

ENQA MEMBERS' FORUM 2017
Oslo, 4-5 May 2017

**Notes from breakout sessions on topics “Governance-related changes in QA agencies” and
“Unintended outcomes of quality assurance”**

Breakout session “Unintended outcomes of quality assurance” by Anne Flierman (NVAO) and Øystein Lund (NOKUT)

Governments and agencies should be willing to reconsider certain measures and steps when they observe an undesired effect that seems to hamper or endanger the original intention.

QA agencies should be careful when applying new instruments, and define and communicate their expectations clearly in advance to all of those concerned.

An instrument should not be used for too many purposes; it was debated in the group whether one policy instrument can successfully only serve one purpose at a time.

It was discussed that it is important to use the know-how and expertise of an agency's partners and stakeholders, especially institutions, staff and students to reflect all sides of the coin.

New measures should be given time to prove their value; continuity in systems is a value in itself and too many changes can create undesired burden, confusion etc.

Breakout session “Governance-related changes in QA agencies” by Berchtold von Steiger (AAQ) and Martina Vidláková (NAB)

Relevance

A significant part of the agencies present have undergone a governance-related change in the recent years or will be facing one in the near future, which makes the topic very relevant to a number of ENQA members and affiliated agencies.

Types of change

In most cases the governance-related change has been induced by legislative change and frequently also carried other novelties to the QA system. Major changes in the governance of the national system of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) recently took place in Hungary, Switzerland, Slovenia or Germany. In Germany, a legal issue was at the origin of governance-related change in the valid accreditation system. The court of Baden-Württemberg came to the conclusion that the legal basis was too weak for the on-going accreditation procedures. In some countries change started when introducing the Bologna declaration in the national system, such as in Azerbaijan or in Kazakhstan. Governance-related change occurs also when a more open accreditation system is introduced: EQAR registration becomes compulsory

in one case where the local agency has no such registration yet. A new law defining a very open process in order to define external quality evaluation of HEIs puts the respect of the ESG under risk, for example in Slovakia. Clustering of programme accreditation procedures occurred either for financial reasons and / or in order to improve consistent evaluation of the learning outcomes (Lithuania, the Netherlands). Change also often constitutes a merger of agencies. Therefore, governance-related change occurs by factors related to the national QA policy or to a change in the HEI system. It seems that any political issue in the field affects quality assurance in HEIs.

Support was voiced for the assertion made during the plenary session that influencing QA is used by governments in the lack of other tools; the government makes major changes to QA with the aim of more quality but at the same lacks a clear vision of higher education on the national level. On the other hand, in the Netherlands it is the QA agency that pushes for change and seeks to develop new methods of work, although it seems to be a risky endeavor.

Challenges

One of the main challenges of mergers is finding a common definition of quality, as a shared interpretation of the concept is needed in the merged agency (such as when integrating further education or vocational education into the mandate of QA agencies). The ESG may contribute to the search for a new definition of quality, but they are not entirely transferrable to other types of education. In Finland, the settled holistic understanding of quality on all levels of education is found to be very useful for all. In fact, the enriching mutual interaction and cooperation with the newly integrated departments is one of the most beneficial outcomes of mergers.

Some examples of losses related to a governance-related change came up; loss of trust between agencies and HEIs or less flexibility have been reported.

More practical challenges of governance-related change include the moving to new premises, forming relations with the new board and changes to the work dynamics and routines. In some cases of mergers, the preparation of the staff for new tasks has been identified as one among the biggest challenges. On the other hand, agencies split up lacked critical mass for efficient handling of the procedures. New evaluation methods aiming to replace peer review by more rigid approaches based on predefined metrics have been identified as another big challenge.

Contracted QA agencies face specific issues; for them it is crucial to find ways for staff to keep their motivation and facilitate the change to a different mindset under new circumstances.

Inducements of successful change

Governance-related change is more likely to be successful when the QA agency is involved in drafting it. There needs to be a dialogue between the government/ministry and the QA agency and other stakeholders on the aim of the change and the expectations placed on the new agency and its role in the system. These need to be clearly communicated to all stakeholders in order to establish the position of the new agency.

Time both to prepare for the change and to bring the desired outcomes of the change has been mentioned as one of the most important factors in carrying out successful governance-related change. It also takes

time to reconstitute trust in the agency due to the fact that major change may be seen as a threat to the QA system.

Thus, examples of positive outcomes of governance-related change also include a more solid legal basis for the procedures, a better “spirit” in the relations with HEIs or a more trustable framework, especially where the ESG are introduced as a reference for the modified QA system.

Role of ENQA

In both sessions, some wishes for support from the ENQA community to agencies when facing governance-related changes have been mentioned. Agencies want to share the same general principles when operating QA and they want to have the possibility to learn from each other within this framework. ENQA should therefore facilitate the further development of the QA framework and prevent from putting this framework to close to an “ISO-style” evaluation. A positive example of the role of ENQA comes from Serbia where most recommendations made in the ENQA external review report were successfully implemented in the new legislation on higher education.

In order to support QA agencies undergoing major governance-related changes, ENQA should remain flexible with regards to the terms of membership especially in cases when the change would coincide with a review. An opinion was also voiced the ENQA should help facilitate finding a shared interpretation of quality across various levels and types of education. As an independent body, participants encourage ENQA to be present and effective as a political actor when the relevant decisions are prepared at the European and global level.

Relevant links for further information on change

The formation of the UK Office of Communications (Ofcom) from a merger (a case study):
https://www.ofcom.org.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0015/19203/public_sector_merger_case_study.pdf

The Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) website gather a number of publications:
<http://www.chea.org/>