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**STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY
ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER
EDUCATION AREA: BACKGROUND FOR A
DEBATE**

Secretariat discussion document

Directorate General IV: Education, Culture and Heritage, Youth and Sport
(Directorate of School, Out-of-School and Higher Education/Higher Education and Research
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ITEM 9

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1. PURPOSE

Following the mandate given to the CDESR Bureau by the 2004 CDESR Plenary “to follow the developments with regard to quality assurance with a view to formulating possible action by the Council of Europe” and following the adoption by the Bergen Ministerial Conference (19-20 May 2005) of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, the CDESR Bureau, at its meeting on 8-9 June, decided to organize a discussion on these standards and guidelines at the 2005 Plenary Session of the CDESR. The objectives of this debate should be:

- to inform the Committee of the adopted Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area;
- in so doing, identify the major issues addressed in the Standards and Guidelines;
- as a further basis for debate, present considered views on the Standards and Guidelines from the point of view of higher education institutions as well as from the recognition community;
- identify a possible role of the Council of Europe in quality assurance;
- provide input to a Council of Europe Higher Education Forum in 2006 on Quality Assurance in Higher Education, including the identification of the major issues that could be addressed in this context.

2. CONTEXT

The enhancement of the quality of European higher education at institutional, national and European levels has been among the key issues and concerns of the Bologna Process from the very beginning. In the rapidly changing environment of higher education, the provision and maintenance of high quality and standards in higher education institutions have become a major concern for higher education institutions and governments. This, in result has increased the need and demand for developing transparent quality assurance processes.

The challenges facing the European and international higher education in this area include the following:

- Massification of higher education and the countries’ realisation that their economic and social future depend, *inter alia*, on the provision of quality higher education for a very substantial part of the population.
- Increase in student numbers with either constant or declining public funding, accompanied by inefficient use of resources – such as programme duplication and diverting resources from such objectives as quality and access (World Bank, Education Report 2002). In many cases, the appropriate student-staff ratio should also be considered.
- Mismatch between institutional autonomy, financial authority and institutional management.

- New expectations for the employability of graduates in the knowledge society.
- Increase in new modals of higher education provision, such as on-line learning, often with little or no connection to national education systems, resulting from the developments in the information and communication technologies (e.g. “Academies” of Microsoft, Cisco, SAP etc. that have created a parallel “universe of IT qualifications and standards with global coverage” (Adelman 2000)
- More awareness of the contribution of quality higher education to the achievement of social and political agendas such as promoting the social cohesion, access and equality in the greater Europe – and beyond.
- Increase in the demands of a growing number of stakeholders for transparent and reliable information about higher education;
- The diversification of higher education provision, both in terms of types of higher education institutions within national systems and the number and kinds of providers without links to national systems, has led to increased demand for accountability by higher education institutions and providers.
- Higher education institutions and their organisations are putting increased emphasis on the internal development of institutional quality, often phrased in terms of quality culture. The importance of the work done on internal quality assurance has, however, often been overshadowed by demands for accountability in the public debate.
- In general, increased demand on public services, without an increased willingness to pay for those services, at least through traditional means of raising public funds, such as taxation (cf. also the CDESR conference on the public responsibility for higher education and research).
- Increased demand on higher education institutions to meet the needs of and contribute to the development of the city, region and/or country in which they are located.
- Academic, political and commercial developments in the context of globalisation, e.g. increased demand for skilled professionals/graduates, increased international academic mobility¹; in some countries increase in competition between the traditional higher education institutions and new providers, including transnational providers.

This concern for quality assurance was emphasised even more strongly in the Berlin Communiqué (2003), where the Ministers committed themselves “to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level”. They also stressed “the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality

¹ In absolute numbers even more than in relative terms.

assurance”. They also underlined that “the major responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and that this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality networks.” They agreed that “by 2005 national quality assurance systems should include:

- A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.
- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.
- A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.
- International participation, co-operation and networking”.

In this light, the Ministers “called upon ENQA through its members, in cooperation with the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB, to develop an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies and to report back through the Follow-up Group to Ministers in 2005.”

3. EUROPEAN COMMISSION PROPOSALS

While the debate should focus on the standards and guidelines adopted in Bergen, it may be useful to keep in mind that, in September/October 2004, the European Commission published a report² and a proposal for a recommendation³ on quality assurance in higher education.

The Commission proposes that Council and Parliament recommend that Member States

- require all HE institutions active within their territory to introduce or develop rigorous internal QA mechanisms;
- require all QA or accreditation agencies active within their territory to be independent in their assessments and to apply a common set of standards, procedures and guidelines for assessment purposes;
- encourage QA and accreditation agencies, together with organizations representing higher education, to set up a “European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies” and to define the conditions for registration⁴;
- enable higher education institutions to choose among QA and accreditation agencies in the European Register;
- accept the assessments made by all QA and accreditation agencies in the European Register as a basis for decisions on licensing or funding of higher education institutions, including eligibility for student loans and grants.

² http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Part_org/EU/040930_EC_quality.pdf

³ http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/EN/Part_org/EU/041012_EC_quality.pdf

⁴ It may be noted that the public authorities responsible for individual higher education systems would be a part of this exercise only to the extent they are involved in or in a position to instruct their respective QA agencies.

The Commission proposal has, as the Secretariat understands, given rise to discussion among EU member states, and alternative proposals have been put forward. The latest proposal that the Secretariat is aware of at the time of writing was put forward by the (then) incoming United Kingdom Presidency in late June. This proposal:

- includes a reference to the relevant part of the Bergen Communiqué
- postulates a stronger role for representatives of national authorities and the higher education sector in setting up a European Register of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies and in defining the conditions for registration;
- more strongly underlines the role of national law and practice, which may limit the applicability of decisions made at European level;
- in particular, suggests that the right of higher education institutions to choose among quality assurance and accreditation agencies in the European Register be made conditional on this being permissible under the national legislation or by national authorities in the country or countries in which the institutions are active. The acceptance of decisions made by quality assurance or accreditation agencies based in other countries may also be made subject to similar conditions;
- higher education institutions may be allowed to seek complementary quality assessment or accreditation from agencies in the European Register with a view to enhancing their international standing.

It should be kept in mind that the Commission proposal is still under consideration in the appropriate bodies of the European Union, that there is also a proposal for amendments from the European Parliament that is in many ways quite similar to the amendments outlined above, and that further developments may follow. *The information given here is intended to provide the CDESR with as complete a picture as possible, it is given as background information only with due reserve as to completeness and accuracy and it is not intended that the CDESR discuss the Commission proposal.*

4. THE ADOPTED STANDARDS

In Bergen, Ministers adopted the following text:

“We adopt the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area as proposed by ENQA. We commit ourselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria. We welcome the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review. We ask that the practicalities of implementation be further developed by ENQA in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE and ESIB with a report back to us through the Follow-up Group. We underline the importance of cooperation between nationally recognised agencies with a view to enhancing the mutual recognition of accreditation or quality assurance decisions”. (Bergen Communiqué)

The adopted standards are:

A. European standards for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions

- 1 *Policy and procedures for quality assurance:*
Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.
- 2 *Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards:*
Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.
- 3 *Assessment of students:*
Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.
- 4 *Quality assurance of teaching staff:*
Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved in the teaching of students are qualified and competent with regard to teaching. The methods and procedures for ensuring that this is the case should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.
- 5 *Learning resources and student support:*
Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.
- 6 *Information systems:*
Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes of study and other activities.
- 7 *Public information:*
Institutions should regularly publish up-to-date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programmes and awards they are offering.

B. European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education

- 1 *Use of internal quality assurance procedures:*
External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part A above.
- 2 *Development of external quality assurance processes:*
The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.
- 3 *Criteria for decisions:*
Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.
- 4 *Processes fit for purpose:*
All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

- 5 *Reporting:*
Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to their intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.
- 6 *Follow-up procedures:*
Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.
- 7 *Periodic reviews:*
External quality assurance of institutions and/or programmes should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.
- 8 *System-wide analyses:*
Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

C. European standards for external quality assurance agencies

- 1 *Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education:*
The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part B above.
- 2 *Official status:*
Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.
- 3 *Activities:*
Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.
- 4 *Resources:*
Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.
- 5 *Mission statement:*
Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.
- 6 *Independence:*
Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.
- 7 *External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies:*
The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:
 - 1 a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
 - 2 an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;

- 3 publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
 - 4 a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.
- 8 *Accountability procedures:*
Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability⁵.

As will be seen from the wording of the Bergen Communiqué, there was discussion around the proposed European register of quality assurance agencies, and CDESR delegations may wish to comment on this in the debate.

5. AN OVERVIEW OF THE ADOPTED STANDARDS

The purpose of this part of the document is to provide a more detailed overview of the adopted Standards and Guidelines. Delegations are referred to the full text – the report submitted to the Bergen conference by ENQA, the EUA, EURASHE and ESIB⁶ - for further details. Points 5.1 – 5.3 below reproduce the Executive Summary of this report, pp. 6 - 8. The main reference for point 5.4 is page 32 of the report.

5.1 European standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions:

Policy and procedures for quality assurance:

Institutions should have a policy and associated procedures for the assurance of the quality and standards of their programmes and awards. They should also commit themselves explicitly to the development of a culture which recognises the importance of quality, and quality assurance, in their work. To achieve this, institutions should develop and implement a strategy for the continuous enhancement of quality. The strategy, policy and procedures should have a formal status and be publicly available. They should also include a role for students and other stakeholders.

Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programs and awards:

Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programs and awards.

Assessment of students:

Students should be assessed using published criteria, regulations and procedures which are applied consistently.

⁵ As reproduced on the official site of the Bologna Process 2003 – 2005: <http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/>; go to “Main documents”.

⁶ http://www.bologna-bergen2005.no/Docs/00-Main_doc/050221_ENQA_report.pdf

Quality assurance of teaching staff:

Institutions should have ways of satisfying themselves that staff involved in the teaching of students are qualified and competent with regard to teaching. The methods and procedures for ensuring that this is the case should be available to those undertaking external reviews, and commented upon in reports.

Learning resources and student support:

Institutions should ensure that the resources available for the support of student learning are adequate and appropriate for each program offered.

Information systems:

Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programs of study and other activities.

Public information:

Institutions should regularly publish up-to-date, impartial and objective information, both quantitative and qualitative, about the programs and awards they are offering.

5.2 European standards for the external quality assurance of higher education

Use of internal quality assurance procedures:

External quality assurance procedures should take into account the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 3.1 (see above) of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Development of external quality assurance processes:

The aims and objectives of quality assurance processes should be determined before the processes themselves are developed, by all those responsible (including higher education institutions) and should be published with a description of the procedures to be used.

Criteria for decisions:

Any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.

Processes fit for purpose:

All external quality assurance processes should be designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them.

Reporting:

Reports should be published and should be written in a style which is clear and readily accessible to their intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find.

Follow-up procedures:

Quality assurance processes which contain recommendations for action or which require a subsequent action plan, should have a predetermined follow-up procedure which is implemented consistently.

Periodic reviews:

External quality assurance of institutions and/or programs should be undertaken on a cyclical basis. The length of the cycle and the review procedures to be used should be clearly defined and published in advance.

System-wide analyses:

Quality assurance agencies should produce from time to time summary reports describing and analysing the general findings of their reviews, evaluations, assessments etc.

5.3 European standards for external quality assurance agenciesUse of external quality assurance procedures higher education:

The external quality assurance of agencies should take into account the presence and effectiveness of the external quality assurance processes described in Part 3.2 of the European Standards and Guidelines.

Official status:

Agencies should be formally recognised by competent public authorities in the European Higher Education Area as agencies with responsibilities for external quality assurance and should have an established legal basis. They should comply with any requirements of the legislative jurisdictions within which they operate.

Activities:

Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities (at institutional or programme level) on a regular basis.

Resources:

Agencies should have adequate and proportional resources, both human and financial, to enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance process(es) in an effective and efficient manner, with appropriate provision for the development of their processes and procedures.

Mission statement:

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives for their work, contained in a publicly available statement.

Independence:

Agencies should be independent to the extent both that they have autonomous responsibility for their operations and that the conclusions and recommendations made in their reports

cannot be influenced by third parties such as higher education institutions, ministries or other stakeholders.

External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies:

The processes, criteria and procedures used by agencies should be pre-defined and publicly available. These processes will normally be expected to include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent procedure by the subject of the quality assurance process;
- an external assessment by a group of experts, including, as appropriate, (a) student member(s), and site visits as decided by the agency;
- publication of a report, including any decisions, recommendations or other formal outcomes;
- a follow-up procedure to review actions taken by the subject of the quality assurance process in the light of any recommendations contained in the report.

Accountability procedures:

Agencies should have in place procedures for their own accountability.

5.4 A European Register and European Register Committee

The report proposes that a European register of quality assurance agencies be established and that a European Register Committee act as a gatekeeper for the inclusion of agencies in the register. It is suggested that the register will make it easier to identify professional and credible agencies, thus providing useful information to national quality assurance agencies and to institutions.

The report assumes that the European Register Committee will decide on admissions to the European Register. The proposal is to establish a light, non-bureaucratic construction with nine members nominated by ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESIB and other organizations representing employers, unions and professional organizations plus government representatives. The members are assumed to act in an individual capacity and not as mandated representatives of the nominating organizations. It is proposed that ENQA will perform secretarial duties for the committee. The European Register Committee should as one of its first implementation tasks formalise the ownership of the register. It is further suggested that the Committee will establish an independent appeals system. Legal advice should be sought by the organisations proposing to establish the European Register Committee before the Committee is established.

6. CONSIDERATIONS BASED ON THESE STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES

6.1 Some considerations for a debate

Internal and external quality assurance

The debate at the plenary session should focus on the standards and guidelines that have now been adopted within the Bologna Process and how these standards may be implemented in the national context, which should be taken to include both at national level and at institutions. It may be useful to keep in mind the distinction between *internal* and *external* quality assurance. It should nevertheless be noted that both accountability and quality developments are goals for both kinds of quality assurance.

Internal quality assurance refers to the work of each higher education institution – or its components, such as faculties and departments – to ensure that its teaching and research are of high or at least sufficient quality. In fact, quality *assurance* is only a part of this work, for which quality *improvement* or quality *culture* are equally important concepts.

External quality assurance refers to the responsibility of public authorities for ensuring the overall quality of higher education systems as well as of institutions that make up the system. There are essentially two rationales for external quality assurance: ensuring that public funds – which make up an essential part of higher education finance in most European countries – is put to good use, and ensuring that the qualifications earned by students and considered by employers as a basis for employment are of sufficient quality.

An alternative view would be to distinguish between *summative* and *formative* quality assurance, where the former would focus on controlling the results of higher education – and hence the quality of provision – whereas the latter would focus on developing quality culture and quality management at institutional and procedural level.

Approaches to quality assurance

It may also be useful to distinguish between “*quantitative*” and “*qualitative*” approaches to quality assurance. Both rely on factual information, but the use of the factual information differs considerably. In one approach – which may be termed “*quantitative*” - emphasis is on statistical information, and a high degree of objectivity is sought by measuring a large number of factors such as books in the library, computer access, student/teacher ratio, the number of academic staff with different levels of qualifications and/or research and teaching experience, physical facilities and a whole range of other factors. In another approach – which may be called “*qualitative*” - there is less emphasis on statistical information and a more explicit attempt to assess what is seen as the reality behind the facts. This does perhaps imply a higher degree of explicit evaluation – which could be seen as subjectivity – but does perhaps also give a more realistic impression of the real quality that is to be assessed.

However one assesses these different approaches or the many possible alternatives in between the two “pure” models, it may be assumed that agreement on mutual acceptance on the outcome of quality assessment will not be obvious unless there is at least broad agreement on standards, procedures and methodology. This clash of quality cultures is likely to be a feature of the European Higher Education Area at least for some time to come. The standards and guidelines adopted by the Bergen conference represent a significant step forward, but the effect of this proposal will to a large extent depend on its actual implementation.

6.2 *Questions to launch a debate*

Below, the Secretariat has elaborated a number of questions to launch the debate. These should be seen as tentative. The list of questions is certainly not exhaustive, but it should also not be seen as mandatory: presenters and participants may choose to address only a few of the questions, and they may also choose to address other questions.

The following, then, is an attempt to launch a debate at the 2005 plenary session.

Implementing common guidelines in diverse systems

- How can the adopted standards and guidelines best be implemented at national level?
- How, given the diversity of national systems, can a common understanding and mutual trust be developed in practice so that QA decisions made in one “Bologna” country may be accepted in other “Bologna” countries?
- How can qualitative and quantitative approaches to quality assurance be reconciled? How can proper emphasis be placed on both internal and external aspects of quality assurance?
- In particular, how can the need for internal quality assurance be given proper recognition in public debate?

Practice, organization and costs

- How can the participation of foreign experts and of students in quality assurance be promoted?
- How can quality assurance best be organized?
- What are the major factors in the choice of an organizational model?
- What is a reasonable balance of the costs of quality assurance and its potential benefits?
- Who should bear the costs of quality assurance?

7. TOWARDS A POSSIBLE ROLE FOR THE COUNCIL OF EUROPE

Before considering a possible role for the Council of Europe, it may be worth underlining that this question should be considered in relation to possible other actors and initiatives. Quality assurance is a field in which there is no shortage of either, and any action by the Council of Europe should either add to ongoing activities or, if considered necessary, aim to formulate alternatives to initiatives that the CDESR would consider as harmful.

In terms of impact and importance, two initiatives may be considered as particularly important: the standards and guidelines adopted by the Bergen Ministerial Conference, and the report and the draft recommendation by the European Commission.

Several options may be open should the Committee wish to undertake action.

i Standard setting

The standards and guidelines adopted in Bergen set standards for the European Higher Education Area, even if some aspects of the standards, notably the proposal for a European register for quality assurance, require further clarification. If the CDESR is to launch work on standards, this must therefore address issues that would be seen as not adequately covered by the standards and guidelines adopted in Bergen, and for which standards adopted by an intergovernmental, pan-European organisation would be seen as useful. This could possibly have to do with issues such as the balance between internal and external quality assurance, the role of stakeholders and the relationship between quality assurance and recognition and/or qualifications frameworks. However, for such work to be launched, the CDESR should be convinced that there are serious further issues that need to be addressed by further standard setting texts.

ii Implementation

Now that the standards and guidelines have been established and they present an overarching framework for quality assurance in Europe, they must be implemented in order to have effect. An overview of quality assurance issues has been included in many of the national conferences on higher education reform that the Council of Europe has organised in Cultural Convention States that had not yet become a party to the Bologna Process⁷ or that had joined only recently. It could be considered whether the Council of Europe could emphasise the implementation of quality assurance, including offering assistance on bringing national regulations and practice into line with the standards and guidelines at European level, even more in its advisory work.

⁷ Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Moldova and Ukraine acceded to the Bologna Process in Bergen, so that almost all Cultural Convention States are now party to the Bologna Process. Only Belarus, Monaco and San Marino are not members of the Bologna Process.

iii. A Council of Europe Higher Education Forum on quality assurance

The CDESR constitutes a unique pan-European platform of policy makers at higher education institutions as well as in Ministries, and it is important to make full use of such a platform. In terms of quality assurance, this implies that the major categories of actors will be represented as members of or observers to the Committee.

The Council of Europe is launching two new activities to make full use of this platform and to better disseminate the Council's work in higher education: the Council of Europe Higher Education Series and the Council of Europe Higher Education Forum. The latter will be a series of conferences on current topics on higher education policy, and the first Forum will be held on higher education governance on 22 – 23 September.

It could therefore be considered whether the Council of Europe could organize a Forum on quality assurance. The Bureau is very much in favour of this option, which could also lead to a publication. It is very much hoped that the plenary session could help identify the major issues that could be addressed at such a conference.

Whatever role or further activities the CDESR might recommend for the Council of Europe in this area, two major questions should be kept in mind:

- How could the Council of Europe most usefully play a role in furthering quality assurance in European higher education, within the framework of the standards and guidelines?
- What is the importance of such action in relation to other possible/priority activities of the Council of Europe?