A Next Generation of Quality Assurance Models

On Phases, Levels and Circles in Policy Development

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Abstract

Quality assessment has been part of the feedback mechanisms of European higher education systems since around 1980. Due to internal dynamics, ‘erosion’ of the effectiveness of first-generation quality assessment systems has led to loss of credibility (legitimacy) of these systems in the late 1990s. External dynamics also necessitate designing a next generation of quality assurance systems. They include notably a loss of transparency (hence, legitimacy) of the European higher education system through increased internationalisation (most notably through the Bologna process) which puts new, increased demands on institutional arrangements for quality assurance.

In this paper, we first intend to schematise the developments of quality assurance in higher education by introducing a phase model of the effects of internal and external dynamics. Next, we will analyse this phase model from the perspective of argumentative policy inquiry. Finally, we will contrast policy developments in higher education with one other example, viz. environmental policy in the Netherlands. The conclusions of this comparison, as well as the new challenges set for quality assurance in higher education by the Bologna process, are the subject matter for the final section of our paper.

1 On Phases: A Phase Model of Quality Assurance Systems

There is a rich variety of quality assurance arrangements in Western Europe (Scheele, Maassen, & Westerheijden, 1998) as well as in Central and Eastern Europe (Campbell et al., 2000; Kristoffersen, Sursock, & Westerheijden, 1998). Policy discussions about the design of ‘a next

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1 Section based on (Verkleij & Westerheijden, 2001 in print).
generation’ of quality assurance in higher education were already going on before the Bologna Declaration made its impact. This is especially true for the ‘pioneer countries’ in Western Europe such as the United Kingdom and the Netherlands, where more than a decade of experience now exists. At the same time, quality assurance mechanisms are being introduced in other countries as part of their effort to develop higher education systems that compete with—or are at least recognised by—established higher education systems in the Western world. Often these emerging quality assurance systems are based on a study of best practices in the frontrunner countries. A close look at the internal and external dynamics of quality assurance systems leads to the introduction of an analytical phase model for quality assurance in higher education systems.

Most, though not all, national systems are based on the ‘four stage model’ of external evaluation, i.e., (a) a co-ordinating agency, (b) submission of a self-evaluation report, (c) a peer visit and (d) a public report, and there are many variations within this general scheme (van Vught & Westerheijden, 1994). These stages imply activities. Actors, i.e. organisations and individuals, have to perform these activities, and in the course of implementation, learning takes place by individuals and by organisations. Learning is the main source of the internal dynamics of quality assurance systems. For instance, staff and leadership within institutions have to learn the art of self-evaluation. Similarly, other actors involved have to learn their respective roles in quality assessment systems. However, learning, despite its positive connotations, is not always a positive development. On the contrary, Verkleij & Westerheijden state as the main internal dynamic an expectation of diminishing returns of repetitions. Once the ‘easy wins’ have been made as a result of a successful first round of evaluations, a second (unchanged) round of evaluations cannot add as much quality improvement or accountability as the first did. Routinisation, bureaucratisation and window dressing are dangers lurking behind this (Verkleij & Westerheijden, 2001 in print). To counteract the tendencies towards diminishing returns, quality assurance systems need to be designed with a built-in facility for learning and change. In other words, quality assurance systems need to be able to evolve, while maintaining the delicate balance between the functions of improvement and accountability, even if all other conditions (i.e. external aspects) remain equal.

Moreover, we maintain that there is a—loosely hierarchical—scale of perceived problems. Bringing one problem to closure for the moment (a political decision or compromise and a temporal state of affairs, not necessarily an actual solution to the issue) leads to the emergence of another one. Attempts to address a ‘subsequent’ problem may be futile before a ‘more basic’ one

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2 We stress that the perception of issues as a social fact may well be more important than any ‘actual’ state of affairs.
has been brought to closure. We single out these changes in the immediate context of quality assurance systems as external dynamics, although we are fully aware of the dynamic influence of many other factors located in the wider context: other policy instruments and arrangements in the higher education system, the economic situation, demography, etc.

The resulting phase model is based on the two principles of internal and external dynamics, fed by systematic reflection upon historical developments in some frontrunner countries as well as on our experiences with the introduction of quality assurance systems in countries in which quality of higher education entered the national policy agenda more recently. The central characteristics of such a phase model are given in Table 1. The basic idea behind this table is that there are contingencies: different types of problems in higher education systems are best addressed through different types of quality assurance systems.

**Table 1** Phases in quality assurance systems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phase</th>
<th>Problems</th>
<th>Role of quality assurance</th>
<th>Information base</th>
<th>Nature of external review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>1</strong></td>
<td>Serious doubts about educational standards.</td>
<td>a) Identifying sub-standard educational programmes.</td>
<td>Descriptive reports. Performance indicators.</td>
<td>Summative; accreditation, checking standards. Report to state.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td>Doubts about the efficiency of the higher education system and/or institutions.</td>
<td>a) Public accountability. b) Creating quality awareness in institutions.</td>
<td>Descriptive / strategic reports (‘self-selling’) covering: a) performance, b) procedures.</td>
<td>Ranking of institutions. One report to state and institutions. Identifying good practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>3</strong></td>
<td>Doubt about innovation capacity and quality assurance capacity of institutions.</td>
<td>Stimulate self-regulation capacity of institutions. Public accountability.</td>
<td>Self-evaluation reports about: a) procedures, b) performance.</td>
<td>Audit report to: – the institution – the state</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>New challenge:</strong> Decreasing transparency across higher education systems.</td>
<td>Market regulation, i.e., informing clients (students, employers).</td>
<td>Performance indicators about ‘products’ (knowledge and skills of graduates).</td>
<td>Publication of comparative performance indicators. Standardised testing of graduates?</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The problems occurring in higher education systems are listed in the first column of Table 1. Focusing on the external dynamics, one may say that the hierarchy of these problems runs parallel to the evolution of concepts for steering models for higher education systems and institutions, especially in terms of increased autonomy of institutions and more market-like steering models. Viewed as another aspect of internal dynamics—and of course internal and
external dynamics interact to influence the development of quality assurance systems—the hierarchy of problems can be interpreted as a learning curve.

The role of external quality assurance (Column 2) depends on the definition of the problems, but to perform these roles effectively adequate experience has to be built up over time. For instance, one may argue that mechanisms to safeguard minimal standards (Phase 1) need to be secured and that (hands-on) experience with safeguarding standards ought to be fed into any mechanism directed to public accountability for the efficiency of a higher education system or institution.

The information base (Column 3) for external reviews may also change over time. As long as external aims, such as identifying sub-standard programs (Phase 1) or public accountability (Phase 2) are dominant, institutions may refrain from being really evaluative. So-called self-evaluative reports will then be written strategically to gain maximum scores or assessment outcomes. However, getting acquainted with the ‘language of evaluation’ and with the group dynamics of self-evaluation processes is a necessary pre-requisite for the step towards genuine self-evaluation and to maximum support for internal improvement processes in Phase 4.

The nature of the external review, finally, also differs in the various phases (Column 4). It starts with summative reviews in Phase 1 for, e.g., accreditation of programmes, and with ranking of institutions as input for macro-efficiency discussions (in Phase 2). Audit reports (Phase 3) move away from content to process. However, without proper experience in content assessment, process evaluation easily becomes too formal.

Clearly, a scheme as presented in Table 1 reduces the complexity of reality to a two-dimensional grid. Overlap between the cells in the matrix is likely, both in horizontal and vertical direction. In addition, within the cells of the matrix, different elements are combined.

While we would stop short of stating that it is impossible for higher education systems to ‘jump start’ by importing good practice gleaned from international comparisons, we do want to stress that there is more to it than simply copying policy instruments.3

2 From Phases to Levels: Argumentative Policy Inquiry and Dynamics of Quality Assurance

Almost two decades of experience with quality assurance systems is a period long enough to consider them no longer an experiment, but a mainstream practice. Thus, learning on the go and accidental use of good practices may no longer be sufficient. A more analytical, reflective look is

3 Observations on the final row, i.e. the ‘new challenge’, will be kept till later in this paper.

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needed at what is happening and what the potential benefits and problems could be for the various actors involved. From this point of view it may be useful to speculate further about the inner logic of development of quality assurance systems as presented in the phase model in the previous section.

In general, the phase model of quality assurance systems development can be seen as a model of the evolving relations between higher education and the state, from one-to-one control mechanisms to more complex and presumably more effective forms of accountability, where concepts as academic excellence and autonomy take on a new meaning. In many cases, it is the state that initiates the introduction of quality assurance systems, as a ‘me too’ undertaking or with other aims. Once started, a debate about quality assurance exposes other layers of problems and underlying beliefs in need to be sorted out before a further move becomes feasible. Each time a certain type of quality assurance mechanism is installed in order to solve specific problems, a whole ‘maze’ of underlying assumptions, beliefs and problem perceptions opens up. The actors involved must find the ways to the exit, sorting out other emerging issues on their way, in a continuous dialogue with each other.

2.1 Four levels of policy argumentation

This process of policy debate is depicted in F. Fischer’s framework (Fischer 1985; 1995) of policy deliberation. In order to bring about clarity and consistency in policy deliberations, Fischer places them at four levels: technical verification, situational validation, system vindication and rational social choice. The discourse at the first two levels takes place within the context of the prevailing value system. Technical verification entails the evaluation of a policy for the purpose of asserting its empirical effectiveness. The central question asked at this level is: Does the policy achieve its stated goals? Problems of efficiency and unexpected side-effects are also addressed. The type of argumentation can be characterised as problem solving. On the second level, situational validation, the analysis should determine whether the criteria used to judge the policy are themselves valid. The central analytical question at this level is: Are the defined policy goals the adequate solution to the problem? Logically derived from there are questions about conflicting goals and situations where reaching the stated goals is not desirable. The type of argumentation used here is problem-formulation and goal-formulation.

At the two higher levels, denoted by Fischer as second-order discourse, policy deliberation concerns the justification and acceptability of the very value system adopted to judge the policy, sometimes cutting deep to core convictions as preferred social order and way of life. The third level is system vindication, or general political argumentation, where the main issues revolve
around the compatibility of the examined policy with accepted political values and general aims, and problems with distributive justice, with a particular attention for serious unforeseen side-effects and issues. At yet a higher level (rational social choice or ideological argumentation), core ideological debate is in place, in instances where a fundamental change of life and the adoption of (radically different) social ideals seem to be necessary to achieve certain goals.

Fischer’s greatest concern is to keep the policy debate open to these core issues as opposed to remaining limited to the craft of policy design at the operational level of technical verification. To analyse policies along the four levels of policy argumentation means to reveal some of the fundamental reasons for policy failure. There are cases when particular problems and solutions have been formulated prematurely, without taking into account the complexity of views of all (potential) stakeholders. The outcome of exploring a policy debate through this perspective is pretty much like ‘running a maze’—there are certain loops that just cannot be ignored if one ever wants to arrive at the exit.

In this sense, there are fewer steps necessary than it may seem towards a practical implication of the general model to solving specific problems in specific policy fields. The model is analytical and does not prescribe any particular order and steps in ‘handling’ issues. Rather, it is a tool which helps to make sense and create order in the daily chaos of policy making and evaluation.

### 2.2 The Phase Model of Quality Assurance in Higher Education Reconsidered

In the light of this framework, phase one, which deals with meeting educational standards, can be seen as largely situated on the lowest level of argument, the level of technical verification. The problem definition is clear, in the sense that the state has a monopoly over it and discussion is not expected about, e.g., the meaning(s) of concepts such as ‘educational standard’, ‘excellence’ and ‘academic quality’. There is the shared belief that the academics and the state ‘just know’ what they are talking about. Thus, a quality assurance system which has to address this clearly defined issue focuses on operational procedures and design details, allowing little or no space for fuzziness and ambivalence, let alone for involvement of other parties than the central government and the academic world.

The main question asked at this level is: does the system, institution or programme satisfy the requirements for quality as they exist? A more or less elaborate system of clearly defined performance indicators serves as an adequate basis for an answer. Logically, the nature of the

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4 We are not the first ones to do this, see for example Hoppe & Pranger (1993).
external review is largely summative, pointed at checking standards and meeting threshold requirements. The recipient of these reports is the state as an uncontested owner of all standards. Uncontested, to the extent that academic professionals do not perceive a threat to their own position and beliefs.

However, the fact that ‘only what gets measured, gets done’, is the obvious drawback of such an arrangement. Its long-run consequence is a severely limited space for innovation and evolution in the field. Soon it becomes clear that the implicit consensus on the definition of academic quality is not sufficient for the emerging demands of a mass higher education system. For the academic world, those standards are largely perceived as timeless and therefore not quite suitable for ‘compromise’ due to budget constraints, to name the more obvious example.

The state, however, cannot afford to ignore the efficiency aspect of any policy. In the second phase of the Verkleij & Westerheijden model, the efficiency argument takes a more prominent place. The argument is still at the level of technical verification, i.e. within the established framework of a quality assurance system as an instrument for state check on higher education.

The question posed is not whether a system/institution/program meets the required standards regardless of the price, but whether it meets them within the prescribed budget. On the one hand, awareness about costs is an indication of a certain maturity of the quality assurance system. Putting efficiency on the agenda means opening the field of higher education quality to public scrutiny and debate. Public accountability becomes a central function of quality assurance systems at this level. On the other hand, conflicting views on quality become apparent at this level; academics perceive budget considerations as a direct threat to maintaining higher standards, because they force them to curtail long cherished ideas of academic excellence.

These controversies are revealed most clearly by the contents of self-evaluation reports in the second phase. The reports are a mix of a ‘strategic self-selling’ apparently aimed at more than one recipient, and a description of quality assurance procedures indicating a growing awareness about the issues. Whether or not the positive or the negative aspect will prevail, depends on the degree of consensus between institutions and the state, between the controller and the controlled, on the main goals of the quality assurance systems. Institutions logically behave in a defensive way and tend to engage in ‘window-dressing’ when they suspect that quality considerations serve as an excuse for further budget cuts.

These emerging issues create a necessity for a higher-level shift to the level of situational validation, in phase 3. The central question then becomes: are the traditional implicit definitions of good quality adequate for the purpose of maintaining good performance? Put in other words, institutions no longer attempt to solve quality assurance problems as defined by the state, they
actively redefine them and only then develop the adequate solutions. Given the space, higher education establishments begin actively to seek ways to meet adequately the challenges of the time.

The awareness that the ideal of good academic quality has to be constantly redefined and/or renegotiated puts the innovative capacity of higher education institutions to the forefront. This implies a redefined role of the state and an accent on the universities’ capacity for self-regulation. Accordingly, the focus of public demand for accountability shifts from the state as the representative of the higher education sector as a whole directly to the individual institutions. Therefore, it becomes important for institutions to inform the public about their accomplishments, while at the same time demanding feedback from external review bodies in the area of organisational development.

Simultaneously, signs occur that the time has become ripe for a serious societal debate on the very function of higher education in the modern world: Does society indeed need highly efficient higher education establishments which, challenged by growing market competition, may tend to forgo other equally valued functions? For instance, how would society make sure that its national education system still gives equal opportunities to all, whatever the specific national arrangements to meet this goal? Is the demand for more flexible workforce compatible with the need to maintain the nations cultural legacy? These issues play a role on the background of a quality debate, and certainly cannot be just ‘resolved’ by a single perfect quality assurance design effort. Rather, the answer is sought in another direction—towards more transparency and enlarging the scope of scrutiny—to include not only the technical means for sustaining high quality, but also the compatibility of the very strategic goals of higher education institutions with societal demand. Transparency of the rules and procedures according to which institutions with a greater degree of autonomy function and are open to public scrutiny, becomes the key word in the fourth phase of development of quality assurance systems. This use of the term ‘transparency’ is not to be confused with the necessity to overcome the feeling of chaos and lack of clarity induced by a shift from national to international context in higher education.

2.3 Lessons from Environmental Policy?

Dave Huitema provides an account of Dutch developments in the field of environmental policy since the 70s, with the explicit aim to draw some lessons and parallels for educational quality policy (Huitema, 2001 in print). He describes the process of ecological modernisation in which

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5 This question is addressed extensively in Magelhães, 2001.
the idea of sustainability takes central place. The dominant conception of sustainability is that environmental problems do not require radical social change in order to be solved. Rather, there could be mechanisms to incorporate them into existing interests and values.

Just like in the area of higher education, the first response to pollution problems in the Netherlands was a technical one, and a ‘quick fix’ was envisioned. When the complexity of the problems became apparent, a shift occurred towards better integrated policy, from technical solutions towards regulatory mechanisms and procedures. Still, at this stage, environmental measures were largely perceived as going against the interest of businesses, therefore resistance and possibly failure were expected. An important shift occurred in the 1980s, when central to all policy efforts became the idea or ‘internalisation, which indicates a desire to have societal actors take up their own responsibility for the environmental problems they are causing.’ As a result, the idea of environmental care systems in firms was launched as an alternative to the ever-expanding government regulation. The basic requirements for setting up such a system were inspired by the tradition of BS and ISO standards. The government retreats to the background, to intervene only in case of serious problems, mainly by means of ‘environmental audits’ based on ‘environmental annual reports’.

In brief, Huitema’s account of the stages of development of environmental care resembles in some respects the phase model of Verkleij & Westerheijden for higher education: first-order, operational problems are addressed at the initial stages, gradually exposing the complexity of the issues involved. Also, the evolution from a reactive to proactive stance is a predictable path. With time, environmental policy instruments become more integrated, and develop from a set of rather unrelated indicators towards integrated systems of environmental care. The ultimate goal of environmental policy—‘internalisation’ of responsible behaviour—is comparable with the ambition to promote ‘quality culture’ in the higher education sector.

However, this is where the parallel with developments of quality care systems ends. While in the higher education system, quality care systems did indeed find a permanent place and seem to produce a shift in quality awareness, the effects of the environmental systems remain limited. Most firms tend to focus on operational measures and on favourable licensing, while little or no change occurs in their environmental strategy. The biggest challenge is, according to Huitema, to induce a ‘reflexive attitude’ in firms:

Reflexive implies that not only ‘single loop’ learning occurs, but also ‘second loop’ learning. The results of measurements which are made in the light of an environmental care system are supposed to feed back into the decision making process of businesses and to lead to adjustments in the
production process (single loop). Secondly, it is hoped that the firm will also start thinking about the targets it has set for itself and the ways in which it is trying to achieve these targets (second loop).

Also, Huitema’s description of the introduction of environmental safety measures shows important parallels with the introduction of quality assurance in higher education. First, the government agencies involved, nationally as well as locally, tried to create a context that was ‘entrepreneur-friendly’ by emphasising the common interests of business and government. Self-regulation at the level of the individual firm as well as the branch of industry became the cornerstone for the environmental safety regulations.

Yet, the dissimilarity with higher education is even more interesting than the analogies. The self-regulation principle is interpreted in environmental safety policy so as to favour tailor-made arrangements and approaches that differentiate between individual firms. At the same time, such differentiated approaches constitute a system of rewards or punishments in themselves, without need for further financial rewards. Thus, firms with a good environmental policy and with a record of good behaviour with regard to their environmental safety are subjected to lighter modes of inspection and would be given permits easier than firms with a less impressive track record. The fiction of ‘legal homogeneity’ (Neave, 1988) which limits the application of self-regulation in higher education does not seem to interfere in Huitema’s case. This difference is largely due to different development paths of state involvement in the two fields. For about two centuries in Europe, education has been a state priority, while environmental issues are a much younger policy priority. A policy field dating back to times when the rule of law was seen as the only policy instrument, rather than the present-day sophisticated mix of regulation, funding, information etc. (Jenniskens, 1997), is much more uniformly organised, and conscious diversification effort may be necessary to promote independence of actors. In contrast, environmental issues cut across a broad area of business branches and products, with highly various, independent actors. Moving towards more uniformity, at least concerning approaches to environmental problems, and to some degree of consensus is the challenge in this field.

Put in the perspective of argumentation levels, we can see that in both fields, one ideologema has been introduced as an organising principle: quality in the field of education and sustainability in the field of environmental issues. The ultimate goal of all policies in both fields is to have target groups ‘internalise’ the modes of thinking these labels represent. However, the extent to which these organising concepts function, differs substantially. Research in the field of higher education shows that ‘quality awareness’ and ‘quality culture’ are becoming more or less mainstream modes of thinking. At a very basic level, a general consensus seems to exist about the contents and mainly the usefulness of the concept of quality. Sustainable development, on the
other hand, is still in the sphere of heated discussions. As Huitema points out, particularly the translation of sustainability into practical requirements for conducting business of high ‘environmental quality’ is highly contested. In spite of the serious concerns about budget cuts and retreat of the state from higher education funding, the belief seems to exist at a very basic level in the possibility of a ‘win-win’ situation—good education at an affordable price. No matter what the specifics may be, the general agreement seems to be that good education is a worthy goal.

Not so with sustainability—in the eyes of the public, environmental problems are still generally framed as a win-lose issue. The common sense belief still seems to be that environmental measures come with the price-tag of less profit and less wealth. Environmental problems, in spite of efforts to convince the public to think otherwise, are still ‘wicked’ and ‘unstructured’. A ‘wicked’ problem is one for which neither consensus on its definition nor certainty about the available means to solve it is present. (Rittel & Webber, 1973; Hisschemöller & Hoppe, 1996) This situation implies that the debate is still in the area of second-order discourse and that attempts to find specific solutions for (ill-defined) issues are likely to fail.

The field of higher education, complex as it may seem, presents policy-makers with a moderately structured problem—the debate is not about the necessity of good (accessible, flexible, etc.) higher education, nor even about the feasibility of this goal, but about the means and the costs to achieve it. Basically, this is good news for attempts to import quality assurance instruments from elsewhere, including from the business world, in spite of their inherent bias towards short-term results. In the case of higher education, given the right design choices, long-term results are at least theoretically feasible. In the context of fragile consensus on environmental quality, programs aimed at promoting it fail to produce lasting results, as Huitema points out.

On the other hand, there are hard lessons learnt in the field of environmental policy about building consensus and overcoming deep resistance. A number of them may be useful for designing successful higher education quality care systems:

• Timely involvement of all major stakeholders in higher education, government, and society is crucial. Mechanisms for this involvement should be found which allow double loop learning. Double loop learning occurs only when the target group’s preconceptions and beliefs change and become incorporated in future action.(Grin & van de Graaf, 1996) Simple ‘negotiations’ with one party holding the initiative at all times may not work.

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6 Still, one should keep in mind that the tension between short-term success and long-term results remains unresolved. Short-term success may produce the very source of discontent about the social function of higher education.
• In the light of the above, focus on common interests of these stakeholders to create shared ownership of the quality assurance procedure. This shared ownership is apparently needed at institutional level, but much more important in the long run, though difficult to achieve, at the level of national policy.

• Within a general strategic agreement, a differentiated application of external review instruments according to urgency of potential problems in a discipline or in a higher education establishment, and according to a institution’s quality assurance record, may be feasible.

This list may be seen as an extension of the third generation of the ‘Dutch model’ of quality assessment in higher education, as set out in the protocol of the VSNU in force since the academic year 2000–2001 (VSNU, 1999). However, the applicability of that protocol has been put into question through recent developments, to which we turn next.

3 Coming Full Circle for a New Challenge: The Bologna Process and a Next Generation of Quality Assurance Systems in Higher Education

Development of quality assurance systems in higher education has an inherent logic, is the main message of Verkleij & Westerheijden’s phase model presented above. This phase model was analysed from the point of view of levels of policy argumentation, which allows for comparison across policy fields. From the Dutch environmental care policy some lessons for the design of a next generation of quality assurance in higher education are drawn. This is the main message of the previous section of our paper. However, all of this analysis took place under a ceteris paribus clause, while in the wider environment of quality assurance in higher education an important change took place with serious implications for quality assurance—the ceteris are paribus no longer. This change is the rapidly growing importance of international aspects for all of higher education, not any more just for the relatively small group of adventurous academics and students engaging in (EU-stimulated) mobility programmes (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001). The focal point of this development is found in the Bologna Declaration of 1999 (Confederation of EU Rectors' Conferences & Association of European Universities, 2000; van der Wende, 2000).

One of the main goals of the Bologna Declaration is to attain comprehensible and more or less similar degree structures throughout Europe. This should take away barriers against the development of a European area—or market—for higher education. We are not so sanguine about all of higher education becoming a single market soon. By analogy of developments in the United States (an argument strengthened by persistent linguistic, cultural and institutional differences in Europe), it is to be expected that for undergraduate higher education most higher education establishments will remain active mainly for the regional or national market. However,
for graduate and postgraduate education, international markets may develop, at least for a top league of programmes in each area of knowledge. Accordingly, the question arises for students—both from within Europe but especially also from other parts of the world—how to find these top programmes across all higher education institutions in the by now more than thirty signatory countries in the Bologna process. Quality assurance is challenged to provide this type of transparency across higher education systems (see the last row in Table 1). Accordingly, it becomes ever more interesting for higher education establishments to acquire recognition or ‘accreditation’ for their programmes from agencies that are known and respected not just within their own (small) country—Europe is replete with small countries—but across Europe (van der Wende & Westerheijden, 2001; Westerheijden & van der Wende, 2001). Moreover, these higher education institutions are becoming ever more interested in showing their top programmes to be really ‘top’, i.e., there is a drive towards differentiation. This would seem to be a reinforcement of the lessons drawn in the previous section of this paper.

What are current policy developments in this area: do they live up to the design requirements implicit in these lessons? The short answer is: no! There are several reasons for this short answer.

First, policies for quality assurance remain on the national state level, where accommodation of structural changes to implement the bachelor–master model required by the Bologna Declaration is the main issue. This can be observed in the German Akkreditierungsrat, which until the middle of 2001 has recognised five accreditation agencies, all based in Germany. The development of an accreditation board in the Netherlands—the proposal for which will be published right after the CHER 2001 Conference—is equally focussed on the national level. In the Bologna process, the European dimension of quality assurance is placed in the hands of the network of national quality assessment agencies, ENQA (Towards the European Higher Education Area: Communiqué of the meeting of European Ministers in charge of Higher Education in Prague on May 19th 2001, 2001), whose ambition is limited to comparing (and recognising?) each other’s state-level methodologies of quality assessment. A proposal for a European Platform that could develop into a Europe-wide centre for information on the value of accreditations and quality assessments, possibly culminating in recognition of accreditation and quality assessment agencies (Sursock, 2001), fell by the wayside in the run-up to the Prague conference of May 2001, the first follow-up meeting of higher education ministers in the Bologna process (Haug & Tauch, 2001).

7 It has to be emphasised that one of the rationales for the Bologna Declaration is the loss of attractiveness of European higher education to students from other parts of the world. Global competition is the name of the game (van der Wende, 2000)!
Second, the reaction of (national) state governments is not one of developing differentiated application models of quality assurance building upon sophisticated phase 4 quality audits. Rather, they seem to be coming full circle to phase 1: accreditation against threshold quality levels is the new approach. However, they are coming full circle in a redefined relation between the state and higher education institutions on the one hand, and in a redefined (enlarged, internationalised) context, on the other. Yet, in present policy discussions, arguments seem to turn around the nuts and bolts of accreditation mechanisms rather than around the adaptation of institutional arrangements to the new challenge of the Bologna process. In Fisher’s terms, the approach is on an inapplicably low level of technical verification. The danger at hand is that policy makers become preoccupied with technical issues, get buried in them and act as if the context has not changed. Straight application of phase 1 accreditation mechanisms in this new environment (Westerheijden, 2001) would be an example of Marx’s statement: ‘Hegel remarks somewhere that all great, world-historical facts and personages occur, as it were, twice. He has forgotten to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce.’
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