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Proposal for a
COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION
ON
EUROPEAN COOPERATION
IN
QUALITY ASSURANCE
IN HIGHER EDUCATION
(presented by the Commission)

EXPLANATORY MEMORANDUM

I. INTRODUCTION

1. Quality in higher education is a priority for the Member States and for the higher education institutions themselves. European Community encouragement, support and supplementing of national measures can provide a substantial boost to the improvement of this quality.
2. The Commission Memorandum on higher education¹ and the responses of the Member States following an extensive debate on this subject² stressed that quality in an increasingly diversified higher education was an issue of paramount importance. It was also recognised that merely evaluating the scientific quality of research and the quality of staff is no longer a guarantee as to the quality of teaching and that the assessment of the quality of programme organisation, teaching methods, management methods, structures and communications are equally important. The role of quality assurance for strategic management and the cultural dimension of evaluation were also highlighted. There was a first support for the introduction of efficient and acceptable methods which are based on European co-operation and transnational exchange of experience and to networking of evaluation experts.
3. Based on this response to the Memorandum, and after several years of close co-operation under the ERASMUS programme, the Council³ and the Ministers of Education in November 1991 urged Community action in the area of quality evaluation in higher education. The ministers felt that European quality assessment experiments could enrich the multiplicity of national quality assurance methods without impinging on the competence and responsibilities of the Member States or the autonomy of higher education institutions. A Commission study⁴ on the methods of quality assessment used in the Member States at the time provided an overview of the "traditional methods" and the "new methods" of quality assessment in the Member States. As this study also showed a growing interest in quality in higher education as well as common elements in the "new methods" already in use, the Commission launched in co-operation with the competent authorities of the Member States two European pilot projects - one in engineering and the other in communication/information or art/design - in which 42 Member State institutions (plus four institutions from Iceland and Norway) participated.
4. In the first half of the 1990s, when the Commission launched the projects, only a few European countries had developed systematic quality assurance of their higher education systems. The aim of the projects was therefore to further raise awareness about the need to assess higher education in Europe, to enhance existing national procedures, to give a European dimension to quality assessment, to support the transfer of experience, and to contribute to the improvement of the mutual recognition of diplomas and study periods by promoting co-operation between institutions and by reinforcing mutual confidence through understanding programmes taught in different cultural contexts.

1 COM(91) 349 final

2 The outlook for Higher Education in the European Community; Responses to the Memorandum, Studies of the Task Force Human Resources, Education Training and Youth N° 2, Luxembourg 1993

3 OJ No C 321, 12.12.1991, p.2

4 Quality management and quality assurance in European higher education. Methods and mechanisms, Study N° 1 of the Task Force Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth, Luxembourg 1993

- 5 The pilot projects for the assessment of quality in higher education were conducted in 1994 and 1995, in conjunction with the competent authorities in the Member States, and focused on the assessment of the quality of teaching in a specific subject area in a selected institution, but did not exclude possible interactions with research activities and the management of higher education institutions. The method was based on the four principles common to those quality assurance systems in Europe using quality assessment at the time the project was designed (Denmark, France, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom). The objectives, methods and organisation of the projects were described in the "Guidelines for Participating Institutions", translated into all Community languages and distributed to all pilot project participants.
- 6 The outcome of the Europe-wide dialogue which took place during the pilot projects between HE institutions, experts, state authorities and NGOs were included in the information note⁵ presented by Mrs. Cresson to the Community institutions along with a report prepared by the management group which assisted the Commission in the implementation of the pilot projects. There was broad satisfaction with the launch and implementation of the European pilot projects and a growing realisation of the need to guarantee the quality of higher education. Participants resolved both to continue the co-operation and exchange of experience and to use the structures set up by all countries for organising the pilot projects, irrespective of whether or not they had already a quality assurance policy.
- 7 At its meeting on 6 May 1996, at which the information note was presented, the Education Council appreciated the co-operation in this important area and took note of the Commission's intention to propose a Council Recommendation with the orientation described in the note⁶.

II. THE CONTEXT

- 8 The new Chapter 3 in Title VIII of the Treaty circumscribes the Community's important role in the development of quality education without harmonisation of legal and statutory provisions in the Member States and confirms the latter's responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of their own education and training systems. Freedom of movement in a single market requires an open education area with mutual recognition of qualifications, while quality education capable of providing everyone with the wherewithal to meet European and world-wide standards and to make use of free movement within the Community needs transnational mobility and transnational co-operation. The education and training mobility programmes the Community has implemented since 1986 have increasingly shown that mobility and co-operation at the European level improve knowledge and understanding of the different national education systems, create greater transparency and mutual trust and so help to remove the barriers to the recognition of qualifications and skills. However, the recent Green Paper⁷ of the Commission on Education, Training and Research "Obstacles to Transnational Mobility" acknowledges that there are still many obstacles to mobility.
- 9 Quality assessment and quality assurance in higher education and transnational co-operation in quality issues stand in this tradition and continue to improve interaction between freedom of movement, quality education and greater transparency and understanding.

5 SEC(96) 800

6 Minutes of the 1920th meeting of the Education Council (SI(96)428)

7 COM(96) 462 final

The establishment of permanent quality assessment and quality assurance mechanisms in the Member States and the institutionalisation of European co-operation will bring added value for the quality. On the one hand, higher education institutions in the Member States can, with the help of NGOs or other groups or agencies, monitor their strengths and weaknesses against the aims of their disciplines, their institutional profiles and in relation to European and worldwide qualification requirements, and thus safeguard the quality of the output of their higher education systems. The resulting flexibility and improvement of qualifications would improve freedom of movement. On the other hand, institutionalised exchange of experiences and European co-operation in quality assessment and quality assurance will broaden knowledge of the situation in the different subject areas, understanding of the programmes taught across Europe, and enhance quality assurance mechanisms in higher education establishments.

Institutionalised co-operation in quality evaluation and quality assurance could eventually achieve a judicious blend of different cultural approaches and common methodological elements developed on a voluntary basis, founded on mutual trust and knowledge. This would be a big step towards overcoming obstacles to mobility.

- 10 What is more, using common methodological elements does not imply a 'ranking' or a common European standard. Quality evaluation methods are procedural rules and not content rules. That means they define the quality assessment or quality assurance procedure (whom to involve, what to look at, etc.) but do not establish quality criteria. These methods help the players concerned to determine their own strengths and weaknesses by examining the performance in their subject areas or their higher education establishments and asking whether this performance represents an adequate response to the concrete problems in the economic, social and cultural context peculiar to their HE establishments. The judgements on the quality of the institutional response are made by the players themselves and those whom they called in for their assistance.
- 11 The globalisation of economies, which involves the intensification of international competition through the emergence of an increasingly integrated worldwide market, has added a new dimension to the economic, social and cultural aims which are embodied in the European Community's developmental task: This can be achieved only if a whole range of structural changes is implemented to enable the Community to strengthen its competitiveness. One of the overarching objectives for corporate strategies and public policies in this context is to exploit the competitive edge associated with the gradual shift to a knowledge-based economy. The quality of education and training thus takes on a new, crucial importance for the development of the Community aims. The White Paper on Growth, Competitiveness and Employment⁸ invites each Member State to take from the document the elements it regards as making a positive contribution to its own action and proposes Community action to give fresh impetus to Europe's competitiveness.
- 12 The recent White Paper on Teaching and Learning⁹ likewise stresses that the changes currently in progress have indeed improved everyone's access to information and knowledge, but have at the same time changed working systems and the qualifications required so that in-depth re-organisation of educational resources is necessary to avoid insecurity and social exclusion in a knowledge-based society in which everyone's position will increasingly be determined by the knowledge he or she has built up.

8 Growth, competitiveness and employment. The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century, White Paper, Brussels, Luxembourg 1994

9 Teaching and learning - Towards the learning society, White Paper, Brussels, Luxembourg 1995

- 13 In this context, the old steering mechanisms used by public authorities have to be streamlined to provide the adaptability required. A new interpretation of the autonomy of higher education institutions is emerging which tends to give them more leeway in the definition of their tasks and the means of performing them, including allocation of financial resources, but also gives them greater responsibility for the quality of the teaching they deliver.
- 14 Experience in the Member States and during the European pilot projects have shown that besides giving higher education institutions evidence of their own performance, quality evaluation and quality assurance procedures can promote the self-critical capacities of these institutions and their ability to reorganise their output so that it better meets the needs of their economic, social and cultural environment. This can be considered as a first step to the development of coherent strategies of quality assessment and quality assurance in higher education establishments as a part of a more wide-ranging development of their ongoing capacity for innovation in the sense of "learning organisations".

Some Member States and/or higher education institutions search systematically for methods to promote this development as part of an overall strategy for redefining the relationship between HE institutions, state and society. The capability of these institutions to respond appropriately and quickly to the complex changes taking place in their environment can be improved by helping them to become self-critical and develop a capacity for self-correction. Quality assessment and quality assurance procedures could for instance not only help to reconcile European academic traditions with the need to strengthen competitiveness, but also to establish a 'holistic' higher education which fulfils not only economic but also social and cultural needs.

- 15 The European citizen is interested in accountability not only as a tax payer and the main contributor to the State funding of higher education, but also as a sometimes fee-paying student. Young people have the right to know the quality level of courses available in order to make an informed choice and obtain the right qualifications.

III. LEGAL BASIS FOR THE RECOMMENDATION

- 16 The means available to the European Community to fulfil the general objectives include the abolition between Member States of obstacles to the free movement of goods, persons, services and capital (Article 3.c EC Treaty) and the contribution to education and training of quality as well as the flowering of the cultures of the Member States (Article 3.p EC Treaty).

In accordance with the principle of subsidiarity set out in Article 3b of the Treaty, the Community is to take action only if and in so far as the objectives of the proposed action cannot be sufficiently achieved by the Member States and can therefore, by reason of the scale or effects of the proposed action, be better achieved by the Community.

For the area of education and training, Articles 126 and 127 state that the Community's role is to encourage co-operation between Member States and, if necessary, to support and supplement their action while fully respecting the responsibility of the Member States for the content of teaching and the organisation of education and training systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity.

- 17 The Recommendation respects the diversity of the European education and training systems and builds on voluntary co-operation and adaptation. Community action in the field could have an added value insofar as the advantages of co-operation at the European level, especially in quality assessment and quality assurance, cannot be achieved by one Member State alone or a single group of Member States without establishing links to all the others. The pace of change in this area makes permanent exchange of experience and full information on all developments in the Member States necessary in order to keep up. As this exchange would

draw on Europe's overall problem-solving capacity, it could build up the momentum and give a substantial and effective boost to the quality of European higher education.

IV. AIMS AND MEANS PROPOSED IN THE RECOMMENDATION AND POSSIBLE SYNERGIES

- 18 The Recommendation urges Member States to consider introducing quality assessment and quality assurance mechanisms into their higher education systems and stresses the usefulness of systems of this kind and certain of their operational principles, without prescribing methods, structures or funding, such arrangements remaining their exclusive responsibility.
- 19 The Recommendation lays particular emphasis on the advantages of European co-operation in quality assessment and quality assurance in helping Member States to meet the new quality demands on education systems. Permanent observation and comparison of the impact of the legal and institutional frameworks on performance will help to avoid possible undesired side-effects of quality assurance procedures in the different Member States and contribute to increasing effectiveness. Co-operation will also make it easier to develop strategies for innovation in higher education systems.
- 20 The establishment of a European Network on quality assurance in higher education will promote co-operation between Member States and higher education institutions by supporting the exchange of information and experience at European level.
- 21 A whole range of mutual catalytic influences between the existing Community programmes promoting co-operation in education on the one hand, Member States' quality agencies and the proposed Network for quality assurance in higher education on the other, are to be expected. Activities pursued by universities, for instance, as part of their institutional contracts under SOCRATES-ERASMUS (e.g. curriculum development or ECTS activities) could derive invaluable additional information from national evaluation agencies or evaluation projects supported by the Quality Assurance Network. Similarly, "Thematic Networks" which decide to implement quality assessment for their subject area(s) throughout Europe on the basis of their previous work, could obtain direct support from this Network. Vice versa, both links could be a resource for information and for building up a pool of international peers for quality evaluation. In the long run, a link could be envisaged with other activities, e.g. open and distance learning and co-operation between university and the business world, in order to integrate graduates in the labour market more effectively.
- 22 European and international organisations and associations which are competent and active in the field of higher education were involved in preparing the pilot projects. A study¹⁰ conducted on behalf of the Commission, provided a systematic overview of the activities of quality assessment and assurance implemented by international organisations and the different projects implemented. While noting the number and undoubted merits of efforts by the competent international organisations to improve the quality of higher education establishments, the study shows that these are nonetheless one-off initiatives. Furthermore, co-operation between these organisations and their participation in the Quality Assurance Network would not only contribute to create complementarity of interests and multiplier effects, but above all would preserve transparency in a field in which confusion could well reign if too many different networks were to be working simultaneously on different aspects and at different levels.

¹⁰ "Initiatives of Quality Assurance and Assessment of Higher Education in Europe" - Commission document.

PROPOSAL
FOR A COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION
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QUALITY ASSURANCE
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6 bis

THE COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION,

Having regard to the Treaty establishing the European Community, and particularly Articles 126 and 127 thereof,

Having regard to the proposal from the Commission¹¹,

Having regard to the opinion of the Economic and Social Committee¹²,

Having regard to the opinion of the Committee of the Regions¹³,

Acting in accordance with the procedure referred to in Article 189c of the Treaty¹⁴,

Whereas a high quality of education and training at all levels is an objective for all Member States and whereas the Community is requested to contribute to its achievement by promoting cooperation between Member States and, if necessary, by supporting and supplementing their action while fully respecting their responsibility for the content of teaching and the organisation of the education and training systems and their cultural and linguistic diversity;

Whereas the Council stated in its conclusions of 25 November 1991¹⁵ that improving the quality of teaching in higher education is a concern shared by each Member State and by every higher education institution within the European Community; whereas in view of the diversity of methods used for quality assessment at national level, national experience could be complemented by European experience provided by a limited number of pilot projects aimed at establishing and strengthening cooperation in this area;

Whereas through developments and activities in the Member States as well as through transnational cooperation and the mobility of students and teaching staff (particularly in the framework of Community programmes such as SOCRATES and especially its ERASMUS chapter) the awareness of European higher education institutions of the need to be able to judge the quality of studies available in other countries and to compare it with that of studies available within their own systems has been substantially raised;

Whereas one of the main issues of the Commission memorandum on higher education¹⁶ highlights that the former view of a vertical quality hierarchy of educational institutions whose qualifications are traditionally considered as different entrance tickets to society is becoming increasingly obsolete; whereas the emphasis today is more on quality across the whole of education and within each institution; whereas quality should be guaranteed at all levels and in all sectors, with differences only in terms of objectives, methods and educational demand; whereas there is support for the introduction of efficient and acceptable methods of quality evaluation which are based on European cooperation and transnational exchange of experience and which emphasise the importance of quality assurance for strategic management as well as its cultural dimension;

11 OJ No

12 OJ No.

13 OJ No. ...

14

15 OJ No C 321, 12.12.1991, p. 2

16 The outlook for Higher Education in the European Community; Responses to the Memorandum, Studies of the Task Force Education Training and Youth N° 2, Luxembourg 1993

Whereas a Commission study¹⁷ on the state of quality assurance in the Member States revealed that the new systems of quality assurance had certain points in common; whereas the two pilot projects conducted subsequently were based on these core elements of existing national systems; whereas they tested the common method successfully and showed that the actors in the field are all eager to pursue the exchange of experience during the reorganisation of higher education in general and the development of quality assurance in particular¹⁸;

Whereas higher education institutions have not only to meet the educational and professional requirements of a world-wide 'knowledge society', but also to address social problems nationally; whereas they aim to guarantee the quality of teaching by developing new initiatives (individually or on a collaborative basis within higher education associations) in order to give the services they provide the required attributes;

Whereas in view of the ever greater constraints of global competition as well as of mass education, authorities in all Member States face the task to tailor higher education systems and their relationships to state and society in ways which respect existing academic norms and values, and reinforce the autonomy and responsibility of higher education institutions;

Whereas the discussion of the Commission communication of 13 February 1994¹⁹ has demonstrated that all Member States are currently considering introducing or overhauling systems to improve mutual recognition of academic or professional qualifications; whereas quality assurance in higher education can contribute to the necessary flexibility and help to modernise higher education institutions;

Whereas the White Paper Growth, Competitiveness and Employment²⁰ identifies as a weakness at European level the lack of an open education area in the Community resulting from an insufficiently transparent system of qualifications; it considers the wealth of nations to be increasingly based on the creation and exploitation of knowledge and states that the key elements in competitiveness include the quality of education and training as well as the way in which corporate strategies are able to react to the changes in society;

Whereas the White Paper on Teaching and Learning²¹ and the premise of the "learning society", on which it is based, stresses the role of education and training as the "main vehicles for self-awareness, belonging, advancement and self-fulfilment", and that the "individual's place in relation to their fellow citizens will increasingly be determined by their capacity to learn and master fundamental knowledge"; as the social and cultural functions of education and training on the one hand and their economic functions on the other are indivisibly linked, demands in terms of the quality of education and training are correspondingly multidimensional and vitally important for all European citizens;

Whereas the Commission Green Paper²² on obstacles to transnational mobility highlights the difficulties encountered by students wishing to pursue their studies on a transnational basis and stresses that this type of mobility is essential for an education of high quality which can enable

17 Quality Management and quality assurance in European higher education. Methods and mechanisms, Study N° 1 of the Task Force Human Resources, Education, Training and Youth, Luxembourg 1993

18 Information Note on the Results of the European Pilot Projects for Evaluating Quality in Higher Education (SEC(96) 800), presented by the Commission to the Council of Ministers on 6th May 1996.

19 COM(94) 596 final

20 Growth, Competitiveness, Employment. The challenges and ways forward into the 21st century, White paper, Brussels, Luxembourg 1994, p. 80

21 Teaching and learning - Towards the learning society, White Paper, Brussels, Luxembourg 1995, p. 16/17

22 Green Paper - Education, Training, Research - The obstacles to transnational mobility. COM(96) 462 final.

individuals to meet European and international standards and to take advantage of freedom of movement within the Community;

I. HEREBY RECOMMENDS TO MEMBER STATES:

A. to establish, within their responsibilities for the organisation of their higher education systems, transparent quality assessment and quality assurance systems with the following aims:

- to safeguard the quality of higher education within the specific economic, social and cultural context of their countries while taking due account of the European dimension and of international requirements;
- to help higher education institutions use quality assurance techniques as steering mechanisms to promote organisational flexibility for permanent improvement in a rapidly changing environment;
- to underpin European and world-wide cooperation in order to benefit from each other's experience for the accomplishment of the two foregoing tasks;

B. to base systems of quality assessment and quality assurance on the following principles:

Autonomy and independence of the bodies responsible for quality assessment and quality assurance

These bodies should be autonomous and independent in relation to the political authorities and to the higher education institutions themselves in relation to procedural and methodological matters.

Relating evaluation procedures to the profile of institutions while respecting their autonomy

Quality assessment and quality assurance procedures should involve questions of institutional self understanding, especially how they define their aims and objectives, be it at the level of the institution, of the department or of the discipline, in order to allow for diverse educational responses to different societal needs.

Internal and external procedural elements

All quality assessment and quality assurance procedures should consist of an internal, self-reflective component and an external component, based on the appraisal of external experts.

Involvement of all the players

The internal element should involve all the relevant players within the institution in the process of self-reflexion, especially teaching staff and administrators in charge of academic and professional guidance, as well as students.

The external element should be a process of cooperative consultation and advice between independent experts from outside and players from within the institution.

Alumni, social partners, professional associations and other interested social groups could be included in the expert groups in order to bring relevant social and professional criteria to bear.

It is recommended to include foreign experts from other Member States in the groups of external experts. They can contribute to quality assessment and assurance by providing experiences from abroad, relating the observed processes to standards prevailing in other countries and by fostering cultural understanding.

Publication of evaluation reports

Reports on quality assessment and assurance procedures and their outcomes should be published in a form appropriate to each Member State and should provide a source of good reference material for cooperation partners and for the interested public.

- C. to ensure that follow-up measures are taken at national or regional or other level in order to enable higher education institutions to implement their plans for improving the quality of studies and for integrating graduates into the labour market more effectively.
- D. to ensure that high priority is given by public authorities and by the management of higher education institutions to continuous exchange of experience and cooperation in quality assessment and quality assurance with other Member States, as well as with international organisations and associations active in the field of higher education;

II. AND, TO THIS END, REQUESTS THE COMMISSION :

- 1. to support the establishment of a "European Quality Assurance Network" of bodies responsible for quality assessment and quality assurance, designated by the Member States, and of organisations and associations within the European Community with quality assessment or quality assurance experience in the field of higher education;

The tasks of this "Network" could include:

- a) exchange of information and experience through European conferences, workshops and by using new technologies;
- b) technical assistance to individual Member State authorities in implementing concrete projects for establishing or improving quality assessment and quality assurance procedures and mechanisms;
- c) assistance to groups of higher education institutions from different Member States who wish to cooperate in quality assessment or assurance, particularly in the framework of the "Thematic Networks" under the ERASMUS Chapter of the SOCRATES programme;
- d) other assistance to higher education institutions including information on new methodological developments and examples of good practice, facilitating contact with international experts by forming a "pool" or preparing a "tool kit" of methodological instruments for obtaining information necessary for quality assessment and quality assurance procedures;
- e) linking quality assurance with other Community activities developed especially in the framework of the SOCRATES and the LEONARDO DA VINCI programmes, or with the recognition of qualifications at European level;
- f) preparation of methods to achieve better integration of graduates in the European labour market;

The "European Quality Assurance Network" will be eligible for financial support in the framework of the SOCRATES and the LEONARDO DA VINCI programmes, subject to their objectives and normal procedures. A tangible business sector involvement in the assurance of quality in higher education is necessary for the latter, but is also desirable for SOCRATES;

2. to present every two years reports to the Council, to the European Parliament and other relevant institutions of the European Community on the development of quality assessment and quality assurance systems in the Member States and on cooperation activities at European level;

in the light of these reports, to submit appropriate proposals to strengthen quality assurance in higher education.

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