Approaches to external quality assurance in Europe – priorities and trends

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Content

• Some uncomfortable truth about QA and why so
• Diversity as inseparable from history
• Comonalities in QA
• Internationalisation of quality assurance
Quality assurance is an instrument, not a goal in itself.

Before asking “how?” and “what?” we should know “why?” and “for what purpose?”
The purposes of higher education?

- Preparation for sustainable employment;
- Preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
- Personal development;
- The development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base.

Public authorities should have exclusive responsibility for the provision of the framework within which higher education and research is conducted. National qualifications frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms should be in accordance with the principles of academic freedom and institutional autonomy and take due account of the basic values and variety of purposes of higher education.

(Recommendation CM/Rec(2007)6 of the Committee of Ministers to member states of the Council of Europe on the public responsibility for higher education and research)
There were various historical reasons to develop national / regional / European quality assurance schemes in Europe (1)

“It is important to note that quality assurance does not exist in a vacuum and is not independent of changes in things such as the structure of the sector, the evaluation and funding of research, the funding of student education, or university governance.”

There were various historical reasons to develop national / regional / European quality assurance schemes in Europe (2)

One of the first external quality assurance agencies established – CTI (in French - Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur) in 1934.

CNE (Comité national d'évaluation des établissements publics à caractère scientifique, culturel et professionnel) which engaged in institutional reviews of research and educational institutions founded in 1985.

In Czech Republic, the Accreditation Commission was formed in 1990.

In Denmark the Evaluation Centre opened in 1992...

“The quality assurance system in Latvia was not created by or because of the Bologna process”.


Equally true for Lithuania... Debates as to the need to modernize educational systems in Lithuania, Latvia and Estonia were launched within the national independence movements, and complex restructuring started immediately after regaining sovereignty in 1990.
The number of approaches?

EHEA – 48 countries
ENQA – 49 countries, of these full members from 28 countries, affiliates – 26 countries [within Europe]; plus European members, plus non-European and international...
Quality Procedures Projects
Diversity of the QA agencies’ landscape

Differences at the outset:
• Established on an initiative of labor market representatives (CTI, FIBAA...)
• Promoted by academics (former agencies in Portugal and Latvia)
• Founded by public authorities

Differences in activity profile:
• responsible for institutional reviews (IEP), programme evaluations, quality audits, etc. at programme or institutional level
• Varying consequences – accreditation, policy advice, enhancement only... and regarding funding of higher education.

• flags of ENQA members and affiliates
  as of 14 June 2017
Diversity of the QA agencies’ landscape

Differences of the scope:

• „Comprehensive“, encompassing the entire education system (FINEEC...)
• „European“ + subject specific (ECCE)
• „European“ not-subject specific (EQA)
• One single agency serving the whole national higher education system
• Regional agencies within one state (Spain)
• Regional and/or crossing borders
• Focused on HE (provision of studies)
• Involved in assessment of HE + research (ASHE)
• Serving the needs of HE + VET (EKKA)
• Having other responsibilities, such as for NQF, ENIC/NARIC activities (QQI)
There is no “one size fits all” solution, however, there is a certain coherence of understanding in concepts and the European quality assurance model, as defined in the European Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in higher education (ESG).

Currently, we mainly talk about „fitness of purpose“ and „fitness for purpose“ + accountability.

For national policies and HEI themselves it also appears to be important to have some activities geared towards encouraging and rewarding excellence.

BUT external quality assurance does NEITHER equal to gathering statistical data on common performance indicators NOR is equal to assessment of learning outcomes by reading of final students’ papers.
ESG (2005, 2015) – the European way:

for **consistency** and **trust** by enabling Higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to use **common reference points** for quality assurance.

Applies to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery.
Bologna Process – shared values, similar challenges, coordinated activities in solving issues

Bologna process judged being among the most important elements in creating the movement to build a common European ‘home’ and “European-ness”, based on:

• a shared commitment to scientific and critical enquiry and to a scholarly and intellectual culture,
• a commitment to academic freedom and institutional autonomy,
• the social mission of the university.

But also – the need to reconsider links between investment in education and economic growth, responsibilities of the nation state vs. shared action lines on a supranational level, the reality of a rapidly integrating ‘core’ and a heterogeneous ‘periphery’.

Shifting focus of procedures

- *Studies*...
- *Learning outcomes*...
- *Internationalisation*
- *Labor market relevance*...
- *Social relevance*...
Common trends of QA in EHEA

• Initially based on peer-review, but increasingly giving consideration of other stakeholder interests – of employers and students – and now including them directly in almost all processes within HEI and external QA.
• Specificity – a separation of QA of teaching and learning and research.
• ESG – policies in the major part covering academic matters (student admission, progression, assessment, academic ethics etc), but also non-academic as well (information management, personnel, careers of graduates).
• Information – of key importance.
• Effective management, professional behavior – in the basis of all activities.
• Increasing internationalisation (re students, experts, procedures...).
Quality assurance of cross-border higher education: Joint Degrees

„European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes“ – based on the ESG, the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), JOQAR project results.

Remains a challenge for the future.

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

October 2014
approved by EHEA ministers in May 2015
the Toolkit

- Encourages development of clear policies towards CBHE
- Addresses information provision by QA agencies, networks, and HEI
- Promotes cooperation between QA agencies and regional networks (e.g. by pointing to the need to avoid the duplication of procedures/efforts while recognising QA results and organising joint reviews)

- The Toolkit offers guidance on how QA agencies can realise the mutual understanding, trust and cooperation that are required to „share the responsibility of quality assuring CBHE“ (UNESCO/OECD)
- Sets out general recommendations supported by explanatory text and good practices
- Respects the autonomy of different national systems
Internationalisation of QA – QPP survey

• Inward internationalisation (at home):
  – introduction of international elements on agencies’ standards and processes
  – opening to the QA services of foreign agencies

• Outward internationalisation (abroad):
  – offering QA services in other countries
  – quality assuring national cross-border education

• Intermediate internationalisation
  – inter-agency exchange of QA cultures
Quality Procedures Project findings:
Internationalisation of Quality Assurance

• The major feature of the European dimension of quality assurance in the EHEA – adoption and compliance to ESG

• Agencies declare having significant autonomy and initiative in establishing their internationalisation strategies

• National policies stir QA agencies towards listing in EQAR, inclusion of international peers, active participation in networks, working towards international recognition of programmes, foreign members of agency governing bodies

• Expectations of stakeholders – somewhat vague and unspecific
QPP findings

• Whilst exporting QA services — in particular through EQAR — may be one of the most common aspirations for governments, it is not yet a common form of internationalisation of QA, nor is it an internal priority for many QA agencies.

• The diversity of internationalisation activities undertaken by different agencies, indicates that there is not yet a single, shared definition or profile of the internationalisation of quality assurance.

  — 56% full members and 55 % of affiliates always involve foreign experts in QA
  — 21% of full members and 26% of affiliates rarely involve foreign experts in QA

• EQAR seems to be valued more from a reputational than a QA market standpoint.

• Member agencies prioritise inward international and inter-agency cooperation over competition; strengthened cooperation and international alignment is the preferred road ahead.
ENQA’s view on priorities for the future

• Internationalisation should not be reduced to the import and export of quality assurance services between countries in the EHEA.

• The adaptation of all national systems – also, and particularly, in countries which have not yet fully developed quality assurance systems – to the revised ESG will be an important priority.

• While “internationalisation at home” has clear positive consequences, the long-term impact of importing and exporting quality assurance services across borders is not yet clear.

• Even though all ENQA members operate according to the ESG, the services they offer can be substantially different in nature (audit, assessment, accreditation, etc.) and serve different objectives, which are quite often linked to specific national agendas.
Back to the agencies...

• Change is constant (mergers, reorganizations, change of leadership)
• The question of costs of QA and relevance
• Tentions between purposes of procedures – control and enhancement
• Use of metrics
• Consideration of social challenges
• Development of the QA profession
• Challenges to fulfil new expectations of the revised ESG (esp. regarding linking internal and external QA with recognition)
“The greatest thing in this world is not so much where we stand as in what direction we are moving.”

/Johann Wolfgang von Goethe/