of terms were raised in relation to convergence, harmonisation, and standardisation. The majority of participants reported that ‘harmonisation’ was principally used in a European context and as such was rarely used to refer to processes at a national level. Standardisation was seen to have negative connotations by many participants – it signalled the end of diversity and autonomy. Convergence conjured up an image of different systems moving together to a single point.

### **2.3 CLUSTER C: ASSESSMENT, EVALUATION, INSPECTION, ACCREDITATION, AUDIT, REVIEW**

UK participants explained that in their national contexts, ‘assessment’ normally refers to student assessment and the word is not regularly used outside this context.

‘Inspection’ was not widely used in any European country in a higher education context as it had connotations of more invasive procedures than are currently used in a quality assurance context. In particular it was felt to indicate the absence of peer review and always involve direct observation. ‘Audit’ and ‘review’ were fairly peculiar to the UK context where as ‘evaluation’ and ‘accreditation’ were more commonly in use across continental Europe.

Participants discussed the relationship between the words as some felt that they fitted into a time sequence – with accreditation following on from an evaluation process. They also ranked the terms into soft (evaluation and review), middle (audit and assessment) and hard (inspection and accreditation).

### **2.4 CLUSTER D: EXPERTS, PEERS, SELF-ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION, VISIT, REPORT, JUDGEMENTS, RECOMMENDATION, FOLLOW-UP**

Although the term ‘peer’ was known to all participants, in many cases the word was used interchangeably with ‘expert’ – a situation which is not the case in the UK. Participants agreed that both terms give a sense of seniority and to a certain extent authority – you have to have expertise to be an expert, and standing among the academic community to be considered a peer. Peers are likely to be experts in a particular subject area, whereas an individual with expertise may not necessarily be considered a peer.

UK participants reported the shift in terminology from self-assessment to self-evaluation as a way of encouraging institutions to move from a 'checklist' to a more reflective account of their quality management. The change did not however, arise from any significant difference in the dictionary definitions of the words. It was pointed out that in French there is a problem translating any term including the word 'self' as this cannot be directly translated – the term 'retrospective analysis' is used in its place. Alternative, more 'neutral' words, suggested included 'submission' and 'document'. In Finnish, for its part, there is no difference between self-assessment and self-evaluation. Participants from the Netherlands found that the self-evaluation regarded the writing of the report by the agency/institution to be evaluated; while assessment was the exploring of that report by an external evaluation team.

The word 'visit' seemed to normally be prefixed by an additional describer i.e. evaluation visit, audit visit. The most common interpretation was that a 'visit' implied actually going somewhere, in most cases visiting the institution. UK participants introduced an additional and related term, 'event', which has a particularly unclear definition – a visit can include an event, and an event can include a visit! The nature of a 'visit' can also be qualified by whether it is a formal or informal 'visit'. UK colleagues also highlighted that while across Europe a 'site visit' implies a visit to an institution involving any of a number of activities; in the UK 'site visit' implies a visit to specifically look at physical facilities or resources.

Although 'report' was a word which was felt to be commonly understood it was noted that the Shorter Oxford English dictionary actually gives 15 different definitions of the term. Key associations for participants were that it was: a formal account following an investigation, which can include judgements or assess achievements.

'Judgement' was universally felt to be a powerful word, one that did not always reflect the true nature of the outcome of the external quality assurance process. Alternatives used included 'the decision' (to accredit/not accredit), 'findings', 'recommendations' (see below) and 'expert statement'.

'Recommendation' as a term was felt to have varying 'weight' depending on whether the recommendations imposed conditions on the institution under scrutiny. It was contrasted by some participants with 'points for consideration'. Recommendation was felt to imply a position of expertise and authority on the part of the agency, which might not be well received by institutions.

The term 'follow up' was felt to contain a wide range of possible meanings, depending on both the system in which it was used and the context within that system. In all cases it was thought to be a continuation or repetition of an action, but it could be:

- required or voluntary
- formal or informal
- timebound or not
- evaluative or not
- an action of the agency or of the institution

For example, in Finland 'follow up' is always used to mean a follow-up evaluation by the agency of an institution; whereas in Germany it refers to what happens in an institution after a review.

### **3. TAKING THE DEBATE FORWARD**

The workshop provided a welcome forum for debate and it was felt by many participants that the discussion should continue in some form. It also became clear that more words than those that had already been discussed caused confusion and raised points of contention and so should be admitted to the discussion. These new words have been added to the before mentioned word clusters in Annex III to this report.

This report is intended to provide a source of information and a basis for those who were not present at the workshop to contribute to a further discussion. It was initially planned that this discussion would continue through an online message board, established by ENQA in September 2006. The contents of the board were intended to be analysed and to feed back to the current report. However, the online board did not attract the attention of ENQA members in a planned way. This might have been due to the time constraints and other projects in which the active ENQA member agencies were committed to. It is however worth while experimenting different participative fora where discussions can be led between the ENQA member agencies and other stakeholders. It is obvious that an attempt to create further discussion can always be either successful or less successful, but this cannot be known if one does not have a try. ENQA will thus continue to take different initiatives on quality assurance and the important discussion on the language and terminology of quality assurance will definitely be continued by ENQA in different forms and fora.

# Annex I: Programme of the Language Workshop

## **The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education**

The Language of European Quality Assurance

An ENQA workshop

29–30 June 2006

Scarman House, University of Warwick, Coventry, UK

Many of the difficulties in communicating ideas, processes and procedures about quality assurance amongst ENQA members result from both the number of languages used by them and, in particular, the consequences of English having been adopted as the common international language for the purpose. Many terms used in quality assurance do not easily translate from English into other European languages and vice versa. The use of English as the ‘mediating’ language between others can also give rise to misunderstanding and even a misplaced sense of effective communication.

There have frequently been calls for the development of authoritative and comprehensive ‘glossaries’ of concepts, words and terms used in quality assurance in Europe, but these have invariably proved to be of limited value because of the difficulty in agreeing the meanings of the concepts and words themselves in English. The consequent lack of a shared linguistic understanding is one of the major stumbling blocks to the full development of the European Higher Education Area, at least in terms of shared values for quality assurance.

Many people are involved in the translation of documents into and out of English in the course of their work for quality assurance agencies. Some is undertaken by the quality assurance ‘experts’ and agency leaders as part of their normal activities. For them the problem may be limited, as they have opportunities to discuss their work in English during the course of their international activities and to develop an understanding of the complexities of other systems and the way these are expressed through English. Some is the responsibility of professional translators and interpreters who do not, generally, get these opportunities.

This ENQA workshop is aimed at anyone whose work requires them to translate technical documents relating to quality assurance in higher education into or out of English.

The aims of the workshop are to:

- improve understanding and communication amongst ENQA members by examining English words and phrases commonly used in quality assurance;
- facilitate future attempts to develop glossaries of those words and phrases.

The objectives of the workshop are to:

- help participants to gain a confident understanding of the range of meanings of relevant English words and phrases used in quality assurance and to relate them more firmly to the corresponding words and phrases in their own languages
- place these words and phrases in their theoretical and operational contexts.

The workshop will be interactive, with opportunities for participants to share the challenges they face in translating quality assurance concepts and terms. They will be invited to add words to the clusters indicated in the programme. It will be led by Peter Williams (CEO of QAA and President of ENQA), and facilitated by Professor Susan Bassnett (Pro Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Comparative European Literature, University of Warwick), Carolyn Campbell (Assistant Director QAA), Fiona Crozier (Assistant Director QAA) and Dr Peter Findlay (Assistant Director, QAA).

## **FINAL PROGRAMME**

### **THURSDAY, 29 JUNE 2006**

- 10:30** Registration
- 11:00** Introduction: The scope of the workshop
- 11:20** Word cluster A: the basic concepts  
*quality*  
*standards*  
*quality assurance/quality control*  
*accountability*  
*enhancement/improvements*
- 13:00** Lunch
- 14:00** Word cluster B: principles  
*principles/values*  
*independence/autonomy/academic freedom*  
*compliance/conformity/adherence*  
*convergence/harmonisation/standardisation*
- 15:00** Break
- 15:30** Groups to discuss questions arising for them from the previous sessions
- 16:30** Word cluster C: types of quality assurance:  
*assessment*  
*evaluation*  
*inspection*  
*accreditation*  
*audit*  
*review*
- 18:00** Day ends
- 19:30** Workshop dinner

**FRIDAY, 30 JUNE 2006**

**07:30**– Breakfast

**08:30**

**09:00** Word Cluster D: operational processes and procedures:

*experts/peers*

*self-assessments/self evaluation*

*visits*

*reports*

*judgements*

*follow-up*

*recommendation*

**10:30** Break

**11:00** Groups to discuss questions arising for them from the previous session

**12:00** Final session: outstanding questions and summary

**13:00** Lunch and depart

## Annex II: List of participants of the workshop on the Language of European Quality Assurance

<b>Tiia Bach</b>	<i>Expert,</i> SA Archimedes, Estonian Higher Education Accreditation Centre, Estonia
<b>Esther Balboa</b>	<i>Technical Staff, Accreditation Programme</i> ANECA – Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación, Spain
<b>Susan Basnett</b>	<i>Pro-Vice Chancellor, University of Warwick and Member of the Board,</i> QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK
<b>Carolyn Campbell</b>	<i>Head of International Affairs, Chief Executive’s Group,</i> QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK
<b>Vera Chepurnykh</b>	<i>Project Manager,</i> National Accreditation Center of the Russian Federation, Russia
<b>Pierre Couraud</b>	<i>Project Manager,</i> CNE - Comité National d’Évaluation, France
<b>Fiona Crozier</b>	<i>Assistant Director, Development and Enhancement Group,</i> QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK
<b>Bruno Curvale</b>	<i>Project Manager, Representative of ENQA Steering Group,</i> CNE – Comité National d’Évaluation, France
<b>Julie Davies</b>	<i>Policy Development Manager,</i> Association of Business Schools, UK
<b>Rachel Dearlove</b>	<i>Aide to the Chief Executive, Chief Executive’s Group,</i> QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK
<b>Peter Findlay</b>	<i>Assistant Director, Reviews Group,</i> QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK
<b>Patricia Georgieva</b>	<i>Chief Executive,</i> National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency, Bulgaria



<b>Emmi Helle</b>	<i>Project Officer/Acting Secretary General, ENQA European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Finland</i>
<b>Fabrice Hénard</b>	<i>Project Manager, Representative of QCS project CNE – Comité National d’Évaluation, France</i>
<b>Achim Hopbach</b>	<i>Managing Director, German Accreditation Council, Germany</i>
<b>Trine Hornemann</b>	<i>Language Consultant, EVA – The Danish Evaluation Institute, Denmark</i>
<b>Volker Husberg</b>	<i>Consultant, Agentur für Qualitätssicherung durch Akkreditierung von Studiengängen – AQAS e.V,Germany</i>
<b>Sue Ibberson</b>	<i>Conference Administrator and PA to the Chief Executive and Head of International Affairs, QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK</i>
<b>Mercedes Jaime</b>	<i>External Advisor for Institutional and International Relations, ANECA - Agencia Nacional de Evaluación de la Calidad y Acreditación, Spain</i>
<b>Mark Kalinin</b>	<i>Member of the Board Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and Career Development, Russia</i>
<b>Helka Kekäläinen</b>	<i>Senior Advisor, FINHEEC - Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, Finland</i>
<b>Teresa Lee</b>	<i>Programme Manager, Irish Universities Quality Board, Ireland</i>
<b>Bianka Lichtenberger</b>	<i>Head of Accreditation, FIBAA – Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation, Germany</i>
<b>Thierry Malan</b>	<i>General Inspector of the Administration of National Education and Research, General Inspectorate of the Administration of National Education and Research, IGAENR, France</i>
<b>Barbara Michalk</b>	<i>Programme Manager, German Rectors’ Conference, The Quality Assurance Project, Germany</i>

- Sirpa Moitus** *Project Manager,*  
FINHEEC - Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council,  
Finland
- Gintar Motiekaitien** *Chief Officer,*  
Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education, Lithuania
- Ariane Nussbaum** *Scientific Collaborator,*  
OAQ Center of Accreditation and Quality Assurance of the  
Swiss Universities, Switzerland
- Trish O'Brien** *Development Officer,*  
National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, Ireland
- Karin Riegler** *Senior Programme Manager,*  
European University Association, EUA, Belgium
- Vyacheslav Samoilov** *Director General,*  
Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance and Career  
Development, Russia
- Gerhard Schreier** *CEO,*  
Evaluation Agency Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany
- Kurt Sohm** *Managing Director,*  
Fachhochschule Council, Austria
- Konstantinos Tzortzis** *Development Officer, International Collaboration,*  
Chief Executive's Group, QAA – Quality Assurance Agency  
for Higher Education, UK
- Els Van Zele** *Staff Member, Quality Assurance,*  
VLIR – Flemish University Council, Belgium
- Michèle Wera** *Policy Advisor,*  
Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands & Flanders  
(NVAO), The Netherlands
- Peter Williams** *President of ENQA, Chief Executive,*  
QAA – Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education, UK

# Annex III: Proposed new word clusters

These word clusters have been re-arranged and expanded (new words are marked in italics) in the light of the workshop discussions.

## **Cluster A: fundamentals**

- quality
- quality assurance
- quality control
- enhancement
- improvement

## **Cluster B: ethical concepts**

- accountability
- principles
- values
- independence
- autonomy
- academic freedom
- *transparency*

## **Cluster C: 'measurement'**

- standards
- *competence*
- *specification*
- *benchmark*
- *criteria/on*
- *guidelines*
- *code of practice*
- *objective*
- *outcome*
- *output*

## **Cluster D: descriptions**

- compliance
- conformity
- adherence
- convergence
- harmonisation
- standardisation
- *comparability*
- *equivalence*

**Cluster E: methods**

- assessment
- evaluation
- inspection
- accreditation
- audit
- review

**Cluster F: processes and procedures**

- expert
- peer
- visit
- *self-assessment/evaluation*
- report
- *document*
- *submission*
- *statement*
- judgement
- follow-up
- *action plan*
- *feedback/feedback loop*
- recommendation
- *conditions*

## Part 2.

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# Final report on the pilot Quality Convergence II project:<sup>1</sup> Promoting epistemological approaches to quality assurance

*Fiona Crozier, QAA*

*Bruno Curvale, CNE*

*Fabrice Hénard, CNE*

## **1. Introduction**

The Quality Convergence Study II (QCS II) built upon the successful outcomes of QCS I. QCS II was intended to provide further stimulus to ENQA member agencies in their discussions and implementation of capacity building. The main outcome from QCS I was the conclusion that, rather than, or perhaps before, the development of common methods of working, it was important to further develop a real understanding of the national contexts within which the quality assurance agencies work. There is a need to develop an understanding that goes beyond how the quality assurance agencies do things, and leads to a comprehension of why the agencies work as they do.

QCS II operated within the context of a continuing debate on how agencies might work together, whether this is at the level of furthering mutual understanding or seeking mutual recognition of the outcomes of evaluations. It was an attempt to question the foundations of quality assurance in higher education.

Initiatives for the further development of the European dimension of quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE) such as the publication of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the TEEP II project and the Nordic Network project on the implications of implementing the ESG in the Nordic countries, were also taken under consideration in the QCS II. This was because these initiatives too, focussed on working together, or on the implications of a European-wide set of agreed principles. The project team also read with interest the outcomes of a survey on ENQA membership criteria, and noted the work being carried out by ECA member agencies in terms of mutual recognition of accreditation decisions.

In particular, the pilot project considered the discussion which developed during the ENQA seminar on the language of quality assurance held at Warwick, in the United Kingdom, in June 2006. This seminar confirmed that, in addition to the problems which arise from the use of a single working language (English), it is necessary, in parallel, to examine and discuss the values, often implicit, that underpin the work done at the individual agencies.

The idea that underpins QCS II is that only a deeper shared understanding of those values will help to overcome any misunderstandings. In the opinion of the project team,

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<sup>1</sup> This report is available in both French and English; it has been approved in both languages.

the recognition of the importance of what lies beneath the surface in agencies' work is essential to the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). What is regarded as beyond question in one country may not be regarded as such in another. If it is implicit in the modus operandi of one agency and therefore not discussed, a second agency may simply believe that it is of no importance. Thus, in the case of processes that are, on the surface similar, there is an assumption that the outcomes of the processes are the same. Working relationships within ENQA are constantly confronted with these unspoken and intercultural dimensions.

The QCS II project chose to work towards understanding the values that underpin QA, in order to help provide better insight and inform capacity building between and within agencies.

## 2. Methodology and timescale

This pilot project ran over a period of one year (January to December 2006). It was guided by two agencies, CNE and QAA, who set up a steering group composed of Fiona Crozier (QAA), Bruno Curvale (CNE) and Fabrice Hénard (CNE).

The method consisted of inviting the ENQA member agencies to react and respond to four notions<sup>2</sup> which are usually present in any discourse about QA in higher education: independence, peer review, transparency and results. The main phases of the method were:

- the agreement of the four notions and the development of a questionnaire (attached at annex B) about those notions (April to June 2006),
- a consultation period when the questionnaires were sent to all member agencies of ENQA (July to October 2006),
- analysis of the completed questionnaires (October to November 2006) and
- the writing of a report (November to December 2006).

It was agreed that the results of the questionnaire should not be published – the aim of the project was not to debate whether or not responses were good or bad, right or wrong, nor to comment on perceived good practice, but to consider the conditions, feasibility and interest in an epistemological debate amongst QA practitioners.

The steering group was supported in its work by four experts chosen for their academic background (Philosophy, History, Social Sciences) and because they represented different areas of Europe (Bulgaria, France, Portugal and UK). All are academics with some knowledge of QA in their national context. It was a deliberate decision not to have a QA expert on the panel; this role was fulfilled by the three members of the steering group. Working with such a group of experts proved to be a real success and greatly enriched the project.

The input of the experts and their interest in the project was invaluable to the steering group. The experts agreed that the decision to focus on four notions (independence, peer review, transparency and results), and to ask agencies to concentrate on the values that underpinned those themes or notions in their context was a good approach. They were involved in the design of the questionnaire that

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<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this project, the word "notion" refers to a concept or idea that is common to many European models of QA in HE, for example, peer review. The word "value" is used to discuss the values that underpin the four notions on which the questionnaire was based.

was subsequently sent to all agencies, and they assisted in the analysis of the results. The discussions between the experts and the steering group at the two meetings held were both interesting and challenging. It was very useful for the project group to be confronted with the alternative and challenging views of HE and QA in HE that were raised by the experts.

The outcomes reported below should be viewed with caution: they emerged from the reactions to and reflections on the responses to the questionnaire of a small group of people (the experts and the steering group).

### **3. The responses to the questionnaire**

Thirteen agencies and the evaluation unit of the European University Association responded to the questionnaire; this represents 47% of agencies that regularly participate in ENQA activities (the list of respondents is attached as annex A).

The development of the questionnaire and the responses to it provided both steering group members and experts with an opportunity for reflection: this was also true for the experts. Mutual comprehension between QA agencies and HEIs needs to be worked at and projects of this type offer the opportunity to interact positively.

For example, the experts brought to the project their own perceptions of QA. They did not only react to the agencies' responses, but also to what they perceived to be missing or unsaid. The members of the steering group were thus confronted not only with what might be implicit within their own national context but also with what is unquestioned or implicit across agencies as a whole. This reinforces the idea that it is important for agencies to explain more clearly, to HE providers and the public in general, their objectives and their approach to quality through the processes they develop.

The experts were surprised by some of the things that they perceived to be "unsaid" or unimportant, whereas for the steering group, sometimes these things were implicitly understood. It is often these implicit values that are used by agencies to underpin their argument.

For example, some agencies did not mention that their methodologies are the result of a process of dialogue and consensus between them and their stakeholders, with the result that the experts thought that such agencies used their procedures as a justification for their actions. In fact, such debate is a positive feature of the *modus operandi* of the agencies concerned.

A more systematic approach to discussion or reflection would allow agencies to improve their position in a national or international debate on QA in HE. Indeed, the experts were of the opinion that the responses to the questionnaires were often defensive and that the agencies should be more self-confident, as they felt that this is one of the conditions necessary for a robust debate between partners/stakeholders.

The four notions proposed – independence, peer evaluation, transparency and results – are integral to the various models of QA found in the European context. The debate with the experts allowed for the questioning of these notions.

#### **3.1 INDEPENDENCE**

This notion attracted the most detailed responses. Independence is at the heart of the majority of agencies in terms of the justification of their legitimacy (an issue dealt with in detail later in this report). However, it is necessary to distinguish between



independence and autonomy: an agency may be independent, in the sense that the judgements it makes formally on the basis of recommendations of its evaluation teams are independent judgements, and are not influenced by the views of stakeholders. But it can rarely operate autonomously from those to whom it provides a service - these include providers of higher education (institutions), potential and current students, government and employers. All these are the agency's *raison d'être* and it provides a service to them.

In addition, many responses showed that the words "independence" and "autonomy" are used interchangeably, giving rise to a problem of vocabulary (see the parallel report on the ENQA seminar "Language of Quality Assurance", Warwick, June 2006 for further detail).

The responses also show that it is necessary to distinguish between the question of the legitimacy of an agency and the question of the acceptability of its results by others (universities, ministries etc).

### **3.2 PEER REVIEW**

Whatever the process of QA used (audit, institutional or programme evaluation, accreditation...), peer review of some sort exists at the heart of every evaluation. It is an attempt to allow the evaluation to operate in the most objective and yet acceptable way possible.

The notion of peer review is understood differently by different agencies each of whom has its own idea of what the term means. In certain cases, the peers can only be drawn from a pool of university professors, in others from the entire pool of personnel relevant to the evaluation in question. The participation of students in evaluation procedures raises more questions about the legitimacy of those who participate in the judgement-making and advisory processes.

In the end, the way in which evaluation procedures apply peer review varies between agencies and depends on their concept of what is or is not acceptable. For example, in some cases, peers carry out the review but an agency officer writes or edits the final report. In others, it is the responsibility of the peer reviewers to write the report.

The matter of objectivity is also crucial. Peer evaluation has many features in common with academic judgement, and it is for this reason that it cannot be rendered completely objective by making it subject to a set of rules. It is also possible that one panel of peers might reach a different conclusion to another panel on the same evaluation. This can lead to disputes regarding the outcomes of evaluations, or the use of appeal procedures.

### **3.3 TRANSPARENCY**

Transparency was cited by some agencies as something that helped them to reflect on their professionalism. The more an agency is transparent, the more it feels professional.

Interestingly the notion of transparency is not generally demonstrated through the discussion of principles, but more often through a technical description of the methods and procedures used. Transparency is the notion that most easily lends itself to technical discourse.

This notion was also used by the agencies to demonstrate legitimacy. However, is transparency of function enough in itself to assure legitimacy in the eyes of stakeholders? The experts were of the opinion that transparency was not necessarily a

positive notion. It is possible for the notion of transparency to be abused since claims can be made that procedures are straightforward and openly available for scrutiny, but are often then carried out subjectively.

Some responses highlighted a lack of criteria to address this value. How does one judge the transparency of an agency, of an evaluation method, or of the result of an evaluation without the necessary criteria? On the other hand, does a lack of transparency necessarily mean that the process or the judgement is unreliable?

Can one assume that there is a lack of criteria because agencies do not make the values that underpin transparency explicit or stable? If so, such a notion may risk losing its sense and place in QA in HE if there are no explicit and agreed criteria to demonstrate its importance.

### 3.4 RESULTS OF EVALUATIONS

This value was not discussed in detail in the responses. However, in some, a political dimension to results emerged.

Agencies gain some of their legitimacy through their mission to carry out a certain task – be it to make accreditation decisions, carry out audits, make public the results of an evaluation at subject or institutional level, safeguard standards and so on. It is difficult for them to question this task or mission. It may also underline the fact that agencies usually act within a framework designed by others (i.e. Governments, rector's conference etc.).

### 3.5 CONCLUSIONS FROM THE OUTCOMES OF THE QUESTIONNAIRE

To conclude this section of the report, the four notions chosen for the questionnaire led to responses which highlighted the authority/legitimacy of agency practices. Interestingly none of the responses suggested that the wrong notions had been chosen or that the agency concerned did not believe one of the notions to be important. Can we therefore deduce that the legitimacy of the work of agencies is focussed on these four notions and the values that underpin them?

## 4. Legitimacy: a central matter

The QCS I study showed that the systematic organisation of quality assurance mechanisms is the result of interaction between partners (agencies, higher education providers, ministers etc). It suggested that there is no single definition or concept of quality. Rather the enhancement of quality in HE is the result of interaction between stakeholders.

The QCS II study, for its part, turned the thoughts towards the acceptability of the results of evaluations; that is, towards the conditions that must be fulfilled before the results of evaluations – be they recommendations, assessment or accreditation decisions – are recognised as well-founded and legitimate. This is an important question because evaluation results impact on the decision-making processes in individual higher education providers and also on the decisions made by other stakeholders.

In their responses to the questionnaire, the agencies tried to show the validity of their work by mentioning the mandate given to them, and their endeavours to ensure that the judgements that they published were governed by justice and equity. They immediately focused on virtue – to do well what has to be done – and sought to

demonstrate that they were reliable and credible by putting forward a definition of professionalism based on the notions of transparency, independence and utility.

It is possible that this tendency towards justification was caused in part by the way in which the questionnaire was designed, but the experts did not believe that to be the case. Rather they saw it as a sign that the agencies lacked a certain amount of self-confidence.

It may also be due to the fact that agencies are not used to questioning their own activities. They do not tend to challenge the frameworks that form the basis of their *raison d'être* and to question the political decisions that impact on their work. They resolutely see themselves as operators of a set of procedures and defend themselves against encroaching on the territory of those that they see as political decision makers or the academic world.

The experts, a little provocatively (which was the nature of the relationship between them and the project steering group) wish to question the agencies on that essential area of their work: the results of evaluations. They invite them to consider more closely the nature of the judgements that they make and the notions of objectivity and transparency, not just the political dimension of quality assurance.

The pilot QCS II project calls on agencies to consider more carefully the most fundamental questions.

## **5. Respect for the process is not enough**

Beyond the confines of QCS II, the matter of legitimacy is currently a topical one. It is of central importance for agencies.<sup>3</sup>

Just as agencies do their utmost to demonstrate their transparency and independence; it would seem that respect for such values is not enough to underpin legitimacy. The outcomes of evaluations, which play an important part in higher education, claim to be the result of technical procedures and thus, entirely objective. But is this really the case?

A look at the ESG can help to clarify things: they refer to the conditions necessary for evaluation results to be legitimate. Part one of the ESG addresses the legitimacy of the objectives of evaluation and parts 2 and 3 address the legitimacy of the processes and the results. Despite that, does strict adherence to the ESG lead automatically to legitimate and acceptable decisions? Those who run evaluations know from experience that one can only evaluate something if one knows its purpose. Will the procedures associated with an evaluation always come up with the right result? Can something really be evaluated if its own objectives are not taken into account in the process? So, what really leads to legitimacy and acceptability of results?

## **6. The political nature of evaluation**

Agencies cannot claim to work outside the political arena. Their results are used by decision-makers and higher education providers to steer higher education systems and to appraise their quality. If the agencies do not take this into account, don't they risk, behind the façade of independence, being exploited? Doesn't this position make dialogue with HE providers more difficult?

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the Council of Europe seminar in Strasbourg on 18th and 19th September 2006 which focussed on "quality assurance and its legitimacy in higher education: the role of universities and national authorities."

## 7. To take things further

The limitations of a procedural approach, and the recognition of these limitations, oblige the agencies to reflect on the matter. The following scenarios could usefully form the basis of some systematic reflection on their part in order to reinforce the quality of the link that binds the agencies to their partners:

- The agencies are part of many actors in the higher education system. They are independent but not, however, necessarily autonomous. So where does the balance lie? What is the necessary distance – needed for evaluations – between agencies and higher education providers (which is the translation of the notion of independence in external evaluation) and the proximity which will allow for an understanding of the higher education system within which individual institutions are operating?
- Peer evaluation is supposed to guarantee the legitimacy of an evaluation since it means that the system is being evaluated by those who understand it. This notion is generally shared by policy makers and by the academic world. It is not, however, exempt from criticism, because it is not enough to guarantee the acceptability of results. So, how can we consider the link between those who are being evaluated and the agencies that carry the evaluations out? How can we discuss the link between agencies' activities and their purpose? The question of legitimacy is a collective one – shouldn't the debate therefore involve all parties with an interest in higher education?
- It is difficult for agencies to think about evaluation without considering the aims of higher education. Aren't they right, along with other parties in the higher education system, to ask themselves what sort of results that system really needs from evaluations?

Finally, it seems sensible to continue the questions opened up by this project to avoid the notions of independence, transparency and objectivity playing too exhaustive a role in the development of methodologies. Thus agencies may, in the spirit of openness, be able to fully play their part in higher education systems.

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The project steering group wishes to thank the experts who provided them with so much help throughout the QCS II study:

**Dr Colin Brooks**, *Higher Education Academy, United Kingdom*

**Dr Licinio Lima**, *University of Minho, Portugal*

**Dr Philippe Saltel**, *University of Grenoble II Pierre-Mendès-France, France*

**Prof Dr Alexander Shurbanov**, *University of Sofia, Bulgaria*

# Rapport final de l'étude pilote Quality convergence II<sup>4</sup>

## « Pour des approches épistémologiques de l'assurance qualité »

*Fiona Crozier, QAA*  
*Bruno Curvale, CNE*  
*Fabrice Hénard, CNE*

### 1. Introduction

L'étude pilote Quality Convergence Study II (QCS II) s'inscrit dans la continuité des conclusions de la première étude sur la convergence européenne dans le domaine du management de la qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur, QCS I. Cette dernière visait à renforcer les capacités de débat entre les agences membres d'ENQA et à développer leurs compétences. Elle a notamment mis en exergue l'importance des contextes nationaux et leur influence sur le fonctionnement des agences. L'étude soulignait l'intérêt d'approfondir la compréhension des contextes nationaux préalablement à la mise au point de méthodes de travail communes. Ce besoin de compréhension va au-delà de la simple connaissance des savoir-faire (le comment) pour s'attacher aussi aux raisons (le pourquoi) conduisant les agences à agir comme elles le font.

QCS II poursuit ce questionnement des agences sur leurs modes de travail, que ce soit pour approfondir la compréhension mutuelle ou pour aboutir à la reconnaissance des résultats d'évaluation. Il s'agit de s'interroger sur les fondements de l'assurance qualité dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Les initiatives pour le développement de la dimension européenne de l'assurance qualité, telles que la publication des références européennes en matière de management de la qualité, l'étude Trans-European evaluation project (TEEP II) sur l'évaluation des programmes Erasmus Mundus ou celle du réseau des agences scandinaves portant sur les implications nationales des références européennes, ont été prises en considération, car elles ont aussi mis l'accent sur les façons de travailler ensemble et sur les implications des grands principes partagés à l'échelle européenne. Le groupe de pilotage s'est également intéressé aux résultats d'une étude interne sur les critères d'adhésion à ENQA. Il s'est aussi penché sur le travail mené par ECA en termes de reconnaissance mutuelle des résultats des processus d'accréditation.

Le groupe de pilotage a porté une attention particulière aux débats menés lors du séminaire ENQA sur la terminologie de l'assurance qualité (Warwick, juin 2006). Ce séminaire a confirmé qu'au-delà d'une réflexion sur les problèmes de compréhension soulevés par l'utilisation d'une langue de travail unique (l'anglais), il est nécessaire

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<sup>4</sup> Ce rapport a été rédigé parallèlement en langues anglaise et française. Il a été validé dans les deux langues.

d'avoir, en parallèle, un débat sur les valeurs, souvent implicites, qui fondent les activités des agences.

L'idée qui sous-tend QCS II est que seule une meilleure connaissance partagée de ces valeurs permettra de dépasser certaines incompréhensions. Le groupe de pilotage juge essentielle l'identification des dimensions implicites du travail des agences : ce qui pose question dans tel pays ne s'envisage peut-être pas de la même façon dans tel autre. Quand la dimension implicite n'est pas objet de débat, les pratiques d'une agence n'induisent pas forcément de questionnement de la part des autres agences. Ainsi, une agence peut considérer à tort, en raison de la similitude des méthodes, que les finalités poursuivies par une autre agence sont les mêmes que les siennes. Les relations de travail au sein d'ENQA sont en permanence confrontées à ces dimensions implicites et interculturelles.

## 2. Méthodologie et calendrier

Cette étude est un projet pilote qui s'est déroulé sur un an (de janvier à décembre 2006). Il a été conduit par deux agences (CNÉ et QAA) qui ont constitué un groupe de pilotage composé de Fiona Crozier (QAA), Bruno Curvale (CNÉ) et Fabrice Hénard (CNÉ).

La méthode retenue a été d'inviter les agences d'ENQA à exprimer leurs points de vue et à réagir sur quatre notions<sup>5</sup> habituellement utilisées dans le domaine de l'assurance qualité : l'indépendance, l'évaluation par les pairs, la transparence et les résultats.

Les principales étapes de la procédure ont été les suivantes:

- élaboration du questionnaire, présenté en annexe B (d'avril à juin 2006) ;
- consultation de l'ensemble des agences membres d'ENQA (de juillet à octobre 2006) ;
- analyse des réponses au questionnaire (d'octobre à novembre 2006) ;
- rédaction du rapport (de novembre à décembre 2006).

Il a été décidé que les réponses du questionnaire ne seraient pas publiées. L'objectif de l'étude n'était pas de débattre sur le fait de savoir si les réponses étaient correctes ou non, ni de repérer des bonnes pratiques. Il s'agissait d'analyser les conditions, la possibilité et l'intérêt d'un débat de nature épistémologique entre praticiens de l'assurance qualité.

Le groupe de pilotage a travaillé en collaboration avec quatre experts originaires de quatre pays différents (Bulgarie, France, Portugal et Royaume-Uni) et choisis pour leurs compétences académiques (philosophie, histoire, sciences sociales). Ces quatre universitaires connaissaient les systèmes d'assurance qualité de leur pays et ont beaucoup enrichi le projet. Il a été décidé de ne pas recruter d'expert en assurance qualité (ce rôle était assuré par les trois membres du groupe de pilotage).

Les apports de ces experts et leur intérêt pour cette étude ont été précieux au groupe de pilotage. Ils ont confirmé l'intérêt de l'approche centrée sur les notions d'indépendance, d'évaluation par les pairs, de transparence et de résultats et sur une demande aux agences de s'interroger sur les valeurs qui étayent ces notions en fonction

<sup>5</sup> Dans le cadre de ce projet, le mot notion renvoie à une idée ou à un élément présent dans de nombreux modèles européens de l'assurance qualité de l'enseignement supérieur, par exemple : l'évaluation par les pairs. Le mot valeur renvoie ici aux idées utilisées par les agences pour justifier les notions proposées à leur réflexion dans le questionnaire.

de leur propre contexte. Les experts ont été associés à l'élaboration du questionnaire et ont contribué à l'analyse des réponses. Les discussions entre eux et le groupe de pilotage ont été stimulantes. Ce dernier a jugé très intéressant d'être confronté aux points de vue alternatifs et provocateurs des experts sur l'enseignement supérieur et l'assurance qualité.

Les considérations rapportées ci-dessous n'engagent pas les institutions dont sont membres les auteurs. Elles résultent des réactions et des réflexions de ce petit groupe de personnes.

### **3. Les réponses au questionnaire**

Treize agences, ainsi que l'unité d'évaluation institutionnelle de l'EUA ont répondu au questionnaire, soit 47 % des organismes qui participent régulièrement aux activités d'ENQA (la liste est présentée en annexe A).

La mise au point du questionnaire et les réponses correspondantes ont offert des occasions de réflexion pour le groupe de pilotage comme pour les experts. La compréhension mutuelle entre les agences et les établissements d'enseignement supérieur a besoin d'être pensée en commun. Des projets de ce type en fournissent l'occasion.

C'est ainsi que les experts ont enrichi l'étude de leurs propres perceptions de l'assurance qualité ; ils ont réagi aux réponses des agences, mais ont aussi exprimé leurs opinions sur ce qui manquait ou ce qui relevait du non-dit. À cette occasion, le groupe de pilotage a compris que les agences se trouvaient confrontées non seulement aux dimensions implicites qui perturbent les relations qu'elles entretiennent entre elles, mais aussi à une part d'implicite commune à toutes mais qu'elles ne partagent pas nécessairement avec leurs autres partenaires. Ce constat renforce l'idée qu'il est important de mieux expliquer aux établissements d'enseignement supérieur et à leurs publics les objectifs et les approches des démarches qualité développées par les agences.

Les experts ont été surpris par le nombre de réponses qui, selon eux, ne traitaient pas certains aspects, alors que pour le groupe de pilotage ces aspects étaient tellement évidents qu'ils n'avaient pas à être mentionnés. Les agences interrogées ont souvent employé ces valeurs implicites pour étayer leurs arguments.

Ainsi, certaines agences oublient de rappeler, en présentant leurs méthodes, que ces dernières sont le résultat d'un dialogue et d'un consensus avec leurs partenaires. Il en résulte que les experts ont considéré que les agences mettaient en avant leurs procédures pour justifier leur action et se protéger, alors même que leur démarche traduisait en fait une réelle ouverture vers les partenaires et les établissements.

Une approche plus méthodique des discussions ou des réflexions permettrait aux agences de conforter leur position dans les débats nationaux ou internationaux sur l'assurance qualité. En effet, les experts ont estimé que les réponses au questionnaire étaient souvent défensives et qu'il serait dans l'intérêt des agences d'acquiescer plus de confiance en elles-mêmes. C'est, selon eux, une des conditions de la vigueur du débat entre partenaires dans l'enseignement supérieur.

Les quatre notions proposées (indépendance, évaluation par les pairs, transparence et résultats) font référence à un modèle de procédures d'assurance qualité. Le débat avec les experts fut l'occasion d'examiner ces notions, caractéristiques du modèle européen d'assurance qualité.

### 3.1 INDÉPENDANCE

Cette notion a suscité les réponses les plus détaillées. L'indépendance est au cœur des préoccupations de la majorité des agences quand elles cherchent à justifier leur légitimité. Il est nécessaire ici de distinguer indépendance et autonomie : une agence est indépendante dans le sens où les jugements qu'elle formule sur la base formelle des recommandations des équipes d'experts sont indépendants et non influencés par les points de vue des parties prenantes. En revanche, une agence peut rarement opérer de manière autonome par rapport à ceux à qui elle fournit un service - les établissements, les étudiants (présents ou à venir), les gouvernements et les employeurs. Ce sont ces groupes qui justifient l'existence même de l'agence, dont la mission est de leur rendre ce service.

En outre, de nombreuses réponses révèlent que les mots « indépendance » et « autonomie » sont employés de manière interchangeable pour signifier l'une ou l'autre notion, démontrant par là un problème de vocabulaire.

Enfin, les réponses montrent qu'il est également nécessaire de distinguer entre la question de la légitimité de l'agence et celle de l'acceptabilité de ses résultats par ses partenaires.

### 3.2 ÉVALUATION PAR LES PAIRS

Quelles que soient les procédures d'assurance qualité utilisées (audit, évaluation institutionnelle, accréditation, etc), l'évaluation par les pairs est le pivot de l'évaluation. Elle cherche à rendre l'évaluation la plus objective et satisfaisante possible.

La notion de pairs est comprise différemment par les agences, qui en ont une conception plus ou moins large. Dans certains cas, les pairs sont uniquement des professeurs d'université ; dans d'autres cas, il peut s'agir de toute personne dont le domaine personnel d'expertise est pertinent compte tenu de l'évaluation menée. La participation des étudiants aux procédures d'évaluation amène d'autres questions sur la légitimité de ceux qui participent à l'élaboration des appréciations et des avis.

En définitive, la conduite des procédures d'évaluation par les pairs varient selon les agences et correspondent à des conceptions différentes sur ce qui est acceptable ou non. Dans certains cas, par exemple, les pairs font l'expertise, mais un chef de projet de l'agence – qui n'est pas un pair – écrit le rapport final ou en vérifie la rédaction. Dans d'autres cas, seuls les pairs sont chargés de la rédaction des rapports.

La question de l'objectivité des jugements est aussi cruciale. L'évaluation par les pairs présente de nombreux points communs avec le jugement académique. Pour cette raison, le jugement ne peut être tenu pour totalement objectif du seul fait de l'application de méthodes ou de techniques. Il est ainsi tout à fait possible, et acceptable, qu'un panel de pairs aboutisse à des conclusions différentes de celles d'un autre panel qui travaillerait sur la même évaluation. Tout ceci justifie le débat contradictoire sur les résultats ou, le cas échéant, sur les procédures d'appel.

### 3.3 TRANSPARENCE

La transparence a été citée par quelques agences comme étant l'objectif les incitant à réfléchir sur leur professionnalisme. En bref, plus une agence est transparente dans son fonctionnement et plus elle se juge professionnelle.

Il est intéressant de constater que la notion de transparence n'est généralement pas abordée à travers une démonstration de principes, mais le plus souvent au moyen d'une



description de nature technique des méthodes et des procédures utilisées. C'est une notion qui amène naturellement des discours de nature technique.

Les agences utilisent aussi cette notion pour démontrer leur légitimité. Cependant, la transparence des fonctionnements est-elle suffisante pour garantir la légitimité des agences aux yeux des parties prenantes ? Les experts ont estimé que la transparence n'est pas forcément une notion positive, car elle peut en effet être considérée comme abusive par le fait qu'elle prétendrait rendre limpide des mécanismes qui sont de nature subjective.

Certaines agences ont souligné l'absence de critères pour juger de la qualité de la transparence. Comment dès lors, étant dépourvu de critères, peut-on juger la transparence d'une agence, d'une méthode d'évaluation ou d'une décision ? Par ailleurs, un défaut de transparence signifie-t-il nécessairement qu'une pratique ou un jugement sont mal fondés ou peu judicieux ?

Enfin, doit-on supposer que cette absence de critères s'explique par le peu d'importance que les agences accorderaient à la stabilité et à l'énoncé explicite des valeurs qui sous-tendent la transparence ? La question paraît importante. Cette notion risque de perdre son sens et sa place dans l'assurance qualité de l'enseignement supérieur si l'on ne peut l'apprécier à l'aide de critères.

### 3.4 RÉSULTATS

Cette valeur n'a pas fait l'objet de développements détaillés dans les réponses. Cependant, quelques-unes d'entre elles ont souligné la dimension politique de la notion de résultat.

Les agences ont acquis une partie de leur légitimité du fait de leur mission qui leur impose d'accomplir certaines activités, que ce soit conduire des audits, rendre publics les résultats d'une évaluation au niveau de la discipline ou de l'établissement, protéger les standards de qualité, etc. Il est, par définition, difficile pour elles de repenser ces activités ou ces missions. Cela met également en évidence le fait que les agences travaillent habituellement dans un cadre défini par d'autres acteurs (les gouvernements, les conférences de présidents d'université, etc).

### 3.5 CONCLUSION SUR LES RÉSULTATS DU QUESTIONNAIRE

En conclusion de ce chapitre, les réponses aux quatre notions choisies pour le questionnaire insistent sur l'autorité, la légitimité et les pratiques des agences. Aucune des réponses n'a évoqué le fait que les notions sélectionnées n'étaient peut-être pas les plus pertinentes pour décrire le travail des agences ; aucune n'a dénié leur importance. Peut-on déduire de ce constat que la légitimité du travail des agences est véritablement guidée par ces quatre notions et les valeurs qui les sous-tendent ?

## 4. La légitimité comme question centrale

L'étude QCS I a montré l'organisation systémique des mécanismes d'assurance qualité et mis en évidence le fait que la qualité est le résultat des interactions entre partenaires : établissements, ministères, agences, etc. Elle suggérait que, s'il n'y avait pas de définition unique de la qualité ou du concept de qualité, en revanche, l'amélioration de la qualité était le résultat d'une « coproduction ».

L'étude QCS II amène à s'interroger sur la recevabilité des résultats des évaluations, c'est-à-dire sur les conditions à remplir pour que les résultats des évaluations – que ce

soit des recommandations, des appréciations ou des décisions d'accréditation - soient reconnus comme fondés et légitimes. Cette question est cruciale dès lors que les résultats des évaluations sont au service de la décision et du pilotage des enseignements supérieurs.

Les agences se sont attachées à démontrer le bien-fondé de leur travail en évoquant le respect du mandat qui leur est confié et la recherche de la justice et de l'équité dans la préparation des jugements qu'elles émettent. Elles se sont situées d'emblée sur le terrain de la vertu – bien faire ce que l'on doit faire – et ont cherché à démontrer leur fiabilité et leur crédibilité en mettant en avant une définition du professionnalisme fondée sur les notions de transparence, d'indépendance et d'utilité.

Il est possible que cette tendance à la justification soit en partie liée à la manière dont le questionnaire était formulé, mais les experts ont estimé que tel n'était pas le cas. Ils y ont plutôt vu le signe d'un manque de confiance des agences en elles-mêmes.

C'est aussi probablement la marque d'un manque d'habitude des agences à réfléchir sur elles-mêmes. Les praticiens hésitent en effet à remettre en cause les cadres qui fondent leur raison d'être et à s'interroger sur le bien-fondé des décisions politiques qui concernent leurs activités. Ils se définissent résolument comme opérateurs et se défendent d'empiéter sur des domaines dont la responsabilité relève des décideurs et du monde académique.

Les experts, d'une manière un peu provocatrice sans doute – mais c'était l'esprit des relations qui se sont instaurées dans le groupe de travail – , interpellent les agences sur l'essentiel : leurs résultats. Ils les invitent à s'interroger sur la nature des jugements qu'elles formulent, sur les notions d'objectivité et de transparence, ainsi que sur la dimension politique de l'assurance de la qualité.

L'étude expérimentale QCS II engage les agences à se saisir de questions fondamentales.

## **5. Le respect des procédures et la recherche de transparence ne suffisent pas**

Au-delà de QCS II stricto sensu, la légitimité est aujourd'hui une question d'actualité<sup>6</sup>. Elle est essentielle pour les agences.

Alors que ces dernières s'évertuent à démontrer qu'elles agissent dans la transparence et de manière indépendante, il apparaît que le respect de ces valeurs ne suffit pas à conforter leur légitimité. Les décisions d'évaluation, qui jouent un rôle important dans l'enseignement supérieur, peuvent-elles prétendre être le résultat de processus techniques tout à fait objectifs ?

Les références européennes peuvent nous éclairer : elles parlent des conditions de la légitimité des résultats de l'évaluation, examinent la légitimité des objectifs de l'évaluation (référentiel 1) et la légitimité des démarches et des résultats (référentiels 2 et 3). Pour autant, le respect strict des références européennes conduit-il automatiquement à des décisions légitimes et acceptables ? Les praticiens de l'évaluation savent d'expérience qu'on ne peut évaluer une activité que si l'on en connaît les intentions. Une évaluation procédurale peut-elle rendre compte, par définition, de la qualité des résultats ? Peut-on bien évaluer sans prendre en compte les objectifs propres de l'entité évaluée ? Quels sont, dès lors, les faits ou les mécanismes qui assurent la légitimité et la recevabilité des évaluations ?

<sup>6</sup> Cf. le séminaire du Conseil de l'Europe à Strasbourg, les 18 et 19 septembre 2006 : L'assurance qualité et sa légitimité dans l'enseignement supérieur : rôle des établissements et des autorités nationales.

## 6. La nature politique de l'évaluation

Les agences ne peuvent prétendre agir en dehors du champ politique. Leurs résultats sont utilisés par les décideurs et les établissements pour le pilotage des systèmes d'enseignement supérieur et pour l'appréciation de leur qualité. À ne pas intégrer cette dimension, les agences ne risquent-elles pas, sous couvert d'indépendance, d'être simplement instrumentalisées ? Ce positionnement ne rend-il pas le dialogue avec les établissements d'enseignement supérieur plus difficile qu'il ne devrait l'être ?

## 7. Pour aller plus loin

Cette limite de l'approche procédurale et cette reconnaissance de l'implication de fait dans le champ politique suscitent une réflexion de la part des agences. Les questions suivantes pourraient utilement faire l'objet de réflexions systématiques de leur part afin de renforcer la qualité du lien qui les unit à leurs partenaires :

- les agences sont des acteurs des systèmes d'enseignement supérieur. Elles sont indépendantes, mais sans être nécessairement autonomes. Dès lors, quel est le point d'équilibre entre la distance nécessaire de l'évaluation (que traduit la notion d'indépendance de l'évaluation externe) et la proximité qui permet la compréhension des enjeux de l'enseignement supérieur ?
- l'évaluation par les pairs est censée garantir la légitimité de l'évaluation, puisque le système est apprécié par ceux qui le connaissent. Cette valeur est, de fait, largement partagée par les décideurs et le monde académique. Elle n'est toutefois pas exempte de critiques car elle ne suffit pas à assurer la recevabilité des évaluations. Dès lors, comment penser le lien entre les bénéficiaires des évaluations et les agences qui les pratiquent ? Comment parler de la relation entre les activités des agences et la finalité des actions qu'elles évaluent ?
- il paraît difficile pour les agences de penser l'évaluation sans s'interroger sur les finalités de l'enseignement supérieur. Ne sont-elles pas fondées à s'interroger, avec les autres acteurs de l'enseignement supérieur, sur la nature des résultats dont le système a réellement besoin ?

Il semble bien nécessaire de poursuivre la réflexion engagée pour éviter que les notions de transparence, d'indépendance et d'objectivité ne jouent un rôle trop exclusif dans l'élaboration des méthodes. Les agences pourront ainsi assumer pleinement, dans un esprit d'ouverture, leur rôle dans les systèmes d'enseignement supérieur.

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Le groupe de pilotage tient à remercier les experts qui l'ont aidé lors de l'étude QCS II :

**Monsieur Colin Brooks**, professeur à la *Higher Education Academy*, Royaume-Uni

**Monsieur Licinio Lima**, professeur à l'*Université de Minho*, Portugal

**Monsieur Philippe Saltel**, maître de conférences à l'*Université de Grenoble II Pierre-Mendès-France*, France

**Monsieur Alexander Shurbanov**, professeur à l'*Université de Sofia*, Bulgarie

# Annex A: List of agencies that responded to the questionnaire

**Accreditation Council** (Germany)

**Austrian Accreditation Council** (Austria)

**Fachhochschulrat** (Austria)

**Agency for Quality Assurance in the Catalan University System** (Catalunya)

**Danish Evaluation Institute** (Denmark)

**Comite National d'Evaluation** (France)

**Hungarian Accreditation Committee** (Hungary)

**Accreditation Commission of the Government of the Czech Republic**  
(Czech Republic)

**National Accreditation Agency** (Russia)

**Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education** (UK)

**Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education** (Norway)

**Swedish National Agency for Higher Education** (Sweden)

**Organisation for the accreditation and assurance of quality in higher education**  
(Switzerland)

**European University Association – Institutional Evaluation Programme**

# Annex B: accompanying letter and the questionnaire used for the QCS II project

*Gloucester, 25 July 2006*

## QUALITY CONVERGENCE STUDY II

**Dear Colleague,**

ENQA is conducting, with the financial support of the European Commission, a second phase of the successful Quality Convergence Study (QCS) and is seeking the help of ENQA members to provide information to the project steering group.

The first QCS concluded that mutual trust, knowledge and understanding were the key factors in any move towards the convergence of quality assurance processes in Europe and the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The aim of QCS II is to continue a little further along this path by offering the member agencies of ENQA an opportunity to reflect together on the values (common or disparate) that underpin their activities.

Attached to this letter you will find an introduction to the objectives and intended outcomes of the project, together with a request for information. The request for information (on side two of the attachment) is worded as a short questionnaire. However, there is no prescribed pro forma for responding to the questions; agencies are invited to provide their answers in free form text. There are four questions and we ask that the answers to each question do not take more than one side of A4. Each agency's total response, therefore, should be no longer than four sides of A4. Of course, it is acceptable for answers to be shorter.

Contact details are given in the attachment. The project steering group thanks you for taking the time to work with us on this project: your responses are crucial to its success. We look forward to hearing from you.

*Yours sincerely,*

PETER WILLIAMS  
*President, ENQA*

Gloucester, 25 July 2006

To ENQA members from QCS steering group

## QUALITY CONVERGENCE STUDY II:

### An Introduction to the ENQA Pilot Project and a questionnaire to ENQA members

#### 1. An introduction to the project

1.1 The first Quality Convergence Study (QCS) concluded with the notion that the focal points for convergence of quality assurance processes in Europe and for the agencies that are working in this area towards the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are those of mutual trust, knowledge and understanding.

1.2 In the end, this main conclusion served to initiate a closer interest in the quality of the international and intercultural dialogue which, step by step, is accompanying the construction of the EHEA, and the emergence of common or shared cultural aspects of our work. Eventually, each member agency of ENQA will have to find a way of showing that it can engender trust in the outcomes of the work it carries out.

1.3. The aim of QCS II is to continue a little further along this path by offering the member agencies of ENQA an opportunity to reflect together on the values that underpin their activities.

1.4. The objective is, therefore, by means of consideration of our concrete activities, to reflect on how we would define those values that underpin practice. This approach is from an epistemological perspective; we hope that it will add another dimension to recent work carried out on practice (e.g. *Report on European Standards and Guidelines from a Nordic Perspective*) and on terminology and vocabulary (ENQA workshop: *The Language of European Quality Assurance*). The project is a pilot and the approach taken below is, therefore, experimental.

#### 2. Project methodology

2.1 Given the time constraints and the experimental nature of the project, the steering group<sup>7</sup> decided to work with a limited number of notions.

2.2 These notions form part of the normal framework for the work of agencies in external quality assurance. They are central to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* (ESG). In the field of external quality assurance, they are the equivalent of expressions of academic values such as freedom of speech, open debate and transparency.

<sup>6</sup> Fiona Crozier (QAA), Bruno Curvale (CNE), Fabrice Hénard (CNE), Colin Brooks (Higher Education Academy, UK), Licinio Lima (University of Minho, Portugal), Philippe Saltel (University of Grenoble II Pierre Mendès-France)

### 2.3 The notions that will be used in the project are:

- **Independence** (that gives authority to the evaluation activity);
- **Peer review** (that ensures that the results of the evaluation process are credible and legitimate);
- **Transparency of the method** (the objective being to sustain confidence in the process);
- **The results** (that justify the utility of the agency's work).

### 3. Questionnaire

The following **questions**, to which the project steering group would like the ENQA members to provide an answer, **relate to each of the notions** listed above:

1. In the agency's context, what are the main values that underpin the notion?
2. What is the impact of these values on the methods and procedures employed by the agency?
3. How does the agency ensure that its values are respected?
4. How does the agency solve any problems it may encounter in relation to the values it holds?

So, for example, for the notion of 'independence', the ENQA member agencies are asked to consider:

- 1) the main values that underpin the notion of 'independence' in the context of a given agency;
- 2) how these values in relation to independence impact on the methods and procedures the agency uses;
- 3) how is it ensured that the values attributed to the notion of independence are respected and
- 4) how does the agency resolve any problems it may encounter with the values it associates with independence.

The project is not trying to test hypotheses, to seek out correct answers or to elaborate definitions. It is aiming to deepen the capacity for collective thinking about the work of the ENQA member agencies.

It is possible that you may consider that the answers to the questions would vary between yourselves and the partners/stakeholders with whom you work closely. If this is the case, it would be very interesting for the steering group to know about such differences.

This format should be followed for all four notions. The steering group is looking for no more than one page on each notion and **we do not expect you to provide us with a response that is any longer than 4 sides of A4 maximum.**

When you have completed your response, please e-mail it to Fiona Crozier (f.crozier@qaa.ac.uk), Bruno Curvale (bruno.curvale@cne-evaluation.fr) and Fabrice Hénard (fabrice.henard@cne-evaluation.fr) **by 30th September 2006. Your response will remain confidential** to the steering group and will not be published.

The steering group is very grateful to you for taking the time to respond. If you have any questions about the questionnaire, you can e-mail (as above) or call Fiona Crozier (+44 1452 557129), Bruno Curvale (+33 1 55 55 68 40) or Fabrice Hénard (+33 1 55 55 78 42). A report on the outcomes of the project will be available early in 2007.

*Yours sincerely,*

FIONA CROZIER  
(On behalf of Bruno Curvale and Fabrice Hénard)