ETUCE Policy paper on Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Submitted for adoption by the ETUCE Committee to the ETUCE Special Conference, the Regional Special Conference of Education International, meeting in Vienna on

26-27 November 2014

In 1999 the HERSC endorsed a policy paper on "Quality Assessment" at its meeting in Bled, Slovenia.

Since then, much has happened in the area of quality in higher education. In particular, the basic concept has moved from an emphasis on 'assessment' of quality to 'assurance' of quality. This shift has significant implications regarding accountability of higher education and the need to involve teachers and students in the processes of Quality Assurance (QA) of higher education in Europe.

It is important too that we consider the connection between Teaching, Learning and Research in the quality agenda. Since the quality of research is evaluated and assessed in other ways, primarily on peer review of publications, it is not a primary focus of the principles for quality assurance of higher **education**. However, it is vital that the future development of the quality agenda would recognize the essential relationship between teaching and research, as the basic activities in higher education processes of any kind. Some of the statements below, for example, refer to research activities, but they don't have research as their main focus point.

Before turning to the principles and policies for QA in HE, it is also of high importance to repeat the mission of HE in the society. In short, we see education – including higher education – as a human right and a public good which should be provided for all on the highest possible level, based on intellectual capacity and not on the ability to pay. HE should enable graduates to be active and critical members of society and actively participate in the development of modern democracies.

Thus, higher education is not just an instrument for development of the economy and competitiveness. Higher education must in a modern knowledge society/economy, find a necessary balance between the long term mission of critical thinking, intellectual development etc. and the short term requirements of the labour market.

In the light of finding this balance, we set up the following principles and policies for QA in HE:

- The quality of higher education is created in the interaction between qualified teachers and motivated, engaged students in the classrooms – whether they are physically on a campus or virtual. Attractive study and learning conditions is vital for a positive teaching process.

- Thus, it is a basic need for quality in higher education that the higher education institutions are able to offer attractive working conditions in order to attract and retain qualified academic staff. Sufficient funding, open and fair recruitment, fair pay and enough members of the academic staff are essential elements in order to obtain this attractiveness. Special focus must be on equal opportunities and non-discrimination in relation to recruitment and the academic career.

- Leaders of institutions, external quality assurance agencies and ministries can set up the necessary frames for the creation of a quality culture, but they do not participate in creating the quality. Quality in education is the exclusive output of the education process.

- QA must build on principles of peer review at the institutional level, as a central feature of quality assurance. QA must have a focus on support for and improvement of the education process – for which the necessary resources (including funding) must be available.

- The QA process must be transparent and engage both students and staff in all parts of the process. This includes the democratic selection of members in review panels and other peers.

- Principles of student centred learning will enhance the quality of the students' experiences and thus ease the achievement of the desired learning outcomes. A prerequisite of student centred learning is that academics have the necessary academic freedom to adjust the curriculum and pedagogical methods in order to meet the needs of the students in the classroom.

- QA must be part of a process which support and improve higher education and academic work and the continuing development of a quality culture at institutional level. Time for preparing classes, for self-assessment and teamwork must be taken into account as a basis for quality education.

- QA must demonstrably sustain the quality of education through helping to build a supportive working environment. Thus, higher education personnel and their representative trade unions must be fully involved in the development of policies for QA at the institutional, national and European levels.

- Necessary time for and focus on continuous professional development is important both in the area of developing didactical and pedagogical skills and subject knowledge. Professional development can take many different forms from conducting research to short courses in the use of new software etc. The close connection between teaching and research is crucial for the quality of both activities.

- Academics must not face unjustified new administrative burdens in preparation for or as a result of QA processes.

- Institutional management should also be subject to QA processes relating to higher education

- External QA plays a role in assuring to the public in general and the public funders of higher education in particular that the necessary quality procedures are in place at institutional level and that the academic community is committed to on-going developments of a quality culture encompassing all activities of a higher education institution.

- Rankings, other kinds of "league tables" and mechanical use of learning outcomes have proved to be misleading as indicators of relative or absolute quality.

- QA must also have a focus on risks of academic fraud and corruption which will seriously undermine the trust in the quality of higher education, no matter what QA processes are in place.

Brussels, March 2014, revised after debate in HERSC