

Speech for the General Assembly of The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Good Morning, Mr Chairman of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Mr Acting Rector of the Technical University of Catalonia, Directors of the European quality agencies, Ladies and Gentlemen.

Although Catalan, the official language of Catalonia, is not an official European language, it *is* a language that represents a fully living culture, committed to the scientific and social development which is taking place in our universities. So I thought it would be appropriate to give my presentation in Catalan, in order to show another facet of the plural Europe we live in.

Firstly, allow me to thank you for choosing Barcelona as the host city for the sixth General Assembly of your Association. It is an honour for us to welcome the annual assembly of one of the four mainstays of consultation in the construction of the European Higher Education Area, along with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European Students' Union (ESU).

The origins of the university system in Catalonia go back to the year 1300, over seven centuries ago, when the first *estudi general*, or university, was founded in Catalonia. Since then universities have been created in several Catalan towns, which have had their ups and downs over the centuries. In the middle of the 1980s, Catalonia had 3 universities structured into various colleges. But following the transfer of authority in university matters from the Spanish to the Catalan Government, the current Catalan university system began to take shape and is now extended throughout the region.

Since 2003, Catalonia has had 12 universities, of which 7 are public, 4 private and 1 for distance learning. The Catalan university system offers 492 university degreesⁱ, taught by 16,500 lecturers to 227,000 students. Of these, 4,500 go to other universities under student mobility programmes, and some 7,500 come to study courses in Catalonia. 30,000 people graduate per yearⁱⁱ.

University policy in Catalonia, channelled through the Ministry of Innovation, Universities and Enterprise, for many years has been outstanding for, *inter alia*, its commitment to the quality of our Higher Education institutions, as well as to the construction of the European Higher Education Area, which pursues reinforcement of the intellectual, cultural, social, scientific and technological dimension in Europe. It is also noteworthy for its recognition of the central role played by Higher Education and the universities in promoting the mobility of citizens, of the demand for qualified people and of the general development of the continent. It is also highly aware of the increase in competitiveness and the European Higher Education system's capacity to attract in the international sphere, of the promotion of the European labour market in a changing context which demands life-long training, the adoption of an easily-comparable system of university qualifications, and of the need to confront the new challenges of the knowledge society and provide guarantees.

One of the most relevant examples where university policy in Catalonia has been specified is the creation in 1996 of the first quality agency in Spain, the Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Catalonia (AQU Catalunya). This Catalan Agency is the main vehicle for promoting and assessing quality in the Catalan university system and since its creation has excelled for its work in accordance with the values of quality, innovation, transparency, cooperation and exchange, and the construction of the European Higher Education Area.

Among the fruits of this work, we should highlight that in 2000 our agency became the first quality agency in Europe certified under standard ISO 9001, certification which is renewed and updated yearly.

That same year, it was a founder member of the ENQA. Then in 2008, once all the external assessment processes had been overcome, it was reaffirmed as a full member of that association, and currently sits on its Board of Directors. Also in 2008, it was one of the first three agencies to be included on the Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQUAR). This enabled an improvement in transparency and confidence with regard to Higher Education in Europe, as well as the cooperation of the main parties involved in the development of the EHEA.

The Catalan Agency underwent its first legal reform in 2003 in order to extend its scope and powers in the certification and accreditation of both institutions and university teachers. Following ENQA's external assessment of the Catalan Agency, the Government of Catalonia is presently working on producing a law for the Agency, which follows ENQA's recommendations, and improves the participation of the actors involved in government bodies and in the institution's assessment processes, amongst others.

The work of the European agencies has been, and is, very important for the construction of the European Higher Education Area. The extensive work done in recent years is of great social value. But now it is especially important to promote transparency in this work and inform the general public, the users. The general public must be aware of the quality of the educational institutions that operate in their region. And all possible mechanisms must be put to use to ensure the transparency of training programmes, monitoring systems and their accreditation.

Students from all over Europe, as well as those benefiting from mobility programmes, need first-hand information on the quality of the studies they wish to undertake. This is undoubtedly one of the main challenges facing the European quality agencies.

Information is vital to increasing the involvement of the various actors in the university community. Permit me to give the students a special mention on this point. Last year some Catalan students rallied against the European Higher Education Area. The Government of Catalonia will foster a variety of actions to improve students' information and participation, but of all these actions, I would like to highlight the specific training courses on university quality for university students, which the Catalan Agency has been promoting for some time.

These courses are a good practice which ought to be regularly incorporated at the universities. They are a vehicle for involving users more in the quality of the services provided by the universities. They are, thus, the routes to transparency and information that we have to take, and for which we must explain the quality of the university system and hold it accountable.

The aim of the Ministry of Innovation, Universities and Enterprise, which I head, is to provide Catalonia with

the necessary tools to take a qualitative step towards a knowledge-based economy, by combining within a ministry the skills of the principal sectors of the production economy with the great generators of knowledge and human capital, the universities. We are working to make our companies more competitive, for the excellence of our universities, for research and innovation as the driving force for the new model for the knowledge society and economy and, in short, so that a Catalonia fully integrated into the European Area becomes a more developed, prosperous and sovereign country.

The achievement of this objective will be partly due to the good work of the quality agencies and of course, it is irreversibly linked to the construction of the European Higher Education Area, which enables the quality and international competitiveness of European Higher Education to be reinforced, thus facilitating an increase in the mobility and employment of European graduates.

The aim of the Assembly that has brought us together today is to deal with the quality guarantee methods in university teaching that need to be implemented in the coming decade, especially those which are dedicated to evaluating the aims of learning and the achievement of the academic, professional and personal skills of future graduates. I hope that the work done in the next day-and-a-half will be very fruitful and that the conclusions reached contribute to making the European Higher Education Area a reality. Welcome to you all.

Thank you very much.

¹ List of qualifications / education centres provided by the system 2009-2010.

ⁱⁱ Data corresponding to the 2008/2009 academic year.