Conclusions of the Conference „Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Vocational Education and Training", 11/12 May, University of Graz

One of the objectives of European policy is to make European education systems a worldwide acknowledged quality reference by 2010. Quality assurance is a central element in supporting European education and training systems to become more competitive and a world reference. Quality assurance is also an essential instrument to connect Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) – and to support the development of a common European Qualifications Framework (EQF) – linking the Bologna and Copenhagen Process.

Quality assurance was the subject of the two day conference in which 300 experts and stakeholders from all Member States, associated and candidate countries and high level representatives of the European Commission and Social Partners participated. Prior to the conference the European Commission and the Austrian Presidency commissioned a study which identified important interfaces in the field of quality assurance between VET and HE. This study and the Graz conference as a whole are intended to be a starting point for further initiatives and joint co-operation.

The participants at the conference acknowledged that VET and HE do not need to do the same work in the same way – but they have similar issues and can learn from each others experiences. Both have unique strengths and can make different contributions as partners.

Participants noted that quality assurance in both VET and HE operates on the basis of identifying guiding principles rather than prescriptive procedures. This approach is embedded in the cultures and tradition of both sectors. Participants also discussed the Common Principles for Quality Assurance (as identified in the EQF Consultation Document – see annex) and regard them as the basis for future joint actions.

In conclusion the conference identified common tasks and key recommendations for future co-operation.

Common Tasks and Key Recommendations

1. To promote and consolidate partnerships between VET and HE in quality assurance – including e.g. future peer learning activities

proposals from the conference:

topic	host country
responsibility of HE institutions in QA	Netherlands/NVAO
QM processes in HE institutions (quality audits)	Austria/AQA
examine QA in institutions/programmes that bridge VET and HE	
examine QA in VET and HE institutions/programmes	
data production as a combination of process-produced data and statistics, considering technical data reliability and data protection	maybe Sweden

choice of indicators – same indicators for VET and HE – how do different kinds of users respond to indicators?	
research oriented: how do institutions behave if budget allocation is related to indicators?	
how does assessment of non-formal and informal qualifications work in terms of outcomes?	
how to measure competences and to include them in statistical systems?	
planning mechanisms	Austria (reviewers: DK, NL)
indicators, evaluation and application of results	Austria (reviewers: DK, NL, CZ)

2. To promote Common Principles for Quality Assurance at European/national/regional/local/sectoral level and develop mechanisms for their implementation on a voluntary basis

3. To jointly support the building of pathways and links between qualifications at VET and HE e.g. through the EQF

4. To promote joint actions at national and European level – e.g. projects, products, conferences, seminars and to support learning networks

5. To ensure continuity of the process that started in Graz, contact points between ENQA and ENQA-VET will be established e.g. regular meetings, and mutual representation at both bodies General Assembly meetings

Annex: Extract of the EQF Consultation Document – Common Principles for quality assurance
(Brussels, 8.7.2005, SEC(2005) 957, pages 26/27 http://europa.eu.int/comm/education/policies/educ/eqf/index_en.html)

Common Principles for Quality Assurance in Education and Training

- QA is necessary to ensure accountability and improvement of education and training
- QA policies and procedures should cover all levels of education and training systems
- QA should be an integral part of the internal management of education and training institutions
- QA should include regular evaluation of institutions or programmes by external monitoring bodies or agencies
- QA external monitoring bodies or agencies should themselves be subject to regular review
- QA should include context, input, process and output dimensions, while giving emphasis to outputs and learning outcomes.
- QA systems should include:
    - o Clear and measurable objectives and standards
    - o Guidelines for implementation, including stakeholder involvement
    - o Appropriate resources
    - o Consistent evaluation methods, associating self-assessment and external review
    - o Feedback mechanisms and procedures for improvement
    - o Widely accessible evaluation results
- QA initiatives at international, national and regional level should be coordinated in order to ensure overview, coherence, synergy and system-wide analysis
- QA should be a cooperative process across levels, involving all relevant stakeholders, within countries and across Europe
- QA guidelines at European level may provide reference points for evaluations and peer-learning.