

UNICA STUDENTS CONFERENCE 2010 “EUROPE THROUGH STUDENTS’ EYES”

FORUM 8

High quality universities with low fees: is it possible? How to choose the best university to study at?

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Introduction

The importance of assuring University quality has been officially recognized by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) representatives since the Bologna declaration.

Nevertheless, European Community agrees that excellence in teaching and research should not be achieved without equal access to university study. Even in the presence of tuition fees, **equal opportunities** must be guaranteed.

The aim of this presentation is to describe European Higher Education Area quality approach in the context of **university funding**. Some proposals will be suggested about both issues.

The **choice of where to study**, or even the choice to not study at all, are deeply affected by considerations on both aspects.

Reference documents

1. “Bologna Declaration”, 1998, [\(link\)](#).
2. “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA”, ENQA 2005, [\(link\)](#).
3. “Delivering on the modernization agenda for universities: education research and innovation”, Communication of the European Commission, 2006, [\(link\)](#).
4. “Quality Procedures in the EHEA and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey”, ENQA 2007, [\(link\)](#).
5. “Ensuring the quality of the system” Salvaterra, Sticchi published on “E.H.E. Space, 10 years of Bologna process.” Ed. CIMEA, 2010, (Italian – [link](#))
6. “EC call for tenders for the design of University Ranking” [\(link\)](#)
7. “Times Higher Education – University Ranking”, 2010, [\(link\)](#).
8. “Tuition Fees in Europe 2007/08”, CESifo DICE Report, IFO, [\(link\)](#).

University Quality

Part 1 of 3

Quality

The definition of quality in the context of an organization involves three different aspects:

- **Input:** the resources provided to the organization such as human resources, structures and financial contexts.
- **Output:** the results of the organization.
- **Process:** the institutional activities that reach the results. It is made by governance structures, decisional process as well as operative procedures.

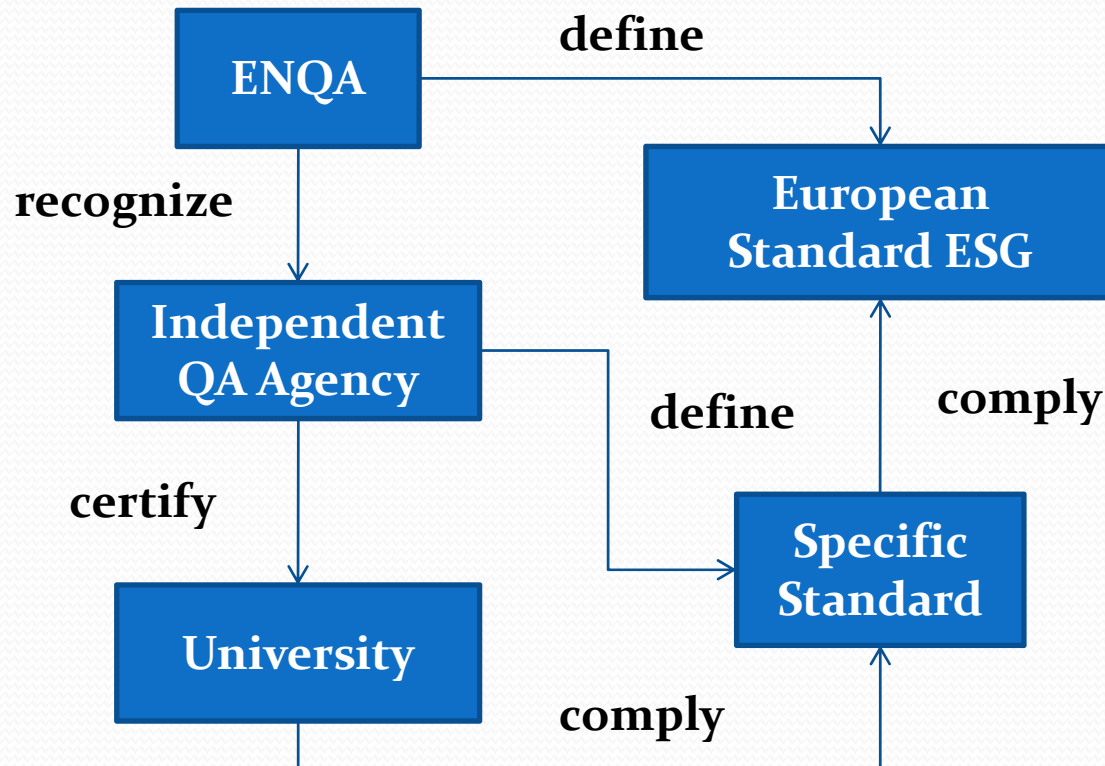
Depending on the context quality can be connected with the attributes of efficiency, effectiveness and excellence. Generally speaking it is the fulfillment of all the requirements and expectations (*ISO 9001 standard*).

Quality Assurance in University

Once the expected results of the organization have been defined, quality should be ensured. **Quality Assurance (QA)** is the program of systematic monitoring, evaluation and correction that ensures the suitability of the results.

- Before the **Bologna Process**, university quality was regulated and monitored only on a national level. Different standards and procedures made comparison of the results difficult.
- How to achieve convergence while maintaining national specificity?

University Quality: Bologna Process Approach



ENQA: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (2000).

ESG: European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (2005).

Issues: QA Agency independence

- **ESG** (European Standards and Guidelines) states that Quality Assurance agencies to be effective should be **independent** from governments, institutions, and national tradition.
- However, the independence of them can be questioned:
 - Most of them operate only on a national level (69%).
 - Does formal independence prevent pressure through informal channels?
- Nevertheless the survey shows that external stakeholders may sometimes influence the **recommendations** in reports (24%) or even the **conclusions** (22%).

Criticism to ESG system: Students

Other criticisms on the activities of QA Agency regards students' involvement:

- European Student's Union (ESU), a consultative member that represents students interest in the policy debate, complain the lack of participation of students to the process of decision making about quality standards. Only **60%** of the agencies have students in their boards.
- **20%** of the Quality Assurance agencies even do not consider institutions' assessments of students in their evaluations.

Reference: Quality Procedures in Quality Procedures in the EHEA and Beyond
– Second ENQA Survey, *Table 30*, [\(link\)](#).

University Rankings

Part 2 of 3

University Rankings

Another opportunity to evaluate university quality is given by the instrument of **University Rankings**.

- University rankings are lists of institutions sorted by a combination of factors like subjectively perceived “quality” and empirical data statistics.
- Widely used in the US, have significantly **affected colleges' applications** and admissions raising many criticisms.
- European Commission has published a *call for tenders*, for the design of a university ranking system (**U-Map** and **U-Multirank**) whose outcomes will be available in second half of 2011. [\(link\)](#)

Advantages of University Rankings

- Standards usually secure a minimum level of quality but fail to create incentive to **beat** that level.
- Rankings increase competitiveness across universities, faculties and programs and help students on **choosing the best university to study at**. They are easier to understand for a prospective student.
- The competition on quality can be the differentiating aspect in an environment of publicly funded universities with comparably low fees.

University Rankings – Some examples

While we wait for the development of an official EC ranking system, here are some example of rankings provided by independent institutions:

- **Times Higher Education** Ranking (previously in association with **Quacquarelli Symonds**).
- **Academic Ranking of World Universities** provided by **Shanghai Jiao Tong University**. [\(link\)](#)
- **Webometrics Ranking of World Universities** by the **Cybermetrics Lab**. (member of the Spanish Scientific Research Institute CSIC). [\(link\)](#)
- **Excellence Ranking** by **Centre for Higher Education Development (CHE)** [\(link\)](#).

University Rankings – Times Higher Education

Times Higher Education ranking features considered in **2010** were:

- **Teaching** — the learning environment (30%)
 - **Research** — volume, income and reputation (30%)
 - **Citations** — research influence (32.5%)
 - **Industry income** — innovation (2.5%)
 - **International mix** — staff and students (5%).
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- Results available at:
<http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/world-university-rankings/2010-2011/top-200.html>

Criticism to University Ranking

University Rankings received many critics since 90s. In US a movement against them grew in 2007 involving institutions, educators and students.

- Colleges outside of the **English speaking** world are disadvantaged (Shanghai Ranking first 19 positions in USA and UK).
- **Natural sciences** have greater impact than other subjects.
- Magazine's rankings are vastly influenced by **fame**, **wealth**, and **exclusivity**. Older and more established institutes in US usually attract more award winning professors. But this doesn't assure high quality teaching.

University Funding

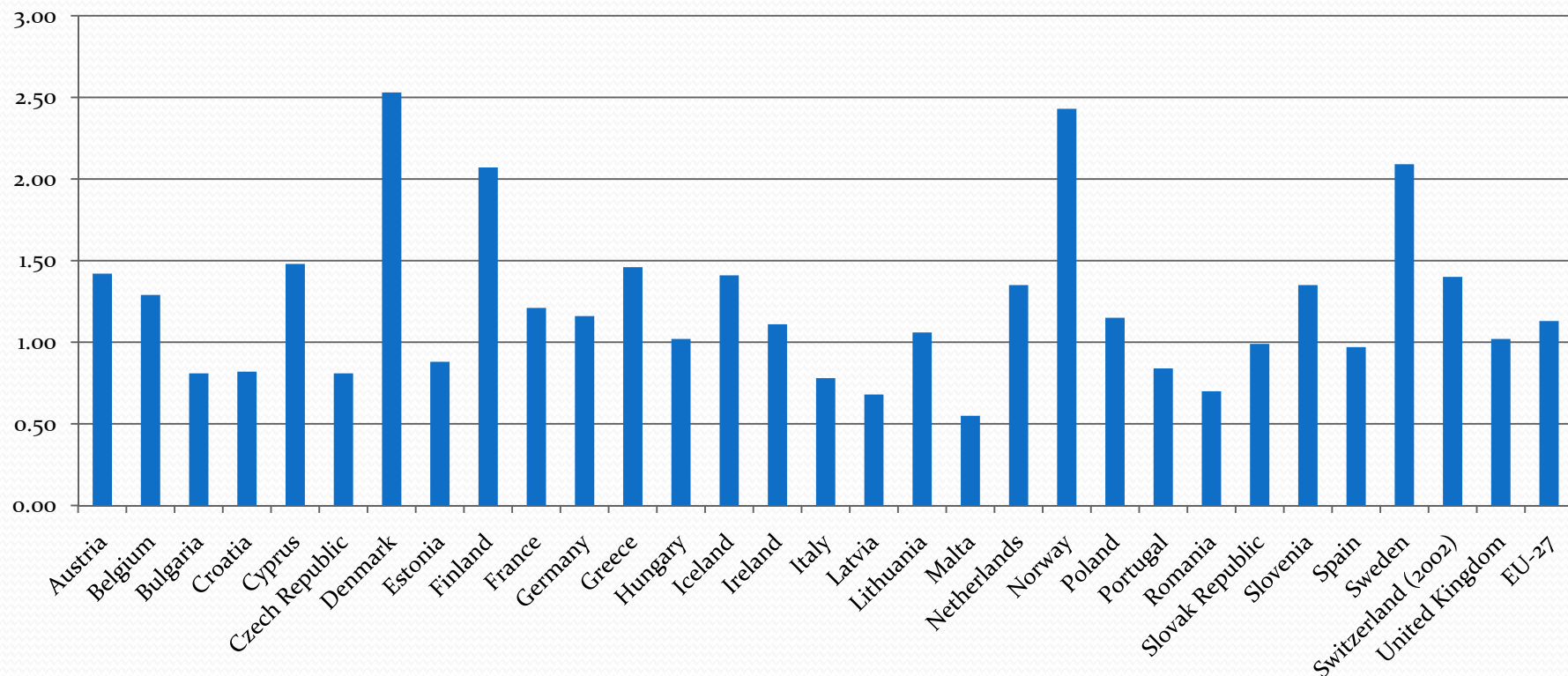
Part 3 of 3

The Role of University Funding

Both quality assurance and rankings are tied up in another, more controversial, issue: the role of **tuition fees**. Students in top ranked universities usually pay high fees.

- The problem of tuition fees cannot be considered without taking into account the wider aspect of **university funding**. A large portion of public university funding is given by governments and other parties, and this is true even for some private universities.
- Equal access to university is affected by **both fees and support scheme**. Current schemes have proven to be insufficient to ensure equal access, and this applies equally to free access university.

Public Funding of Higher Education in 2004 (% of GDP)



For Lisbon Strategy (2010), EU should also aim, within a decade, to devote at least **2% of GDP** (including both public and private funding) to higher education.

Tuition Fees in Public European Universities

Tuition fees in public European Universities show huge variation across countries, institutions, and single students. A report of the situation in 2007 is given by a survey of IFO conducted in 31 EHEA countries [\(link\)](#).

Fees Applied Undergraduate	Nations
No fees	Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Finland, France, Greece, Ireland, Malta, Norway, Poland, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden.
Mean less than or equal 500€ / year	Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Luxembourg, Portugal, Romania.
Mean greater than 500€ / year	Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Netherlands, Spain, Switzerland, United Kingdom, Russia.

The Funding Gap

Another issues that must be considered is **funding gap problem**: the difference in incomes between public and private universities.

- While there has been a **growth in student** enrolments, this has not been matched by a comparable growth in public funding.
- The average gap in resources for both research and education activities in EU25 compared with US is about **10.000€** per student per year.
- In 2003 EU25 devoted only **1.9% of GDP on R&D** compared with **2.6% of US** and **3.2% of Japan**.

Reference: “Delivering on the modernization agenda for universities: education research and innovation”, *Table 1 and page 4*, [\(link\)](#).

Conclusions and Proposals

High quality universities with low fees is an achievable target:

- The current approach to university quality should be improved, both by aiming at its **complete levelling** throughout Europe and by increasing the **independence** of Quality Assurance agencies.
- **Student participation** in the policy-making process should be explicitly required in the European Standards and Guidelines.
- An **increase in competitiveness** could raise the quality of the institutions. A new approach to **University Ranking** could deliver this result and help students in choosing the best place to study.

Conclusions and Proposals

The funding gap negatively affects university quality.

- University funding should be improved both by **raising the public expenditure** and basing it on actual, achieved **performances**.

In conclusion, to have high quality universities we need to **attract the best** academics and students. This can be achieved with a mix of **increased competition, more mobility and further financial resources**.



Thank you for your attention!

Do you have any questions?