



# Quality and quality assurance: the European debate

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Iceland

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Germain Dondelinger



# General context

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- Why is there a debate on quality higher education?
  - Tight job market for graduates
  - Concern over (rising) tuition fees
  - Debate on the efficiency of higher education
  - Call for increased productivity of faculty and accountability
  - Calls for assistance with problems facing the local, national, international community
  - Balance between teaching and research
- ⇒ Collective significance of the debate



# General context

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- Deregulation, devolution of authority
- Institutional autonomy coupled with institutional accountability
- ⇒ new public sector management with concepts like “value for money provision” “fit for purpose institutions” and the like
- ⇒ quality: no longer an implicit, self-evident property of higher education but “quality enhancement” becomes a mechanism and a tool to gain legitimacy for investing in the system



# Quality: the question not to put

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- What is quality? Is it in the eye of the beholder?
- An attempt at definition: cf David Garvin 1988
  - Innate excellence
  - Product based quality
  - User-based quality /needs
  - Conformance to requirements
  - Value-based: costs and prices



# Dimensions of quality

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- Academic quality:
  - Instruction/teaching/learning
  - Research
  - Service/Outreach
- Administrative quality:
  - Processes,
  - Systems,
  - Procedures
- Relationship quality:
  - Cooperation
  - Relations with publics
  - Interpersonal sensitivity and skill



# Underlying principles

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1. Leadership
2. Service orientation
3. Information
4. Collaboration
5. Communication
6. Continuous improvement



# The European framework

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- EU-27: Subsidiarity principle

## 2 Recommendations

- **1998**: promote a quality assurance system in HE
- **2006**: *(a)* institutions to introduce/develop internal QA systems  
*(b)* QA agencies to apply the European standards and guidelines on QA  
*(c)* European register of QA agencies

- Bologna Process (2005) European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)

- applying to internal QA, external evaluation and to agencies:
- assuring performance of both internal and external QA
- assuring reliable standards and procedures
- assuring consistency and transparency of decisions



# QA in the European Higher Education Area: a growth sector

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- HEIs internal QA: develop a real quality culture
- External QA by agencies. Informing stakeholders in a transparent and accountable way
- Student and international participation in QA
- Strong growth in QA infrastructure



# As You Like It: Diversity

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Purposes: accountability, enhancement, confidence building, resource allocation, public information,

Methods: peer reviews, inspections, quantitative models, desk-based analyses, explicit standard-based judgement

Focuses: programme - institution



# Amidst Diversity, two trends

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- Evaluation:

Result: judgement of strengths and weaknesses in the form of a report in view of quality enhancement

⇒ confidence judgements and recommendations

- Accreditation

Result: yes/no answer that the programme /the institution meets the required standards

⇒ accreditation decision /approval



# Amidst Diversity: risks and opportunities

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- The risk of standardisation: how to be open to and supportive of innovation and diversity in HE?
- Still a national prerogative: how to support greater opportunities for recognition of accreditations?
- Discipline quality seals: how to foster subject-based initiatives



# Rankings

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- Ranking= relative position in a group according to performance on a number of selected measures
  - Data = independent data or data obtained or usually checked by HEI
- ⇒ externally driven snapshot of the current situation of an institution in comparison to other institutions on the basis of selected indicators

# Rankings: entre l'amour et la haine



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- Global rankings:
  - Shanghai ARWU
  - Times – QS World University Ranking
- Observations levelled at these rankings:
  - Dominance of research and metrics
  - Reflection of reputation factors (40% THES)
  - Use of available data but no compilation of own data
- ⇒ Favours old, large, Anglo-Saxon research intensive institutions with +/- 24,000 students and a \$2 billion annual budget
- ⇒ Yet with increasing competition between institutions it is likely that rankings will continue to grow in importance



# Rankings: The European response

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- Initiatives by the Commission:
  - Feasibility study to develop a multidimensional university ranking
  - Statistical database on HE by Eurostat
  - Classification project
  - Research assessment by DG research expert group
- CHE (D): classification initiatives with different foci (research, employability of graduates, ...)



# Rankings: The European response

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## Underlying principles:

- Multi-dimensional approach avoiding the simplification of aggregate composite indicators
- Subject-based approach
- Data on the local-regional integration of each HEI
- Data collection and their processing accessible for further analysis
- Independence
- International outlook

⇒ classification: building groups instead of league tables



# Quality: today's and tomorrow's needs

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- Better higher education based on shared understandings and values
  - Streamlined recognition of qualifications
  - Comparable academic standards
  - Useful information about quality for stakeholders
  - Improved academic professionalism