Bonn Declaration on Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Adopted on 20 June 2007 during the Conference "Enhancing Quality Across Borders – Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education" organised by the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)

Participants from the Arab World, the ASEAN countries, Central and South America, East Africa, Europe, plus representatives of regional and international organisations gathered in Bonn from 18 to 20 June 2007 for the Conference "Enhancing Quality Across Borders – Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education" organised by the German Rectors' Conference (HRK) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) as part of the Dialogue on Innovative Higher Education Strategies programme (DIES) to discuss developments in quality assurance and how to promote further cooperation. Participants underlined the importance of regional cooperation in the field of quality assurance. While quality and quality assurance in higher education are primarily seen as the responsibility of higher education institutions, it is for national governments and/or quality assurance agencies to set requirements at national level. However, participants highlighted the importance of regional cooperation in the light of globalisation and the growing internationalisation and competitiveness of the higher education and labour markets.

Participants welcomed the various initiatives for capacity building in quality assurance, such as the new Global Initiative for Quality Assurance Capacity (GIQAC) taken by the World Bank to provide support for a variety of regional capacity building activities tailored to the needs of the region and taking into account differences in the cultural, legal and political contexts.

I. Rationale

Regional cooperation in quality assurance is seen as essential for the following reasons:

1. Quality assurance is not an end in itself but should rather contribute to improving higher education systems and promoting good governance. It will enhance the relevance of programmes, employability and the student experience. Additionally quality assurance must contribute to solving regional and global problems.

2. Quality assurance is a key element in promoting the mobility of students as well as of academic staff and graduates.

3. The basic prerequisite for improved mobility is that degrees are recognised in the region. The mutual recognition of accreditation and evaluation decisions is needed to facilitate both the mobility of students as well as the recognition of degrees. Regional cooperation promotes the idea that countries are looking at quality in comparable ways, are applying comparable methodologies and will in future apply comparable standards.

4. Regional cooperation in quality assurance promotes the transparency of higher education systems and of the programmes they offer, making benchmarking possible.

5. Regional cooperation in quality assurance makes it possible to have independent external assessment, especially for small higher education systems.

6. Regional cooperation, promoting internal quality assurance and external quality assessment will make quality more visible. This provides donor organisations with a higher degree of clarity when making funding decisions.

7. Regional quality assurance contributes to increasing mutual trust between different national systems as well as trust between different stakeholders in higher education. Therefore, the involvement of stakeholders (institutions, governments, employers, employees, students) is of the utmost importance.

8. Regional cooperation in quality assurance should facilitate the cooperation of one region with other world regions as well as international players.

II. Recommendations

In the light of the above-mentioned rationale, participants made the following recommendations:

1. **Institutions of higher education** are called upon to develop and put into place a sustainable and continuously operational internal quality assurance system (IQA system) in line with international developments and standards. Regional experience in Central and South America, East Africa, the Arab countries, the ASEAN countries and Europe can be useful in this process.

2. **National and regional quality assurance bodies**, be they public or professional organisations, are advised to align the accreditation processes, the accreditation frameworks and the accreditation standards in such a way that accreditation decisions are recognised within the region. It is furthermore recommended that the accrediting bodies apply the criteria for reliable quality assurance agencies, including the use of peer review in quality assessment, the involvement of stakeholders and independence from other organisations.

3. The International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (**INQAAHE**), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (**ENQA**), the European Consortium on Accreditation (**ECA**), **UNESCO**, the International Association of University Presidents (**IAUP**), and the Iberoamerican Network for the Accreditation of Quality in Higher Education (**RIACES**) are recommended to work towards coordinating the principles of good practice and guidelines that have been developed for a reliable quality assurance agency.

4. **National and regional university associations** are called upon to support their member institutions in the process of developing IQA systems by making the necessary knowledge and instruments available and by organising training sessions and workshops.

5. The **ministers responsible for higher education** are recommended to contribute to the development of regional quality assurance and to promote the harmonisation of accreditation by making a clear distinction between accreditation as a professional activity and the consequences connected with obtaining or failing to obtain accreditation. The latter is the prerogative of national governments and in some countries of public universities and/or professional organisations. Furthermore, they can contribute to such initiatives by assuring adequate funding and by removing obstacles to regional quality assurance initiatives.

6. **Donor organisations**, such as the World Bank, Regional Development Banks, the European Union and national development cooperation institutions, are advised to support the idea of regional quality assurance as regional public goods. Against this background they are advised to support projects to develop IQA systems as well as national or regional external quality assurance systems. Furthermore they should support capacity building for regional programme assessments for benchmarking and transparency, plus projects aimed at harmonising accreditation and external quality assurance in a region.

7. Participants are aware of the rich diversity of quality assurance in the various regions. However, in the last few decades a certain body of knowledge on quality assurance in higher education has been built up. To support the above-mentioned recommendations it should be possible to take stock of the basic knowledge available on quality assurance. Therefore UNESCO, in cooperation with stakeholders and other relevant organisations, is invited to investigate the possibility of compiling and translating this body of knowledge, possibly in a **manual on quality assurance in higher education**. Use can be made of the various examples and initiatives that exist at national and regional levels.

8. In general, it is recommended that institutions of higher education, university associations, quality assurance bodies and other stakeholders (governments, students, employers, employees) in a region develop **regional programme assessments**, thereby making benchmarking and transparency of the disciplines in the region possible.

9. It is recommended that all stakeholders involved in the quality assurance of higher education systems start developing **innovative and sustainable programme assessment and programme quality assurance methods**.

INQAAHE and other networks of quality assurance agencies are encouraged to cooperate with the university networks as well as with students and other stakeholders in order to foster the implementation of the above-mentioned recommendations.

Against the background of this declaration on Regional Cooperation in Quality Assurance in Higher Education, endorsed in the final plenary session on 20 June 2007, participants reaffirm their commitment to furthering cooperation and discussion in order to reach the goals set out in this document.

Annex: Recommendations of Regional Working Groups

Looking at the developments in the various regions, a number of specific needs have been formulated and specific recommendations made for the regions:

1. Latin America

Standards of quality assurance should be consistent within and across the region in order to strive for comparable quality decisions. At the same time they must be flexible enough to take into account national and institutional needs and differences.

A strong emphasis should be placed on building institutional and individual quality assurance capacities within higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other related organisations.

2. East Africa

The Interuniversity Council for East Africa (IUCEA) and higher education regulatory agencies in East African member states commit themselves to strengthening their Higher Education Area (The East African Higher Education Area) characterised by harmonised quality assurance benchmarks and standards set in accordance with the framework being developed by the various stakeholders.

3. Southeast Asia

Recognising the contribution that quality assurance in higher education makes to a culture of excellence, good governance and mutual understanding as well as the importance of regional cooperation for harmonisation of and in higher education, the working group agrees on the following:

- At policy level, to make the quality assurance and regional sharing activities visible to the ASEAN ministers and the ASEAN-EU minister meetings. This aims to generate mutual recognition and understanding among the political leaders for the regional educational initiatives taking place
- To encourage participation from within ASEAN and other regional groupings as observers at the AUN-QA workshops and assessment exercises.
- To promote regional cooperation with external assessment bodies.

4. Arab Region

Activities in the area of quality assurance and accreditation in the Arab region have now reached the point of institutionalisation at three levels:

- Establishment of quality assurance structures within countries at national level and within universities

- Emergence of the UNDP Higher Education Project as a voluntary network of collaborating universities and UNESCO initiatives on coordinating national agencies in the region

- The recent formation of the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The next phase of the development should focus on consolidation and coordination between these levels with the support of the responsible ministers of education and in dialogue with international donors.

5. Europe

The working group from Europe focused discussion on how cooperation with other regional networks can be further enhanced in the future. The group addressed the question in view of the major obstacles to such enhancement. The question is very complex but two major obstacles, among others, can be identified. One of them is political: who is responsible for building networks between regions? Has a will for building networks been expressed specifically at ministry level in the various countries? In countries with many external players within quality assurance: do networks exist between these QA organisations and the universities that can address questions of regional cooperation? Who will and can take the national initiative for networking between international regions?

The other major obstacle is the language barrier. In most countries in Europe the working language is the native language. However, the best, or maybe the only, way of promoting broad international cooperation is to participate in joint projects between countries and regions. To be able to achieve this, countries that want to start cooperation must agree on a common working language. Experience from countries that have agreed on using a foreign language as the working language proves that something is lost in the process. On the other hand, experience also shows that more is gained by cooperating with foreign experts through the transfer of knowledge between countries and regions. However, the use of a foreign language can be an obstacle, even at the political level, that first has to be overcome.