



ENQA Standards and Guidelines: Identifying and addressing the implementation challenges

21 - 23 March, 2007

The American College of Greece

Post-seminar summary report

This brief report summarises the content and outcomes of the Athens seminar, organised by the EAIR through the Special Interest Group (SIG) for 'Quality in Higher Education'. As had been hoped, the seminar provided an excellent opportunity for the 50 or so participants to discuss the challenges presented by the ENQA Standards and Guidelines: for agencies, for governments, institutions, quality managers, and institutional researchers. Participants also enjoyed the excellent hospitality provided by our hosts, the American College of Greece.

Day One

Following the introduction and welcome by Professor Jethro Newton, the opening address was made by Professor Spyros Amourgis, head of the recently established Hellenic Quality Assurance Agency, the national accreditation body for Greek universities. Professor Amourgis spoke about the implications of change and growth in higher education and his address included a focus on higher education qualifications, curriculum design, pedagogy, and curriculum delivery. He emphasised the importance of the ENQA Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in providing safeguards and guidance on best practice and for them not to be seen as regulatory guidelines. He expressed the hope that the ESG would encourage better practices across European universities.

The first keynote presentation was made by Mr Peter Williams, Chief Executive of the UK Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and President of ENQA. Peter's presentation was named *Implementing the Quality Assurance Standards in the European Higher Education Area: The Way Forward*. The main points covered in the presentation included the ESG's objectives; what they are; what they are not; the major challenges (for QA agencies, for HEIs); and implementation questions.

The first morning was completed by break-out group discussions which focused on the topic of 'Issues at national and European levels'.

The afternoon session commenced with the second keynote presentation by Dr Dermot Douglas, Senior Executive (Academic) at the Council of Directors of Institutes of Technology, Ireland. In his presentation Dermot considered some of the institutional aspects of using and implementing the ESG. Of particular interest was his consideration of the implications for programme and curricula design, and the need for effective staff development and staff evaluation. Dermot also looked at implications in terms publication of performance indicators.

Further opportunity for discussion was provided in the second breakout group session, on the afternoon of the first day. The topic on this occasion was 'Issues at institutional level'. This was followed by a plenary session at which each group provided summary feedback on day one discussions as preparation for day two.

Day Two

Day two of the seminar commenced with a presentation by Jethro Newton on 'Implementation challenges: emerging. The purpose of this presentation was to draw together the main issues highlighted in the keynote presentations and discussion groups from Day One. The powerpoint summary maps onto the discussion questions which groups had been asked to focus on, such as whether the ESG are achievable, issues around harmonisation, the tension between accountability and improvement, burden and compliance, sharing of experience, and how the ESG might help to secure engagement.

The final sessions were a third breakout group, where future needs and challenges were addressed, followed by a final plenary, where each group reported back on its final discussions. These discussions are summarised here:

Group A (Jethro Newton)

Four areas discussed:

- firstly, variety of experiences, contexts, practices, and challenges
- all participants reported usability of ESG; some institutions will align this with use of EFQM Model, but the key factor is experience and use of self-assessment and self-evaluation (quality culture)
- discussion also merits or otherwise of quality models from industry
- secondly, building systems is important but can be burdensome and this may be necessary before it is possible to develop sufficient maturity for asking whether we are improving the student experience, and what evidence do we have
- thirdly, how do we address 'low quality' or 'poor quality'?; some national contexts and experiences are very challenging; here, it is difficult to maximise the benefits of from the ESG and this is frustrating
- fourthly, there is detail in the ESG (eg staff issues; assessment issues) which is important for all of us; we can all find important aspects to work on within our institutional contexts.

Group B (Lee Harvey)

Four areas discussed:

- firstly, the ESG are useful but empty perhaps? If we focus on any one area (eg assessment) and ask 'what should be in there' this would be productive for participants (eg what types of assessment; research into assessment etc)
- secondly, this led into a discussion about 'what is quality' and how this might be recognised; if there are different notions of quality and standards in different contexts, what are the implications for improving student learning? the notion of 'quality as transformation' throws some light on this but the ESG adopt a 'fitness for purpose' approach to quality;
- thirdly, the key section, for participants, is that relating to institutions; this is the problematic aspect; what does it all mean in practice?
- there is an underlying pedagogic approach which is learning outcomes driven; but this is only one approach, and there are other valid ones; is it all about quality imperialism?
- Finally, the group achieved a consensus in its discussion of the view that quality should come from the ground level (institutions, teachers, students), otherwise it won't work; the theme of 'quality from within' emerged as a unifying theme from the group's discussions.

Group C (Olga Kikou)

Four areas discussed:

- firstly, the future development of ESG: use of ESG as a point of reference for further development, but variations across countries;
- QA a journey, not a destination; but as there will be revision and adaptation in time there is a need for a reference point or a target
- 2010 deadline not feasible, not all objectives will be reached but it's a starting point.
- secondly, development of a 'Quality Culture': institutions need to embrace the standards, QA, get people involved; important role of governments, agencies, institutions but governments can use agencies to control institutions, so there is also a compliance issue.
- thirdly the issue of the purpose of a university, and types of: debate over new vs old institutions, universities teaching a range of subjects or specialized universities; role of the university: provide general training or focus on employment? Or both?
- strategy: it is important to note that the strategy an institution follows is determined by its leaders and management; often, national bodies forget the goal, which is to provide education for students and beyond; need to equip students with tools for their lives after their role in the university ends.
- fourth, challenges: as Peter Williams said, universities don't cooperate well with each other, how do we overcome this? also, how will universities point out trends in society and prepare for them? need to plan ahead.
- what happens when an institution fails? what is the role of the state here? this was not discussed in the seminar.
- need for more involvement from all interested parties; in addition, how can we all get involved? one of the lessons of the seminar: avoid dangers for newly established agencies.

Final reflections

Though participants expressed the view that the seminar had been successful, inevitably there remained issues which perhaps didn't get resolved or discussed fully or sufficiently. Indeed, the implementation dimension still leaves much room for future discussion. That said, it was clear by the end of the seminar that participants had gravitated towards the value of continued discussions, focusing on the 'quality from within' dimension and the merits of sharing and exchanging ideas and case studies. In respect of all of this, the EAIR and the Quality in Higher Education SIG, will reflect on how the issues emerging from the seminar can be discussed in future. The EAIR Forum itself, this year in Innsbruck, provides further opportunities and, if there is sufficient interest and demand, and a suitable host location can be found, then perhaps a second seminar can be arranged for 2008.

Jethro Newton

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