Workshop 3

Workshop on Quality assurance and accreditation

This workshop focuses on accreditation as one of the most known mechanisms for assuring learners and stakeholders on the quality and relevance of the education/ training offer.

Accreditation, as quality, has different meanings in different contexts. In the context of this seminar, we chose the official EU definitions: "Accreditation of an education and training provider is the process of quality assurance through which accredited status is granted to the provider showing it has been approved by the relevant legislative or professional authorities by having met predetermined standards"[1]. Essentially, "accreditation" is meant as the formal recognition that "a body is competent to carry out specific tasks"[2] and its value resides in the fact that it provides an external (to the educational institution) and officially recognized statement on whether the training programmes have been implemented in accordance with the objectives, criteria and standards of the (national/sector) policy frameworks for quality"[3].

Accreditation is widely used in Higher Education (HE) and on all its levels (national, European and international). The Bologna process has made the accreditation of academic programmes and institutions a widely recognised standard in the European Higher Education Area and its 47 member countries (EHEA)[4]. The Common European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) that steer the HE institutions' policies in this field were adopted as early as 2005, have been already implemented and are currently under revision giving HE a clear lead in this field. It should not come as a surprise therefore that so many International and European Associations of Universities stress the importance of accreditation and of accreditation agencies for the quality assurance processes[5].In

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[1] Glossary Quality in Education and Training. CEDEFOP (2011) Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/17663.aspx)

[2] Assuring quality in vocational education and training. The role of accrediting VET providers. CEDEFOP (2011). Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities. http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19074.aspx

[3] Accreditation and quality assurance in vocational education and training Selected European approaches .CEDEFOP (2009). Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/5007.aspx)

[4] European Higher Education Area (EHEA) http://www.ehea.info/

[5] European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) http://eurashe.eu/, European University Association (EUA) http://www.eua.be/

addition, accreditation and external evaluation of HE institutions constitute focal points of the European cooperation, facilitated by common and powerful tools such as the already mentioned ESG and the European QA Register for HE (EQAR)[6] in which participate most of the EU Member States through the registration of their quality assurance agencies. EQAR-registered agencies will be encouraged "to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements"[7].

Similar-but so far less coherent-tendencies can be observed in vocational education and training (VET), boosted by the adoption of the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the establishment of a European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET[8] (which however does not refer to accreditation explicitly).

However, few VET systems have yet comprehensive accreditation systems based on standards. Most of them dispose of accreditation systems and procedures for specific VET categories (mainly for initial VET offered by secondary or post-secondary schools) or VET actors (for private VET-providers or for state- funded ones). Contrary to HE where the role of state is limited with education institutions enjoying important autonomy, in VET national authorities are usually in charge of the accreditation of VET providers[9]. Clearing the market, assuring a minimum standard of quality and thus giving a guarantee of quality to potential users have been main reasons for establishing accreditation schemes in many Member States (MS), like for instance in Italy (for both IVET and CVET providers applying for public funds) or in Hungary and Germany (for CVET providers). Undeniably, the EU policies (EQF - regarding National Qualification Frameworks, compatible with and referenced to the European Qualification Framework, ECVET - regarding the European Credit system for Vocational Education and Training and EQAVET) put pressure on public authorities to not only develop accreditation structures and mechanisms but to do so in a way that renders them sufficiently compatible to facilitate learners/students mobility. This is gradually becoming an issue of reflexion because the existing accreditation mechanisms vary greatly from one VET system to the other and even within the same system. For instance, some systems use for internal evaluation only self-evaluation, others only peer-evaluation, whilst others combine both albeit in different degrees. Registration of (authorised) VET providers is another field where national practices differ considerably and are scarce in comparison to HE: in few MS accreditation leads to a national registry, as in Romania, for example, where VET institutions whether public, private or public-private have to be registered in order to provide authorised/recognized qualifications. These differences lay behind the conclusions of the Irish Presidency Conference on QA in Qualifications Frameworks (Dublin, March 2013) which call for a dialogue between the main actors in HE and VET on their QA approaches in order to promote their greater compatibility.

As two Cedefop studies on ten VET national accreditation systems and four sector ones have shown, there exist sector specific accreditations also which assure the quality of skills and competences delivery and which respond to sector specific needs for a qualified labour force at European and/or international levels (like for instance the welding sector, the nursing and health care, the banking and financial services etc.)[10]. These sector approaches operate without or with little state intervention resembling in this aspect to HE accreditations.

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[6] European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education http://www.eqar.eu/

[7] EHEA Ministerial Conference, Bucharest 2012
http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/%281%29/Bucharest%20Communique%202012%281%29.pdf

[8] http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:C:2009:155:0001:0010:EN:PDF

[9] Information Gathering Exercise Quality assurance procedures in the processes of certification, curricula setting, accreditation and training of trainers in European VET systems (2011).
(http://eqavet.eu/gns/library/publications/2011.aspx)

[10] Assuring quality in vocational education and training. The role of accrediting VET providers (2011). Luxembourg: CEDEFOP/Office for Official Publications of the European Communities (http://www.cedefop.europa.eu/EN/publications/19074.aspx)

Common challenges in VET and HE

In VET, accreditation systems tend to ensure more the respect of minimum standards in VET delivery rather than to promote the continuous improvement of the quality of the training offered. In other words, it appears difficult for existing accreditation systems to combine the accountability function they have by definition with improvement. This concern is shared by HE institutions also. In addition, the above mentioned studies showed that the relationship between internal and external quality assurance is rather weak and this represents a second concern for both education subsectors. Although internal and external quality assurance should in theory complement each other, in reality their relationship is often problematic if not inexistent. In fact, external quality assurance and accreditation seem to be more developed than internal quality processes. Apparently, it must be less demanding to set up mechanisms required by external parties for accountability purposes than to manage Internal quality assurance is a complex issue consisting of policies and procedures, concepts and structures, processes and methods, data analysis, usage and publication of results. In order to perform all these functions in a serious manner, the role of internal quality assurance needs to be both strengthened and acknowledged. However, in order to achieve such recognition, more evidence is needed on the real impact of internal quality assurance on the improvement of teaching and learning: it is a shared finding that while distinct evaluation activities are being introduced everywhere, feedback and actions for improvement still appear to be insufficiently developed.

Consequently, VET providers and universities are often hesitant about the effectiveness of their internal quality assurance systems sharing similar concerns about it. Moreover, both HE and VET institutions complain often about the costly bureaucracy that external accreditation entails and this is another challenge they both face in this field.

As mentioned in the Background document, Lifelong learning (LLL) is a relative new approach to education and learning, steadily promoted since the Lisbon Strategy of 2000. Covering all general and vocational education and training, non-formal as well as informal learning undertaken throughout life, LLL is gradually making the division between HE and VET obsolete[11]. Therefore European and national competent authorities are being confronted with the challenge of linking existing and well embedded policies and tools in a way to create synergies and to bring coherence and transparency in systems still operating quite separately.

A greater compatibility could also lead- at a future stage though- to a common (core) framework for quality assurance and accreditation encompassing both HE and VET. The definition of such a common quality framework should take due consideration of both the elements that bring HE and VET closer and of those that differentiate them and it should draw its legitimisation and acceptance under the condition that it drives quality improvement further than existing arrangements do at present. This could be considered a response to the growing need for an intelligent overarching structure for the existing approaches to quality assurance and accreditation in use. For example, such a framework could define more

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[11] In Romania, a unique set of standards for accreditation in (pre-university) general education and in IVET applies and a unique authority, ARACIP, is in charge of their elaboration and the coordination of the accreditation process.

clearly the prerequisites for effective internal quality assurance bridging in this way the gap between external quality assurance/accreditation and the requirements for internal quality assurance which are often stated vaguely or are even totally lacking, as already said.

As known, the quality of education and VET delivery is facilitated by various instruments that may relate to either the external or the internal quality assurance or even to both. As already stated, this workshop focuses exclusively on accreditation, one of the most popular instruments for external quality assurance. However, we should not forget that accreditation is sometimes related to other tools such as rankings and labels. Rankings and league tables have long been applied in HE where they constitute a global practice aiming at enabling students to make a better choice on where to study by providing standardised and uniform information on HE institutions. If rankings are familiar to HE, quality labels are more often used in VET and sectors. They are mainly delivered by private organisations; however, in France the labels of "GRETA+" and of "Lycée des Metiers" are delivered by the state as labels of excellence in IVET and CVET respectively.

There are also other instruments that support internal quality coming from outside the institutions such as, for example, incentives and peer reviews. Peer reviews are used as a soft way of introducing improvements in an educational organisation with the help of peers or critical friends. However their real impact on the quality of teaching and learning is still an open issue since there is no conclusive evidence of their influence yet.

Objectives

The workshop on quality assurance and accreditation should facilitate mutual learning on one hand and identify core elements for a reinforcing joint approach to quality assurance and accreditation in HE and VET, on the other hand. Following the seminar's overall approach, it should privilege those elements that are common to HE and VET when it comes to quality assurance and accreditation. As a by-product, the workshop may define crucial areas for further research to support the above-mentioned objectives. Reflexion should be encouraged by the input presentations which cover several aspects of quality assurance and accreditation from the perspective of HE or VET or of both.

Issues for discussion

Participants are invited to reflect on and answer to the following questions:

- Both in HE and VET accreditation has an accountability function but it is also meant to promote improvement of the quality of the education/training provision. These two roles are not necessarily convergent; in reality they are often opposite. Where is the focus of accreditation placed in HE and/or VET? Is it possible to describe future tendencies in this field?

- Both HE and VET institutions complain against the bureaucratic burden the accreditation process puts on them. How could red-tape be reduced? How could procedures be main-steamed and simplified?

- What is the role and weight of participatory approaches like the involvement of students, employers and other stakeholders in the accreditation process itself? In the delivery of education/training? In the definition of criteria for accreditation?

- How to promote mutual beneficial relationships between internal quality assurance and accreditation of education institutions?

- How far could/should quality assurance agencies active in the VET subsector be registered in an approach inspired by EQAR?

- How far can international cooperation / internationalisation contribute to the improvement of quality within an education/training institution and under which conditions?

Workshop 3		Quality assurance and accreditation	
Chair		…	
Rapporteur		Ms Tina Bertzeletou, Cedefop	
VET	Estonia	*Going for excellence in VET*	Mr Kalle Toom, Head of VET, Ministry of Education and Research
HE	EU	*The EQAR mission and experience with automatic recognition and foreign auditing*	Prof Eric Froment, Chair EQAR Register Committee
VET	France	*Academie de Caen : A Regional network for permeability between VET and HE*	Mr Alain Tambour Assoc. Lecturer at IUFM - Caen
VET	NL	*The EQUASS Quality Label*	Mr Guus van Beek Executive Manager
HE	Germany	*Institutional accreditation in HE: A means to increase internal responsibility for quality?*	Prof Philipp Pohlenz, Man.Director, University of Potsdam
LLL	France	*Stakeholders' cooperation on accreditation for a quality culture in VET and HE*	Dr Pascale de Rozario, Conservatoire national des arts et métiers