

Evidence from the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education: the Education Select Committee's inquiry into the impact of exiting the European Union on higher education

November 2016

Introduction

1 The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the independent body that monitors and advises on quality in UK higher education. Founded in 1997, our mission is to safeguard standards and improve the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered in the world.

2 We were a founding member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), which works to promote cooperation and good practice in our field within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and we continue to be an active participant. In 2012, we became the first member agency to be judged to meet all the European standards for quality assurance agencies, which have been approved by ministers from EHEA members, including from the UK and Scottish Governments.

3 The UK's exit from the European Union will have a number of effects on all walks of public life. We know that universities and other higher education providers will be keenly watching a range of areas, such as the potential threat to research funding, or the potential for students' experiences of higher education in the UK to lose their richness and international outlook if enrolments of EU and international students fall.

4 This submission focuses on two aspects that could have a particular impact on higher education quality:

- the rise of UK higher education provision in EU countries, and universities considering branch campuses in EU states
- the EHEA, and why the UK should remain a member.

UK universities operating in EU member states

5 UK universities setting up in other countries is nothing new. It is known as transnational education, where education that is recognised in one country is delivered, in full or in part, in another country.

6 In 2014-15, 663,915 students based outside of the UK were working towards a UK higher education qualification. Of those, 75,280 (11 per cent) were based in other EU countries, while 20,745 (three per cent) were from non-EU countries in Europe.¹

7 QAA has long reviewed UK transnational education, within the EU (most recently in Greece and Cyprus), and beyond the EU. From September this year, we entered into a formal contract with the four UK higher education funding bodies for the future conduct of transnational education review.

¹ All figures from the HESA Aggregate Offshore Record (2014-15)

8 Following the referendum result, sources including the BBC² and the Guardian³ reported that some UK universities fearing a 'hard Brexit' were exploring branch campuses in EU member states (a form of transnational education) speculating that this could mitigate the risk of losing EU research funding. This could mean an increase to the scale and nature of UK transnational education delivered, and therefore the scale and nature of both QAA and the funding bodies' quality review response.

9 Because of this potential increase of UK provision across Europe, it is crucial that the UK remains part of the EHEA (see below). This, along with QAA's continued involvement with ENQA, facilitates the quality assurance of UK higher education delivered in the EHEA, ensuring that this provision meets the standard required of a UK-recognised qualification, protecting the hard-won reputation of UK higher education.

The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Bologna Process

10 The EHEA comprises 48 countries from Europe and beyond. It stemmed from the Bologna Process, an intergovernmental agreement between European countries signed in 1998. The UK was one of the original signatories. The Bologna Process was established to provide greater comparability and compatibility between the higher education systems of individual European countries.

11 In the context of the continued global outlook of higher education, the Bologna Process also aims to support greater recognition of degrees and other higher education qualifications internationally, and to strengthen the global competitiveness and reputation of higher education in the EHEA.

12 As preparations continue for the UK's exit from the European Union over the next two years and beyond, there is a risk that the benefits of the EHEA are lost in complex negotiations. Membership of the EHEA is not connected to membership of the European Union, and the continuation of the UK's membership will not impact upon Brexit negotiations. Similarly, membership of the European Union does not confer any special status or relationship within EHEA. Because of this, a reaffirmation by the Government of the continued commitment of the UK to the EHEA and the Bologna Process would be a powerful statement of intent in a time of uncertainty.

Why the UK must retain its membership of the EHEA

13 The UK's membership of the EHEA and continued participation in the Bologna Process ensures influence on policy decisions across the wider European area. In light of the referendum result, this is particularly important in ensuring the comparability of UK higher education with European systems. It also strengthens the competitive position of UK providers in relation to competitors in other European countries.

14 Given recent changes to the approaches to quality assurance in the UK,⁴ it is important that these reforms continue to be recognised as underpinning the quality of UK higher education by other jurisdictions. Our continued membership of the EHEA, and participation in Bologna, means that the UK is an active participant in the European systems

² Brexit: UK universities consider EU branches (23 September 2016)
<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-37451392>

³ UK universities draw up plans for EU campuses ahead of Brexit (22 September 2016)
<https://www.theguardian.com/education/2016/sep/22/uk-universities-mull-eu-campus-in-new-era-of-uncertainty>

⁴ More information on the changes in England can be found on the HEFCE website:
<http://www.hefce.ac.uk/reg/QualityAssessment/>

that ensure comparability, and can demonstrate how the reformed quality system meets European expectations. This is vital for the reputation of the UK sector if it is to continue to be attractive to students from across the world.

15 Decisions made through the Bologna Process have implications for UK higher education providers, whether or not the UK participates in the EHEA. It is, therefore, to the UK's advantage to continue to participate in and actively influence Bologna decisions. By being within the Bologna Process, the UK sector is also better placed to understand and anticipate any changes which might have significant impact, for example on the recruitment of European students.

16 Bologna reforms have supported and enabled students and graduates to move within the EHEA – and increasingly, globally – with recognition of their qualifications and periods of study. Student mobility through the transfer of credit will also be important for degree apprenticeships, a key current policy focus for the UK Government. Mutual recognition of standards helps facilitate university partnerships across Europe and particularly benefits UK graduates who wish to pursue postgraduate study and research internationally.

17 Clear understanding and recognition of qualifications also benefits business, as employers can understand and trust the qualifications that job applicants hold. This could be particularly important for higher education awards that are professionally recognised, or support professional practice, such as engineering or medicine. Clarity about how UK higher education qualifications compare with qualifications from Europe and the rest of the world helps graduates of UK universities secure jobs internationally, and helps UK businesses benefit from the talents of the candidates from across Europe and beyond.

18 Current Bologna policy priorities, as set out in the Ministerial Communiqué from the last meeting in 2015,⁵ echo a number of the priorities of the UK Government and devolved administrations. They include: enhancing graduate employability; recognition of qualifications; enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; and fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives.

19 The Bologna Process and its progress since 1998 continue to attract significant attention from the wider international community. Respected and recognised pan-European approaches to quality assurance, underpinned by the Bologna Process, are important in securing wider international trust in national as well as transnational education, which benefits the fast growing number of UK universities now operating around the globe.

⁵ <http://www.ehea.info/cid101764/ministerial-conference-yerevan-2015.html>