



**European Association for  
Public Administration  
Accreditation**

## **Public Administration Education and Accreditation in Europe: a Balance**

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### **1. The Start**

#### **1.1 Erasmus and Bologna**

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It all started with the EU Erasmus programme. Universities began exchanging students for part of their study programme, and wanted to know more and better what was the quality of those other programmes at the universities they had exchange contracts with. Representatives of several public administration programmes throughout Europe met each other (with the financial support of the EU) in EPAN, the European Public Administration Network. They exchanged information about their programmes. Then in 2000 there was the famous meeting of the European ministers of education in Bologna where the first steps for the European quality framework were put.

#### **1.2 Leuven 1997**

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But before Bologna, in 1997 a few European public administration programmes, who met during the annual conference of the European Group of Public Administration (EGPA), took the initiative to discuss the possibility and desirability of an European system of accreditation of public administration programmes. The idea was inspired by the example of our US sister organisation NASPAA, who had a long standing system in place, but was not willing (at that time) to accredit non-US programmes. Some programmes from central and eastern Europe regularly visited these EGPA conferences, and so became aware of the EAPAA initiative and participated in the discussion.

In 1999 the European Association for Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA) was founded with the aim to realise a European system of accreditation specific for public administration programmes. About 15 programmes signed up as members, and the development of an accreditation system started. Luckily we could find a lot of expertise in NASPAA.

### 1.3 Toulouse 2010

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Since 2005 there have been discussions among EAPAA, EGPA and NISPAcee to strengthen the ties between EGPA and NISPAcee at the one hand and EAPAA at the other. This has resulted in a proposal for a change of statutes of EAPAA by which no longer the programmes are the EAPAA members, but instead EGPA and NISPAcee. This change also was important because in order to become registered in the European Quality Assurance Register, EAPAA has to cut the formal ties to the programmes it wants to accredit. Both EGPA and NISPAcee now nominate two members of the EAPAA board (and they jointly nominate a chair form 'abroad'). This change of statutes became effective at 1-1-2011.

## 2. Where Are We Now?

### 2.1 The Accreditation Business

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Like all large systems, the European accreditation system has become heavily bureaucratised. The amount of work needed for accreditation is huge. I have to say, also for EAPAA accreditation. Because national accreditation organisations in many countries have a monopoly, there is no pressure to reduce the burden for universities or programmes. And the 'accreditation of accreditors' has become a profession in itself. May be this is not a big problem for large government owned accreditation organisations, but for small peer-based organisations like EAPAA, this is a large burden, organisational as well as financial. One of my colleagues refers to this system as 'the accreditation mafia'. May be this is too strong, as I don't think there is an intent in this direction, but such systems have the 'natural' and almost irreversible tendency to grow and making itself indispensable.

Another 'problem' of the present situation is that the system more and more is based on distrust instead of trust. This is not specific for the accreditation arena because we see it in all areas: professionals cannot be trusted. I know professionals have greatly contributed to this image and earlier the freedom for professionals was too big, but now it is denying the worth of professionalism, and creating bureaucracy.

As public administration scholars we should investigate both these developments and 'invent' alternatives.

### 2.2 EASPA

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Because the European accreditation system is dominated by national accreditation systems, the room for discipline based accreditation is minimal. I come back to this later.

In this light I am very pleased that two years ago the European Alliance for Subject-Specific and Professional Accreditation & Quality Assurance (EASPA), was created. EAPAA was one of the founding members. We hope that this association will be able to create more understanding for discipline based quality assurance. Not all members of this organisation use accreditation as vehicle for improvement of educational quality. Certification and the use of specific quality labels are alternatives for accreditation and have the advantage that they don't double national accreditation as much as discipline-based accreditation does. We should look at the pro's and con's of such alternatives to see what could be the worth for the public administration discipline.

### 2.3 A Crisis in Public Administration Accreditation?

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So far I looked in the environment for answering the question “where are we now?”. But we should look inside our discipline as well. When we started EAPAA almost 15 years ago, we knew that the start would be difficult, but we hoped that after some time more and more programmes would join the initiative. To my sorrow, the increase of programmes is stagnating. There still are new programmes that join EAPAA, but at the same time we see programmes not applying for re-accreditation after their first 7 years. And also we see that programmes who are with us from the very beginning, still haven’t applied for accreditation for the first time.

It is not clear what is the explanation for this phenomenon, but it worries me a lot.

### 2.4 The Review of EAPAA by INQAAHE

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The last item I would like to mention in this “Where are we now?” is the coming review of EAPAA. EAPAA is trying to become registered in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). This is necessary because that is a requisite in many countries. Without such a registration we cannot accredit programmes for national purposes, and that means that programmes need double accreditation with all the accompanying costs in time and money. In September a review team composed by the International Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), will interview EAPAA’s stakeholders like programmes EAPAA accredit, organisations with whom EAPAA collaborates, and of whom EAPAA is member. Also the review team will speak to EAPAA’s Board and Accreditation Committee, and meet with persons who were member of EAPAA’s site visit teams. Based on the report of this review team first INQAAHE will decide if we satisfy INQAAHE’s requirements, and thereafter the report will be used to apply for registration in EQAR. So September will be a very busy and important month for EAPAA. I hope we fulfil all requirements, but that’s not sure, mainly because these requirements are designed for national accreditation agencies, and not for international ones. And they demand economic and organisational solid organisations with a large staff and budget. Peer-based accreditation and unpaid accreditors are seen as ‘suspicious’. Butchers who approve their own products. Again here is the mistrust I mentioned before.

## 3. The role of NISPAcee

### 3.1 NISPAcee’s rol in EAPAA

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Research was the most important issue for NISPAcee from the beginning. Rightly it was seen that improving the quality of the research at the central and eastern European universities would enhance the quality of public administration and the quality of public administration education as well. Although the importance of education was acknowledged, and NISPAcee members devote most of their time teaching, education as such was not a real item at NISPAcee’s annual conferences for a long time.

As said, in 1999 EAPAA was founded. Four programmes from the NISPAcee region from Poland (Bialystok), Slovak Republic (Matej Bel), Slovenia (Ljubljana), and Ukraine (NAPA) immediately became member of EAPAA with the purpose to compare their quality of education with the EAPAA standards, and to become accredited in due time. Also individual NISPAcee members became involved in EAPAA as member of site visit teams, the Accreditation Committee, and the Board. At that time there was no direct formal involvement of NISPAcee in EAPAA, although presentations about EAPAA were scheduled during the annual conferences, and the director of the NISPAcee secretariat was member of the EAPAA board.

In 2010 NISPAcee, together with EGPA, became the 'foster parent' of EAPAA, and so the promotion of quality in public administration education now is the joint responsibility of these three organisations.

So, the attention of NISPAcee for education has grown. There now is a Working Group on Public Administration Education, but the interest for this working group still is modest.

### **3.2 What NISPAcee Can Do More**

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Could NISPAcee do more? I think it can. Although, as said, the attention of NISPAcee for education has grown, it is not equally important as research yet. Also, quality assurance through accreditation is seen as something 'extra', for which programmes have to pay an extra fee. In my opinion, the EAPAA services for quality assurance should be an integral part of NISPAcee (and EGPA) membership, in order to express the importance of education. And it should be assumed that members are accredited. May be in the future programmes cannot become full member of NISPAcee without accreditation?

Furthermore, NISPAcee could stimulate more discussion and research on public administration education. For example, a discussion on public administration relevant competencies and learning outcomes is very important in my eyes.

## **4. The Need for Peer Review**

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Accreditation is a hot item in almost all European countries, and it asks for a lot of energy of all public administration programmes. However, it is foremost national accreditation that is important.

In most countries there are accreditation systems for degree programmes, at least for those programmes that are financed by the state and/or where students get grants or loans or guarantees for commercial loans. These quality assurance and accreditation processes focus mainly on quality management procedures, such as cyclical evaluation procedures, rules for involvement of stakeholders, strategy and mission documents, a.s.o.

In recent times the focus is shifting gradually towards the inclusion of learning outcomes in the quality assurance and accreditation processes. The relation of these learning outcomes with competences asked for by the fields of practice get full attention, also through the Bologna process.

Although the input from the disciplinary or professional side is assumed in the standard accreditation process used in all countries, there are no clear rules about how this input has to be realised. In many occasions of accreditation, the programmes to be accredited themselves are asked to nominate national or international scholars for site visit teams, with all dangers of not-totally unbiased opinions.

It is my opinion that a next step in the Bologna process should be that the input from the field or discipline is guaranteed as well.

Why should the academics be involved in quality assurance in another role than the 'object of investigation'? Can they be trusted to evaluate critically their own fellow academicians?

1. The quality of education is based largely on the content of the programme. And the content is discipline bound.
2. Peers should be involved because only they (and not quality experts) know the state of the art in the development of the discipline or profession, especially through personal involvement in research.
3. Peers should be involved because academic education is more than 'training skills that practitioners think are relevant', as many educational experts want us to believe.
4. Peers can be trusted when there is a balance between near (the same discipline) and not too close (not the same country)
5. For a relatively small discipline like ours, the community of knowledge is international. This is especially true for smaller countries. So this international community should be involved in accreditation.

## **5. The Future**

### **5.1 Accredit or Perish**

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The cry 'publish or perish' is well known in academia. More and more it will be accompanied by a new cry: 'accredit or perish'. This is already true on national level because most programmes cannot exist without government money, for which national accreditation is necessary. But I hope that this national accreditation will be supplemented by disciplinary accreditation, and that all self-respecting programmes will go for disciplinary accreditation. Even if they will not pass the first time, it is better than not trying. For organisations like NISPAcee, EGPA and EAPAA there is the command to make sure that disciplinary accreditation is not too big a burden, money and time-wise. Integration of national and disciplinary accreditation probably is the best way to realise this.

### **5.2 EAPAA's Viability**

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EAPAA is nothing without the programmes it accredits. If accreditation by peers from the discipline is not seen as valuable by many, if not most, public administration programmes in Europe, than EAPAA should stop. But that's not the intention with which EAPAA was started and supported by many of you. But EAPAA only is viable when much more programmes are applying for accreditation.

### 5.3 New Leadership

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This is my last NISPAcee conference. I have decided to step down, so others will take over my responsibilities. Prof. Taco Brandsen (Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands) is chosen to be the new EAPAA secretary-general.

He is well known among NISPAcee members, so it will not be difficult for him to blend in. In the coming years also the EAPAA chair (Prof. Christoph Reichard) and the EAPAA Accreditation Committee chair (Prof. Arthur Ringeling) will step down. Their successors are not known yet.

Under this new leadership I hope EAPAA will flourish even better than it is now. And I hope that all NISPAcee members will support EAPAA by applying for accreditation.

I would like to end with thanking NISPAcee, and especially Ludmila and her staff. For all the years of support, collaboration and friendship. Without you EAPAA wouldn't be what it is now, and it wouldn't be so much fun for me personally. Thank you very much!.