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Quality Convergence Study

A contribution to the debates on quality and convergence
in the European Higher Education Area

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Foreword

The Quality Convergence Study (QCS) project, a follow-up to a 2002 ENQA survey of quality assurance practices in European countries, was carried out between September 2003 and October 2004. The project was coordinated by a project team consisting of representatives of ENQA member agencies and conducted by six member agencies of ENQA. The project team also made good use of six external quality assurance experts. This publication at hand is the final report of the project.

The objective of the QCS project was to study the possibilities for convergence of national quality assurance systems in Europe through six examples, with the aim of obtaining identifiable reference points for transnational evaluations. In practical terms, the project aimed to find out *why* national quality assurance systems operate in particular, yet commonly identifiable ways in different national contexts. The existing descriptions of *how* these quality assurance processes work, formed the starting point of the project. Consequently, the QCS project had as its distinct purpose to increase understanding of those processes and their context in order to provide a base from which further action might be considered. In that sense, the project broke new ground.

The writing of the self-analysis documents (SADs) and their examination constituted an important part of the project. Each participating agency drafted a detailed description about its specific national quality assurance context. After a cross-checking exercise, the SADs were sent to the external experts for analysis on the possibilities of convergence. The SADs have not been included into this paper, but can be found on the ENQA website at: <http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso>.

One of the most important findings of the study is that convergence can be achieved not only by identifying similarities in the higher education systems, but also by understanding the different national contexts. The higher education systems are complex and constantly changing contexts for external quality assurance.

The overall concept and objectives of the project fit closely with the aims of the Bologna Process. A European Higher Education Area requires a level of convergent quality assurance systems among the signatory States of the Bologna Declaration.

It is my expectation that this publication will stimulate a further debate on the need of convergence and promote understanding among national quality assurance agencies in Europe.

Christian Thune

President

ENQA

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1 General context and introduction to the project

1.1 Objectives

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) promotes mutual understanding of the work carried out by its member agencies. At the present time, those agencies are faced with several trends that cannot help but dramatically change the face of European higher education. The trends include the growing autonomy of higher education institutions, the fact that education is increasingly being considered at a high political level, the growing need for training and education – particularly in relation to the commonly shared political goal of increasing the intake of school leavers –, the debates engendered by the development of an “education market” and the desire of the EU to create the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) by 2010. Through the Quality Convergence Study project, the project group hopes to touch on some of those debates that are so much at the forefront of the work of ENQA and its member agencies.

The project group was concerned not to repeat work that had already been carried out through ENQA and by other means. Its starting point was an assumption that it would not be the best use of the group’s time to describe how quality assurance (QA) processes worked in other countries. It therefore chose a more analytical approach in an attempt to find out *why* things operate in the way they do in other countries. The aim was to help others to understand the debates and the key actors in national contexts that led to the evolution of a particular set of quality assurance and enhancement processes. The *why* question became a pivotal part of the group’s work and discussions often came back to this point.

1.2 Rationale

The rationale of the Quality Convergence Study project approved by ENQA in September 2003 was as follows:

“The Bologna declaration proposes and supports the elaboration of a European space for higher education. Quality assessment and evaluation/accreditation procedures are of central importance in underpinning and meeting each of the three main goals of the processes leading from the Bologna declaration: enhancing the mobility of students and academics, improving the employability of graduates, and increasing the attractiveness of the EHEA.

Achieving these purposes requires the establishment of a convergence, at least in part, of the goals and reference points of the different national agencies in charge of quality assessment and evaluation. The agencies, however, are facing sets of conflicting demands: the activity of each national agency is embedded in, and pertinent to, the characteristics of the organisation of each national system, but progression towards some elements of convergence requires the identification and establishment of supra-national common references and practices.

Until now, the major attempts to increase convergence have consisted of either compiling high-level common standards and indicators in use in a large set of agencies, or gathering detailed descriptions of the evaluation/accreditation procedures relevant to and applied within each national system.

The simple compilation of standards and indicators normally offers no preliminary analysis of their general applicability or transferability into different national settings – in terms of their relevance and utility, or any substantive possibility to assess them rigorously. A mere description of the existing

procedures of the agencies will typically fail to provide any information on their internal and external dynamics i.e. the links between these procedures and the constraints and requirements of the national system.

While these attempts are useful in providing a basis of shared knowledge on what exists, they may well not make an efficient contribution to the establishment of convergence in QA. *One has to move from the “how” to the “why” question, from the description of procedures to a better understanding of the reasons why the procedures are what they are in such or such a country.* Once this understanding is achieved it will be possible to raise the “action question”: what can be done to promote convergence, i.e. to adopt a common set of references in one specific area of EHEA, and to question and understand what the possible relevant criteria (standards or indicators) might be for them, as each national system is considered in its own terms under the principle of subsidiarity.

This proposal focuses directly on these crucial relationships by comparing the links between the work of each agency and the constraints of its national system; the study will involve analysis of the links in several European countries with different and contrasting approaches to QA in higher education.” (Proposal to ENQA, CNE/QAA, 9 June 2003).

To summarise, the aim of the project was to examine the possibilities for convergence of the goals and reference points of national quality evaluation agencies. The rationale for the project was that it would differ from previous projects by achieving its aim through an analytical approach to the work in order to find out *why* things operate in a particular way within different national contexts. The project took, as its starting point, existing descriptions of *how* quality assurance processes work in other countries, and aimed to increase understanding of those processes and their context in order to provide a base from which further action might be considered. We hope that this report will show how the project group attempted to work within this rationale, and the findings and conclusions of the group.

1.3 Organisation

A total of six agencies worked on the project: the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT), the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC, Lithuania), the Comité National d’Évaluation (CNE, France), the Hungarian Accreditation Committee (HAC), the National Agency for Higher Education (HSV, Sweden) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, UK). The project was steered by CNE and QAA with the help of the ENQA secretariat.

ENQA wrote to the agencies through its secretariat in July 2003 to invite them to indicate their interest in participating in the project. Relatively few agencies were able to offer their commitment to the project. However, the range of the interested agencies allowed ENQA to select six that would give the project the variety of national contexts required. By including the SKVC, which is not a member of ENQA, the project also widened the scope of participation beyond that of member agencies. This was agreed to be very beneficial to the project. The participants from the agencies were: Fiona Crozier (QAA), Bruno Curvale (CNE), Michel Deleau (CNE), Nick Harris (QAA), Fabrice Hénard (CNE), Sverre Redtrøen (NOKUT), Eugenijus Stumbrys (SKVC), Tibor Szanto (HAC) and Staffan Wahlén (HSV).

One of the central activities of the project for each agency was to write a self-analysis document (SAD). More information on the SADs can be found under the Chapter 3. The SADs are published on the ENQA website (<http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso>).

Also five external experts worked with the project group. They were Andrzej Bielecki, Jindra Divis, Jürgen Kohler, Anna-Maija Liuhanen and Ko Scheele. Chapter 3 includes more information on their role and position.

The calendar of the project was structured in a way to allow all participants as much input as possible. The intention was that the whole group would agree upon the structure and activities of the project.

Consequently, the meetings were held as follows:

- 30 September 2003 Preparatory meeting
(for interested agencies)
- 27 October 2003 Agreement on the themes of
SADs (all participating
agencies)
- 12 December 2003 Agreement on the structure
of SADs (all participating
agencies)
- 8 March 2004 Discussion about the role of
external experts (all
agencies and external
experts)
- 23 April 2004 Meeting of the external
experts
- 4 May 2004 Discussion about the work
done by the external experts
(all agencies and as many
external experts as were able
to attend)

3 June 2004

Agreement upon the draft
report format (ENQA
General Assembly; as many
participants as were
available)

1 October 2004

Final meeting to finalise the
present report (all
participants)

The project group generally met before each meet-
ing in order to discuss agendas and other important
issues.

The project group would like to take this oppor-
tunity to thank the participating agencies and the
external experts for all their hard work and advice
throughout the project. It would also like to thank
the ENQA secretariat, and in particular Kimmo
Hämäläinen, for its help throughout the operation
of the project.

2 Executive summary

2.1 Objectives of the project

The Bologna Process supposes a convergence of quality assurance practices in order to achieve the goals determined by the signatory States. This Quality Convergence Study (QCS) project, carried out between September 2003 and October 2004, aimed to seek possible areas of convergence in order to assist further ENQA projects in the field of European co-operation.

The objective of the project was to examine the possibilities for convergence of the goals and reference points of national quality evaluation agencies. The rationale for the project was that of being different from the previous projects by pursuing its objective through an analytical approach in order to find out *why* things operate in a particular way within different national contexts. The project took as its starting point existing descriptions of *how* quality assurance processes work in other countries. Consequently, it aimed to increase understanding of those processes and their context in order to provide a base from which further action might be considered.

2.2 Methodology

A total of six agencies participated in the project. The project was steered by the Comité National d'Évaluation (CNE, France) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, UK) with the help of the ENQA secretariat. Each of the six agencies produced a self-analysis document (SAD) explaining the national dynamics and constraints within which they and other key stakeholders worked in higher education. The SADs were commented by a group of five external experts who represented some of the main stakeholders in European higher education.

The SADs are published on the ENQA website (<http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso>).

2.3 Findings

The headline findings, which can be found in more detail in Chapter 3 of the report, are as follows:

- The reality of a context-free reader does not exist.
- The way in which the SADs are written influences the overview of the situation.
- National contexts are important. An understanding of them is fundamental in order to facilitate mutual comprehension.
- The SADs reflect choices that have been made because of the complexity of the national and the higher education contexts.
- The objective of convergence cannot rely simply on a search for similarities in the functioning of higher education systems.
- A systemic approach leads to an emphasis on the interactions of the various actors/stakeholders (teachers, researchers, professionals, students, public authorities, evaluation agencies etc.) each of whom may only have a partial or particular knowledge of the system.
- The systemic approach also leads to a reformulation of the question about quality. Independent of its definitions (results achieved, methods used, analysis of the stages between project and result etc.), *quality is the product of interaction between actors or elements in the system*. It is the consequence of the functioning of the system.
- Comprehension of the SADs and national situations relies on the ability of the reader to integrate all the elements of a system.

Consequently, the QCS project wishes to highlight three important characteristics to be taken into account when considering the conditions necessary for convergence:

- the systemic dimension of higher education;
- national contexts and the continuous evolution within each system;
- and the powerful influence of the different players interacting in each system.

In addition, the project found out that three main trends tend to influence the evolution of national systems: the strengthening of national policies, the integration of “stakeholders” in the functioning of quality assurance in higher education and the increasing responsibility of higher education institutions for their activities.

2.4 Conclusion

The conclusions of the report are the outcomes of reading the SADs, but also of the collective outcomes of the debates and reflections of agency representatives and external experts. These discussions and reflections allowed development of thoughts and ideas throughout the course of the project.

The outcomes of the project show that, in order to function effectively, higher education systems re-

quire all actors to have confidence in the way the processes within that system are carried out (e.g. admission policies, student welfare systems etc). The complexity of such systems means that confidence cannot rely solely on a complete knowledge and understanding of them. Crucially the QCS project demonstrates that, beyond the formal means for guaranteeing quality or a level of quality, it is up to those who are involved in the systems to find means of providing confidence.

The QCS project shows that, in the end, confidence is a process of cultural transformation – the result will be a progressive increase in mutual comprehension and in the capacity for interaction between higher education systems at different levels (national authorities, agencies, higher education institutions – HEIs, teaching teams etc.). As one of the drivers in any higher education system, evaluation or accreditation agencies could expand their role in seeking to make the different elements of their national systems more transparent. Thus the report finishes with several suggestions for projects that ENQA might take forward in the future in order to further assist and develop the notion of convergence.

3 Methodology

3.1 Writing of the self-analysis documents

One of the central activities of the project was the writing of the SADs. Each of the six participating agencies wrote one document. The SADs became the central resource around which all discussion was based. The working language was English.

The project group agreed that the SADs would be written around four themes and that each of these themes would be addressed by a framework of questions.

The four themes were:

- institutional autonomy;
- students;
- programmes;
- and teaching staff.

A further theme on national context could have been added separately if it was felt that this would have clarified the document. Of course, themes not covered by the SADs could have been considered equally important to those that were covered. For example, the evaluation of research was not analysed in the SADs although most HEIs encompass laboratories and link training to research activities. However, in order to make the task manageable, the themes above were selected.

The SADs aimed to address the themes in terms of the following framework of questions:

- What are the internal and external impacts on quality assurance?
- Is there a debate in describing the dynamics?
- If so, what is it about? Who are the main actors? In what direction is the national debate moving?
- Any other comments?

There was no guidance as to the length of the SADs, although the following guidelines were agreed:

- The SADs should not be descriptive – links to websites or references should be given in place of description. Instead, the SADs should be analytical.
- Although length is not important, the SADs should be concise.
- They should be written in a way to be accessible not just to those who work in quality assurance or in higher education but to any interested party wishing to read them.
- The documents should represent the reality of each national context, not the ideal outcome of any debate.

Before the SADs were passed to the external experts, the project group carried out a cross-checking exercise. This was to ensure that the documents were comprehensible, and to identify any initial areas that seemed to be possible points of convergence. The cross-checking exercise was carried out in pairs. Each pair worked on two SADs – one participant was responsible for one SAD, supporting the other, and vice versa. The pairs drafted a response to each SAD in terms of its comprehensibility, asking questions and requesting further detail where things were not clear, and also pointing out areas of possible convergence with the processes in their own national context. The latter exercise led to a grid of areas where there *appeared* to be similarities in process. The grid, along with the work of the external experts, was used to promote discussion in the later stages of the project.

3.2 Role of the external experts

The group of external experts was selected and approved by the project group. It was agreed that the external group should have knowledge of higher education and offer representation across the sector. The group duly asked the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Network of National Information Centres on Academic Recognition and Mobility (ENIC) and the National Academic Recognition Information Centres (NARIC) to nominate a participant for the group. A representative from the Dutch Inspectorate of Education had also indicated his interest in the project and the project group found that his input would be valuable. The group of external experts therefore comprised:

Andrzej Bielecki (Student, Belgium, for ESIB)

Jindra Divis (Director of the Centre for International Recognition and Certification, the Netherlands, for the ENIC/NARIC networks)

Jürgen Kohler (Professor of Law at Greifswald University, Germany, for EUA)

Anna-Maija Liuhanen (Senior Advisor at the Finnish Higher Education Evaluation Council, Finland, for ENQA), and

Ko Scheele (Inspector at the Inspectorate of Higher Education, the Netherlands).

The project group deliberately did not provide a detailed brief for the external experts. It did not want to shape the views of the external experts in any way and was interested to learn the outcome of their reading of the SADs without that reading being compromised. The group of external experts was informed that it was free to ask questions and to

request more details at any time. It was told that, in general, the project group hoped that the external experts would be able to comment on the comprehensibility of the SADs, on the possibilities for convergence and on the priorities and key actors involved in each national context in terms of their impact on the possibility for convergence.

The external experts found the task difficult because of the lack of detailed briefing. Interestingly, they started to work as a group but became aware that the matters they wished to raise and the questions they had were very much points made from stakeholder's point of view, depending on which group they represented. The group worked by producing a grid in which each theme was considered and areas of similarity highlighted. The experts also felt that it was necessary for them to redefine the project in some ways in order to make sense of their task. For example, they defined their own framework of questions against which they considered each theme.

The project group did not feel that this was inappropriate as it was interested in the views of the experts. In fact, it agreed that many of the questions and matters raised by the externals were similar to those raised by the project group but from the point of view of the stakeholder. For example, the external group defined the key elements of processes (the *what* rather than the *why* question) and decided that convergence at the level of process was not the primary goal. It was rather the trust and acceptance of decisions made by agencies in other countries that mattered. This opinion was important in the final discussions of the project group.

The project group recognises that the task given to the external experts was a difficult one and would like to thank them for completing the task in such a professional way.

4 Findings

The findings presented here are the results of a long period of immersion in the self-evaluation documents (SADs) that are, in themselves, an important outcome of the Quality Convergence Study (QCS). The synthesis relies on the cross-reading of the six SADs. It is suggested, therefore, that readers should read them in conjunction with this report in order to get a full understanding of the project. The SADs can be found on the ENQA website (<http://www.enqa.net/pubs.lasso>).

4.1 Reading of the self-analysis documents

The drafting of the SADs was marked by the desire of the agencies participating in QCS to produce texts that could be easily understood by any reader (cf. section 3.1). However, not even the common structure of the six SADs and the editorial principles adopted were enough to make the national contexts and dynamics of quality assurance in higher education completely accessible. On the one hand, the cross-analysis of the SADs carried out with a view to clarifying the documents demonstrated the risk of misinterpretation of the situation in six different countries. On the other hand, what was more worrying was that the external expert group, involved in the project with a view to helping to improve the readability of the SADs, raised a number of areas where it had further questions and needs for clarification, showing that the objective of universal comprehension had not been achieved.

The scrutiny of the SADs by the external experts was not enough for them to be able to respond to the three objectives assigned to them (ie. to improve the comprehensiveness of the SADs, to search for areas of convergence and to give views on the impact on convergence of the key actors involved).

At this point the conclusion is not that the drafting of the SADs was useless, far from it. In fact, the gap between the ambitions of the QCS project (to

produce short documents that are universally comprehensible) and the external experts' reaction (a need for further information in order to carry out their task) is in itself indicative of a result which should be taken further: communication and description of national context is possible, but to understand it remains a difficult challenge. However, taking into account all these difficulties, several results can be highlighted from the SADs:

- *The reality of a context-free reader does not exist.* The six agencies worked in the spirit of providing material that was comprehensible to everyone. The external experts' reaction – however knowledgeable about the subject of quality assurance in higher education in Europe – proved that there is no such thing. The comprehension of the SADs varied according to the situation of each reader, who reacted to the document in the light of his/her own experience and national context. On the other hand, having worked together for six months, mutual comprehension improved and progressed enormously amongst the participants. The nature of the project proved to be self-learning and, because of numerous changes and re-editing of documents outside formal meetings, the six agencies are currently in a position to have a deeper knowledge of the group's national contexts and, in particular, how these contexts are currently changing and developing. Discussions between the agency representatives had rarely to do with the mechanics of quality assurance processes (neither evaluation nor accreditation methods); they had to do with national factors – politics, economics, demographics and social and cultural aspects – which explain the reasons why things are the way they are in each particular country.
- *The way in which the SADs are written influences the overview of the situation.* The authors of the SADs tried to avoid the trap of an over-technical approach and agreed to make explicit the mean-

ing of each specific term¹. This approach highlighted the following:

- Beyond the difficulty of translation that can often lead to the misinterpretation of nuances, the question of vocabulary remains a major point in the understanding of national contexts.
- Developing a dictionary of multilingual terms is only a part of the task. A dictionary would quickly become obsolete and require more than a simple translation of terms; to be useful, the translation of a term should be contextualised.
- The terms “accreditation”, “evaluation” and “assessment” are used in the SADs, but their precise meaning in each document will vary depending on the function they are accorded and their purpose in each national context².
- The agencies’ and the external experts’ understanding of the SADs did not falter on the terms themselves but on the sense given to the words by the writer of each SAD.

A plain description of a mechanism does not usually raise questions of understanding. But referring explicitly to dynamics compels us to place the mechanism in a wider context of comprehension. For example, to describe the recruitment process of teachers in Lithuania and Hungary, without explaining that the lack of attraction of the profession in these countries is due to low wages, would not make sense. Description in itself is not enough to help comprehension. Besides, a writer may describe something in good faith but forget or underestimate the fact that some aspects that are evident from his/her point of view may not be so for the readers³. In

¹The terminology for programmes and HEIs varies from one country to another and changes over time. The implementation of the Bologna Process is expected to simplify the structure of the study cycles but not the harmonisation of the programmes or their terminology. The search for understanding the real meaning of these issues will continue.

²Before QCS, other international studies have shown that the same word can have different connotations depending on the country in which it is being used. (Cf. the outcomes of the first Transnational European Evaluation Project, TEEP I, on the use of common evaluation criteria).

³Thus, the scope of the national QA mechanisms (programmes, teaching etc) relies on the number of HEIs in the country and the extent of training available. It is also influenced by the role the State wishes to play in the HE system. This matter is not addressed by the SADs but it impacts on the design of QA mechanisms.

addition, some implicit elements may not be pointed out because the writer may refuse to shoulder responsibility of mentioning them. An agency in charge of drawing up a SAD is one of the actors in the system and may feel constrained by reasons of its own lack of legitimacy in a particular area.⁴ This point has been discussed in detail amongst the agencies with a view to publish the SADs on the ENQA website⁵.

- *National contexts are important. They are a fundamental issue for mutual comprehension.* Significant historical and national dynamics exist. For example, France created the CNE in 1984 when the increase in the number of students led to the necessity of founding new institutions and to the need for the State to check and strengthen a system which was becoming more complex and autonomous. The issue of devolution in the UK introduces a new contextual factor that is influencing QA methodology. In addition to permanent realities, national contexts highlight the reasons why some countries have evolved in a particular way: Hungary explains its input-oriented approach to QA by arguing that it is easier and simpler today to carry out resource evaluation rather than to assess the teaching process rigorously. The Berlin Communiqué of 2003 recognises implicitly the importance of the national context by directly referring to the national level as the relevant one, along with the HEIs’ involvement, in the improvement of quality in higher education⁶.

⁴E.g. the current debates on the increase of the fees in the UK require certain prudence when describing their part in the British HE system. Likewise, in France, the lack of transparency of the “habilitation” criteria is a point in question for CNE and numerous stakeholders, but that is not necessarily the case for the authorities in charge of the “habilitation” process.

⁵The questions were: on whose behalf is the agency supposed to write the SAD? Does the agency act as a spokesperson or does it carry out its own analysis? In what way would the point of view of the agency be wiser than that of any other stakeholder of the HE system? These questions highlight the difficulties of the writer being the only person in charge of the SAD as s/he may shape the vision of the system to his/her own perception.

⁶“Ministers welcome the various initiatives (...) to make higher education systems more transparent and to enhance the quality of European higher education at institutional and national levels”.

The horizontal reading of the SADs, made possible through a common structure of writing, enabled us to obtain a transversal view of the themes adopted by the six countries. However, it did not help us to understand why the trends within the HE systems move in a particular way; such cross-referencing may lead to oversimplification.

The added value of the SADs was initially to reflect the main, current changes at a certain moment within a specific country. But one must keep in mind that SADs quickly become obsolete. Most agencies have underlined the dynamic nature of current thoughts and reforms (e.g. White Papers in UK and Sweden, expected new legislation in France, reflection on the impact of the Bologna Process in Hungary). Others (Lithuania, Norway) have highlighted the fact that their QA system is so new that they lack time and experience to assess fully its outcomes. Probably, the content of the SADs would be dramatically different in the next few years.

- *The SADs reflect choices that have been made because of the complexity of the national and HE situation.* Considering the experience and the level of autonomy of the HEIs, the involvement of the stakeholders in evaluation or accreditation, and the size and scale of the higher education system of the country, the writer of an SAD has been obliged to highlight some aspects and to leave out others.⁷ Besides, it is difficult for the writer to know if the issues in the SADs are short or long term matters and if they are likely to change the scope of HE in the country. In the UK, the SAD was being written while important debates in Parliament and via the media about tuition fees were taking place. The French SAD was written when the bill on the increase of autonomy of the HEIs was suddenly withdrawn; this text would otherwise have strongly affected the future of self-evaluation.

⁷E.g. the question of the pace of evaluation cycles and the means used by the accreditation or evaluation agencies are not addressed in the SADs, although they form an important issue in several countries.

For now, we can conclude that the SADs may be considered as documents with political overtones. They state a specific vision at a specific moment in time which is open to criticism. Even more than a static description of a situation, the overview of the HE and QA systems displayed by the SADs is context-dependent.

4.2 Thoughts on European convergence and the question of quality

The complexity of grasping a national reality and sharing it with others in a precise manner is explained (and highlighted by the SADs) by the fact that one is dealing with national processes that have their own logic and that are born in their own context. However, we can see that, despite their diversity, these same national systems of higher education seek to achieve similar objectives: training, transfer of knowledge, research, development of citizenship and introduction to the professional world, as well as assisting the economic development of the country.

So from this position, can questions about quality and convergence be asked? To take the matter further, we analysed the mechanisms of higher education as if they were systems, or more precisely, as if they were organisations made up of elements that interact.

4.2.1 Higher education as a system

Whilst making comparisons may be helpful for comprehension, it does not necessarily reflect the reality. Comparisons are possible in many areas: one can compare the way students are recruited, the funding of higher education, the relations between HEIs and national political authorities etc.⁸ However, it seems that similarities between such ele-

⁸Within the QCS project, the authors of the SADs were invited to point out possible areas of convergence amongst the different countries. It would appear that there are numerous possibilities but these possibilities rely on extremely precise elements of systems or on an *impression* of similarity. Cf. the final section of each SAD.

ments still do not easily assist the development of a real comprehension of how the system actually works.

The elements of different systems can appear to be similar but can in fact be pursuing different priorities.

- Thus, Sweden has changed its quality audit system to one of evaluation of subjects and programmes, partly at the request of students wishing to be able to compare the different programmes offered. The Swedish agency, like other agencies, still retains the objective of the enhancement of higher education. However, it has been compelled to add a new specific objective that could meet the students' interests.
- In France, the CNE carries out institutional evaluations for the attention of the government, institutions and the public with a view to developing institutional autonomy. The pedagogical objective of developing a culture of autonomy is particular to France where the centralist tradition is still strong. This objective is not shared by the United Kingdom, where institutional autonomy is well embedded. As for Lithuania and Hungary, they use a system of quality assurance which conforms to European standards but in which one objective is the control of offers of higher education places in the middle of the expansion of the system.
- International expertise is something that one finds repeatedly in external evaluations. In this matter, the size of the country and its higher education system becomes very important. In a small country, international experts are used to complement a network of national experts which may not be sufficient. Then again countries with a prominent higher education community have less problems in recruiting experts and therefore tend to use international colleagues to validate the outcomes of their evaluations.

On the other hand, there are functions within systems which are carried out in very different ways according to each country, even though they seek to achieve very similar objectives. The following examples demonstrate that the way in which the

function is carried out is less important, so long as it is done professionally and all interested parties can be confident that it has been done. The question of responsibility (that is to say, who carries out the function and guarantees that it has been done) leads us to the question of confidence (how much faith is placed in the person responsible for the function):

- The State is interested in whether or not the objective of using public money wisely is achieved, but the way in which the function is carried out varies from country to country. Thus, in the United Kingdom the guarantee of the quality of a programme is assured and demonstrated by the institution itself; in France the role is carried out by the Minister for Education; and in Norway the principal responsibility rests with the institutions themselves, but is made transparent through the national agency (NOKUT), which evaluates the institutions' systems for quality assurance.
- The recruitment of teachers is carried out in a very different way in France than in the United Kingdom. In France, a double system of recruitment aims to select the best attributes for teaching in an institution (national selection and then selection by the institution on the basis of a list of aptitudes). In the United Kingdom, the institution is entirely responsible for the recruitment of its staff. However, it is obvious that it is in the institutions' interest to recruit the most qualified, motivated and dedicated staff possible. Effectively the two countries share the same objective of quality although it is achieved in very different ways.
- The mechanisms for quality assurance use the same methods (self-evaluation, external evaluation, publication) but reading the SADs shows that the outcomes or purposes for each country may be slightly different. In Hungary, one of the underlying objectives for accreditation was to maintain State control, a situation common amongst the former communist countries, which is now changing. In France, "l'habilitation" is a means by which the State can guarantee the minimum quality of education of which it is responsible. CNE has the task of ensuring that institu-

tions have adopted an internal quality assurance system which works. The French model for external quality assurance aims to assure the institutional strategies and to prepare them to face up to national and international competition in higher education. In the United Kingdom external quality assurance is clearly based on the search for confidence in a complex system with many laws and institutional autonomy anchored in a political-institutional context which itself is in the middle of change. In Sweden, there are three objectives for quality assurance: to ensure a minimum level of quality, to enhance quality, and to provide public information for all stakeholders. In Norway, quality assurance as carried out by NOKUT aims to strengthen institutions' internal quality assurance procedures and to ensure a minimal level of quality for institutions and programmes.

A systemic approach leads to an emphasis on the interactions of the various actors/stakeholders. In any system, numerous people interact. The SADs highlight the roles and multiple interactions of stakeholders who have their own logic for working in a particular way and who follow different objectives (e.g. the economic situation v. teachers, the State v. local enterprises). The boundaries between fields of action are sometimes blurred or misunderstood by the actors themselves.⁹ In any case, these fields are constantly evolving. Each actor has his/her own part to play in the improvement of the quality of the system (teachers/researchers, agencies, the Minister, Vice-Chancellors and heads of institutions, public and private partners, students, etc.).¹⁰ Those with a role to play in a system have a partial knowledge of the system of higher education, and it is the complexity of *that* system which prevents a complete vision and a true understanding of it. This is a constraint at national level which is reinforced at the international level.

The analysis of such a system relies on the understanding that the notion of a neutral position does

not exist. The complexity of the system is one of human and institutional interactions. For example, the Hungarian SAD states that the influence of certain people involved in quality assurance (called *founding fathers*) has influenced the scope of the work of the accreditation agency and the system of quality assurance. These interpersonal relationships could explain the current complexity of the Hungarian quality assurance system. Consequently, we can see that the level of information that each actor possesses and their manner of interacting with others becomes a determining factor for mutual comprehension, and one which is much more powerful than the "rubber stamp" of quality by an external body.

In conclusion, an approach that examines only the elements of a system upsets the overall vision of that system and prevents us from getting to grips with national realities. On the other hand, an approach that looks at the functions of systems allows us to discover how things work and to move beyond the difficulties presented by national characteristics. The SADs effectively show that the systems considered by the project carry out similar functions, in particular the following:

- guarantee the quality of the content of higher education programmes and their operation by institutions;
- recruit a teaching body which is capable of teaching at a high level;
- offer students the resources for study, and the means of developing a personal and professional course;
- respond to the needs of national and global economies;
- verify that institutions satisfy the demands of integrity and good management, etc.

Finally, comprehension of the SADs and national situations relies on the ability of the reader to integrate all the elements of a system; that is to say to take into account how:

⁹The overview of the outlook of the French quality assurance mechanisms provides an interesting example of the interaction of actors in this area.

¹⁰The debates in progress cited in each SAD allow a definition of the respective weight and influence of each group of actors in shaping the higher education system and in matters concerning quality.

- the elements of the system are linked and interact with each other¹¹;
- to dissociate them would be to misunderstand the true function of higher education in a country;
- the elements are placed in context – they have a history and are determined by national politics which have their own influence and their own dynamics;
- the elements should be judged in the light of what becomes permanent¹² and what changes¹³;
- the system is capable of self-regulation and of dealing with the retrospective effects of the elements from which it is constructed.¹⁴

The systemic approach also leads to a reformulation of the question about quality. Independent of its definitions (results achieved, methods used, analysis of the stages between project and result etc.), *quality is the product of interaction between actors or elements in the system.* It is the consequence of the functioning of the system. The six SADs showed that the evolution of quality assurance mechanisms did not depend so much on methodological considerations than on the influence of

¹¹ E.g. the question of the autonomy of institutions has a direct influence on the necessity to be accountable to accountants and politicians. Further, the introduction of tuition fees (under debate in several countries) will reinforce student demands regarding the quality of the education that they are contemplating. Another example, the strengthening of institutional powers could further cloud the link between public authorities, institutions and other partners and affect the government of the university system.

¹² E.g. in France, it is difficult for policy-makers to think about increasing tuition fees as it is considered by many as a basic principle.

¹³ Lithuania established the Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC) in 1995. In less than ten years, the breakdown of responsibilities in the area of quality assurance between the national authorities, the Centre and the institutions has evolved considerably. Norway says that it has still to evaluate its new system of quality assurance, which was put in place in 2003, but it already foresees modification in the light of concrete experience. Hungary points out that the present method of accreditation will evolve since it will be completed by advice on quality management, which will modify the objectives of HAC (from accountability to enhancement of quality).

¹⁴ The strong reaction of Swedish students obliged the State to modify substantially its system for quality assurance. The rapid increase in the number of students in Lithuania increased the number of programmes offered and, consequently, means that the quality assurance mechanism must develop its activities to cope with this (by inviting the participation of international experts).

the national contexts, that quality was not linked to one particular element of the system and that it was not limited to questions of working methods. For example, the accreditation agencies are no longer content to accredit on a binary basis (yes–no) but are evolving towards taking into account the realities of the national higher education systems. One example is the new Norwegian method for quality assurance which has adopted a dual system of evaluation-accreditation of the internal procedures for the quality assurance of programmes and institutions.

4.2.2 Three main trends that influence the evolution of national systems

Alongside the political desires manifested in the intergovernmental Bologna Process (Bachelor's and Master's Degrees – BMD, diploma supplement, etc.) the evolution of national systems of higher education is supported by the broad trends which transform working conditions and the development of higher education.

1. The strengthening of national politics is a current trend in Europe. The construction of the EHEA through the Bologna Process is an important intergovernmental challenge. It has already been noted that the Berlin Communiqué does not ask the European authorities for a mandate to construct a supra-national system for quality assurance. On the contrary, it insists that the development of quality assurance is the responsibility of institutions and their governments. The HEIs' responsibility depends directly on the political desire of the State to uphold the autonomy of such institutions; it is not the institutions themselves that decide their own autonomy. In the same way, the system of quality assurance put in place in each country depends in many cases on the States' initiative. Authority on the regulation and control of education systems in Europe continues to be retained at national level. If we are working within the context of EU policy, then we should have to think in terms of the principle of subsidiarity.

The strengthening of national politics demonstrates the States' strategic interest in developing a "knowledge economy" which would be favourable

for them in terms of employment, economic development and international recognition. In those countries where there is a long tradition of higher education, the tendency is towards a strong reaffirmation of the State's role in the higher education system. The British example is enlightening. In this country with a long tradition of institutional autonomy in higher education, where the national system of quality assurance has been considerably lightened in recent years, the role of the State can not be ignored. Thus, quality audits are obligatory for the receipt of public funds. The trend towards devolution has also affected the area of quality assurance, as the devolved regional administrations (Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) have insisted on adapting the quality assurance methods to suit their own objectives. Finally, the introduction of a set of national reference points, the "academic infrastructure" reflects the common framework for higher education desired by the State in the United Kingdom. All HEIs now make use of this infrastructure. In the former communist countries, a proliferation of legislation at the beginning of the 1990's in the area of higher education bears witness to the desire of those States to take responsibility for the education and training of their own students and to meet the highest skills in a short timeframe.¹⁵ The Nordic countries, for their part, have highlighted the use of higher education as a lever for economic and international development.¹⁶

The implementation of the BMD reform also highlights the important role played by the national authorities in how far and how fast they are approaching the reform. All countries are thinking about a common structure for studies¹⁷, but the dis-

tinctions remain important. Although the higher education community may have broadly accepted the Bologna Process, it fears the effect that it may have on its autonomy. The Hungarian SAD refers to current controversies in Hungary which are linked to the Bologna Process and which concern the government of institutions, State control and finances.

National politics will not leave it up to the institutions to take sole responsibility for the implementation of the Bologna reforms; the States are very much the central players in the construction of the EHEA.

2. The integration of "stakeholders" in the functioning of quality assurance in higher education.

This trend is particularly visible through the desire to integrate students into quality assurance mechanisms. The desire is shared by all six of the participating agencies.

The general impression on this trend obtained through the six SADs is one of pragmatism, even sometimes of experimentation by the national authorities and the institutions. The role played by students and the functions they assure through their part in evaluation is very diverse across the six countries. Their activities range from participation in internal evaluation procedures to representation on external evaluation or accreditation teams. In certain cases, their participation may even be recognised as part of their programme of study. Such activities are well recognised and go beyond simply defending students' rights. Beyond the diversity of national strategies, it would seem that the participation of students is thought to be one of the factors important for quality and for the improvement of the higher education system.

At this point, we should mention the place of other "stakeholders" (professionals, families, society in general). The SADs show, in a general way, that the systematic publication of the results of evaluation and accreditation is part of a desire to consider the public and partners of institutions as actors across the whole system. It is recognised that the manner of publication (i.e. as part of a ranking system, numerical/verbal etc.) is part of an ongoing debate.

¹⁵ The creation of the agencies in Hungary and Lithuania has reinforced aspects of quality assurance from the 1990's.

¹⁶ The Norwegian SAD reminds us of the State's growing interest in maintaining the employability of its students, as it concentrates also on the evaluation of results and learning outputs as well as on the evaluation of processes. In other respects, the State has entrusted much to the Norwegian agency, NOKUT, whose remit goes beyond quality assurance: it confirms recognition of international diplomas and awards and provides information on the Norwegian system for non-national institutions and overseas partners.

¹⁷ Confirmed by the study "Trends 2003 progress towards the EHEA", DG Education and Culture, European Commission.

3. *Higher education institutions are increasingly responsible for their activities.* Whatever the history of the country, there is, at the moment, a common desire to delegate more power to higher education institutions. However, we must underline again that factors governing evolution are linked to the national context, and that it is not the construction of the EHEA to be the real driver for institutional autonomy. The SADs show that national policies (the White Paper in the United Kingdom) and events (the influence of students in Sweden, the need to rationalise the number of programmes of study in Lithuania and Hungary) are those driving the national authorities to find the most effective action. As much as the decision-makers can choose to strengthen regulations and demands on institutions as regards the quality, and as much as they refuse to reconsider the system¹⁸, they have taken account about the fact that national authorities, like the evaluation agencies and the institutions, are actors in a system that only works if there is interaction between all parties. The State might have pre-eminence in deciding the direction in which to move but it can no longer shoulder all the responsibility alone – and indeed it does not want to do so anymore.

The status of the institution – be it public or private – is irrelevant, the principle is to delegate further powers to the local level so that the mission given by the State can be better assured. Devolution of powers remains very varied across the different States (the recruitment of teachers, is without doubt, the most notable differentiation across the countries).

The growing institutional autonomy leads to a redefinition of the objectives and the shape of internal evaluation which, in future, has to deal with

guaranteeing quality for the authorities, students and other stakeholders.

Internal evaluation is no longer just a part of the evaluation process carried out by an agency. From now on, it will be considered as a permanent internal tool for accountability and the enhancement of quality. This change of direction could lead to considerable consequences for the agencies, which in the future will have to be sure that institutions can prove that they have taken the necessary measures to guarantee quality. Either, like QAA, they no longer carry out this function, or they combine accreditation of programmes and evaluation of internal quality assurance systems.

4.3 Creation of convergence and quality

To sum up, the reading of the SADs leaves no doubt that a common factor is the existence of higher education systems made up of interacting elements and influenced by broad drivers for change guiding their development.

In this particular context, quality appears to be a result of interaction between actors. In the same manner, convergence can also be seen as a result of interaction. A good example of such a mechanism is reflected in the concept of joint degrees which associate different national teaching staffs in a single educational project.

The importance of the actors leads us to maintain that convergence must be thought of not just in terms of the objectives that it may permit us to achieve (i.e. EHEA), but also as a collection of processes which allows the achievement of these objectives.

¹⁸ E.g. the strong legislative activity in the post communist countries does not restrain higher education institutions from steadily assuming new powers.

5 Conclusion

In concluding and evaluating the experiences of the project, it should be remembered that the main objective of the project was to propose possible paths that might be followed in order to assist the development of convergence. This was done not just from the point of view of the way different national agencies work, but especially from the perspective of increasing the knowledge and understanding of the contexts within which they are working. It is particularly on the latter point that the QCS study feels that it can offer some new areas for reflection and create new dimensions for the different debates in which the member agencies of ENQA are currently involved.

The following conclusions are the outcomes of reading the self-analyses written by the participating agencies. They are also results of the external experts' and agency representatives' debates and reflections that allowed development of thoughts and ideas throughout the course of the project.

5.1 Cultural dimension

The mechanisms of higher education are the realities with which we work, the shapes of which are largely the product of national culture. This perhaps rather obvious discovery has direct implications on the true capacity of those outside each national system to clearly understand why things are the way they are within each national context. The problem is not just a question of language but goes back to the very real difficulty of understanding complex situations. Further, we have concluded that these constantly evolving mechanisms cannot be considered as static for the purposes of one project. They are political objects the level of knowledge and understanding of which can vary from one outsider to another, even within the same national system.

These discoveries may seem obvious, but there is a need to look at the consequences in terms of

international co-operation. As the work of the QCS project – aiming at developing a good level of mutual understanding amongst participants – progressed, it demonstrated that there is a tendency to underestimate this difficulty. The danger of communication based on over-simplified caricatures of national systems became very clear. In this respect, the difficulty arises less from the use of one working language (English) than from a real difficulty to understand the day-to-day realities that support the way in which facts are presented or strategies expressed. In brief, we noticed that the comprehension of the SADs and of the debate they produced required the understanding of the position of the author as well as of the point of view of the actors (students, teachers, administrators etc.) and the national and cultural situation within which they work.

We have emphasised this point because it seems to us to be crucial: mutual understanding is difficult to achieve – it is demanding in terms of personal time and investment. It requires a total immersion in the different cultural situations.

5.2 Functioning of systems and quality

The specific focus of this study allowed us to go beyond the individual points of view of the agencies and to include in the debate all the elements of the mechanisms of higher education with which they work. In addition, the decision to integrate the current debates in each topic of the SADs led to a dynamic picture of their developments and evolution. The SADs were constrained and/or encouraged to a greater or lesser extent by the Europe-wide objectives of the Bologna Process. They were naturally also influenced by their own national contexts, however. The picture of what was happening in the countries in which the agencies work allowed us to perceive the mechanisms of higher education as

systems and the agencies as actors within these systems.

This point of view has direct consequences on the way in which we ask questions with regard to quality assurance. In fact, using the idea of a system and the logic of the functioning of each country's system allows us to see clearly the difficulties and to clarify exactly what is taking place in some of the ongoing debates.

The actors' point of view: the fact that those people working within a system have their own perceptions and expectations of that system, according to their position, became very clear during the course of the project. In this respect, the inclusion of a group of external experts was crucial. It became clear that the main difficulty in terms of dialogue between the participating agencies and the external experts was that the latter group brought into the project expectations and ideas that had not been considered by the project group. It became obvious that the objectives of a project of this nature must be carefully thought through and clearly explained, particularly because the different participants (agencies, stakeholders etc.) each bring their own different motives with regard to achieving the goals – and their priorities are not necessarily the same. The experience of the QCS shows that the experts began to see their role as one of developing a particular framework of reference for their thoughts and their points of view. In other words, it is difficult to have expertise that is truly independent and not influenced by the expectations on the possible outcomes.

National quality systems: the complexity of the organisations and the regulations developed over time in the countries participating in the project should be given due consideration. The balance between the organisations, their processes and political imperatives does not appear to be moving towards rapid or radical change. The QCS study definitely shows that convergence at the European level in the area of quality assurance is developing along the lines laid down in the Berlin Communiqué, in particular through a “national quality framework”: “They [the ministers] also stress that consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy,

the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework”.

A realistic dynamic approach: we noticed that the systemic approach allowed us to put the conflicts between various actors/stakeholders into perspective and to consider them relative to one another. This allows us to consider the notion of accountability. In practice, the idea of accountability often means that information is provided on how far and how well higher education institutions fulfil their mission. Without going into detail, it seems that, in order to help to improve or guarantee quality, the mechanism is more one of retrospective action. This is not just about a simple choice of vocabulary, talking about retrospective or remedial mechanisms refers to the relationship between actors which goes beyond nit-picking control.

More generally, in focusing on the relations between actors, the systemic approach allows one to move beyond the logic of administrative control or of subordination. From this point of view, the systemic model allows one to see more clearly the growing responsibility of the higher education institutions and the contractual relations between the State and institutions.

The idea of function: the systemic concept allows us also to debate in terms of function. The national case studies presented in the QCS project allow us to approach this idea with a perspective that helps to define the framework of the debate currently in progress in Europe. In brief, the national studies highlight the fact that in all the systems there is a function which recognises educational programmes and professional training receiving public funding. It seems that the word which often applies to this function is “accreditation”, but this is not always the case. However, the function exists. The practise varies from one national system to another but in general the mechanisms in question possess common characteristics: an authority recognised as legitimate by all actors has responsibility for the recognition of training. This functional definition completes the procedural one which

states that accreditation is a mechanism for evaluation culminating in either an “approved” or a “not approved” judgement.

To complete this survey, we noticed that the systemic approach is compatible with the principles and the objectives of the section “Quality Assurance” in the Berlin Communiqué.¹⁹

Generally, therefore, it seems to us that the QCS study invites us to reflect further on quality assurance from a systemic point of view. The benefits include the achievement of a better definition of the problems and a better understanding of the parts played by the various actors. In particular this approach allows us to consider all the actors and to envisage the development of quality through cooperation of the various actors rather than through mechanistic coercion.

To sum up, the idea of the system in the area of quality assurance in higher education allows us to move beyond a static point of view of the characteristics of quality and its maintenance. The notion of quality can be seen as a result of the function of systems and of interaction between the various stakeholders/actors. This approach allows the integration and evolution of ideas and the capacity for adaptation of developing systems.

¹⁹ “The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. Ministers commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level. They stress the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance. Therefore, they agree 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.

At the European level, Ministers call upon ENQA through its members, in co-operation 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. Due account will be taken of the expertise of other quality assurance associations and networks.”

5.3 Question of confidence

To make quality a result of co-operation implies that the responsibilities of the various actors and the objectives followed by some or all of them are clearly identified. It also suggests that all the actors share a mutual confidence in their collective ability to make the system work.

One of the first questions that the QCS project asked was: “Did the idea of quality assurance arise at a certain moment in time in the mechanisms of higher education?” The self-analyses show that there is a direct link between the debate about confidence in higher education and that on quality. At the origin of the debates on quality are discussions on the expansion of higher education and on professional training, which are strategic challenges faced by the States.

From this perspective, how does one create confidence in systems that are permanently in a state of flux? The QCS project demonstrates that evolution and transformation are the current characteristics of the mechanisms of higher education and there is no evidence to suggest that this will change. It is necessary, therefore, to examine the need for assurance and confidence in the context of continuous change. If we make a link between the continuously developing system and complementary responsibilities of the actors involved, it would seem that the key question has to do with the actors’ exercise of responsibilities.

In other words, once we have characterised the procedures of higher education as complex systems in a state of constant change²⁰, it is necessary to consider the conditions in which the various actors work and develop their opinions. From this perspective, confidence, like quality, is the result of the functioning of the systems and depends, in the end, on the quality of the actors’ interaction and their level of participation. This complexity leads us to con-

²⁰ The frequent changes of methods used by evaluation or accreditation agencies may illustrate their difficulty to State the existence of quality. As a consequence, some of them turn to quality audit and most of them require the HEIs themselves to assess and prove their quality.

sider that confidence cannot only be derived from a decision taken even by a clearly legitimate authority. The confidence an actor has in a system does not rely only on the hallmark of an official authority (accreditation agency, ministry, private label-provider) but also on the interaction among stakeholders.

We think that the system or part of it can be a factor for convergence if it can provide conditions of confidence: confidence among stakeholders, among governments, among institutions, and on various scales (e.g. consistency and objectives of programmes, quality of teaching, living conditions of the students). It is important that any stakeholder has the possibility to understand easily why s/he can trust a mechanism, a way of doing or a particular approach. This happens when:

- the stakeholder understands correctly the HE system because s/he is sufficiently informed and can formulate an opinion or take a position as regards the system (this is what the SADs were eager to accomplish; there is a long way to go to reach this objective);
- s/he knows that the system is capable of identifying areas where the quality is in danger and equipped with the means to act if needed;
- the functioning of the system is transparent and open to criticism.

For example, when it comes to making complex choices about an institution or a programme, each individual should have the opportunity to examine all the available information and make a decision according to his/her own criteria.

To achieve convergence, there is first a need for confidence. The explanation of the national situations is a prerequisite, but it cannot single-handedly support the active collaboration of systems. The question of confidence is of great importance in the search for convergence. To address the matter of confidence allows the integration of the diversity of national systems, their complexity and their continuing evolution.

At this juncture it may be helpful to mention a possible analogy with the international ‘convergence’, i.e. recognition of degrees and qualifica-

tions. Due to the differences between the ever-changing national educational systems and the legal provisions for professional qualifications, international credential recognition focused for many decades on a case-by-case scrutiny of the different curricula and programmes, stressing all the possible differences along the way. To smoothen the process of recognition and so to reach a certain level of ‘convergence’ in both the academic and the professional fields, the concept of the harmonisation of programmes and curricula for specific professions in all the Member States of the European Union was developed in the framework of the EU Directives. It regarded the recognition of qualifications giving access to regulated professions. It goes without saying that this proved to be an arduous task.

In the 1990’s the international competent authorities developed a new approach to both academic and professional recognition. The approach does not focus on differences between curricula, but accepts them, unless they prove to be too substantial to be recognized without creating problems. The approach was codified both in the legal instruments of the European Commission for professional recognition and in the Lisbon Recognition Convention for (mainly) academic recognition by the Council of Europe and the UNESCO.

At the very heart of the mentioned approach is mutual trust in each others’ educational systems. The mutual trust is based upon the confidence in the capabilities of the systems to provide the necessary and comparable education and training having acceptable minimum quality standards and leading to certain credentials and qualifications.

The approach might be useful for the elaboration and eventual implementation of the idea of international convergence in quality: accepting the differences, based upon the confidence as described above, unless those differences prove to be too substantial. As was the case in the field of recognition, an important task should be the identification of the “substantial differences”.

To conclude, in the context of complex and evolving systems, the creation of global confidence relies not only on the affirmation of a product’s quality or on an award granted at a given moment. It

also depends on the development of processes for increasing knowledge and understanding which will allow each stakeholder, in the case of a problem, to be assured that there is a procedure for rapid and efficacious remedial action.

5.4 Project proposals for ENQA for the continuation of co-operation

The QCS project considers crucial from the point of view of convergence development that information about higher education systems is available for actors. The transcultural nature of the EHEA, the development of quality at the hands of multiple actors and the increase of confidence in the collective ability of actors to face up to current and future challenges weigh heavily in favour of enhancing the direct knowledge of the situations in which actors are working and making choices.

The member agencies of ENQA, whatever their activities – institutional evaluation, quality audit, accreditation of institutions and/or programmes – are at the interface of the national field in which they legitimately carry out their work and fulfil their mission and of the EHEA where their scope for manoeuvre is limited by those same national frameworks which sustain them. This ambiguous position (national obligations and international commitments) is unique amongst the organisations targeted by the Berlin Communiqué for the development of quality assurance at the European level (ENQA, EUA, ESIB, EURASHE – the so-called E4 Group). For ENQA member agencies, the complex position makes the identification of projects more challenging: should agencies defend their national system? Should they work towards defining extra-national systems which may transform their own national contexts? The vague nature of the situation encourages a prudent approach; an approach which favours broad areas of reflection.

The QCS project group proposes that the forthcoming projects would study further the possibility for convergence of national quality systems. In the light of the conclusions drawn by the QCS project, it favours action by those stakeholders affected directly by convergence within the particular area of their responsibility (students, teachers, institutions, agencies).

With regard to the agencies the project group emphasises that the projects to be decided upon should seek to develop a better reciprocal knowledge of European cultural realities. Namely, these projects should take forward some practical work on achieving mutual trust. In this respect, it would be also useful to increase the number of participants involved in projects such as QCS, to include member agencies of ENQA, but also all stakeholders concerned with higher education. In particular, projects should be aimed at searching for a better understanding within the E4 Group. This could help ENQA to develop some actions in three main areas:

- Reaching agreement on terminology. This would involve going beyond definitions of procedures or simple translations of terms and trying to agree on functional definitions based on reflection on higher education systems. Such a project could be combined with the idea of an ENQA workshop on the topic.
- Developing cross-participation of permanent staff members of QA agencies in evaluation or accreditation programmes. These kinds of actions could be organised in the framework of bilateral relations between agencies but also reinforced by regular meetings and exchanges of experience organised by ENQA.
- Enlarging the experimental approach begun by QCS through the SADs by exploring the possibilities of defining a general quality matrix at European level. This “quality map” would cover the main elements of the national higher education

systems from the point of view of quality and would identify the actors or organisations bearing responsibility with regard to these elements. Such a document should be of great value as regards information about the Bologna Process activities. It could also encourage further debate.

These projects are the steps necessary to work out a method for undertaking analysis of the way the

systems work, and how they exercise the functions required to promote confidence among stakeholders. This means gathering and describing functions, understanding the elements of the context which have an impact on the organisation, appraising their strengths and weaknesses and disseminating understandable information for a multicultural public.