

**DRAFT**

**ELGPN Policy Briefing 4**

**Quality Assurance in lifelong guidance provision: approaches and experiences from other EU initiatives**

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**INTRODUCTION**

**This Policy Brief is intended to give an overview of EU initiatives in quality assurance from the fields of education, training and public services which may assist the deliberations of ELGPN and of WP4 in particular in addressing the priority area of quality assurance identified in the Council Resolutions of both 2004 and 2008. It also provides some suggestions to advance the work of ELGPN within this broader context.**

**1. BACKGROUND**

**1.1** It is very difficult to find exact parallels in EU initiatives in education, training and employment to the work of ELGPN in the area of quality assurance (QA). Within the education and training fields, we find specific networks established for over a decade to deal with the issues of quality assurance in vocational education and training (VET) and in Higher Education (HE). The issue of quality assurance is only one of four priority areas to be tackled by ELGPN, a network that is just two years old.

There are some similarities between the work of ELGPN and other initiatives: there is huge diversity and variety in VET and HE both within countries and between countries; there are questions of institutional autonomy, awarding bodies, and subsidiarity that come into play. There are different approaches to quality assurance at institutional, regional and national levels. The diversity and differences are seen as enriching rather than dividing. Indeed the area of quality assurance is viewed as supporting the development of a common culture for VET and HE at European level, echoing the Council Resolution (2008) on the role of quality assurance in lifelong guidance networks at national and regional levels. It is important to note that there have been differences in approach to quality assurance between the VET and HE sectors at EU level; the European Parliament was able to enunciate a common set of just five principles for both VET and HE in its Recommendation on the EQF in 2008 (see 2.11 below).

**1.2** It is also worthwhile recalling that the development of principles, standards, guidelines and indicators for QA in both VET and HE was the outcome of much mutual/peer learning activity at EU levels and of much discussion between all of the stakeholders. What has issued at the end of the day has been generic in nature and non-prescriptive, respecting the principles of subsidiarity/national primacy and institutional autonomy.

**1.3** The differences in QA development approaches between VET and HE at European level are also illuminating:

- VET targets system and provider levels; HE emphasises internal and external review and the quality control of the external review agencies themselves.
- In the development of the HE standards and guidelines, the European unions of students played a significant role.
- For VET, for each quality criterion, indicative descriptors are provided for systems and provider levels. In addition a reference set of selected quality indicators for assessing quality in VET is provided, stating the type of indicator and the purpose of the policy. For HE, standards are specified together with guidelines indicating expectations on how the standard should be implemented.
- VET uses a toolbox approach from which providers and systems may choose a quality criterion according to their circumstances; it also provides a selected reference set. HE appears to present a comprehensive set approach by which it hopes that all institutions will follow all standards.

**1.4** In terms of political endorsement, the VET QA framework has been approved by the European Parliament and Council. It is important to note that QA in VET has received much political attention over the decade through a series of Council Resolutions. This may be due to the fact that stakeholders such as the European Social Partners have a significant role in EU and national VET developments whereas they do not exercise such influence on HE. The ESG was adopted by Ministers in 2005 and there are regular reports on its implementation, the latest by Eurydice in 2010 (See 2.7 below).

**1.5** On the employment side, services of general interest have received political attention since 2003 (Green Paper, White Paper) with more focus on the social services area since 2005 involving an EU public consultation exercise. Some key operational principles (diversity, quality, access, user rights) underlying services of general interest have emerged through these processes which were reiterated in the Commission Communication of November 2007 (see Section 4 below) in the context of the reform of the Lisbon Treaty. Quality assurance has been the focus of public attention in the related reform of public services in Europe. The European Public Administration Network (EUPAN) has held conferences devoted to the theme of QA in public services and produced some very useful publications (See 2.14 below). Judged solely by the criteria of frequency of reference in Council Resolutions, it cannot be said that quality assurance in the public services has received the same degree of political attention as in VET and HE.

## 2. EU INITIATIVES IN QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE FIELDS OF EDUCATION, TRAINING AND PUBLIC SERVICES

### A. Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (VET)

#### 2.1 Rationale

To promote increased transparency of VET policy developments between Member States with the effect of enhancing mutual trust, mobility of workers and learners, and of lifelong learning.

#### 2.2 Approach

The establishment of a **European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for VET (EQARF)**<sup>1</sup> which comprises a quality assurance and improvement cycle (planning, implementation, evaluation/ assessment and review/revision) based on a selection of quality criteria, descriptors and indicators applicable to quality management at both VET-system and VET-provider levels.

The EQARF aims to help in assessing and improving existing systems and provision of VET, and to **contribute to evidence based policy and practice** as a basis for more efficient and equitable policies.

For each quality criterion, indicative descriptors are provided for VET systems and VET provider levels.

A reference set of selected quality indicators for assessing quality in VET is provided, stating the type of indicator and the purpose of the policy.

The aim is not to introduce new standards, but to support Member States efforts, whilst preserving the diversity of their approaches. **The Framework should be regarded rather as a toolbox, from which the various users may choose those descriptors and indicators that they consider most relevant to the requirements of their particular quality assurance system.**

The proposed descriptors and indicators are **provided as guidance only and may be selected and applied by users of the Framework in accordance with all or part of their requirements and existing settings.** They may be applied to initial vocational training (IVT) and/or continuous vocational training (CVT), depending on the relevant individual characteristics of each Member State's VET system and the type of VET providers.

They are to be used on a **purely voluntary basis**, taking account of their potential added value and in accordance with national legislation and practice. They should be considered neither as benchmarks, nor as a means of reporting on, or drawing comparisons between,

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<sup>1</sup> OJ C 155, 8.7.2009, p.1.

the quality and efficiency of different national systems. **The responsibility for monitoring the quality of these systems remains entirely with the Member States.**

### 2.3 Target levels:

- ❖ VET system
- ❖ VET provider
- ❖ Qualification award

### 2.4 EU political endorsement:

Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council, July 2009; Opinion of European Social and Economic Committee, April 2009; Opinion of the Committee of the Regions, December, 2008

### 2.5 Precedents and time-line:

- 2002 The Council Resolution on VET (the Copenhagen Declaration)
- 2002-4: The development of a Common Quality Assurance Framework (QCAF) through Member State and other partner cooperation and mutual learning
- May 2004: Council endorsement of the QCAF approach
- October 2005: establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance in VET
- 2006: Helsinki Communique on VET – to further develop and implement common European tools drawing on the principles underlying the QCAF
- 2008: European Quality Assurance Reference Framework (EQARF) finalised
- November 2008: Bordeaux Communique on VET – to implement the EQARF
- 2008-2009: Recommendation of the European Parliament and Council, and of other EU Institutions on EQARF.

## **B. Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Europe and the Bologna Process**

### 2.6 Rationale

To promote consistency of QA across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by use of agreed standards, guidelines and reference points; to promote mutual learning, transparency and trust among all stakeholders and agencies; to improve the credibility of QA agencies; and to enhance comparability, compatibility, and recognition of qualifications.

### 2.7 Approach

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance in Higher Education<sup>2</sup> are intended to be **a source of assistance and guidance** to the internal quality assurance of Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and to agencies involved in external evaluation of quality assurance in HEIs, as well as **contributing to a common frame of**

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<sup>2</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, Brussels, 2005.

**reference** to be used by both HEIs and external QA agencies. The ESG seek an appropriate balance between the creation and development of an internal quality assurance culture and the role which external QA procedures may play. They also seek a balance between consumer protection, internal improvement and public accountability.

The standards and guidelines focus on three areas:

- internal quality assurance
- external quality assurance<sup>3</sup>
- external quality assurance agencies.

The **standards** are framed as **generic principles** than specific requirements, more on what should be done rather than how it should be done. The internal standards cover areas such as policy, learner support, staff, information, monitoring and review. The **guidelines** are set down as **expectations/suggestions** as to what should occur for the standard to be implemented.

The standards and guidelines respect institutional autonomy, the diversity and variety of HEIs in the EU, and the principle of subsidiarity and primacy of national systems.

## 2.8 Target levels:

- ❖ HE provider – internal assessment
- ❖ HE provider – external assessment
- ❖ External QA agencies for HE

## 2.9 EU political endorsement

2005: EU Ministers of Education adopted the ESG for QA in the EHEA<sup>4</sup>.

## 2.10 Timeline

1994/5: EU pilot project on QA in HE

1998: Council Recommendation on EU cooperation in quality assurance in higher education<sup>5</sup>

1999 Bologna Declaration: cooperation in QA with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies

2000: European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) established

2001 Prague: collaboration of HEIs and national QA agencies in establishing a common framework of reference

2001/2: E4 Group<sup>6</sup> established to advance the framework

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<sup>3</sup> The Eurydice Report: Focus on Higher Education in Europe 2010 – The Impact of the Bologna Process, notes the growth of external quality assurance in higher education as one of the most notable features of the Bologna decade. In the majority of EHEA countries however, quality assurance is concerned with granting permission to higher education institutions or programmes to operate on the basis of threshold quality standards. Only a minority of countries exclusively follow an improvement-oriented approach.

<sup>4</sup> The Bergen Communique: [www.bologna-bergen2005.no/.../050520\\_Bergen\\_Communique.pdf](http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/.../050520_Bergen_Communique.pdf)

<sup>5</sup> OJ L 270 p.56, 7.10.98

<sup>6</sup> The E4 Group included the ENQA, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutes in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB).

2003 Berlin: primary responsibility for quality lies with HEIs  
2003/4: European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for QA developed  
2005 Bergen: ESG adopted by the Ministers for Education and Higher Education  
2005-8: European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education (EQAR) established and operative

### **C. Common Principles for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and VET in the context of the European Qualifications Framework**

**2.11** The following **common principles for QA in VET and in Higher Education** were enunciated in the Recommendation<sup>7</sup> of European Parliament and Council on the EQF in 2008:

- I. Quality assurance policies and procedures should underpin all levels of the European Qualifications Framework
- II. Quality assurance should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions
- 111. Quality assurance should include regular evaluation of institutions, their programmes or their quality assurance systems by external monitoring bodies or agencies.
- IV. External monitoring bodies or agencies carrying out quality assurance should be subject to regular review.
- V. Quality assurance should include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes.

### **D. Services of General Interest in Europe and Quality Assurance**

**2.12** Services of general interest cover a broad range of activities, from the large network industries such as energy, telecommunications, transport, audiovisual broadcasting and postal services, to education, water supply, waste management, health and social services. As such, the provision of lifelong guidance services falls within the policy area of services of general interest in the EU. Such services are deemed essential for the daily life of citizens and enterprises, and reflect Europe's model of society. They play a major role in ensuring social, economic and territorial cohesion throughout the Union and are vital for the sustainable development of the EU in terms of employment, social inclusion, economic growth and environmental quality.

Although their scope and organisation vary significantly according to histories and cultures of state intervention, they can be defined as the services, both economic and non-economic, which the public authorities classify as being of general interest and subject to specific public service obligations. This means that it is essentially the responsibility of public authorities, at the relevant level, to decide on the nature and scope of a service of general interest. Public authorities can decide to carry out the services themselves or they can decide to entrust them to other entities, which can be public or private, and can act either for-profit or not for-profit .

**2.13** Services of general interest in the EU have been the subject of a Commission Green Paper in 2003<sup>8</sup>, a Commission White Paper in 2004<sup>9</sup>, a Resolution of the European Parliament

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<sup>7</sup> 2008/962/EC

<sup>8</sup> COM (2003) 270, 21.5.2003

<sup>9</sup> COM (2004) 374 , 12.5.2004

in 2006<sup>10</sup>, and of a Commission Communication to the European Parliament and the Council in November 2007<sup>11</sup>. The 2007 EC Communication reviewed progress since the 2004 White Paper, drawing on EU public consultation on social services initiated in 2006. It states some **operational principles that should underlie the provision of services** of general interest for example:

- *Respecting the diversity of services, situations, and needs and preferences of users*
- *Achieving a high level of quality, safety and affordability*
- *Ensuring equal treatment and promoting universal access*
- *Upholding user rights.*

**2.14** The provision of lifelong guidance services also falls with the reform of public services in Europe. The question of the quality of such services is an on-going concern of the European Public Administration Network (EUPAN) and has been the subject of EU conferences (the latest during the French Presidency of the EU, 2008) and very useful publications such as:

- ❖ *A European Primer on Customer Satisfaction Management (2008)*
- ❖ *Seven Steps to a Citizens Charter with Service Standards: Implementation Plan for Governmental Organisations; A Practitioners Handbook (2008)*

which can be downloaded from the EUPAN website: [www.eupan.eu](http://www.eupan.eu)

EUPAN has taken a Total Quality Management approach to its initiatives in quality assurance.

#### **Implications for ELGPN members**

Given that lifelong guidance services are strongly based within the education systems of most Member States, the analogies between the work of ELGPN on QA in lifelong guidance and those for QA in VET and HE are valid. While lifelong guidance is by its nature educational, its delivery extends beyond the field of formal education both in terms of coverage and service delivery modes. Thus it is important to situate QA for lifelong guidance in the context of EU debates on services of general interest, and in particular of the reform of public services in Europe, and to use principles and approaches also from that field to inform and to politically situate its work. Clarity on the following QA issues needs to be achieved by ELGPN:

- ✓ EU and national rationales for QA in lifelong guidance
- ✓ Target level at which it is aimed
- ✓ Which QA approach to adopt based on real evaluations of existing systems
- ✓ How to build policy maker and other stakeholder support at national level
- ✓ How to test the adopted approach at national and/or regional levels with policy maker and other stakeholder support
- ✓ How to implement such an approach and review its implementation
- ✓ How, if desirable and useful, to have such an approach politically endorsed at EU

<sup>10</sup> A6-0275/2006 26.9.2006

<sup>11</sup> COM (2007) 725 final 20.11.2007