



BRINGING OUT THE BEST IN EDUCATION

Enhancing quality in higher education

Conference Report
Cairo • 7/8 May 2008



Report from Tempus conference on quality enhancement in higher education

Cairo, Egypt, 7-8 May 2008

1) Objectives of the Tempus conference in Cairo

The quality of higher education institutions and systems is a growing concern of education policy makers in Europe and beyond, who want to make their universities **more attractive** and minimise brain drain. Globalisation forces universities to open up to international cooperation and trends, to send and receive more students from abroad and compare quality across borders. Higher education systems are under pressure of new demands for **international recognition of degrees** and they need to respond to an increasingly competitive environment. International university rankings have evolved: they provide more and more data on university performance, and receive growing attention from the media.

In the framework of the Tempus programme, many university cooperation projects have in recent years focused on the development of quality assurance procedures, on enhancing the quality of study programmes and higher education institutions. The European Commission, together with the Egyptian Ministry of Higher Education, have therefore organised an international conference in Cairo on 7-8 May 2008, to review this large experience, and discuss the latest developments in quality enhancement in the EU and its partner countries. The conference was a platform for dialogue between academics, experts and students coming from the EU and the 28 Tempus partner countries.

The Minister of Higher Education Mr Hany Helal, and the EU Commissioner for Education, Training and Culture, Mr Ján Figel' addressed the participants and presented their vision of the higher education modernisation agenda.

2) EU strategic choices

Commission Directors David White and Marcus Cornaro stressed that quality assurance was mainly about creating **confidence**. Confidence that if one follows a particular course in higher education, s/he will acquire the announced learning outcome. Confidence that higher education systems are providing the service they announce as effectively and efficiently as is possible. Confidence that they are constantly reviewing their own performance, both by internal review and external assessment, in a continual effort to improve delivery. Confidence that higher education is achieving its aims and ensuring that its aims are correct.

In the context of globalisation, education systems are judged not just against their own past performances but against the performances of education systems elsewhere. Education systems must be in constant discussion with others. Tempus is a good example of how this can be done.

Education policy in the EU is undergoing major changes. Four strategic choices will underpin the EU education policy for years to come: 1) the shift towards **lifelong learning** to adapt constantly in a world that changes ever faster; 2) **student-centred**

learning, which is about meeting the needs and ambitions of the student, in life and at work; 3) strengthening **equity**; and 4) ensuring that education policy is **evidence-based**. The alternative to evidence-based policy is assertion-based policy. The stakes are too high to build our future on someone's assertions alone.

3) Tempus study on quality in higher education

A study was commissioned by the Commission to John Reilly and Ard Jongsma, to identify examples of innovative practice in quality assurance in Tempus projects. From the study and the feedback received from the Tempus partner countries, a number of issues have emerged, in particular:

- The focus on **student-centered learning**: it is a process that needs to be brought much closer to the heart of education developments and that many still find difficult to take seriously. Degree programmes should first of all be relevant for students, who want to be sure that minimum quality standards are met. Students should therefore be more actively involved in internal quality assurance procedures, and not only through student feedback questionnaires. This is a major challenge in environments where teaching and learning tend to remain teacher-centered.
- **Institutional development and leadership training** are part of the quality agenda: quality assurance projects are often carried out by enthusiastic academic staff on a voluntarily basis, when they are not teaching. If quality is to be recognised as a strategic issue at university level, its place within the universities should be more visible and **proper human and financial resources** should be allocated to it.
- **Information and transparency** are the key to quality assurance. Stakeholders of higher education, governments, teachers, students, parents, employers are keen to have information about the quality of the institutions and academic programmes. Such information is used for accountability to these stakeholders, as well as for decision making purposes, but the need to put more emphasis on information and transparency is not uniformly recognised. The absence of effective information systems means that a pillar of the quality assurance requirements is often missing.
- An area which needs to be strengthened is the **ongoing review** (a process of internal self-assessment, programme evaluation and review). Although excellent structures for monitoring quality are put in place, it is rare to have timetables and processes for internal periodic reviews separate from the external processes to which all institutions are subject for accreditation. Institutions are too rarely embedding concepts of **self-assessment** within their internal quality systems.

The study can be downloaded from Tempus website (soon available in French and Russian as well): <http://ec.europa.eu/tempus>

4) The views from the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Peter Williams, President of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) stressed the role of his association in developing **European Standards and Guidelines** (ESG) for quality assurance in higher education, and establishing the European Quality Assurance Register. Most countries now have quality assurance (QA) or accreditation agencies, which offer a mixture of programme accreditation, institutional accreditation, and non-accrediting quality assurance reviews. Some countries are moving/have moved from programme focus to institutional focus, while some are moving the other way. European Standards and Guidelines are being increasingly used. According to the London Communiqué, ESG have been a powerful driver of change in relation to QA. All countries have started to implement them and some have made substantial progress. External QA in particular is much better developed than before. **Student involvement** at all levels has increased. Since the main responsibility for quality lies with Higher Education Institutions (HEI), they should continue to develop their systems of QA. International cooperation amongst QA agencies is encouraged.

Another interesting development is the **European Quality Assurance Register** (EQAR: (www.eqar.eu). It is a publicly available, web-based, information tool consisting of a list of QA agencies operating in Europe. Entry is voluntary through compliance with ESG, evidenced by an external review. The purpose of EQAR is to promote student mobility by providing a basis for the increase of trust among the HEIs; to reduce opportunities for 'accreditation mills' and to gain credibility. It should also provide a basis for governments to authorise HEIs to choose any agency from the Register, if that is compatible with national arrangements. EQAR will provide a means for HEIs to choose between different agencies, if that is compatible with national arrangements. It will serve as an instrument to improve the quality of the QA agencies and to promote mutual trust among them.

There is clearly a need for **information about quality**, for public confidence in providers and for reassurance about the value of qualifications. Academic ownership of quality and standards needs to be strengthened, and international comparability judged. All of this suggests a requirement for strong internal quality cultures, external verification of quality, up to date information about quality, clearly understandable standards for QA and the use of a common language and vocabulary.

At the end of his presentation, Peter Williams expressed a number of personal concerns: ESG are being given more weight than they were originally intended to bear. Too many QA agencies **are fixated on processes and not on purposes** and unfortunately fitness for purpose is not the predominant driver of external QA processes at present. There is a lot of information but limited communication on QA systems. Compliance approaches work against improvement and might lead to self delusion. And finally, quality assurance systems need to be **cost-effective** if they want to reach their intended objectives.

When asked to identify a possible trajectory for 2020 and beyond, P. Williams insisted that institutions should take more responsibility for their own quality and quality assurance. External national programmes for quality assurance/ accreditation

should ultimately be replaced by selective **international accreditation** and by external national institutional quality assurance /accreditation. It is essential that all stakeholders share the same values and understandings.

5) Self assessing the quality of the student experience

Gwen M. van der Velden, Director of Learning and Teaching Enhancement at the University of Bath explained how her university seeks to use quality management processes to enhance learning and teaching practices in support of outstanding student learning.

Contrary to many of its peers, Bath no longer separates quality enhancement from quality assurance. As is reflected in the organisational structure at the University of Bath, quality management, academic staff development and representation of the student voice are closely linked in an effort to return to the essence of quality management in learning and teaching. At the core of the 'Bath approach' lies an interpretation of quality management as a process of rigorous self assessment and enhancement on the basis of reliable data and views.

Methods of **self assessment** still include those commonly known in higher education, and range from online unit evaluations and the National Student Survey to staff appraisals, staff-student liaison committees and periodic programme reviews. Gwen van der Velden gave an insight into the way that different stakeholders contribute to rigorous assessment, and particularly, the increasingly important role of students in this context. Self assessment is carried out at all levels (modules, programmes, staff, peers, central services...). Staff are evaluated by senior colleagues, peers, and students, and this evaluation is directly linked to staff development planning.

Finally, a comparison was made between self assessment and assessment of quality by externals. They share some common features: they use broadly the same data; external review uses internal quality management systems and both systems base themselves on peer review. But they also differ since external assessments lead to league tables and have a potential impact on funding (student numbers). Only self assessment includes students directly. External reviews are snap shots while self assessment is a continuous process.

6) The student perspective on quality assurance

Mrs Ewa Krzaklewska from the Jagiellonian University, Krakow, Poland, stressed that outcome oriented programmes cannot be created, organised or improved without the input of students. Students are not the only actors in the play (the employers are also an important group), but they are sometimes the **unique source of information** on the learning processes. This is even more the case since education is going through a major innovation processes (e.g. introduction of BA/MA levels of studies, new market-oriented curricula).

Students nowadays differ from students from some decades ago. They stay longer in education, they are of a wider age range, often **mobile** – they change universities or participate in international exchange programmes. They are also influenced by new technologies that allow them to gain information from innumerable sources and compare it. The ability to choose the institution where they want to study makes them more demanding. Investing time and money in higher education should have a clear return: competences needed on the labour market. Most students therefore welcome quality assurance initiatives with applause.

Students involvement is needed at all levels: programme, institutional, national, European (ESU), in all different forms – from passive to active role in groups and panels, in formal and non-formal ways. And most importantly, on equal foot with other opinion-givers and ideas-producers.

Among the student body there are students of different ages, abilities, and knowledge. Some students could be used for their management skills. Students often set up informal groups, which could be used for feedback (e.g. sport teams for quality of sport facilities, physically disabled for the development of more accessible buildings). Other interesting groups are those who studied abroad, as they have benchmarking abilities, alumni (they know what skills served them on the labour market and which were missing) as well as students that dropped off from universities. Students' roles in QA can be information providers, actors, experts or partners.

Institutions often voice concern that students are not mature enough to engage and construct their own learning processes. Other concerns are that they are not responsible, they change too often, or that they do not care about quality issues and remain rather passive service receivers. Some institutions say that it is hard to recruit competent students as experts. Reasons behind such thinking may be many: students might not know they have such a possibility. They do not know how to engage and need to learn how to do it. They can also be discouraged as they often do not see the results of the feedback activities in which they have participated, and may feel that their help has not generated any change in their institution. Questionnaires can become a routine exercise which is less and less effective and should not become a substitute for the active involvement of students in quality assessment. But this might be the result of a certain culture in an institution. There are tools to overcome those obstacles: the task of every institution is to allow and empower students into the QA processes.

While creating a quality culture at the university, institutions have to set up structures and give real possibilities for students to become engaged in the process of quality assurance. Students need to learn how to evaluate their own learning processes. The results from student feedback should be transparent and available to all students. The support given by students needs to be appreciated. **Follow-up is a must:** the provision of information must have an aim: the improvement of existing structures and processes. Therefore, creative teams should analyse the evaluation results, design follow up actions, and certainly, they should also have student representatives on their board. It is advised to use new technologies in order to speed up analysis processes. Interestingly, HEI can be evaluated even if they do not know about it, most importantly through informal Internet communities and websites that young people often engage in.

The results of the working group discussions showed that the involvement of students and employers in QA and curriculum development was still generally too weak. There is a need for more transparency in the information provided about QA processes.

7) Changing the culture - from "policing" to "effective professional practice": the Tuning experience

It is normal practice that higher education institutions (HEIs) and their staff wake-up when the quality of their educational offer is evaluated by external experts such as quality assurance committees or accreditation authorities. Both might use peer review committees, which are experienced and a useful form of policing, which guarantees a minimum level of quality. This is a reactive form of quality assurance. As part of this procedure, academic and supporting staff involved in the teaching, learning and assessment (TLA) process are asked to write a self-evaluation report based on a set of questions raised by the external body.

Mr Robert Wagenaar, joint coordinator of the Erasmus, Tempus and Alfa Tuning project at the University of Groningen, explained that in 2000, a group of academics, active as ECTS counsellors, wondered – against the background of the launch of the Bologna Process – whether academics and their institutions should not play a **more active role** in upholding the quality of their degree programmes. It was thought that the responsibility for developing, maintaining and increasing quality in TLA lies with HEIs and their staff. In 2001 a large scale project was launched by a group of carefully selected universities for which a number of clear objectives was identified: 1) To raise awareness of the importance of quality in process and delivery; 2) To respond to the growing demands of a lifelong learning society which requires more flexibility and differentiation; 3) To implement the Bologna Process at subject area level; 4) To develop best ways to introduce the two / three cycle system; 5) To raise awareness of the importance of employability and citizenship in the educational process; 6) To introduce the concept of learning outcomes and competences Europe wide.

The title “Tuning Educational Structures in Europe” was chosen to reflect the idea that universities do not look for uniformity in their degree programmes but simply for points of reference, convergence and common understanding. In the framework of Tuning it was concluded that it would be necessary – as a condition to meet the objectives of the Bologna Process – to move from the traditional staff centred approach to a more student centred one. This change of paradigm is reflected in the outcomes and the products of the Tuning project.

One of the main purposes of Tuning has been to develop a new methodology for re-designing high quality degree programmes and to enhance the educational offer on a regular basis. Its approach gives the academic staff and the students a central role in the process. By focussing on the competences to be developed and the learning outcomes to be achieved, degree programmes are based on:

- an identified need and **consultation with stakeholders** (including employers),

- targeted sets of **generic and subject specific competences** (knowledge, understanding, skills, abilities and attitudes),
- well structured programmes with a clear eye for the **student workload** involved (expressed in terms of ECTS credits),
- and well chosen TLA approaches, and a continuous quality enhancement system.

Tuning offers simple tools to help academics in this process. These tools have been developed for academics by academics. More detailed information can be found in the general brochure *Tuning Educational Structures in Europe. Universities' Contribution to the Bologna Process. An introduction* and on the Tuning Website: <http://tuning.unideusto.org/tuningeu> and www.rug.nl/let/tuningeu

8) Quality assurance in higher education: the way forward

Commissioner Jan Figel presented his vision of the higher education policy agenda and stressed that dialogue was a building principle and the hallmark of the European experiment. The Union for the Mediterranean will continue to enhance dialogue with this region.

The European Commission believes that universities should make a full contribution to the **Lisbon strategy** for growth and jobs. The quality of higher education is a key ingredient for this. So is the relevance of education content. The enormous pool of knowledge held within the universities should be freed up to make sure that its potential will be used.

First, universities should identify their own specific **areas of excellence**. It can be in teaching, in research, in innovation. It can be targeted on new groups. It can be focused on particular disciplines. But we must recognise that only few universities can become world leaders across the board.

Second, universities need to encourage broader participation in higher education. This should include targeting groups that have not traditionally been students. Older people may need to upgrade and update their knowledge. And aging population needs **lifelong learning**. To achieve this, universities need to restructure their courses.

Third, universities need to develop a system of **governance** that gives them more independence. Universities should be free to build their own development plans and to choose their own staff. But they should be publicly accountable for their choice. They need to ensure that these plans are financially sustainable.

Higher education is regarded as one of the priority areas of the EU neighbourhood policy; as such, the European Commission will continue to offer its cooperation to all its partner countries—notably through the Tempus programme. Students and their prospective employers are important stakeholders in the design of higher education and quality assurance policies. There should be a stronger focus on **student-centred learning**.

Another reason why quality is crucial can be found in the progressive internationalisation of higher education. Globalisation is forcing universities to open up to international competition and cooperation; the most dynamic and successful universities send and receive many students from abroad and compare quality across borders. In general, higher education systems are under a new **competitive pressure**, as new demands for **international recognition** of degrees arise and they need to respond to an increasingly open environment.

Mr Figel mentioned three concrete aspects of quality assurance in higher education:

- The **European Quality Assurance Register** which will provide reliable data on quality assurance. Quality assurance is about giving stakeholders the confidence that the higher education service which is promised by one or other institutions will in fact be delivered. The Register will help promote student mobility. It will increase trust between higher education institutions. It will enhance the quality of universities and help them make an intelligent choice of the quality assurance agency they should use.
- **University rankings** are becoming more and more important for students, for university authorities and for other stakeholders. They are increasingly used to help allocate funding. However, there is no agreed basis for ranking of universities. The Commission's concern is to ensure that each student, researcher or teacher can rank universities according to their specific priorities. Some maybe concerned with teaching quality. Others maybe concerned with research performance. Still others maybe concerned about the possibility of combining particular disciplines. That is why the European Commission is supporting work to **categorise institutions** according to what they do and how they perform. In this way we hope to lay foundations which will do justice to the riches and diversity of Europe's academic landscape and its 4000 universities.
- The European Commission wants to see an **increase in the mobility** of students and teachers. For this to be a good experience, teachers and students need to be properly prepared. Further it is important that what they have learned in one country can be properly understood and recognised in another country. That is why the Commission initiated the **European Quality Charter for Mobility**. It will help ensure that mobility is a useful experience. An additional instrument is the European Qualifications Framework. It is the first international qualifications framework. It empowers people and changes them from tourists to citizens in one legal space.

9) Quality assurance in Egyptian universities

The concluding remarks were left to the Egyptian Minister of Higher Education Hany Helal who explained the conditions under which higher education in Egypt was being modernised: the increasing competitiveness, the growing population, limited resources and an overall resistance to change. The strategic objectives of higher education reforms in Egypt are to train highly skilled graduates in a quality oriented system, so that they are able to compete in the knowledge economy. Tempus is

embedded in the **National Higher Education Reform Plan**, which includes 25 distinct reform projects linked to governance and legislative modernisation. An integrated approach to quality assurance was adopted to achieve international quality standards in higher education.

A National Agency for Quality in Education and Accreditation was set up to develop quality assurance and accreditation standards for various levels of education. ICT, e-learning and distance learning were also reinforced. Competitive projects were introduced, as a driver and incentive to improve quality.

The challenges for the future are linked to:

- **Access and equity:** 30% of the age group are currently enrolled in higher education, with an objective to reach 40% by 2022 i.e. almost doubling the current number of students;
- **Teacher/ student ratio** should reach international standards;
- Education **infrastructures** should be upgraded through competitive projects and direct government funding;
- More than 400 faculties and institutes should be involved in quality assurance and accreditation procedures;
- Reform cost, finance and **funding mechanisms** will be reviewed;
- The **relevance and flexibility** of the higher education system should be strengthened.

Quality assurance is not a project or a process, it is a **culture** that should be embedded at all levels of the higher education system.

10) Recommendations for future Tempus projects

Based on the discussions and recommendations made during the conference, some guidelines for future Tempus projects on quality assurance have been developed, which will become part of future Tempus calls for proposals:

- Future projects should seek to develop effective materials and courses for staff development and training for all levels and types of staff. These should include **leadership courses** for the senior managers of universities – rectors, vice-rectors, deans, and heads of department. They should also include **courses for academic staff** on the principles of quality assurance, approaches to curriculum development, new teaching methods and general professional skills updating, as well as courses for senior administrative staff working in the field of quality assurance and associated administrative areas.
- Projects should go beyond procedures and processes and implement the recommended measures within the time span of the projects.
- Future projects will have to focus on **student and employer participation** in all aspects of quality assurance nationally and at the institutional level.
- Projects covering best practice in **self-assessment** for external and internal purposes would be welcome.

- European models for quality assurance can be used as a powerful source of guidance and inspiration, but must **never simply be copied** into a foreign context.
- There is a need for projects tackling the development of **information systems and performance indicators** using the European Standards and Guidelines. They should publish performance indicators at a national and institutional level, using for example institutional intranets for communication, teaching and learning.
- Outcomes of external quality assurance and accreditation processes must be **published** (and disseminated) in a form which is accessible to the public and stakeholders.