

## CHALLENGES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA

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### **Abstract**

*Rapid changes in higher education require critical analysis of quality assurance tools and changes in their development and implementation. Quality assurance must respond to the changing higher education landscape in order not to become an obstacle for innovation and modernisation. This paper draws attention to recent changes in the European Quality Assurance Area as well as presents challenges that are linked to adapting to the fast-changing environment, also to demonstrating the impact of the agencies' work, thus, justifying the benefits of external quality assurance.*

**Keywords:** *Quality assurance, higher education, Bologna process.*

### **Introduction**

Higher education play a key role in countries' response to globalization, but at the same time becoming itself more and more globalised. 20 years ago European countries agreed on a common vision of a European Higher Education Area that would allow European students and graduates to be able to move easily from one country to another with full recognition of qualifications and periods of study, and access freely the European labour market. It was expected that Higher Education in the European region would increase its international competitiveness, as well as improve cooperation with HE in other regions of the world.

### **Changes in Higher Education**

In the last quarter of the 20th century serious concerns with quality assurance in higher education emerged, on the part of both the institutions themselves and society in general. Higher education has experienced noticeable changes, some particularly relevant aspects were:

- The massification of access, which resulted in the exponential growth in higher education over the world, the diversification of provision of study programmes, the diversification of institutions as a consequence of the fast development of private sectors, as well as the new expectations of the public with regard to higher education in enhancing the capacity of students and staff to be active and responsible citizens in the context of the knowledge society.
- Internationalization, which brought a need of fair recognition of qualifications, in order to facilitate the transferability of academic and professional qualifications, in face of an increased mobility of students and graduates. This question is particularly relevant for the European Union, as a fundamental condition for ensuring the right to free mobility and support of common job market.
- Greater awareness of demand for quality. Higher education institutions were faced with new challenges and expectations, namely the problem of how to preserve quality in the

face of massive and sometimes uncontrolled growth, which made it necessary to consider quality from a more institutional perspective.

### **The Bologna process**

The Bologna Process and the Lisbon Strategy are the main vehicles or frameworks guiding the European response to globalisation in higher education.

Historically, quality assurance in most cases has been a responsibility of the ministry in charge of education. The massification of higher education in the 1980s and 1990s, together with the increasing internationalization led to the need to ensure quality of higher education in the changing environment in internationally acceptable and trustworthy ways. With increased student mobility, Higher Education Institutions needed to find ways to demonstrate, also outside of their national context, that they provided high quality education, and that this was certified in a reliable way. (ENQA, 2010). There was a kind of wave of new quality assurance bodies established in the 1990s, with organizations being founded at almost the same time in the North-Western (Denmark, France, the Netherlands, and the UK established independent QA agencies) and Central-Eastern (Austria, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, etc.) parts of Europe.

About the same time the Bologna Process (formal beginning in 1999 with signing Bologna Declaration) has brought about a number of important reforms in European higher education. This was an important bottom-up initiative towards system convergence with a view to enhancing the international competitiveness of European higher education. The Bologna Process represents the totality of commitments freely taken by each signatory country (48 countries full members as of 2018) to reform its own higher education system in order to create overall convergence at European level, as a way to enhance international/global competitiveness. Its non-binding character was a crucial facilitator, given the need to overcome reluctance in Europe towards standardisation and harmonisation (Wende, 2009). Bologna process started as an intergovernmental initiative of four ministers, but over the past decade the agenda of the Bologna Process has evolved considerably through its biannual conferences. At each Bologna conference, new action lines were added, new aspects highlighted, or the phrasing of existing fields of action adjusted. Reforms have included the convergence of degree structures, the establishment of a common credit transfer and accumulation system, and the use of a Diploma Supplement for the purpose of transparency, mobility and facilitated recognition of degrees and periods of study.

### **Quality assurance in the European context**

Quality assurance in the European context has evolved in parallel with the Bologna Process. In this area huge advances have been made in terms of both policy and implementation since 1999. A major milestone in this development was the statement in the 2003 Berlin Ministerial communiqué that “the primary responsibility for quality assurance lies within each higher education institution itself, and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system” (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). Another important milestone has been the adoption of a common framework for quality assurance across Europe, namely the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (the ESG) in 2005.

Even having shared Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance European countries have different approaches to quality assurance. The meaning of quality assurance may vary depending on the field of activity. Different countries have evolved QA models for their higher education systems as necessitated by their unique national contexts. But nevertheless there lies a common unifying thread that unites together the basic concepts (ESG 2015):

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;

- Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;
- Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

### **Changes in European Quality Assurance**

Rapid changes in higher education require critical analysis of quality assurance tools and changes in their development and implementation. Quality assurance must respond to the changing higher education landscape in order not to become an obstacle for innovation and modernisation. The economic downturn following 2008 also caused some countries to look at merging agencies with different functions relating to qualifications and quality assurance. That was a case in Ireland where QQI is now overlooking quality assurance of universities and institutes of technology as well as acts as ENIC/NARIC centre; AQ Austria is now responsible for evaluation of public universities, *fachschule* and private universities; Latvian AIC acts as ENIC/NARIC office and Quality assurance agency. One could also observe widening of responsibilities of the agencies in Europe:

- FINEEC (Finland) supervises education from early childhood to higher education;
- QQI (Ireland) evaluates quality of higher education, further education (VET) and is responsible for National qualification framework and qualification's recognition;
- NOKUT (Norway) assesses higher education, Vocational education and training and acts as ENIC/NARIC;
- EKKA (Estonia) along with higher education institutions reviews providers of Vocational education and training.

There have been advantages and disadvantages of such mergers, but it has permitted some of the smaller member states to create agencies with multiple functions that have a critical mass of staff in relation to educational functions. In some cases, new functions have provided synergies and allowed for multi-actor involvement of stakeholders. At the same time, such changes do bring potential challenges especially to agencies that have been allocated a number of functions by ministries, such that could possibly compromise their independence as external quality assurance agencies operating in line with ESG. Therefore, each time an agency undergoes such changes, the issue of independence should be re-negotiated.

The issue of independence of Quality assurance agencies is high on the agenda since establishment of ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) and adoption of ESG. The Standard requires that "Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence". The guideline further clarifies the most important points for considering the independence of an agency:

- Organisational independence, demonstrated by official documentation that stipulates the independence of the agency's work from third parties, such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations;
- Operational independence: the definition and operation of the agency's procedures and methods as well as the nomination and appointment of external experts are undertaken independently from third parties such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholders;
- Independence of formal outcomes: while experts from relevant stakeholder backgrounds, particularly students, take part in quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

It is still a question whether Quality assurance agencies are fully independent from the governments or other state institutions? In most countries QA Agencies are established by the Governments or the Parliament or Ministries responsible for education. The overall framework of quality assurance are designed and approved by the authorities. How (is) the opinion of the Agencies are taken into consideration in these cases – it is up to the politicians. Indications are that governments are seeking to have a far stronger influence than they had in the past. Former President of ENQA Achim Hopbach during the Member's Forum in Oslo expressed a view that Ministries right now are lacking tools for steering the higher education systems and they intend to use quality assurance for that purpose; and less and less it is about quality, but more and more about steering the higher education system. No longer is it easy for QA Agencies to implement the double mission of quality assurance – accountability and enhancement, because the trust in higher education institutions is diminishing and the demand of meeting minimum quality standards is growing (requirements – such as graduation rates or the number of students who find jobs in their fields immediately after graduation).

There have also been some developments whereby member states have left the responsibility of the organisation of external QA processes to agencies and the formal decisions are taken by separate bodies, such as accreditation councils (a case of Denmark accreditation decisions are taken by Danish Accreditation Council, in Switzerland – by Swiss accreditation council, in Netherlands-Flanders – final word by NVAO).

During the last several years it is possible to identify movement from programme accreditation (only) to a mixture of institutional accreditation and some programme audits/accreditations. Institutional assessments may carry lower costs and less 'administrative burden' than programme assessments, but audits or quality assurance system accreditations might give HEIs more institutional autonomy, they require effective internal quality assurance systems and a 'quality culture' within HEIs.

Another tendency - movement to more risk-based quality assurance. A "one size fits all" approach is not seen as appropriate for a diverse sector of higher education. The method involves more consecutive monitoring of performance of higher education institutions and direct attention to where it is most needed, focussing effort where it will have the most benefit in the development, enhancement and protection of quality.

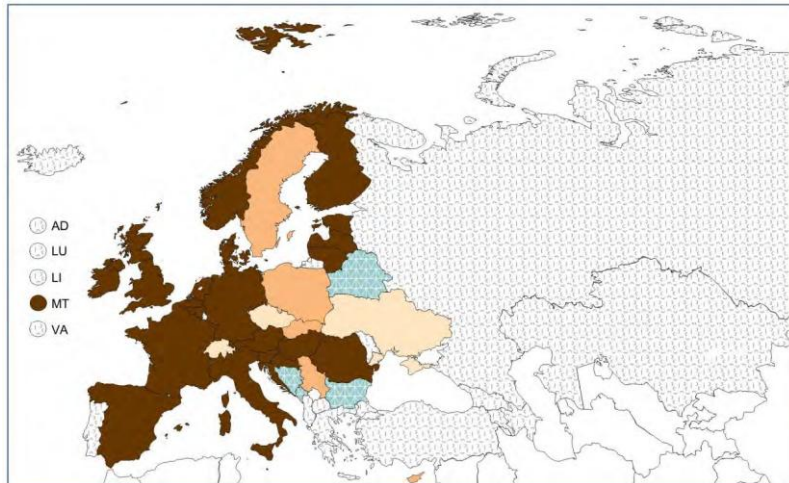
### **Challenges for Quality Assurance in implementing ESG 2015**

The majority of European quality assurance agencies are full members of ENQA and registered on EQAR. In February 2018, 50 quality assurance agencies from 28 EU countries were full ENQA members, while 46 agencies from 24 EU countries were listed in EQAR. As the main criteria for full membership is successful review by ENQA expert panel, it could be said that these agencies comply with the ESG. It also means that many national legal frameworks take into consideration the ESG.

The ESG 2015 take account of the developments in European higher education since 2005, such as the shift to student-centred learning and the need for flexible learning paths and the recognition of competencies gained outside formal education. In addition, the increased internationalisation of higher education, the spread of digital learning, and new forms of delivery are listed as important developments influencing the quality assurance of higher education. The ESG 2015 also make reference to other tools at the European level that contribute to transparency and trust in higher education, such as the qualifications frameworks, the ECTS, and the diploma supplement (EQUIP, 2016).

Quality assurance agencies across Europe are facing many challenges that are linked to adapting to the fast-changing higher education landscape, but also to demonstrating impact of the agencies' work, justifying thus the benefits of external quality assurance (EP, 2015).

The most remarkable development in quality assurance in the EHEA has been to give student voice on quality of their higher education institution and to actively involve them in quality assurance. In the draft of the Bologna Process Implementation Report in 2018, information has been gathered from national student unions on the level and frequency of involvement of students in external quality assurance activities (BFG, 2018).



*Source: draft version of Bologna follow up report, 2018*

***Figure 1. ESU perception of student participation in external quality assurance, 2016/17***

The ESG, the key regulatory instrument in the European Higher Education Area, explicitly mention that students as internal stakeholders are jointly responsible for internal QA (standard 1.1), that they and other stakeholders should be involved in designing and continuous improvement of QA methodologies (ESG, 2015, Part 2), and that quality assurance agencies and accreditation bodies need to ensure involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work (ESG, 2015, Part 3).

But even with the clear highlight in ESG about student involvement in quality assurance only 14 countries out of 48 fully guarantee that students participate as full members in all quality assurance reviews at five levels:

- in governance structures of national quality assurance agencies
- in external review teams
- in the preparation of self-evaluation reports
- in the decision making process for external reviews
- in follow-up procedures

There is still considerable improvement to be done to meet the Bologna Process commitment to full student engagement.

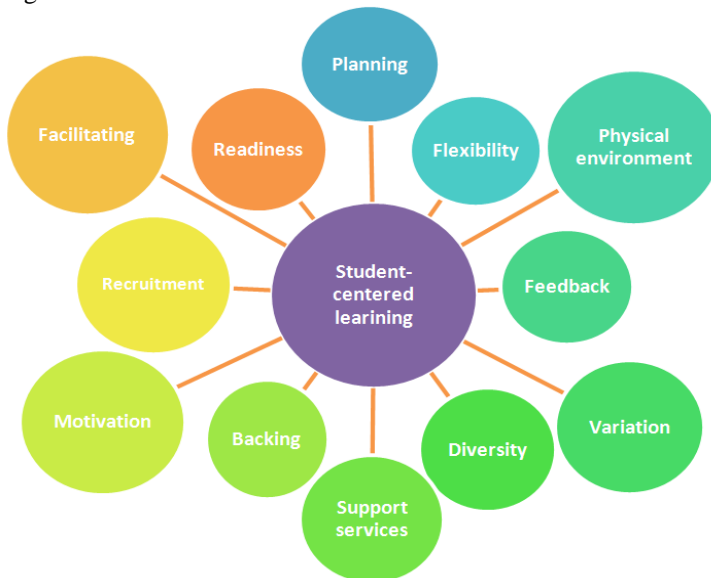
More recently, the Bologna Process has brought about a shift from a focus on teaching and input measures to a focus on students and their learning outcomes. This is reflected also in the revised version of the ESG adopted in 2015. Consequently, many institutions have started to explore and use new pedagogical methods that are more student-centered, and to implement competence-based approaches to teaching and learning. The new approach has given the external quality assurance agencies a challenge for assessing how higher education institutions

have adjusted the requirements of the ESG 1.3. “Student-centered learning, teaching and assessment”.

The Danish quality assurance agency has carried out thematic analysis (Warming, Frydensberg, 2017) and discovered that higher education institutions have a very different understanding of the Student-centered learning, such as:

- Variation in educational and didactic learning styles;
- The teacher’s role in facilitation and planning the learning process;
- Flexibility with respect to the student’s study path;
- The student’s motivation with respect to learning and actively participating in the learning situation;
- Providing feedback on the student’s ongoing academic development and performance in exam situations;
- Accommodating diversity across the student community;
- Backing from heads of institutions for the learning style;
- The student’s readiness to engage in independent reflection and action;
- An offer of support services for students where private/personal factors present an obstacle to learning;
- Recruitment of teachers with the appropriate educational and didactic skills and a passion for the institution’s teaching style;
- The right physical environment for learning which supports e.g. group work and encourages students to interact with teachers.

The figure below illustrates the many meanings which are associated with the Student-centered learning.



In order for Quality assurance agencies to evaluate whether the higher education institutions ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach, common understanding of this approach should be discussed and agreed by all stakeholders. This is a challenge that quality assurance agencies should address in the coming years.

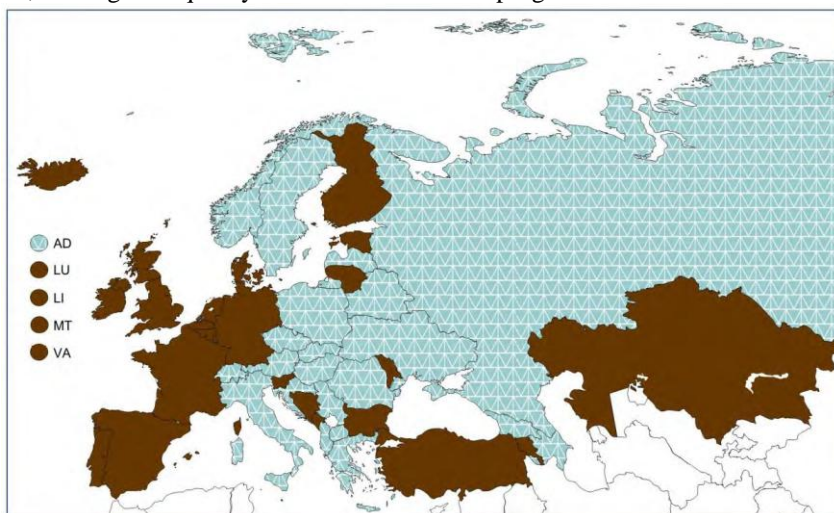
Key developments in European quality assurance in recent years include a stronger focus on internal quality assurance, more stakeholder engagement and further internationalisation of quality assurance. Three dimensions of internationalization of quality assurance could be highlighted:

- Cross-border quality assurance;
- Quality assurance of cross-border higher education /transnational education;
- Quality assurance of joint programmes.

Cross-border QA benefits the openness of the European higher education system but depends on national legislation that defines under which conditions agencies can provide formally recognised quality assurance services beyond their own territory. Cross-border QA often takes place in parallel to the obligatory, national external quality assurance arrangements due to a lack of a legal framework allowing the recognition of such procedures. But only 13 EHEA systems recognise cross-border evaluation/accreditation by an EQAR-registered agency as part of the obligatory, national external quality assurance system.

Quality assurance agencies are also interested in internationalisation of their activities by involving international experts in quality reviews or as members of the Agencies' Boards. This kind of internationalization provides not only more objectivity to the evaluation process, but also sharing of best experiences. In some countries the main obstacle for such internationalization became the language of the process – higher education institutions are not willing to produce self-evaluation documents in English or other working language. And this is rather surprising knowing the aspiration of the most of European countries to increase mobility of students and lecturers as well as provision of studies in foreign languages.

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is still finding its way to the national systems of higher education. The European Approach was adopted by Ministers throughout the continent at the Yerevan Conference in 2015 and is designed to recognise the particular value of cooperation across national borders in joint programmes, and also to rationalise the process of quality assurance for these programmes. In 10 EHEA countries, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is available to all higher education institutions. In 23 further countries, it is not permitted by their legislative framework, although the quality assurance is based on programme-level accreditation.



*Source: draft version of Bologna follow up report, 2018*

**Figure 2. Countries allowing the European Approach to Quality Assurance, 2016/17**

In order for this single European process to be possible, governments have to accepted the approach and change their own national requirements.

### **Conclusions**

Agencies need to develop more sustainable systems focusing both on minimum thresholds and continuous quality enhancement. This is especially important in the context of changing landscape of higher education and national policies. Quality assurance needs to engage all stakeholders and empower the students and staff as essential actors.

Reviewed ESG asks for new relations and balances between Internal quality assurance and External quality assurance where more and more higher education institutions take their own responsibility.

National policies should take into account the international dimension and open borders to necessary transparency and international recognition built on trust.

Quality assurance should be open for new challenges that will be brought by the fourth industrial revolution that is characterized by a range of new technologies that are fusing the physical, digital and biological worlds, impacting all disciplines, economies and industries, and even challenging ideas about what it means to be human.

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