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# The Power of Normative Coordination in the Bologna Process

## How Universities Learned to Stop Worrying and to Love Quality Assurance

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The article posits that the institutionalisation of quality assurance within European higher education is largely attributable to the reshaping of power relations by means of practices that are very similar to the open method of coordination. All the major parties involved in this process − universities, governments, the European Commission and quality-assurance agencies − have been able to gain from it. The whole process is open to scrutiny in the central documents of the Bologna process: following the formation of a common 'truth' about the European situation, it has been possible to move forward and reshape power through normative procedures.

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# 1. The Normative Power of the Open Method of Coordination

**Quality assurance: sharp critique, smooth implementation?**

Quality assurance has become everyday life in Europe's academia. It has been in use for a couple of decades in some countries, whereas others have adopted it relatively recently. Nevertheless, its advance on the European agenda has been largely unopposed. This is surprising, because according to numerous studies, quality assurance is the most political goal of the Bologna Process (Harvey/Williams 2010; Berndtson 2007; Rinne/Simola 2005, p. 16). It has a direct impact on the way in which power relations are formed inside universities and national systems. For the same reason, it has aroused scholarly suspicion throughout its existence, particularly with regard to how it endangers the autonomy of universities. (Saarinen 2007, p. 62 – 63; Amaral/Magalhães 2004; Morley 2003, p. 164; Newton 2002, p. 46 –47; Brennan/Shah 2000, p. 13 – 16) Given all this, it is somewhat surprising that the "Bologna Process" has seemingly easily introduced quality assurance in the everyday practices of universities from Baku to Reykjavik (see Khazar University 2012; Reykjavik University 2012). The gap between the sharp critique presented in research and the seemingly consensual implementation of the changes by the practitioners raises important questions that touch the very core of the European Higher Education Area.

**How did quality assurance become the everyday of Universities?**

The assurance of quality is currently incorporated into European and national institutional systems of higher education − within the discourse at least (see Bologna Stocktaking Report 2009). The aim in this article is to follow the developments that have led to this 'institutionalisation' of quality assurance in Europe, and to examine the power dynamics involved. The main question is: how did quality assurance become widely accepted in Europe's universities? In addressing this I will first focus on the open method of coordination and power, and then conduct a discourse analysis based on documentary material, concentrating on the elements of power in the process.

**Documentary research**

The research material is limited in both time span and actor scope. The temporal focus is the so-called "Bologna Process", together with some documents from earlier in the 1990s. The actors include the European Union (EU), the European University Association (EUA[1]), the *European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ENQA[2]) and the European ministers' (of education) meetings in the

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[1] The *European University Association* was founded in Salamanca in 2001 as the result of a merger between the CRE (*Association of European Universities*) and the Confederation of European Union Rectors' Conferences.

[2] Before 2004 the ENQA was known as the *European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education*.

context of the Bologna Process; this means that in the core of this analysis is not the European-level students' associations and other higher-education institutes, for instance. Within the EU bodies attention focuses mostly on the Commission, whose role is also strong within the growing role of the ENQA (Ala-Vähälä/Saarinen 2009).

**Open method of coordination as the key**

The spread of quality assurance clearly happened through the Bologna Process, which has ensured its efficient diffusion. Along with the growing influence of the European Commission and overlapping with the goals of the Lisbon process (Keeling 2006), the procedure started to follow the principles of the EU's open method of coordination. According to William Walters and Jens Henriks Haahr (2005, p. 1 – 2), the method is based on the conceptualisation of Europe as an actor and on the definition of common goals (c.f. Keeling 2006, 209). Once the goals are agreed, any criticism will only develop the existing system further (Walters/Haahr 2005, 123). Autonomous agents then pursue the goals set in the process of centralised decision-making: "[The open method of coordination] affirms the agency of the governed. It perceives Europe as a multi-levelled space of autonomous agencies, a domain of individual and institutional energies which it seeks to catalyze, coordinate and harness" (Walters/Haahr 2005, 135). Because the governed are seemingly autonomous, an "appeal to freedom" is created (Walters/Haahr 2005, 135). The method is, above all, a persuasive and essentially normative way of governing.

**Inclusion/exclusion**

Andreas Fejes (2005, p. 13 – 16) notes how the documents of the Bologna Process are based on discourses of homogeneity and heterogeneity. Heterogeneity relates to the inclusive criteria of participation, and homogeneity to the standardisation inside the process. Once the actor is committed to the process standardisation, homogenisation starts to take effect through the exclusion of those who do not act according to the agreed norms. For example, Taina Saarinen (2008) found an embedded right and wrong type of expected behaviour in the quality-assurance documents of international organisations. It seems that freedom of choice is restricted by the commonly accepted truth of how national governments should act. The lure in the Bologna Process is the easy access, but the catch is the tangled exit. This also applies to quality assurance as part of the process: all the criteria evolved during it have been very inclusive.

**Normative power**

The approach described above is based on the conception of power first introduced by Michel Foucault. Three issues of relevance arise in this context. The first is the triangle of power, truth and right. According to Foucault (2003, p. 24 – 25), these three concepts function in constant interaction. On the one hand power has normative effects, and on the other it has effects on truth. It cannot function without creating truth, which affects perceptions of everyday life. Thus, the core question concerns how power and right operate in creating the discourse of truth. Secondly, there is the voluntary nature of the Bologna

Process. Again according to Foucault (1975/2005), new power techniques are based on normative rather than coercive forms of conduct. This requires autonomy from different actors, which makes the overall situation an endless strategic game between free autonomous subjects (Burchell et al. 1991, 5; Hindess 1996, p. 101 – 103). Hence, there is an interconnection between privatisation (autonomy) and totalisation (norms) (Foucault 1991, p. 2 – 8). Thirdly, it is vital to have common concepts and the means to measure common goals in order to create a situation in which the open method of coordination is possible, as Walters and Haahr state and as the Commission emphasises (Keeling 2006, 209).

**Enhancing dialogue in EHEA**

It is worthwhile noticing that the analysis of power has nothing to do with judgements of good and bad. From the point of view adopted in this article, power permeates everything and thus, it is not value-laded, it just is. Understanding the processes of power could help different actors in the European Higher Education Area to better reflect their own and others' positions. This kind of consciousness could eventually help in mutual dialogue.

**Analysing the core documents**

In line with these theoretical implications, in the following I will study the core documents related to European quality assurance, most of which were created under the umbrella of the Bologna Process. I examined the research material by means of discursive text analysis. First I described and organised the text, then I focused on the relevant parts that were eventually reorganised as a holistic interpretation of the questions of power, meaning the positioning of the different institutions inside the European frame of reference (see Fairclough 1992; Saarinen 2007).

## 2. Tracing the history of quality assurance in the Bologna Process

**Roots of quality assurance**

The idea of public-sector evaluation paved the way for quality assurance in North America in the 1960s. Quality assurance, again, has its roots in manufacturing industry's management models. (Amaral/Rosa 2010; Morley 2003, 13; Lumijärvi/Jylhäsaari 1999, p. 20 – 23; Rhoades/Sporn 2002, p. 359 – 360) Following its strong breakthrough in the business sector in the 1980s, US higher-education institutions adopted quality models at the beginning of the 1990s (Ewell 2010; Rhoades/Sporn 2002, 366; cf. Birnbaum 2000). The American influence spread to Europe in the 1980s, mushrooming in pioneering countries such as Great Britain and The Netherlands, and then more extensively in other countries during the 1990s (Furubo et al. 2002, 11; Rhoades and Sporn 2002, 363). The pioneering countries implemented first-generation quality assurance in the 1980s, and it seemed to attract

a lot of criticism (Jeliazkova/Westerheijden 2002, p. 433 – 434). Nevertheless, other European countries such as Belgium, Denmark, Finland and Norway opened up the political debate on the issue during the mid-1980s (Rhoades/Sporn 2002, 363). Further external pressure from international organisations such as the OECD, the EU and the World Bank fuelled this second wave (Furubo et. al. 2002, p. 11 – 17). The OECD, for instance, shifted its general policy emphasis towards quality assurance in the 1990s (Rinne et al. 2004, 40; Kallo 2009). It launched its *Institutional Management in Higher Education* (IMHE) programme in the early 1990s, which was heavily influenced by US practices (Henry et al. 2001, 76). The EU started a pilot project in 1994 – 1995 focused on evaluating quality in higher education, the goal of which was to "increase the awareness for the need of evaluating higher education" (European Commission 1995, I). The topicality and diffusion of the idea is evident in the concentration on quality assurance in conferences for researchers in higher education at that time (Rhoades/Sporn 2002, p. 363 – 364). It is clear how the promotion of quality assurance by international organisations coincided with the European take-off in the late 1990s. It was during this period that a standardised model of quality assurance emerged.[3]

**Lisbon Convention 1997**

Formal commitment to quality assurance in international agreements was still vague, however. In 1997 the pan-European Lisbon Convention agreed that the universities in the 26 signatory states should issue quality indicators: currently the agreement is ratified in 53 countries (Council of Europe 2012). A modest means of reaching this objective was to obligate the signatory states to publish the results of a formal assessment, or to give out other information that would illustrate their designation as institutions of higher education (Council of Europe 1997, art. VIII.1). No formal quality-assurance assessment was required. The same policy is put forward in the Sorbonne declaration (1998), which does not mention the word *quality* however, but refers to provisions of the Lisbon Convention on the recognition of qualifications.

**Council recommendation 1998**

The means of promoting quality assurance were also strengthened in 1998 when the EU member states adopted the Commission's proposal in the Council recommendation (1998) on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education. The basic premise of the recommendation is that all member states should pursue quality, given the intensifying global competition and the challenges related to the

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[3] This model usually comprises self-evaluation, evaluation by an external expert panel and the publication of the results without a ranking system. Stakeholders' interests and the meta-evaluation of the quality-assurance system are also included in this international quality-assurance model (Henry et. al. 2001, 77; Rhoades/Sporn 2002, 373; European Commission 1995, II; see also Trends I 1999).

labour market and new information technology. The recommendation also suggests that different European organisations that specialise and are involved in quality assurance should cooperate.

**First Trends report 1999**

Among the most enthusiastic promoters of quality assurance before the Bologna declaration was the Association of European Universities (CRE), which itself had worked from 1994 with a European approach to institutional peer review evaluations and quality culture. Its EU-funded Trends I -report (1999) echoes the basic premise of the Council recommendation concerning the need for action: global competition, information technology and the labour market. The report promotes the European model, and the characteristics of the models used in the pioneering countries. Trends I (1999, p. 4) also notes that "[t]here is a marked trend towards more autonomy of universities, coupled with new initiatives for quality control and evaluation in many countries".

**Changes related to Magna Charta**

Trends I marks a change from the universities' stand in Magna Charta Universitatum in the previous decade. The 1988 declaration closely connects autonomy to independent research and teaching. It also emphasises some of the principles behind the Bologna Process, such as the need for increased academic mobility, but makes no mention of quality assurance and evaluation. (Conference of European Rectors 1988; see Kwiek 2004, 762 for similar conclusions.) In the 1990s universities came to the conclusion that they were obliged to guarantee quality in order to achieve autonomy as institutions.

The Bologna declaration (1999) was still vague on quality assurance, the only criterion being to promote "European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies". This was the result of compromise among the 29 signatory states. It seems that a somewhat more uniform view prevailed among the 15 EU countries as can be seen from the Trends I report, which mainly concerned EU and EEA countries.

**No clear vision in 1999**

It is fair to say that there was no sharp vision of quality assurance in Europe during the first steps of the Bologna Process: it did not feature even as an idea before being actively promoted, mainly by some EU member countries and the CRE. However, although a common European vision was lacking, the principle had gained acceptance. It was developed separately from the Bologna Process in the beginning, but once incorporated it soon gathered momentum.

**ENQA**

Things were pushed on the move, once the institutionalisation of quality assurance started. The European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was founded in March 2000, one year before the second ministerial meeting, and this formalised the earlier unofficial agency meetings. The EU was strongly involved in that the Commission funded the ENQA at first, and it was on the recommen-

dation of the Council that it was a catalyst for its establishment (Ala-Vähälä/Saarinen, 2009; Council Recommendation 1998; Commission 2004, 2). The purpose was rather clear: in its first general assembly (ENQA 2000, p. 3), as the co-author of the Trends I report described it, quality assurance was one of the "weak points" in the Bologna declaration. The vague formulation in the Bologna Process seemed not to satisfy all members of the European University Association (the EUA, formerly the CRE). During the discussion members of the ENQA (2000, p. 4) mentioned that quality assurance was actually the "corner stone" of the whole process.

In the 2001 Salamanca declaration the EUA (2001, p. 7) accepted as a fact that universities were in a global competitive situation, and in order to cope with it they needed autonomy and adequate financing. The notion of linking autonomy, public financing and quality assurance in universities is present in both the Salamanca declaration and Trends II (2001). The former uses the same kind of language as the ENQA in referring to quality as the "fundamental building stone" of the European Higher Education Area (EUA 2001, p. 8). The reasoning in the document is that quality is the means for confidence building and everything else follows (EUA 2001, p. 8).

**EUA: Universities in global competition**

The ENQA's (2001) contribution to the Prague meeting was to sketch out some initial plans for a European quality-assurance system, which included the CRE's proposal for a European co-operation forum, or "European platform", and institutional evaluation or accreditation. Moreover, stakeholders' interests are emphasised more strongly in the ENQA than in the EUA documents. Unlike the Bologna declaration (1999), the Prague communiqué (2001) puts emphasis on quality assurance. The new partner, the ENQA, was asked to collaborate with other parties and to develop common quality criteria.

**Prague 2001: developing quality criteria**

The common European quality assurance system started to take shape as the first network devoted to quality was established. The Commission's ideology highlighting competition and stakeholders' interests is visible in this process. The Commission was excluded from the original Bologna declaration in 1999 and the acceptance of its agenda is evidenced in the fact that the Commission was accepted in Prague as a full member of the process.

**Inclusion of the Commission and competition agenda**

Following the impetus from the Prague meeting, a start was made to draw up guidelines for the institutionalisation of quality assurance in Europe in the Berlin follow-up meeting in 2003. Before the meeting the EUA (2003, p. 7 – 9) had declared in Graz that academic quality was one of its core values, and that implementing it demanded strong institutions. In practice, and in the light of the Trends III report (2003, 11), strong institutions imply university autonomy without strong governmental control, although with governmental funding. Trends III (2003, p. 3 – 6) also aired the first grass-roots-level disagreements

**Drawing up guidelines of quality assurance**

about the Bologna reforms. However, most of the Bologna documents consulted for this article never referred to them again.

**Stronger ENQA**

The ENQA was evolving into an association, and was about to change its name accordingly before the Berlin meeting. This marked a further step in the institutionalisation of quality assurance as the shift from a network to an association also imposed membership criteria and quality requirements on the members. The logic behind the system was analogical to the universities' quality-assurance process: the agencies ensure quality by internal (documentation) and external (ENQA membership) means. For the Berlin meeting the ENQA presented its Europe-wide quality-assurance plans in which it proposed a common framework and a Europe-wide register of quality-assurance agencies that should be autonomous (ENQA 2003, p. 2 – 3, 6 – 7). The working process included meetings with EUA, ESIB (European Student Information Bureau) and EURASHE (European Association of Higher Education Institutions) (ENQA 2003, p. 2).

**Berlin meeting 2003**

The Berlin meeting was very receptive to the suggestions made by the ENQA and the EUA. Quality assurance was the first item, after the introduction, in the Berlin communiqué (2003, p. 3): "The quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area". The terminology is more or less analogous to the EUA's and the ENQA's conceptions of quality assurance as a "cornerstone" and a "fundamental building stone". The communiqué goes on to state that national quality-assurance systems and the European division of responsibilities should be in place before 2005. On the European level, Ministers of Education mandated the ENQA and the rest of the E4 group[4] to develop standards and guidelines for quality assurance in Europe and to establish an "adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies" before the next ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005 (Berlin Communiqué 2003, p. 3).

**Standards and Guidelines 2005**

The new responsibility came so quickly that even the ENQA steering group was astonished. At the same time the EUA was pushed aside, apparently because the ENQA was more familiar to the national governments. (Ala-Vähälä/Saarinen 2009, 94) Its role was strengthened as a result of the Berlin mandate, and with the publication of Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ENQA 2005). Although the EUA's role in quality assurance had diminished, in common with the ministers in the Bergen communiqué (2005) it still supported these standards in its Glasgow declaration (EUA 2005) and in the Trends IV (2005) report. Once again it emphasised the need for institutional autonomy in order to ensure

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[4] The E4 group consists of the ENQA, the EUA, the EURASHE and the European Students' Union (ESU, previously ESIB).

quality, and the need for governments to move from active regulation towards more passive supervision (EUA 2005, p. 2 – 4; Trends IV 2005, 31). The ministers for their part saw quality as one of the defining principles of the European Higher Education Area. As the next step the E4 group was mandated further to arrange the practicalities related to fulfilling the requirements of *European Standards and Guidelines*. (Bergen Communiqué 2005)

European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA 2005) emphasises the embedding of a quality culture in every process of higher education, the interests of different stakeholders and the evaluation of internal processes by an external quality-assurance body. Evaluation is to be based on documentation produced by the institutions and site visits by expert groups. The proposal to establish a register of external quality-assurance agencies is quite similar to the ENQA's earlier suggestion for the Berlin follow-up meeting:

- The register would separate agencies that fulfilled the requirements of the Standards and Guidelines from those that did not.

- The decision-making body for accreditation would be the European Register Committee, which would consist of the E4 group in addition to governmental and labour-market representatives.

- The ENQA would act as the secretary of this nine-member committee.

- If universities and national quality-assurance agencies did not start the evaluation, ultimately the ENQA and the Register Committee would control the process.

- Furthermore, the work of the E4 group would be consolidated in the future through the establishment of a consultative forum for quality assurance, which later on would include labour-market organisations.

According to the *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report* (2007, p. 18 – 19) that was produced for the London meeting in 2007, *European Standards and Guidelines* (ENQA 2005) had gained a dominant position as a guide for implementing national quality-assurance systems. This was confirmed in the London communiqué (2007, p. 4), although more development was urged:

**London 2007: strong ESG**

"The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA adopted in Bergen (ESG) have been a powerful driver of change in relation to quality assurance. All countries have started to implement them and some have made substantial progress. Since the main responsibility for quality lies with HEIs, they should continue to develop their systems of quality assurance."

Furthermore, *European Standards and Guidelines* was recognised as giving the evaluation criteria for entry into the European register of quality-assurance agencies (London Communiqué 2007, p. 4). In adopting them the Bergen communiqué (2005) became to an agreement on the division of labour in European quality assurance. The London meeting gave it the finishing touch: it consolidated the institutionalisation of the system proposed mainly by the ENQA, the EU and the EUA.

**Leuven 2009: fine tuning**

The Leuven meeting about the Bologna process in 2009 seemed to move on with the quality-assurance agenda and started the fine tuning of governance. The creation of a register for quality-assurance agencies is noted, and it will also be evaluated. An emphasis on stakeholder participation and the continuation of the E4 group are also mentioned (Leuven Communiqué 2009). Hence it would seem that the processes of quality assurance had become rather clear and mutually agreed on the European level.

**National level importance – and differences**

However, there were many signs that the national level was becoming more important as the implementation started. The ENQA (2009) and its E4 partners prepared second and third editions of Standards and Guidelines, placing more emphasis on subsidiarity. The communiqué also acknowledges that generally "not all the objectives have been completely achieved" in the Bologna process (Leuven Communiqué 2009, p. 2). The Bologna stocktaking report (2009, p. 9) was more critical in this sense pointing out that only 22 countries had quality assurance agencies with full membership of ENQA, which "suggests that the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance … may not yet be fully implemented in some countries."

This variance was further noted in the Budapest–Vienna meetings in 2011. Regarding quality assurance, the communiqué briefly notes that the practises varied from country to country (Budapest–Vienna Declaration on the European Higher Education Area 2010). In addition, a report from Education International (2010) criticised the commitment to the process and the use of the Bologna goals for national purposes. It seems that the managing of quality assurance in Europe started gradually, was at its height around 2003 – 2005, and then shifted from the European level interests to the sphere of national decision-making.

Finally, the communique of the last Bologna process ministerial meeting was able to present the outline of the fully operational European system drawing on the E4 co-operation, Standards and Guidelines and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). (Bucharest Communique 2012, p. 2). Nevertheless, the Bologna Process Implementation Report (The European Higher Education Area in 2012, 2012, p. 70) pointed out that while quality has advanced ever since 1999, the national systems were diverse. In the next chapter I will analyse, how this became possible from the perspective of power.

## 3. The institutionalisation of quality assurance and power

**Europe as one entity**

Despite the fears voiced by some, the Bologna process did not create a quality-assurance doomsday machine reducing national and university decision-making to a unitary system. However, it has indeed reshaped power at the European level, which was the starting assumption of this article. Many answers to questions of power come down to the issue of autonomy among both universities and nations. The conduct of autonomous subjects has been the key factor in organising European quality assurance. This is happening in the European Higher Education Area through standardisation and agreement on common criteria, a system intriguingly similar to the Open Method of Coordination (OMC). The basis has been the agreement on basic principles, of which the main one is that global competition has challenged European higher education, and that quality assurance is the answer. The unquestioned premise is that Europe needs to function as one entity in higher education in the face of an existing although non-specific external threat.

**Re-understanding quality assurance**

European governments made the link between quality assurance and global competition, presenting it in Lisbon in 1997 and in the EU Council in 1998. Universities adopted this connection during the 1990s, and the EUA has maintained it ever since. Thus there was a key change in the common understanding when the universities initially accepted international competition as a starting point even before the Bologna declaration in the Trends I report (1999), and finally in the Salamanca 2001 declaration. At the same time, quality assurance advanced in Europe first through the creation of concepts and then through the Bologna Process (see also Keeling 2006). As far as the universities were concerned the important thing was to emphasise institutional autonomy. This connection was made clear in the first Trends report before the Bologna declaration, and the same line of argument has been followed consistently ever since. The autonomy in question is not the same as referred to in *Magna Charta Universitatum* a decade before the Bologna declaration: it now includes everything, having previously focused only on research and teaching – in other words academic freedom. This reformulation of the concept has made it possible to include the interests of "stakeholders'" in different university procedures. It is true that the area of autonomy has been enlarged, but so has the area that different stakeholders can affect. In fact, because of the principle of competition, currently among the most influential stakeholders affecting every day practices in universities are the quality-assurance agencies. As a result of the growing number of stakeholders, the universities are more like one of many partners on the side of national governments (Keeling 2006, 213).

**Common premises as key facilitator**

The acceptance of the common premises at the beginning of the Bologna process facilitated the rapid development of the quality-assurance framework, and the first European-wide quality institution, the ENQA, was mandated to develop and enforce the system. In cooperation with the EUA and the rest of the E4 it started to develop common criteria and norms for European quality assurance. The autonomous subjects were then obliged to act according to these norms. In the words of Walters and Haahr, quality-assurance agencies are the new autonomous agencies in the European space. This also means that they could well gain the most in this new situation of power. However, although they have indeed gained an autonomous status, they are regulated by means of common norms imposed in European Standards and Guidelines (ENQA 2009). Nevertheless, apart from doing the practical work, they do not necessarily have their own strong agenda: the ENQA guidelines are formed within the E4 group, which increases the power of the universities and other stakeholders in making the rules. What is clear is that, in accordance with the pan-European agreement on standards and guidelines, quality-assurance agencies are here to stay. In addition, after the Bucharest 2012 meeting, these agencies and other E4 members will now play a central role in the drafting of revised ESG, following the review process which has already taken place.

**Open method of coordination as key harmoniser**

Steering with the help of autonomous actors and commonly set goals and indicators, the open method of coordination style of governing, has been the key factor in creating Europe-wide quality assurance and making it become a routine practice. The first documents launching the idea were created outside the Bologna process, and had it never happened, quality-assurance practices would most likely have spread into the everyday life of academia, but not necessarily in all Bologna countries and less likely in a standardised way. It was after the European Commission became involved in the project, which coincided with the introduction of the open method of coordination (Keeling 2006), that national applications of quality assurance became more uniform and its coordination more centralised. Furthermore, the justification of reforms on the national level would have been more difficult had the concept of Europe acting as one on quality assurance never arisen.

**No space for critique**

Following the acceptance of the common truth and goals, no critique has been able to dissolve the construction. From that point on, all it has done is strengthen the development of the process. To put it in another way, the efficiency of the open method of coordination has made it possible to depoliticise the process. The principle of quality assurance has caused little or no friction in the ministerial meetings: at first the views were not very coherent, but the accepted common goal has made Europe-wide institutionalisation possible. An essential question is, what does depoliticisation do to common discussion.

The open method of coordination and its effect on the institutionalisation of quality assurance in Europe can be understood through Foucault's triangle of power, truth and right (Foucault 2003, p. 24 – 25): truth in that global competition demands quality assurance, right in setting its implementation as a common goal, and power in creating the institutional arrangements. In this situation, autonomous actors work according to given premises and rules, which are seldom questioned, but rather embraced.

**Power, truth and right**

The diffusion of quality assurance has benefited all the main actors – at least discursively. Had it not, the process would have aroused more opposition. Universities started to pursue quality assurance because it was seen as an answer to the challenge of global competition, and it was also connected to universities' autonomy. The quality assurance agencies have benefited most from the new strategic situation in that they now have a stable position. European governments have been able to create a self-guiding system, which in some respects is beyond their direct control, but still works for the benefit of the state through normative control. In addition, it seems that European coordination has not disturbed national goals.

**Discursive benefits for all**

Both the way of coordinating the Bologna process and quality assurance as a concept have proved their power. They have been able to create a shared but rather flexible understanding on quality assurance in involved countries. As there are reports of the differences of the level of national implementation of quality assurance, the future challenge for EHEA is how to include different countries in the process. In theory, the very persuasive tools of open method of coordination can be used for creating a uniform model for quality assurance. In practice, forcing uniformity will probably only distance the national solutions from the European level models. The institutionalisation of quality assurance has a risk of creating inflexible mechanisms that misfit the diversity of higher education environments. In this sense, a fruitful starting point is to remember that European strengths are not in creating uniformity and exclusion but in communal diversity and inclusion.

**Scenarios for future**

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