1 Accreditation in the Framework of Evaluation Activities: A Comparative Study in the European Higher Education Area

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1.1 Introduction: The Study’s Goals and Structure

Higher education systems in Europe are currently undergoing deep reforms. These reforms are triggered by national developments, as well as by the aim to evolve towards comparable systems and ensure the quality of the higher education systems in Europe (Bologna Process). This study was initiated by the education trade unions’ goal to widen the scope of the debate on accreditation and evaluation activities in higher education in Europe from a comparative perspective. In order to provide the factual base for this discussion, we were asked to carry out a comparative study of ‘accreditation in the framework of evaluation activities’ in the European higher education area. Accreditation is the focus of our study, but accreditation is a policy instrument made up of two elements: evaluation and approval. Therefore, we felt it necessary to analyse these two elements in their own right. Hence, the aims of the study are to:

1. Provide an updated picture of the current situation with regard to (1) accreditation schemes, (2) other approval schemes (outside accreditation) and (3) evaluation schemes.

2. Analyse the underlying principles of the accreditation scheme(s) and how they relate to other approval and evaluation schemes (‘system logic’ or ‘system dynamic”).

3. Point out and analyse current reforms of the accreditation scheme(s) (with a view to other approval and evaluation schemes as well as supra-national developments, e.g. the Bologna process and other influences).

Our study covers all countries involved in the Bologna process. For practical reasons, we have had to limit ourselves to a sub-set consisting of all fifteen EU member states (situation as of 2003, minus Luxembourg which has a minute higher education sector), a main Western European country which is not part of the EU (Norway) and a sample of Central and Eastern European countries which entered the EU in 2004 (the Czech Republic, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland), bringing the total to 20 countries. With regard to Central and Eastern Europe, we have reason to believe that the situation depicted below is representative of not just the countries sampled, but

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also of much more of the Central and Eastern European area (Campbell & Rozsnyai, 2002).

We asked all 20 country experts of this study to provide reports on their respective system of ‘accreditation in the framework of evaluation activities’. They compiled studies describing and analysing in detail how the respective accreditation and evaluation systems are institutionalised and how they are linked to other relevant developments, e.g. the Bologna Process and internationalisation trends (including GATS). From April 10 to 13, 2003, all country experts were invited to share their work and to learn about the ideas of their European colleagues in a two-day workshop at the EI/GEW Forum ‘Shaping the European Area of Higher Education and Research’.

In this chapter, we will provide a synopsis of the findings of the country reports by taking the three main elements, ‘accreditation’, ‘evaluation’ and ‘approval other than accreditation’ as the basic structure of the sections. To maintain consistent distinctions between accreditation, evaluation and other approval schemes across all 20 country cases, we adopted the following definitions.

**Accreditation schemes**: All institutionalised and systematically implemented evaluation schemes of higher education institutions, degree types and programmes that end in a formal summary judgement that leads to formal approval processes regarding the respective institution, degree type and/or programme.

**Approval of institutions, degree types, programmes**: To grant the ‘right to exist within the system’ (or, respectively, to reject the ‘right to exist’) to an institution, degree-type, programme (e.g. charter, licence, accreditation). The approval can be carried out by several organisations or one organisation and is granted by one or more organisation(s) at the supra-institutional level.

**Approval outside the accreditation scheme**: All major approval schemes of higher education institutions, degree types and programmes that are not part of the accredi-

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1 The term ‘scheme’ refers to the ‘entire picture’, the ‘overall picture’, the landscape of the respective three concepts of ‘accreditation activities’, ‘approval other than accreditation activities’ and ‘evaluation activities’.

2 Higher education institutions: All organisations providing degrees at the tertiary level (ISCED 5 and 6), recognised by governmental/public agencies and/or by the general public. This definition is meant to include both public and private higher education institutions with official national recognition and ‘non-official’ higher education leading to degrees that may be recognised in other countries but not necessarily in the country of operation. Our intention is to keep an eye open on organisations that are active in ‘transnational higher education’.

3 Higher education degree-types: The different degrees that are awarded by and certified through a higher education institution (e.g. Bachelor, Master, Diploma, etc.).

4 Higher education programmes: All education provisions within higher education institutions that lead to higher education degrees (ISCED 5 and 6).