IEMed.

The European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed), founded in 1989, is a consortium comprising the Government of Catalonia, the Spanish Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation and Barcelona City Council. It incorporates civil society through its Board of Trustees and its Advisory Council formed by Mediterranean universities, companies, organisations and personalities of renowned prestige.

In accordance with the principles of the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership’s Barcelona Process, and today with the objectives of the Union for the Mediterranean the aim of the IEMed is to foster actions and projects which contribute to mutual understanding, exchange and cooperation between the different Mediterranean countries, societies and cultures as well as to promote the progressive construction of a space of peace and stability, shared prosperity and dialogue between cultures and civilisations in the Mediterranean.

Adopting a clear role as a think tank specialised in Mediterranean relations based on a multidisciplinary and networking approach, the IEMed encourages analysis, understanding and cooperation through the organisation of seminars, research projects, debates, conferences and publications, in addition to a broad cultural programme.

EURO-MEDITERRANEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA: ENHANCING QUALITY, PROMOTING MOBILITY AND EMPLOYABILITY

Nick Harris
Consortium formed by:
Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation
Government of Catalonia
Barcelona City Council

President:
Artur Mas
President of the Government of Catalonia

Vice-Presidents:
José Manuel García-Margallo
Minister of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation
Joana Ortega
Vice-President of the Government of Catalonia
Xavier Trias
Mayor of Barcelona

President of the Executive Committee:
Senén Florensa

Director General:
Andreu Bassols

Board of Trustees:
Banco Bilbao Vizcaya Argentaria, BBVA
Caixa d’Estalvis i Pensions de Barcelona
Cámara de Comercio, Industria e Navegación de Barcelona
El Consorci. Zona Franca de Barcelona
Endesa
Iberia
Telefónica
Conseil Interuniversitari de Catalunya

PapersIEMed.
Published by the European Institute of the Mediterranean
Coordination: Javier Albarracín
Proof-reading: Neil Charlton
Layout: Núria Esparza
ISSN: 1988-7981
January 2012

This publication has been produced with the assistance of the European Union. The contents of this publication are the sole responsibility of the author and can in no way be taken to reflect the views of the European Union or the European Institute of the Mediterranean.

The iEMed is a think tank for the identification and interpretation of the challenges in the Euro-Mediterranean area and for the preparation of proposals to confront them. It offers spaces for reflection and debate as well as advice and assistance to cultural and cooperation projects in the Mediterranean. Moreover, it promotes the participation of civil society in the Euro-Mediterranean space through several networks and in collaboration with entities from the social, economic and cultural worlds.

The PapersIEMed. collection seeks to approach the study of key issues on the current Euro-Mediterranean agenda. Its objective is to provide a new and original view of these issues through the publication of painstaking analyses by recognises experts and researchers in this field.
Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area: Enhancing Quality, Promoting Mobility and Employability

Nick Harris*

BACKGROUND

INTRODUCTION

CHANGING CONTEXTS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: OPPORTUNITIES, CHALLENGES AND RISKS

The Changing Nature of Higher Education in General: National, Regional and Global Drivers

The Changing Nature, Purposes and Expectations of the Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges through Evolution or a Paradigm Shift?

QUALITY ASSURANCE AS A DRIVER FOR IMPROVEMENT IN CHANGING CONTEXTS

Quality Assurance in Practice as a Primary Driver in the Development of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

Quality Assurance in Practice in the (Non-European) Mediterranean Area

Patterns of Change

Aligning Standards and Practices

* ANECA International Advisor.
HIGHER EDUCATION QUALITY FOR MOBILITY AND EMPLOYABILITY 34

Different Types of Mobility May Require Different Quality Parameters and Quality Assurance 35

Higher Education and Employability: Changing Expectations and Quality Assurance Needs 36

Higher Education Awards and “Licences to Practice” 37

THE CULTURE OF QUALITY: THE PRIMARY NEED FOR GROWTH 38

Same Words, Different Interpretations? 39

Acknowledging Differences Is Good 39

EURO-MEDITERRANEAN SCENARIOS FOR HIGHER EDUCATION: “GOLDEN OPPORTUNITIES”, CONFERENCE REFLECTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS 42

Summary of Conference Reflections 43

Towards a Coherent Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area: Recommendations and Practical Steps to Support Them 43

RECOMMENDATIONS 44
Background
This paper results from a European Institute of the Mediterranean (IEMed)/National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain (ANECA) Conference held in Barcelona 23rd May 2011 on enhancing quality, promoting mobility and employability across the Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area. At a time when there is considerable change and uncertainty in almost all parts of the Euro-Med region, the conference discussions ranged across the nature and purposes of higher education, particularly in relation to employability and employment, and the benefits of and barriers to mobility for both students and academic staff. It also sought to identify the most effective ways in which the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM) could contribute to further developments in higher education, bearing in mind the diversities and uncertainties that currently exist at social, political, and economic levels as well as in educational terms. Most of the key stakeholders in higher education within the Euro-Med region were able to exchange information on the latest developments in their work and their continuing needs.

Whilst illustrating the breadth and diversity of contexts across the Euro-Med region, the conference noted that it currently includes some 2 to 3 million students, a number that is expected to rise to 10 million within a decade. Delegates were keen to focus not just on the practical details of recent projects but on identifying a wider and clearer strategic vision that could set and prioritise purposes which would act as a framework to aid integration of the various current actions and future projects; only within such a framework is it likely that the essential synergies can emerge. Aware of the magnitude of the task being faced, several speakers posed deliberately provocative questions to aid discussion and seek agreements on purposes and priorities. Most particularly, it was noted that higher education is but one part of overall education systems and wherever possible its further development should be linked to overall education and training policies. Support for individual aspirations in lifelong learning, including progression between vocational education and training, professional education and higher education was seen as essential.

This paper does not follow the sequence of the conference programme but aims to integrate the content and contexts discussed under several main themes. The paper concludes with a summary of the conference outcomes and some recommendations. These concern the specific integration of a quality strand within the UfM’s overall strategy. Such a quality strand should be designed to co-ordinate wider experiences and current pilot projects to support the enhancement of quality matters in general and particularly where they are concerned with mobility and employability. Recommendations and proposals are made regarding the development of specific actions and “tools” for further development and dissemination.
Introduction
The current Euro-Med framework is a consequence of a substantial commitment and much integrated work. Formerly known as the Barcelona Process, it was re-launched in 2008 as the UIM to promote economic integration and democratic reform across 27 EU members and 16 countries in North Africa and the Middle East. A wide-ranging and detailed programme has been established and enacted including, under social, cultural and human partnerships, three actions that are particularly relevant to this conference:

- Education and training – including training in public administration.
- MEDA-ETA – education and training for employment.
- TEMPUS III and Erasmus Mundus strands concerned with external co-operations.

In addition to details of the UIM, further relevant material can be found in, amongst others: the Catania Declaration (2006); the Cairo Declaration (2007); and the EPUF General Assembly (Barcelona 2010). Other background material relevant to the conference included: the European Standards and Guidelines; key policy documents of the European Universities Association; the European Commission regarding the Bologna Process and quality in higher education, and UNESCO regarding its work in the field of higher education.

Following on from the success of its 1998 World Conference, in 2009 UNESCO organised another wide-ranging World Conference on Higher Education. Along with related activities it was concerned with New dynamics in higher education: From development to sustainable development (reinventing progress). The conference covered a broad range of aspects linked to higher education including the notion of higher education as a public good, the social responsibility of higher education, and the important aspects of access, equity and equality. Noting that the expansion of higher education poses challenges to the quality of higher education, the final communiqué was concerned that quality criteria must reflect the overall objectives of higher education, “[…] notably the aim of cultivating in students critical and independent thought and the capacity of learning throughout life.” In considering “internationalisation, regionalisation and globalisation” the communiqué noted, amongst 11 wide-ranging points, “the fact that globalisation has highlighted the need for the establishment of national accreditation and quality assurance systems along with the promotion of networking amongst them” and “along with international university networks and partnerships […] help to enhance mutual understanding.”

Other recent or current related work includes: the ENQA project on the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, the GIQAC (2010) report prepared by ANQAHE, and JISER-MED; several of these are referred to in greater detail throughout the following text. Conference delegates were reminded that whilst the European Commission is the organisation most closely associated with stimulating the development of the Bologna Process, the European Union has been of crucial impor-

tance in providing the underpinning political context in which such a development could take place, because of its relevance, and further expand well beyond the members of the EU itself.

In addition to a wealth of relevant published information, conference delegates were also introduced to a number of related ongoing projects including several developed through the UNESCO office in Beirut and also information on the establishment of a suit of programmes designed by EMUNI and the Euro-Med University. The findings from the UNESCO work provided an early “reality check” to the conference – some public higher education institutions are reluctant to work with quality assurance agencies and some private ones are interested more in profit than recognition issues; seeking elaborated standards for engineering and business areas was less than straightforward; ”quality” means different things to different groups; governance matters are confronted by issues of balancing institutional autonomy and state responsibilities; the provision of higher education in each part of the Mediterranean region is hugely diverse; mobility and in particular recognition remain at best problematic, despite various signed agreements. There was however a note of optimism in the fact that the various projects were “still talking” and sharing information and seeking solutions to both specific and more generic matters. In a similarly optimistic vein, delegates heard about the development of a series of 6 programmes by EMUNI and the Euro-Med University. The first three programmes to be delivered will be concerned with alternative energy, pollution of the Med, and the financing of small and medium sized enterprises. EMUNI will also be undertaking a survey of the ideas and concerns of university rectors in the southern parts of the Euro-Med about entering a (Bologna type) three cycle higher education system as a further part of the gathering of information on the diversity, the current and changing state(s), and the aspirations of higher education across the Euro-Med.
Changing Contexts for Higher Education: Opportunities, Challenges and Risks
The Changing Nature of Higher Education in General: National, Regional and Global Drivers

The major issues facing higher education and its key stakeholders throughout the Mediterranean region are not specific to only this region; many of the same issues are confronting higher education everywhere, irrespective of the underpinning type/model of higher education. For centuries, until the mid 1900s, a university education was available to only a minority (often less than 5% of the relevant age cohort) of the population – in any country. This minority was often drawn from the social elite but, since the founding of universities, there were usually some opportunities for the most intellectually able to attend higher education irrespective of their social background. Irrespective of whether the education system and intellectual approach was based on one of three (main) models (the Humboldtian, Napoleonic, or Anglo-American), “going to university” was generally a life-changing process for any individual. This was intended, perhaps more implicitly than explicitly by today’s standards of “transparency”, to do two main tasks: firstly, to contribute to the continuation of the “academic species” (academics are concerned with identifying and promoting retaining the very best amongst their students), and secondly to provide intellectual leadership for society whether through religious, political, social or commercial leaders and innovators. Such people, often serving in the public rather than commercial sectors, were expected to contribute to the further development of “society”.

Massification and Diversification
From the mid 1900s, with different start times and different rates of development in different countries, participation in higher education has changed dramatically and now exceeds up to 50% of an age cohort in some countries. As a consequence the process and experience of many of today’s students cannot be quite like “going to university” in earlier times.

Linked to this rapid increase in student numbers has been an inevitable increase in the numbers and types of institutions providing higher education. Whilst the traditional concept and personalised teaching experience of the “ancient university” still exists for a minority, the majority of today’s students study in new(ish) surroundings and in large cohorts, or on their own through “distance learning” with little “face to face” contact with the teaching staff.

The range of subjects available for study increases with each academic year and also with an increasing emphasis on inter-disciplinary and multidisciplinary combinations. In an increasing number of countries there is a tendency to broaden the scope of higher education to include areas of advanced practice, such as are now taught in “universities of applied science”. These often have a more explicit link to employability in general or a particular field of employment.

Noting the rapid developments in higher education, conference delegates were keen to identify the close inter-relationships between the development of societies, the importance of the development of all forms education leading to progression into successful higher education, and the critical relationship between education and employability. Others have discussed the relationships between societal and educational developments and this was not a focus for this meeting or this paper. By contrast the relationship between (higher) education and employment was a focus of comment, and there was concern particularly around scenarios where the numbers of qualified graduates might outstrip the needs for graduate-level recruits and employees.
Closely associated with the consequences of such challenges are the opportunities for mobility, linked both to education and to employment. The main “directions” of mobility are seen to change in response to the availability, or limitations, of opportunities, although generally this has been in a “south-north” direction. Noting that European and Mediterranean countries, and other regions of the globe, do at different stages have different balances between opportunities and limitations, delegates sought to identify not the competing elements of “brain drain/brain gain”, but a wider Euro-Med framework in which there was “brain circulation”. This approach was seen as a better reflection of the interchanges that might be anticipated as the Euro-Med is further developed. It was however noted that whilst mobility to European countries, and the USA, is high (though sometimes limited by visa restrictions) mobility between Arab countries was very low. At perhaps no more than 3% overall, mobility between some of the Arab countries with larger populations of students could be as low as 1%.

**Changing Prioritisation in the Purposes of Higher Education**

The transformation of universities, particularly with regard to the context of the Euro-Mediterranean region, is addressed in detail by the authors of *The Contribution of Euro-Mediterranean Universities to Social Progress*, especially in chapters 1 and 2. They comment on the social roles of universities and how (changing) demands can be met, how new “contracts” between universities and their communities are being established, and the authors expand on the redistribution of responsibilities with the development of a more widely educated population.

External factors are a key driver of such expansion. One important external factor in higher education is the concept that it can and will provide a stimulus to economic development both for societies in general and for the individuals involved. The consequences of such dramatic changes, however, also include a shift in the balance of purposes; whilst “going to university” was, for academics, about identifying the most intellectually able minority and also enhancing “citizenship”, including educating leaders, delegates agreed that “higher education” is now expected to provide graduates who will be readily employable in increasingly diverse and demanding commercial sectors.

It is important to distinguish between “employment” and “employability”. The development of specific knowledge and practical competencies required for employment in particular areas of professional practice may be readily identified and these are often subject to international/regional agreements. There remain problems in identifying more precisely the key goals and characteristics of employability that may or should be provided by higher education in general. Linked with such a distinction are strategic decisions, in part at a political level and in part at the level of the higher education institution, on whether higher education should be responsive to labour markets, and if so to what extent.

Whilst such externalities can undoubtedly bring “positives” with them (greater social mobility, etc.), evidence is beginning to accumulate that unless political policies and initiatives concerning education and employment are co-ordinated within a wider framework then there is the potential for “negatives” as well, for example an increasingly educated and trained but subsequently “under-employed” (and potentially frustrated) work force.

During the period 2004-2007 the Barcelona Process included a theme on Education and Training for Employment (MEDA-ETE) which focused mainly on supporting Mediterranean partner countries in the design and implementation of technical and vocational education and training policies that could contribute to promoting employment. Lessons learned from this and the more recent activities con-
carning higher education offer a major opportunity (and challenge) for the Euro-Med today. Reflecting the (changing) priorities and challenges it is interesting to note, for example, that a significant number of themes within the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO) Education Programme deal very specifically with such matters.12

Whilst there has been a significant shift for the major part of higher education from the academic asking “who is the very best?” to the employer asking “can they do the job?” there are now also additional aspects concerned with the specific “recognition” of qualifications as students and graduates seek to use higher education as a platform to mobility.

In addressing the purposes and priorities of higher education within the Euro-Med, delegates were agreed that the first priority was to ensure that the quality of education and of its graduates, at whatever level, needed to meet international expectations. The criteria for these were discussed in some detail and are considered later but at a general level the further development of the overall form and characteristics of the (European) Bologna Process were seen as a strategic opportunity and potential model for the wider Euro-Med.

**Emergence of a (Commercially) "Competitive Market"**

Higher education is now a “global industry” increasingly regarded as both a driver and a “mirror” of economic development. It can lead to increased competitiveness and potential (commercial) success. Historically, universities were mostly publicly-funded, either through government grants from general taxation, and/or through endowments from individuals and organisations. The increasing demand for and provision of higher education has seen increasing provision by the private sector, either through not-for-profit organisations or companies seeking to make profit. Currently non-public provision is mostly restricted to relatively small institutions offering a limited range of typically vocationally/employment-related programmes often in conjunction with local market needs. Recently however there has also been an increase in the small number of trans-national companies that offer a broader range of programmes to a wider (world?) market. Depending upon legal contexts such programmes and their awards/degrees may or may not be required to undergo formal external quality assurance and may or may not be officially recognised. A tension can thus exist between the formal (often state) requirements for quality assurance which were designed essential for publicly-funded higher education. These are not always required for non-public higher education. There is thus a potential for a “let the market rule” approach to quality assurance in regional or global higher education; such “markets” may not be regulated or quality assured in any rigorous manner in which case of course the student/“customer” may be at risk.

Conference discussions focussed on several issues concerned with the balance between public and private higher education and the effects and consequences of the mix and competition between them. Whilst all were agreed that all forms of higher education should be subject to similarly rigorous quality assurance there was some doubt about whether this would necessarily always be enforceable. Various views were expressed with concerns about the extent of real commitment to internal and/or external quality assurance in some parts of public higher education. Others considered that private higher education, whether for profit or not, might be more concerned with short-term turnover of student numbers rather than sustainable provision of valid programmes for the medium term. The discussion was further complicated by views of the different and differential impacts of “ranking” on higher education institutions, and their real and perceived success. Irrespective of the type of institution there was a general

---

view that all should be subject to checks that would protect the rights and interests of students, their funders and their potential employers. There was considerable interest amongst Southern Euro-Med delegates in the approaches adopted by those European countries that have significant provision through both public and private higher education, including the extent to which there might be (mutual) recognition of awards from the different sectors.

Regionalisation and Globalisation: Benefits and Drawbacks
The Barcelona Process and the subsequent Union for the Mediterranean exists because of belief in the benefits of regional co-operation, and there has clearly been a successful track record to date. As in all areas of collaboration however there are some potential risks and drawbacks and these should not be overlooked or avoided in seeking to identify and promote the benefits. In terms of higher education the benefits appear obvious and include the opportunities for individuals whatever their initial circumstances to achieve their full potential and contribute to a civilised and civilising society both locally and, ideally, more widely. Some risks are perhaps equally obvious; that there may be insufficient employment opportunities at an appropriate level for a more highly educated and specialist trained population. This might however be mitigated by policies aimed at providing a managed balance between higher education per se and higher level vocational education and training.

Other risks of the greater regionalisation, even globalisation, of higher education may lie in the potential for loss of unique local/national characteristics and with this an apparent diminution in different cultural identities. Yet cultural identities are deep rooted and can be expected to change at far slower rates than the politically-motivated harmonisation of educational processes and procedures. Conference delegates noted significant differences in pedagogical approaches in, for example, the ways in which in Western Europe knowledge was often advanced through challenge, particularly at a personal level, whilst such an approach was not traditionally practised in the higher education systems of some Far Eastern countries. Yet despite such variations in educational context and “etiquette” it was clear from, for example, international rankings, that transitions to global expectations could be accommodated successfully whilst at the same time retaining some unique/special “local” characteristics. In this regard there were some brief but interesting discussions on the extent to which education is both a public good and for the public good; it can also be a driver of social and even political reform.

The purpose of the conference was however to consider the narrower but critical matter of enhancing quality, promoting mobility and employability across the Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area. In this regard there was discussion on whether, in seeking a practical framework and “tools” to support such an endeavour, it was better to focus initially on the needs for supporting a generic approach to quality in higher education, and then seek the parameters and criteria appropriate to the promotion of mobility and employability. The (rejected) alternative would have been to focus on specifics from the outset, in the hope that these would, as practical “tools”, provide a key to wider objectives.

Since public policy for higher education is undoubtedly complex, both within and between countries and regions of the Euro-Med, it was felt on balance that it would be better to come to a shared view on the purposes and priorities in seeking parameters for quality per se before seeking to enhance quality for the specific purpose of promoting mobility and employability.

The success of the Bologna Process, and particularly of its strand concerned with quality and quality assurance, was seen as both a good example and a “motivator” for development into the Euro-Med.
Discussions noted that this involved the development of quality assurance systems within, and managed by, higher education institutions, and also external systems that could and would (in due course) verify the effectiveness of each institution’s own internal arrangements for quality assurance. Mobility and employability were regarded as being essentially dependent upon the level of trust that can be placed in (individual’s) qualifications, and the teaching that led to them. The primary goal should thus be to focus a drive to quality (assurance) that supports trust in qualifications and their recognition, and through this support mobility and employability. Only when there is a strong basis for such trust can there be any likelihood of further and sustainable enhancement.

(Public Expectations of) Accountability

Several aspects of the changes outlined above impact on the concepts and practices of quality assurance. The roles of quality assurance multiply with changing purposes and the increasing diversity in higher education provision. Such increasing diversity is seen both in terms of discipline areas and types of institutions, and increasing expectations of accountability and the extent and level of the provision of information about higher education provision and its quality. Whilst in earlier decades the roles and purposes of traditional universities might have, albeit implicitly, been "understood" there has been significant changes to today’s expectations. There is now demand for increasing amounts of, and increasingly publicly available, information to ensure both the fitness for purpose and the fitness of purpose of higher education, in ever changing local, regional, national and global contexts. Accountability in and about higher education, and the public provision of (more or less) reliable information on higher education, are now both politically and commercially important. In part this has been stimulated by the rather specialist area of “global rankings” which, in effect, only really apply to a very small number of very specialised higher education institutions in an extremely small number of countries. To a greater extent however rather more governments/ministers are in the process of developing and/or modifying policies concerned with the provision of higher education as a consequence of perceived “lack of success” in global rankings.

National, regional and global networks of higher education institutions and higher education quality assurance agencies have led to the discussion and promotion of shared views on the core purposes, and the bases and processes for internal and external evaluation of higher education. For a such as the networks and associations of universities in Europe (EUA) and Arabia (AARU), and similarly for quality assurance agencies at European (ENQA), Arabian (ANQAAHE), and global (INQAAHE) levels provide the basis for discussions both derived from, and leading to, developments at institutional, national, regional, inter-regional and global levels. Amongst others, Jordan, for example, has announced (May 2011) at the 44th Meeting of the Association of Arab Universities (AARU) that its Ministry of Higher Education and Scientific Research is currently drafting a rating system for both universities and courses. The system will cover both public and private higher education institutions and, in his announcement, the Minister also called for developing relations with the private sector and finding solutions for adequate funding sources for universities. At the same meeting, University of Jordan President Adel Tweizi called for a comprehensive review of the higher education in the Arab world.

In wide ranging discussion of the drivers of, and the requirements for, change, delegates at the Barcelona meeting noted that it was important for the partners to consider and identify the bases for quality assurance before effective Euro-Med approaches to the enhancement of quality of higher education could be addressed particularly in support of, for example, the promotion of mobility and em-

13. Fitness for purpose – focuses on “how well is the job done?” Quality assurance is on the “process of production”, in this case whether the education system meets expectations. Fitness of purpose – focuses on “was the job worth doing?” Quality assurance is on whether the “result of the process”, in this case whether the graduates/their qualifications meet expectations. Question Q1.v.a might be restated as – Are we concerned with precisely what (and why) higher education does what it does (fitness of purpose), or are we merely concerned with how well higher education does what it does (fitness for purpose)? Or both?!


ployability. There was however unanimous agreement that both fitness for purpose and fitness of purpose were essential elements of quality across the Euro-Med, and its assurance. It was further agreed that this was particularly relevant for matters concerned with mobility and employability.

The Changing Nature, Purposes and Expectations of the Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Meeting the Challenges through Evolution or a Paradigm Shift?

Who and What Is Quality Assurance (Really) For?
The authors of the EPUF document *The Contribution of Euro-Mediterranean Universities to Social Progress* start their chapter on quality assurance with the statement: “Evaluation is one of the main instruments used by institutions that wish to reach international recognition and visibility;” clearly the (important) perspective of academics working within and committed to improving “their system”.

The perspectives of their students, and those who support them during their studies and employ them afterwards, might however have different perspectives and priorities. For example, an intending student might reasonably note that “evaluation should assure me that [...] the degree/award I receive is worth having (and will help me get employment), or perhaps that [...] the programme I study on should be delivered in such a way that (assuming I have the ability and work hard) I have a fair chance of completing the programme and gaining my degree/award.”

Similarly, employers perhaps individually in the case of multinationals or collectively through their organisations and chambers of commerce, such as ASCAME (the Association of Mediterranean Chambers of Commerce and Industry), might reasonably want to be assured that a graduate holding a particular degree can actually do what might reasonably be expected, and that each student has a validated transcript of their achievements (across the Bologna Higher Education Area, the Diploma Supplement issued meets this aim).

The “audiences” for information about the quality of higher education often have overlapping interests but certainly different priorities; students wish to know about the likely quality of the programme they might wish to study, employers whether student’s awards/degrees match their own expectations for employment, and politicians need to know that public money has been spent effectively (and efficiently).

The purposes of quality assurance of higher education are generally anticipated to include some of: the quality of programmes offered to students, the (academic/practitioner) standards of graduates, and accountability for public expenditure, yet it was acknowledged during conference discussions that the quality assurance criteria and procedures often applied do not necessarily give direct evidence on any of these. This inevitably led to a discussion about possible parameters for more efficient and effective, and directly relevant, quality assurance.

What Really Needs To Be Quality Assured?
Quality assurance is “expensive” but it is necessary. The expenses include both the direct costs for institutions and programmes and, particularly for academics whose careers are often largely determined by their research productivity, it can seem that there can be significant “distraction” and “lost opportunity” costs. Typically, academics genuinely believe they have the best interests of their students in mind yet they may be unused, and reluctant, to engage in more and “transparent” quality assurance activities that are now widely expected. It is thus important that quality assurance is effectively grounded
within regular academic practice, rather than be seen as and become a bureaucratic exercise that adds little of real value. The precise purposes and targets for quality assurance must be identified and their priorities agreed. It is only after such agreement that the greatest opportunities lie, by examining only what is necessary to effectively cover the agreed priorities. It may thus be possible to reduce the requirements of quality assurance and make it more effective, and more efficient.

Few, if any, quality assurance systems in higher education have yet to fully (re)focus on only the necessary and sufficient parameters to meet quality assurance’s real requirements. There remains a heritage of measuring what can readily be measured whatever its real value to the new requirements of quality assurance. It might be argued, for example, that if we truly consider that learning outcomes are the critical components with regard to employability then it should not matter how, where or for how long a student has studied. Quality assurance would then focus largely, even solely perhaps, on the fair assessment of the required learning outcomes and the standards (grades) achieved.

Higher education is however more than a mechanism to provide training linked to employment. Each student has the right to expect that the course they enter is structured and delivered in a way that will provide them with a fair opportunity to succeed, and this requires other aspects to be included with the overall quality assurance. Similarly, there should be fair and equivalent (though not necessarily equal) opportunities across the range of programmes provided by a higher education institution. All such aspects require quality assurance linked to:

- the content, coherence and progression within an offered study programme;
- the expected and actual final achievements of each student;
- the management of academic matters related to programme design approval delivery, monitoring and review.

Delegates were agreed that future Euro-Med collaboration would need to be based, if it were to be successful, on several practical aspects. These included better knowledge of each other’s contexts and working practices, and an appraisal of each partner’s essential and prioritised requirements of quality assurance. Only after an integrated mix of practical and desk-based collaborative exercises could there be any realistic chance of identifying the shared core of necessary and sufficient criteria (and procedures) that would meet the apparently diverse requirements of different countries/agencies across the region. But it would be on these that trust, and in time mutual recognition, could be built.

The example of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) was seen as a potentially very valuable “model” for the further development and integration of efforts across the Euro-Med. Conceived initially as a project group to support the work of individual agencies as they sought to keep abreast of the rapid changes and expectations in the quality assurance of higher education, ECA sought from the outset to identify the bases of mutual trust in each other’s evaluation procedures that could lead, in the first instance, to a mutual recognition of accreditation decisions (on higher education programmes and/or institutions). This was done with the subsequent hope that it would facilitate easier mutual recognition of qualifications. Such an approach was seen as an effective route to provide both more effective and efficient quality assurance and promote internationalisation, and in particular enhance mobility in general and individual’s potential for employability.
ECA has demonstrated that, within Europe, such an approach can be very successful. Following a series of bilateral mutual recognition agreements between agencies from 14 countries, members have this year started to develop and sign a multi-lateral agreement. Closely-linked work within ECA is concerned with the mutual recognition of qualifications (in association with the relevant national recognition bodies) and the provision of easily accessible and directly comparable information on programmes accredited across an increasingly wide range of European countries and institutions.

The collation and integration of a series of related projects, each targeted to a series of specific and sequenced “steps”, was brought about by having a very clear “road map”. This in turn was based on practicalities yet with clear political motivations in mind. It is a clear demonstration that those involved in the delivery and quality assurance of higher education can quickly and effectively make significant progress despite a wide and complex variety of social, legal, historical and political contexts. Such a model might meet the conference delegates’ desire for a more focused integration of ideas and projects across the Euro-Med so that they were potentially more obviously and directly targeted to the wider needs of the region.

**Quality Assurance: “A Journey Not a Destination” (but [Road] Maps Are Essential)**
Quality assurance is widely regarded by its practitioners as “a journey not a destination”, yet all are agreed that “outcomes” are needed along the way; reports – on the quality that exists, on how things may be improved, and on improvements that subsequently have been made. It is clearly the case, though not always openly acknowledged, that different “actors” participate at different stages on such a journey, and perhaps also with different levels of enthusiasm. This may be most clearly seen in the expectations, requirements and approaches applied to the internal quality assurance within any higher education institution and any external quality assurance that is applied to evaluate such internal arrangements.

The countries and regions of the Euro-Med are at different stages of development both in terms of internal quality assurance within their higher education institutions and the external quality assurance applied to the higher education institutions, and additionally conference delegates referred to differences in attitudes to the need for and practicalities of modern expectations concerning internal and external quality assurance related to higher education. The conference heard about various projects and initiatives being undertaken across the Euro-Med initiated under a variety of programmes and national and international agencies. A critical issue that was identified was whether and how these diverse actions might be integrated to ensure a minimum of duplication and a maximum effective impact. Potential difficulties were identified in the different targets and priorities of different initiatives and the extent to which internationalisation of criteria and procedures might have be accommodated without any negative impact on the important diversity that contributes to the “richness” of the region(s).

In seeking to identify how work could be directed towards achieving a shared understanding of the common and different contexts and requirements for quality assurance in higher education a number of “practical tools” were discussed. These included the development and roles of national and regional qualification frameworks, the identification of sets of core (and additionally desirable but fundamentally optional) knowledge, understanding and “competencies” (a word that seems to have different meanings in different contexts), and a recognition that it was important to move from quality assurance based not largely or solely on “input measure” but also to include some “outputs”
as well. Learning outcomes are very much in vogue and yet there seems to remain a degree of uncertainty about just what learning outcomes are, how they are best expressed and assessed, and the extent to which they might contribute to or predominate in evaluations of programmes and/or higher education institutions.

Various benchmarking projects were discussed including the alignment of qualification frameworks, the (UNESCO) AHELO and (EC) Tuning projects, and the standards and guidelines of, amongst others, ENQA, INQAAHE and ECA. Almost all are, to a greater or lesser extent, concerned with learning outcomes. Whilst all were seen to be of significant interest and potential value all were also regarded with some caution; caution that was in part based on uncertainty about the ways in which the outcomes of such projects might/could be implemented.

The outcomes of such programmes can be both useful and valuable but it is likely that they will only be successful and sustainable over a wider area where there is understanding and agreement of how the criteria and/or procedures can be applied. Different traditions, predominantly legal but also pedagogical and cultural, impact on the way in which criteria and procedures are perceived and applied. The same is clearly true for learning outcomes; for some they represent "definitions" (often very detailed) of what the student has to have demonstrated, whilst for others learning outcomes are set in more generic terms and are regarded more as "reference points" to the sorts of things a student will have achieved. Clearly the subject/discipline area of study will impact on this balance between what must be known and what might generally be expected to be known, but there is an underlying difficulty in reaching a shared view on learning outcomes that will need to be addressed across the Euro-Med before significant progress in trust building can lead to mutual recognition – of, for example, qualifications that are the basis of mobility and employability.

Quality Assurance and Enhancement

Whilst the primary purpose of quality assurance for some may be the provision of "guarantees" about programmes and awards, for those within higher education the primary purpose is usually seen as "improvement" or "enhancement". Is there a difference?

The term "enhancement" also led to interesting discussions amongst delegates; enhancement of what? (education and its consequences or the quality assurance of education? or both?), enhancement for what? (for greater effectiveness of process or more useful process outcomes? or both?), and there was discussion about the difference between enhancement and improvement. The last was the easiest to agree; improvement was used when referring to making something that was not generally acceptable better, enhancement could be used when referring to the further improvement of something that had at least already met threshold levels of acceptability.

Enhancement is sometimes promoted, particularly within the higher education community, as the primary purpose of quality assurance, especially where quality assurance systems are "mature" and have demonstrated successful achievements over a number of cycles. Even in such circumstances there remains however, as far as the wider public is concerned, a need to "know" that the basic quality and standards continue to meet general (threshold) expectations. It should not merely be enough to provide evidence that things have in some way been made even better (from the perspective of the higher education community) when other (e.g. employer) expectations may have changed.
Discussions at the conference on enhancement concluded that approaches to enhancement must be adapted to the nature, size and context of the higher education system; trying to adopt an enhancement strategy system developed in, for example, a small country with an old and traditional higher education system may not be appropriate in a country/region where the systems are quite different in terms of size, maturity and underpinning legal context.
Quality Assurance as a Driver for Improvement in Changing Contexts
Quality Assurance in Practice as a Primary Driver in the Development of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area

Quality assurance has and continues to be one of the major successes and drivers of the Bologna Process. Established at the outset as one of the Bologna Process action lines, the successes have come from a combination of “bottom up” and “top down” initiatives. Perhaps the best example of a “bottom up” initiative is the development of the now very widely established Framework for Qualifications in the European Higher Education Area. Starting with an informal gathering of representatives from several European quality assurance agencies, the Joint Quality Initiative grew in size and strength as it sought a shared view on two rather simple questions:

- What characterises a “bachelors” degree, and what a “masters” degree under the new Bologna 3 cycle system? And – importantly –
- what are our shared views of the critical differences between bachelors and masters?

Answering a widely held need, a series of meetings, workshops and conferences quickly developed the prototype framework and its (“cycle”) descriptors – the Dublin Descriptors; these are now widely used as reference points across the Bologna countries. Similarly, although with more of a “top down” approach, the organisations representing the quality assurance agencies, the universities, the students and the European Commission developed the European Standards and Guidelines that are the basis for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions, external evaluation of higher education institutions by external agencies and review of the quality assurance agencies themselves.

There are of course many other very successful developments led by the universities and higher education institutions (through EUA and EURASHE), the quality assurance agencies (working through ENQA and ECA) and the students (through ESIB/ESU) and the European Commission, particularly through Erasmus/Erasmus Mundus. The very clear “message” from all of these is that where there is a real need and benefit from finding a shared solution, the various “actors” can and do work together very effectively. By contrast, where the perceived need is not strongly and widely shared then initiatives are less successful/sustainable.

Quality Assurance in Practice in the (Non-European) Mediterranean Area

ANQAHE has been an effective forum for international discussion and mutual support amongst Arab countries for years and its 2010 GIQAC report provides the most recent formal report on quality assurance and capacities for its enhancement within the Arab region. As well as a forum for those countries with developed and developing quality assurance systems, ANQAHE covers policy dialogues for countries that lack quality assurance systems and for regional initiatives. It provides practical initiatives concerned with, for example, workshops and has established a multilingual glossary. Most recently, Arab nations and institutions were well represented at the 2011 INQAAHE Madrid Conference, with 10 Arab organisations now as full members of INQAAHE and 8 as associate members.

The ENQA MENA project is concerned with integration of quality assurance in higher education across Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. Linked to the growing demand for quality assured higher education across the region, the project aims to assist with the consolidation and integration...
of existing regional initiatives, to develop support for national quality assurance systems, and build capacity at national and regional levels, as well as disseminate exchange of knowledge and expertise for undertaking internal quality assurance within higher education institutions, and the external quality assurance of such internal systems.

Another interesting input on the state-of-the-art of internal quality assurance processes in the Mediterranean Area is the Tempus Project AQI-UMED to strengthen the internal quality assurance systems of the Mediterranean universities (Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia). This project is coordinated by the Centre international d’études pédagogiques (CIEP) of France and it is co-funded by the European Commission. Its main objective is to contribute to the development of quality assurance practices in the ten universities of the three countries that take part in the project. The priorities are the internal quality assurance processes to improve and modernise the governance of these institutions. The project also seeks to harmonise their processes with the international standards of quality assurance in higher education, especially with the European experiences within the Bologna Process. This harmonization will allow developing national mechanisms aligned with the regional context in the Maghreb as well as among these countries and Europe to facilitate student mobility among other benefits in the short term. ANECA takes part in this project giving technical support in the quality assurance mechanisms developed by the institutions as well as in training the people involved in the project.

In the Near East area, ANECA is also taking part in the Tempus Project Accreditation – Pathway to Quality Assurance, focused on establishing quality standards in both public and private universities in Syria. The project is coordinated by the University of Damascus and ANECA along with other European agencies to provide good practices in capacity building of internal and external quality assurance processes in the Euro-Mediterranean Area. The final goal of this project is to identify accreditation standards aligned with those internationally accepted in order to test them in the Syrian institutions identified in the pilot project. The project also focuses on the preparation of self-evaluation reports by the institutions involved, as well as site-visits to carry out the reviews.

Various Tempus projects were introduced including JISER-MED. Joint Innovation and Synergies in Education and Research is coordinated by the University of Barcelona and funded by the European Commission. The four dimensions of the project deal with the following strategic points: the improvement of services and mobility for doctoral students from countries of the Mediterranean Area; to develop quality assurance mechanisms from a Mediterranean perspective; to strengthen good practices on research and higher education; and to reinforce the political and strategic debates among the stakeholders in the Euro-Mediterranean Area through the IEMed. Apart from the organizations mentioned, EPUF, MUNI and ANECA take part in the project, which will last until December 2013.

Patterns of Change

Superficial observation of quality assurance in higher education over a period of time suggests the emergence of a somewhat similar pattern irrespective of the educational/legal contexts of the country/countries involved. This pattern, in summary, starts with a period of quite detailed quality assurance, usually focused at the programme level. After some time (typically 5 to 10 years) systems tend to move towards a system in which external quality assurance focuses at an institutional level. Several reasons may lie behind this, including a diminishing return in terms of quality assurance information (particularly at threshold level) despite the high cost of programme level evaluations and a ca-
pacity within institutions to be able to "play the game". However, a further stage is starting to emerge in those countries that have been running external quality assurance of their higher education systems for some decades; after several cycles of evaluation at the institutional level there is a return to external evaluation at programme level in addition to continuing institutional level evaluations. Amongst the drivers for this "return" to programme evaluation are the rather similar outcomes reported at institutional level (thus providing very little for any "ranking", and the fact there is increasingly outdated, publicly-available information available on a programme by programme basis. This seems to initiate a call for a return to a focus on programme evaluation.

Simultaneously, there has been an increasing internationalisation of higher education that has been accompanied, and in some ways by, led increasing internationalisation of the quality assurance of higher education. Purposes and priorities are changing; the application of criteria based essentially on "input measures" is being replaced by an increasing emphasis on "outputs" (often but not always referred to as learning outcomes and/or competencies), and a focus on meeting threshold standards is being replaced by a focus on improvement/enhancement.

Needless to say, with different countries and their higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies at different stages of development there is little synchronisation across regions yet alone between regions. This remains a (challenging) goal for higher education policies that seek, at all levels, to develop or depend upon international and/or regional agreements.

Aligning Standards and Practices

Some analysis of the different national/sub-regional approaches to standards/criteria and practices/procedures (used in the quality assurance in higher education) is essential in seeking to meet the challenges linked to the development of regional agreements.

Considering procedural aspects first, it is now widely agreed that a general outline for quality assurance in higher education should include: 1) the establishment of agreed and accepted (c.f. imposed) criteria and standards; 2) a self assessment by the proposers (ex ante evaluation) or providers (ex post evaluation) of higher education (at programme and/or institutional level(s)); 3) an external evaluation of the self assessment against the agreed criteria and standards, by an independent panel (usually organised through an external agency); and 4) a public report of the outcomes. The report of the external evaluation may include "judgements" in the form of accreditation (or not), and/or "grades" (numerical or verbal descriptive) under a number of categories, or be a commentary.

In each step there are critical features which influence the context and outcome of the evaluation. For example, the way in which the standards and criteria for evaluation are "agreed" will have a significant effect on the manner in which any evaluation is undertaken. Criteria agreed between academe and the external evaluators are more likely to be conducive to a constructive procedure and outcomes than criteria that are imposed without genuine consultation. Similarly, it must be clear whether the criteria are "absolute" – i.e. they must be met, irrespective of context, or whether they are "guidelines" that can be interpreted by the evaluators in the context of the higher education institution and the programme being offered. The latter is particularly important with an increasing emphasis on "outcomes" as measures of quality assurance. There seems to be little agreement yet on the apparently simple question "are learning outcomes definitions or descriptions?"; that is, do learning outcomes set out
what a student has to/has achieved(d), or merely indicate the sorts of things that might be expected. It may be that for some programmes the required learning outcomes are set as “descriptions” open to academic interpretation by the assessors of students’ work. In others, however, and particularly where the award leads to a “licence to practice” (e.g. medicine, engineering, or similar areas) and where there is significant public risk associated with failure in professional practice, the learning outcomes must be “definitions”. This leads towards the potential for a risk-based approach to the quality assurance of higher education. Although widely based in national practice, it is not so obviously acknowledged within the development of international collaborations, other than in specific and limited areas of professional practice.

Whilst there is general agreement on the components for a shared procedural basis for the quality assurance of higher education there is only now starting to emerge the beginnings of discussions about the criteria themselves. In part this may be because of different understandings of “quality” in higher education. For some “quality” is concerned more with what should be achieved by the students; for this, key indicators traditionally including “input factors” such as curricular content, (research) excellence of the teaching staff, facilities (nominally) available to students, and time (measured as the duration of the study programme) would be necessary.

For others, particularly those with some heritage from UK higher education, the overall concept of “quality” is divided into “standards” (what the student is expected to/has been shown to have achieved(d)) and “quality” per se. In this model quality is about the management of those aspects of the higher education institutions management that affect the students’ opportunities to study and learn; now increasingly described as “the student experience”. This approach has led to the development of various “Codes of Practice” for the management of higher education and its quality assurance.

**Qualifications Frameworks**

In recent years, and particularly under the influence of regional and other international collaborations, there have been increasingly shared views about the nature and criteria for assessing what is expected of, and achieved by, students. The emergence of “qualifications frameworks” has been at the forefront of this. Developed initially at a national level in a number of countries, they have since led to the development of regional ones (the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (see above), and the European Qualifications Framework for example) which have, in turn, influenced the development of further national qualifications frameworks in those countries that did not previously have one/them. Qualifications frameworks include a series of “levels” each with its associated “descriptor(s)” which are inevitably designed for use in higher education and for use in vocational education and training. However, at a time when lifelong learning and mobility between sectors is encouraged at both personal and political levels it may be uncomfortable to state clearly that the purposes, context and nature of higher education and vocational education and training are in some respects fundamentally different. This is not to deny the opportunity for mobility between the two but rather
to acknowledge it openly to better facilitate such mobility, which can and probably should be at a basis of lifelong learning, individual development and societal advancement. It is argued that a move to the use of learning outcomes/competencies will overcome such difficulties but if anything it seems at present to be compounding difficulties because of the different nature and understanding of learning outcomes/competencies and, particularly, their assessment.

- The language and vocabulary of qualifications frameworks often appear to be “shared” yet, because of the different contexts in which higher education alone is practised, and the differences within vocational education and training, these “shared” words may be “understood” and applied in quite different ways. Unfortunately, a “shared glossary” between higher education and vocational education and training does not yet appear to be a simple solution in practice.

This is not to suggest that it is not possible to compare, and where appropriate align, qualifications frameworks. It is argued however that for maximum lasting effectiveness it is important to acknowledge and address, though perhaps not necessarily “solve”, all incompatibilities at the outset.

There is widespread agreement that national qualifications frameworks are essential tools for establishing and securing shared expectations about the academic/practitioner standards associated with particular types of qualifications. Similarly, there is widespread agreement that aligning qualifications frameworks is an essential process in the better understanding and, ultimately, the mutual recognition of qualifications between different countries/regions.

Qualifications frameworks appear increasingly important in setting, assuring and comparing student achievement, between programmes, within and between institutions, and across countries and regions.

As this paper goes to press, ANQAHE is at an advanced stage in the development of a qualifications framework for higher education across Arab countries. The United Arab Emirates are at a late stage in the final development of a unified qualifications framework (for secondary and tertiary education and vocational education and training). The United Arab Emirates Qualifications Framework (UAEQF)\(^\text{17}\) is designed to set out the general comparative descriptions of different types of qualifications as well as establish a clear coding system for all qualification titles. The latter is an interesting development since it has the potential to provide a link between developing programmes to meet the specific the needs of the various employment sectors and also monitor progress in student achievement.

One particularly interesting feature of the proposed UAEQF is the introduction of “component” and “composite” awards. Designed with clear regulations about the level and extent of study required and the need for a clear coherence between the various components going to make up the award, these innovative developments potentially offer a lot to those who are seeking to link their learning (and accredited prior learning) to the needs of their careers and the priorities of their employers.

Both the United Arab Emirates and the wider ANQAHE qualifications frameworks are expected to be aligned against other major qualifications frameworks, including the European ones for lifelong learning and for higher education. This should provide an excellent platform to advance mutual understanding about the aims and achievements in higher education. It is anticipated that a shared approach to qualifications frameworks would greatly benefit collaboration in higher education across the Euro-Med.

\(^\text{17}\) The UAEQF is still in “late” draft form as of October 2011, but further details are available from the National Qualifications Authority, Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates.
Subject/Discipline Descirpts
Qualifications frameworks provide, in effect, a “skeleton” upon which the detail required by each subject or discipline area may be arranged. It is perhaps not surprising that qualifications frameworks are proving particularly useful in helping focus attention on the expectations/attainments of students studying in inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary areas, since they provide a common generic language for all.

The number and type and the extent of detail in associated subject/disciplinary statements, and the approach to the ways in which these are developed, presented and applied, has varied considerably even within individual countries yet alone between them. National and international initiatives provide extensive evidence and experience of what to do and how to do it, and also what not to do, which can be useful for those who seek to follow, particularly at national levels. The major challenge now is for regional and inter-regional agreements on subject/discipline details since it is in these that the “trust” required to support effective and improved mobility (and employment) may reside.

Two major international initiatives have been established in this area of seeking international agreement at subject/discipline level in higher education. The European Commission has provided substantial support for the Tuning project over many years, initially covering a few subjects just in Europe. Tuning has now expanded its “boundaries” and now has projects around the world. Conference discussion following a proposal to consider a Tuning Arabia proposal did not generate any strong support. Tuning is not without its problems; most notably it does not appear, despite considerable investment, to have made the sort of wide-ranging impact that might have been anticipated across and within the 4,000 or so higher education institutions within the Bologna Process. By contrast, although at a quite different scale, the UK academic communities have, since 1998, developed more than 70 Subject Benchmark Statements18 that are essential tools in all internal (higher education) quality assurance procedures, even though their use is not required legally. One key reason for the difference in impact may be that all UK higher education institutions are expected to be able to demonstrate that their internal quality assurance systems take account, at programme level, of the relevant Subject Benchmark Statements. By contrast, European quality assurance agencies, which were not widely involved in the development of Tuning, do not generally seem to have included Tuning statements amongst the essential requirements in their (external) quality assurance procedures or their expectations of higher education institution’s own internal quality assurance procedures.

More recently, the OECD has established its AHELO project.19 OECD describes how the “Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes will test what students in higher education know and can do upon graduation. More than a ranking, AHELO is a direct evaluation of student performance. It will provide data on the relevance and quality of teaching and learning in higher education. The test aims to be global and valid across diverse cultures, languages and different types of institutions.”

OECD proposes that AHELO will be a tool for:

- Universities: to assess and improve their teaching.
- Students: to make better choices in selecting institutions.
- Policy-makers: to make sure that the considerable amounts spent on higher education are spent well.
- Employers: to know if the skills of the graduates entering the job market match their needs.

---

18. UK Subject Benchmark Statements: despite their titles these documents are not “benchmarks” or “statements”! Rather, they are extended “essays” written and agreed by the relevant subject communities and used as “a reference point” to their subject/discipline area for the development, delivery and quality assurance of study programmes in it.
19. OECD AHELO project, www.oecd.org/document/22/0,3746,en_2649_39961291_40624662_1_1_1_1,00.html.
AHELO is still at a relatively early stage of development in terms of applicability to the broadest range of subject/discipline areas but it is undoubtedly making progress in those areas where it has started, most notably where there is a clear need to identify specific professional/technical knowledge and skills related to areas of (professionally) regulated employment. There remains however some scepticism about whether the AHELO approach is sufficiently and appropriately focused on the (different) characteristics and expectations associated with more general higher/tertiary education, and its quality assurance. As with other learning outcomes based comparisons the question remains – are the identified attributes absolute/threshold requirements or are they better considered as “reference points” for the application of “academic judgement” in student assessment within autonomous higher education institutions?

Codes of Practice for the Management of Higher Education and Its Quality Assurance

Several Codes of Practice or sets of Standards and Guidelines are currently used at national and international level, covering the requirements and expectations of:

- the internal quality assurance within higher education institutions;
- the various forms of external quality assurance of higher education institutions; and
- the external evaluation of those who undertake the external evaluation of higher education institutions.

Perhaps the most widely used are the European Standards and Guidelines\(^{20}\) which cover, in Sections 1 to 3, each of these three situations.

Similarly, other Codes of Practice have been developed by, for example, INQAAHE (at a global level), the ECA (for accreditation agencies in Europe) and other networks to meet the needs of regional collaboration. These provide a shared basis for discussions on the essential elements in evaluation. There remain however very few examples of the specific consideration of the quality assurance of mobility and employability within the published Codes of Practice.

In conference discussion there was strong support for a “mapping” of the existing Codes against the needs of higher education institutions and agencies within the Euro-Med. This was seen as a requisite to identifying the shared essentials in terms of principles, procedures and criteria, whilst recognising that individual countries/agencies/institutions are likely to have additional requirements above those shared by all.

Similarly, it was agreed that it was important to seek alignments of the more generic aspects of the quality assurance of higher education before attempting to reach agreements on detailed aspects such as mobility and employability. It was noted for example that whilst mobility may be regarded as a human right, and agreements may be reached concerning mobility aspects in education, there can be over-riding and often political factors that can determine the often-limited extent of mobility in practice.

---

Higher Education Quality for Mobility and Employability
The conference heard many endorsements for the range of added value(s) brought about through mobility in (higher) education. Examples included the mobility of both undergraduate and postgraduate students, of teaching and research staff, and also those involved in governance. Highlighted examples included the highly-successful international schemes, such as Erasmus, Erasmus Mundus and Tempus, as well as nationally-driven schemes. In all cases, there appeared to be considerable benefits to the participants although such benefits were often seen in the less tangible/quantifiable/assessable aspects of their development. Yet it was felt that it was such “intangibles” that were often the basis of improved “quality”, particularly in individuals, and certainly in terms of employability.

Quality assurance can cover, and lead to improvement in, the “technical” and practical aspects of mobility, including aspects related to learning. It was however less clear what the parameters/criteria were in other to assess and improve the quality of the more general beneficial consequences of mobility since these are, in part, generic and varied in their terms and with different priorities on an almost individual basis. In line with the conference decision to first seek the underlying principles for quality across the Euro-Med and then look to apply these in the specific areas of mobility and employability, there were various interventions proposing to address the extent to which a more general framework for agreement might first be considered. It would then be within such a generic framework that specific factors could be considered concerning mobility and its quality assurance. Whilst it was not possible to present them at the conference, the development of component and composite awards as envisaged within the UACEF may offer a model for much wider discussion. With wider agreement and acceptance such a scheme could have the potential to provide a system in which all forms of verified learning could be considered for validation/recognition across all of those countries/educational jurisdictions that are party to a wider agreement on education for mobility and employability/employment and, vice versa, the (demonstrated) benefits of employment and mobility contributing to the recognition of educational achievement.

Intriguingly, such a model might be reasonably straightforward to develop from an education/training perspective, so long as it was not overburdened with requirements for “detail”. Rather, it would need to be based on “mutual trust” in the judgements of the various quality assurance agencies in each of their validations of learning, rather than requiring some re-validation each time the learner/worker entered a new country/region/sector. It is however more likely that such a radical scheme would, at least in the first instance, find itself faced with some “political” hurdles, as well as some stakeholder scepticism. From 2004/2005 to 2009/2010, the Higher Education Funding Council for England supported the development of approximately 30 Lifelong Learning Networks. Ranging in scope and ambition these sought to promote mobility and employability within quality assured frameworks to support entry into, and progression within, higher education for non-traditional entrants. One of the largest, the Greater Manchester Strategic Alliance provided a network of nearly 30 “education providers” (including elite research universities, secondary and tertiary education colleges, and small private training organisations) that supported thousands of students/learners. A change of government was linked with what many regarded as a premature end to this potentially very important project supporting mobility and employability.

Different Types of Mobility May Require Different Quality Parameters and Quality Assurance

Higher education has, since its inception, been associated with mobility; mobility of students as they learn from different “masters” and mobility of academics as they move from one “seat of learning” to

22. HEFCE Life-long Learning Networks, www.hefce.ac.uk/widen/ln-funded.
another. Mobility is usually assumed to, and usually does, add value although it is not always clear what the parameters of that added value are or what criteria might be appropriate to assess it; “value” is after all subjective and any judgement may be dependent upon a particular but not general perspective.

Mobility within study programmes is increasingly prevalent at undergraduate level, perhaps less common in taught post-graduate programmes except where the programme is specifically designed and delivered as a “joint programme”, but is again increasingly common for researchers, whether at graduate, post-doctoral and/or faculty level.

All of the major aspects relating to mobility are carefully considered in Chapter 5 of The Contribution of Euro-Mediterranean Universities to Social Progress, including:

• Mobility and internationalisation.
• Student mobility and the implementation of common recognition systems of credits and diplomas.
• Mobility of academics-researchers.
• Mobility of non-academic staff.
• Implementation of specific mobility programmes.
• Language promotion and promotion of free academic circulation.
• Mobility between academia and the labour market.

Mobility in whatever form can however be expensive and where resources are limited it is important that these are used, and shown to be used, effectively. Quality assessment/assurance can provide evidence of effective use of resources and support the integration of the mobility achievements into the overall outcomes sought. At undergraduate level key aspects include the extent to which the study during any mobility/placement period is properly integrated into the overall study programme or whether, for example, it may (merely?) be a form of “academic tourism”. It may be interesting to note that from an academic perspective the integration of curricular material is critical, particularly where credits/grades may be combined, whereas for (subsequent, non-specialist) employment purposes many employers seem merely to be content with evidence that a student has demonstrated the ability to “adapt and operate successfully in different contexts.” For them it seems that the academic details are of less interest than the additional personal attributes gained from the experience.

Higher Education and Employability: Changing Expectations and Quality Assurance Needs

Higher education has always been regarded as a route into employment, sometimes as a direct result of the high level study of areas of professional practice and sometimes through the acquisition (through education) of knowledge and experience to apply certain principles to almost any area of work (the so-called generic skills associated with collation and analysis of information, problem solving, team working and leadership, etc). In recent years there has been an apparent shift, certainly in demand if not supply, for a greater emphasis on graduates who are ready to undertake employment in diverse and demanding employment sectors without the extensive “in house” training that used to characterise a graduate’s first year(s) in employment. Jobs tended to be retained for longer and the “pace” of transition was less frenetic than that apparently demanded by many of today’s employers. Study program-
mes are initiated and evolve to meet certain demands although it has been noted that, because of the delay between inception of a new programme and “production” of the first graduates, the demand that led to the programme has changed or in some cases even disappeared. This has resulted in some higher education institutions focusing on a particular type of provision and in the UK for example the emergence of the “business facing” universities. Similarly, consortia of higher education providers and employers are starting to emerge to meet a growing demand for continuing education and lifelong learning provision for employees.

There are increasing demands that higher education should relate more clearly and directly with employment, and that quality assurance should monitor the success of such. With so many variations, however, in the relationships between higher education and employment it is not a straightforward business to identify which programmes are necessarily successful in terms of employability, particularly in the short term.

With higher education becoming increasingly expensive there are also calls for some form of monitoring of “value for money”; again the quality assurance of such a measure is less than straightforward. Simple rankings based on, for example, the median salaries of graduates after some years might tell us something about those individuals, and even the amount of tax that they might pay, but it does not necessarily provide any relevant information of any benefits to society.

It was thus apparent to the conference that whilst employability is rightly seen as an increasingly important aspect of higher education its analysis, quality assurance and enhancement are far from straightforward. Monitoring overall employment is straightforward, requiring little more than surveys and an infrastructure for records retention, yet any classification/ranking of (types of) employment is inevitably going to be subjective, and dependent on the (different) priorities of (different) individuals and their (often governmental) sponsors. Delegates were agreed that it was essential to reach a shared understanding across the Euro-Med of what employability represents, or at least the characteristics it includes, before it would be possible to seek to quality assurance and enhance it.

Higher Education Awards and “Licences to Practice”

Some higher education that leads directly to “a licence to practice” in a (profession) where the public are particularly exposed to risk by poor practice (e.g. medicine, pharmacy, engineering, architecture, etc.). Such disciplines are generally covered by specific and addition quality assurance requirements related not only to knowledge and understanding but critical aspects of practice. They are generally heavily regulated at national and often international levels and the integration of such areas is outside of the scope of this more general approach to seeking ways to enhance mobility and employability through shared approaches to the quality assurance of higher education in the Euro-Med region.

This is not however to suggest that there are not significant “lessons” that can be learnt from the advances made in international recognition in regulated areas of study and practice; it will be important for any future work across the Euro-Med region to draw on the international examples and experiences already established in quality assurance and recognition in, for example, engineering, medicine and other disciplines.
The Culture of Quality: The Primary Need for Growth
An underlying theme throughout the conference was the need for an increase in the shared understanding of the value of demonstrable quality assurance in all aspects of (higher) education, and the extent to which this was dependent both on the “internal” approaches to quality within each higher education institution and the extent to which this needed to be monitored/demonstrated by some form of “external” evaluation. Educational culture and practices, particularly in higher education, are deep rooted yet the expectations associated with expansion and internationalisation demand changes. Finding the appropriate balance between autonomy and self-regulation of quality and external needs of demonstrably reliable information on quality is a challenge. Identifying and aligning a “quality culture” within higher education and its individual institutions with the needs of external stakeholders is of critical importance to the success of higher education.

**Same Words, Different Interpretations?**

“Quality culture” is a term that is now widely used and promoted within higher education. It is generally associated with the idea that, for the best quality, universities (and other forms of higher education institutions) should be autonomous and responsible for the primary quality assurance of the study programmes they offer. This has worked well for centuries but with a relatively small sector involving perhaps 5% of an age cohort. Despite massive expansion and changing expectations placed on higher education the promotion of a “quality culture” cannot (and must not) be argued against, but some perspectives may need to be refocused. There is now an explicit need for information that can demonstrate (publicly) that the quality culture is not only present but is operating effectively as well.

It was agreed that it is particularly important that those involved in seeking collaboration within the Euro-Med, in terms of enhancing quality in general and in relation to mobility and employability, are quite clear in what they understand (and do not understand) about “quality culture”, and that they identify the different perspectives and priorities held (perhaps implicitly) by each other.

**Acknowledging Differences Is Good**

Directly related to such an explicit awareness is an acknowledgement that there are and will be, even should continue to be, differences – in perspectives and priorities. An open acknowledgement that different countries, different groups of “actors”, and different institutions each have different priorities within the overall field of enhancement should provide a sound basis for real practical progress.

Conference participants noted their shared expectations, goals and needs, and the constraints they perceived, and there was a general view that whilst it was essential to retain local/national traditions and characteristics there would be undoubted benefits in moves to extend a Bologna-like process further into and across the Euro-Med.

Whilst acknowledging the value of the various different projects examining, for example, the similarities and differences in expectations, practices and cultures in higher education, there was
a concern about how the information gained from such might be extrapolated and applied more widely. How could specific information best inform the development of a general framework that, all were agreed, was needed to support enhancement (in all aspects, including mobility and employability)?

Many concluded that a wider overview and integration, and the development of a more extensive and inclusive vision, should be the basis of discussions to generate a “road map” to support the further development and any desirable further integration of higher education within the Euro-Med. It was widely thought that, as with the Bologna Process in Europe, a practical “bottom up” driver to wider goals could and probably would come through addressing shared needs.

Within the Bologna Process consortia of quality assurance agencies, of rectors’ conferences, and of students’ organisations have demonstrated that they can together bring about fundamental changes in a short period of time, where they are working towards shared, agreed and prioritised needs. With such a successful model as a driver, several initiatives have and are being undertaken through bi-, tri-, and multi-lateral projects involving national and regional quality assurance agencies working with universities and other higher education institutions, looking at the similarities (and differences) in needs for “quality” and how they are met. The outcomes of these projects must input into the development of a wider “road map” that will co-ordinate the further integrated development of the educational aspects of the Euro-Med.
Euro-Mediterranean Scenarios for Higher Education: “Golden Opportunities”, Conference Reflections and Recommendations
The conference concluded with the view that there are “golden opportunities” for the development of closer and effective links across the Euro-Med with regard to higher education. At a time of considerable change and uncertainty the role of education was seen as paramount in the future development of cohesive societies that are economically successful. Within a trans-national/global context a requirement for the demonstration of quality is the basis of the recognition of qualifications which in turn supports both mobility and employability. It is thus essential that there is high level (political) support at both strategic/planning and practical/implementation levels, and it was important that the conference heard that just such support is present.

Summary of Conference Reflections

A variety of issues and practicalities were raised during the conference discussions. In summary, these included:

- Regional integration is critically important. The goals for integration need to be identified more precisely.
- Mobility leads to economic benefits for all – countries and individuals – but there are issues including funding and return on investment, visas, etc.
- Employability needs to be defined more accurately – and not confused with employment – and there should be an emphasis on general skills, and might include education to enter entrepreneurship, the capacities for employment in the 21st century, encouragement for more dialogue between the education and employment sectors, and a recognition (and support) of the importance of lifelong learning.
- International quality standards should be applied to all including providers in both public and private higher education.
- A consensus needs to be taken within the southern countries but it would appear that there is potential in an extension of the Bologna Process as a strategic opportunity for enhancement.
- There is a real urgency! Others are developing approaches to benchmarking, international certification, ranking, etc.; it is essential that a Euro-Med dialogue is developed quickly while focuses on the specific and targeted needs within this governance, quality assurance, and financing should be considered together.
- The project should be (more) ambitious!... for the Mediterranean… but does need...
- The need for a clearer (and greater) vision – and with clear boundaries – in which smaller projects can be located, directed and integrated with an authoritative think tank established to draw upon a wider scope of “actors” who have demonstrated success in the related fields and must have a clear focus on integrated dissemination of strategy and practical progress in implementation – most likely through (trusted) networks of which there are several within the Euro-Med.
- There must be a greater focus on seeking political interest and support – but this should not be drawn into technical aspects.

Towards a Coherent Euro-Mediterranean Higher Education Area: Recommendations and Practical Steps to Support Them

To support what the conference saw as an essential process for further integration of activities concerned with higher education across the Euro-Med, a series of general recommendations have been developed, along with some proposals for practical activities to aid their implementation.
Recommendations
Recommendation 1
That relevant organisations concerned with higher education in the Euro-Med region establish an authoritative working group/think tank that represents the different stakeholder interests in the Euro-Med. This group will develop and publish a coherent strategic vision that best integrates the stakeholder’s different but inter-related activities and interests on quality in higher education. In addition to representatives from higher education itself, the group should also include those representing quality assurance agencies, and students and employers’ organisations. Importantly, the group should include authoritative political representatives.

Recommendation 2
That the strategy document for integration of interests in quality in higher education across the Euro-Med includes a "road map" and timeframe to prioritise the main goals, aims, and objectives.

Recommendation 3
That quality assurance agencies and their representative bodies continue to map and compare the similarities and differences in the purposes, procedures and criteria of their activities. Amongst the likely priorities of this work will be:

- A comparison of national and, where available, regional qualifications frameworks, and other reference points used to set and assess the academic standards of awards.
- A comparison of Codes of Practice (or equivalents) that guide the establishment and the evaluation of internal and external quality assurance systems.
- A series of “shadowing exercises” between quality assurance agencies to provide the basis for building trust in each other’s evaluation decisions and outcomes. The aim of such work will be to seek to move towards agreements concerned with mutual recognition, in sequence, of quality assurance procedures, quality assurance decisions, and awarded qualifications.

Recommendation 4
That, having established the shared bases of internal and external quality assurance in higher education across the Euro-Med, specific focus will be directed to matters concerned with mobility and employability. This will initially be concerned with the quality of mobility for postgraduate students with the aim of enhancing their experiences and outcomes.

Recommendation 5
In a wider but essential context, higher education institutions, their representative organisations and the respective quality assurance bodies across the Euro-Med should work more closely and effectively together, to seek means of mutual recognition of all forms of validated learning.

Recommendation 6
These same bodies should seek to ensure “political” recognition and support to identify and publicise the important benefits of both 1) mobility in advancing education/training and 2) education/training in strengthening the effectiveness of mobility, particularly where it is related to employability.