

# External Quality Assurance

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**“Quality Assurance” is an all-embracing term,  
used to include**

**all the policies, processes, actions and mechanisms**

**through which**

**the quality of Higher Education is recognised,  
maintained and developed.**

**Quality Assurance can be reduced to two basic questions:**

**‘Could X be better?’**

**‘Is X good enough?’**

**In terms of Higher Education,  
X = the provision made for the student to  
achieve, or even surpass, the intended learning  
outcomes.**

***We should remember that it may always  
be possible to achieve even more if the  
provision made for their achievement can be  
improved.***

One of the commitments entered into by Croatia when it signed the Bologna Declaration is:

*“Promotion of European co-operation in Quality Assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies”.*

The development of national Quality Agencies in Europe increasingly emphasises the **improvement** of the quality of Higher Education provision as the important goal

*- even when formal accreditation decisions are a by-product of the process.*

**Who should ask the questions:**

**‘Could the provision made for the student to achieve, or even surpass, the intended learning outcomes be better?’**

**‘Is the provision being made good enough?’**

As understood in the European Higher Education Area, Quality Assurance needs to be

**grounded in a university's recognition of its own  
*corporate responsibility* for the quality of the  
educational provision made for its students.**



Quality Assurance can best be seen as:

- a collaborative process
- devoted to optimising quality
- within the constraints of resources etc

and extending upwards from

- the student experiencing his or her own education,
- to the self-evaluation of the individual professor through
- corporate responsibilities and accountability at different institutional levels,
- up to a national body

# **The standard pattern of national Quality Assurance in Europe:**

- The establishment of a central national agency.
- Internal evaluation and the preparation of a self-evaluation report (or programme plans).
- External evaluation by a panel of experts (peers), organised by the agency, which includes
  - a visit to and discussions at the institution.
- Publication of the results of the external evaluation.
- Checks made on any necessary follow-up actions by the institution.
- Evaluations recurring on a cycle, typically every five years.

*It is essential that evaluation is an academic not a bureaucratic process.*

- Articulation of conclusions and their justification before one's peers is the paradigm of the academic process in research.
- It should be an analogous process for peer evaluation as part of a Quality Assurance process.

**Many means are employed to try to ensure that the judgments resulting from an evaluation are defensible and consistent (i.e. objective)**

**It has become general practice to seek to ensure the following:**

- The process is structured – *although open*.
- Factual inputs (data) are unambiguous and correct

and

- efforts are made to ensure that all panel members are in possession of all the relevant facts.

- The members of the panel are chosen for their appropriate knowledge and understanding of the kind of institution (or programme) being evaluated, including being aware of current developments in the appropriate field.
- Panel members who would otherwise be appropriate are excluded if there is anything in their background which might be considered liable to prejudice their judgement.

- Efforts are made to ensure that all panel members understand the principles of the evaluation process, often through prior training.

- The members of the panel are allowed to exercise their academic judgement,
- but are guided by a professional and experienced member of the Agency staff,

or

- by a Chairman who is carefully selected for his/her suitability and experience and is given further training in the role.



- *Students are consulted separately*
  - although their input will not determine the outcome until the staff have been given an opportunity to respond to any adverse student comments.

- The judgment and the resulting report reflect *a group decision*, if at all possible one based on consensus. (The panel accepts a corporate responsibility.)
- The panel's general conclusions are reported orally, before it leaves the institution.
- The institution can challenge the report in draft, on the grounds of factual inaccuracy

In relation to evaluations, an Agency's relevant professional staff should:

- advise HEIs on their preparations, including on their self-evaluations;
- nominate an appropriate evaluation team (from an approved list);
- plan evaluation visits including their structure and a provisional agenda for meetings;

- anticipate and provide necessary data and briefing;
- provide guidance to the evaluation team on good practice and precedent;
- advise and support the team leader/Chairman;
- if essential, intervene to avoid bad practice;
- help the evaluation team to reach decisions on the basis of consensus;

- draft reports and obtain their approval from the evaluation team;
- clarify conditions and/or recommendations, as necessary, to the HEI receiving the report;
- follow up any reports which the HEI is required to make subsequently;

- plan ahead
- advise on any necessary changes to procedures and/or policy

Throughout, the professional staff of the Agency will need to be able to work, **and on occasion argue** with those in a position of authority,

as well as working to support the expert members of evaluation teams

and the HEIs,

particularly the latter's Quality Promotion Units.