



**UiO** • **Faculty of Educational Sciences**  
University of Oslo

**Regional perspectives on quality assurance -  
European developments**

**Bjørn Stensaker**



## A (very) brief history of QA in Europe

- Quality and the many (domestic) policy agendas within the region:
  - Reforming public sector (efficiency and effectiveness issues)
  - Challenges with massification
  - Mobility and transparency
  - Globalisation and excellence agendas
  - Regulation of private sector HEIs

## The organizational build-up

- Professional agencies supported by European initiatives (ESG)
- Associations for the agencies (ENQA, EQAR)
- The instruments (accreditation, audit, assessments and evaluations)
- The public outreach (EQAF, journals, publications, media coverage, etc..)

## The effects on the sector

- Centralization of governance in HEIs
- Professionalization of QA in HEIs
- Student empowerment
- Enhancing knowledge on quality in HEIs
- External profiling of HEIs
- Academic de-coupling?
- Managerial de-coupling?

## Current status: More diversity than integration of approaches?

- ENQA (2012: 5): "Variety and dynamism are two distinct features of QA in the EHEA...75% of agencies recently changed their approach/were about to do so"
  - Isomorphism = the general model, the instruments (accreditation), the agencies
  - Isonymism = the label hide different practices
  - Isopraxism = similar practises have different names

## The problems with QA

*“Many higher education systems are currently being held back from Bologna implementation – and thus from offering improved services to students and society - by national QA systems that are costly, offer no evidence of overall quality improvement, and stifle institutions’ capacity to respond creatively to the demands of evolving European knowledge society “(Trends V: 2007: 59).*

## QA and the current policy-agendas (1)

- The need to drill deeper – QA has not addressed the real "quality" issues
  - qualification frameworks
  - learning outcomes
  - re-invention of national external examiner systems (Sweden)?

## QA and the current policy-agendas (2)

- QA is too costly and not flexible enough – the search for more effective and efficient ways to secure quality
  - risk-management approaches
  - extensive use of quantitative performance indicators



## QA and the current policy-agendas (3)

- Why should QA be an "independent" process? Why not integrate QA closer to specific governance and funding procedures?
  - the search for tools to address excellence and competition ("we do it in research – why not in education" ...)
  - more benchmarking and comparative exercises linked to both incentives and sanctions

## QA and the current policy-agendas (4)

- Why should QA be a public responsibility?  
Why not leave it to the "market" or to the HEIs themselves?
  - the growing impact of rankings
  - stakeholder influence in QA (private initiatives addressing "quality" issues)
  - towards a free market of "quality assurance"? (new actors entering QA)

## Closing reflections

- ENQA (2012) "Main priority..of agencies..is to develop procedures to enhance HE" – do we see this ambition being backed by governments?
- With all the variety and dynamism among the agencies – is ENQA and EQAR able to secure the European dimension – or do we see QA "returned" to domestic agendas?