External QA in Europe: context, trends and challenges

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Brussels, 29 November 2016
What is ENQA?

- ENQA is the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
- ENQA is a **membership organisation** of external Quality Assurance Agencies
  - 49 members from 26 European countries
  - 47 affiliates from a further 15 countries
  - ENQA is representative of 41 of the 48 members of the EHEA
  - Affiliates in the USA, Ecuador, Hong Kong, Israel and Jordan
- The criteria for membership is that an agency undergoes a successful **external review** against the 2015 **European Standards and Guidelines (ESG)** every five years
ENQA – member agencies
The wider European context of HE

What is Europe?

- The **European Union** has 28 member states
- The **European Higher Education Area** has 48 signatory countries (including all EU member states, and the European Commission) → a voluntary intergovernmental process (the “Bologna Process”)

- **European Union**, through the European Commission, supports higher education reforms, and harmonization efforts, but in particular, since 25 years, student (and staff) mobility (to create “European citizens”)
- Education policy, including HE, is an area of autonomy of the EU member states

→ the European Union can only support, add value, promote common agendas etc. through funding and the “Open method of coordination” (benchmarking, European projects, studies, data…)

→ Also for EHEA: no legal tools to enforce implementation (voluntary → peer pressure and support)
Different EQA Agencies and approaches in Europe

- Evaluation, audit, accreditation...
- Programme level and / or institutional level
- Subject specific / multidisciplinary methods and agencies
- European, national, and regional agencies

- Outcomes of quality assessments:
  - Permission to operate/award degrees
  - Impact on funding
  - Recommendations for improvement

- Compliance with standards vs. Excellence
- Profile building through thematic elements

- Main purpose always: accountability and enhancement (whatever the methodology!)
Diversity and constant evolution of QA

- Different levels of autonomy and capacity of HEIs for IQA
- Different levels of independence and capacity of QAAs for EQA
- Different cultural contexts, history, and traditions
- Innovation and the “QA pendulum”

➔ Need for a common framework: the ESG (and EQAR)
What are the ESG?

- **Standards and guidelines for quality assurance**, including:
  - IQA
  - EQA
  - IQA and operation of QA agencies
- **Generic principles** → allow for diversity of implementation (sufficient basis of trust)
- **Apply to all** HE, independently of place (TNE) or mode (elearning) of delivery
- **Focus on learning and teaching** (links to research)

**PURPOSES**

- **Set a common framework** for quality assurance systems
- **Enable the assurance and improvement of quality** of higher education
- **Support mutual trust** (→ recognition and mobility)
- **Provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA**

*Most agencies in the EHEA have proven to be ESG compliant*
The principles for QA in the EHEA (ESG)

- HEIs have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance
- QA responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students
- QA supports the development of a quality culture
- QA takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society

- Independence of QA agencies!
EQA and IQA – a collaborative relationship

• Primary responsibility of HEIs for quality and quality assurance of their own provision

• Role of external QA is to:
  – Provide a way for autonomous institutions to **demonstrate their accountability externally**
  – **Support the HEIs in constant enhancement** of HE provision and its quality assurance
  – **Independent (of ministries and HEIs) QA agencies** as counterparts of autonomous institutions

Concentric circles, one smaller only for sphere of activity, not for importance!
Role and involvement of stakeholders in European QA

• Stakeholder participation is very important in the European HE and QA context:
  – The ESG
    • Drafting
    • Requirements on HEIs and QAAs → national and institutional level
  – EQAR

• Internal and external stakeholders
  – Students’ participation at all levels is fundamentally important
  – Engaging academics (quality culture)
  – Employers/labour market

• Stakeholders participation in QA practices in the QAAs is important for the transparency + accountability (of the QAA)

• Stakeholders participation in the QA policy results in co-responsability and legitimacy of the process (and outcomes) of the QAA and the HE system
Trends and challenges in European (E)QA

• Possible move to “softer” approaches (fitness-for-purpose), especially in well-established QA systems:
  – from programme to institutional approaches;
  – risk-based methods;
  – more flexible methods or methods based more on IQA/institutional priorities; etc.

BUT the picture is not univocal

• Going beyond minimum standards and find ways to measure and reward excellence (of different types!)

• Greater importance given to the quality, usefulness and readability of reports (competing with international or national rankings as information source?)
Trends and challenges in European (E)QA – cont.

- Adapting to the requirements in ESG 2015: “good practice” in many systems for several years BUT big changes are still ahead:
  - adapting to student-centred learning
  - student involvement
  - publication of reports
  - collaborative relationship with HEIs
  - QA of alternative delivery modes (elearning), etc.

- Internationalisation of QA and QA agencies
  - use of international reviewers (small systems, but not only)
  - networking (e.g. ENQA) → sharing of good practice and experiences, building QA policy
  - international collaborative projects
  - joint reviews or cross-border reviews
Trends and challenges in European (E)QA – cont.

• **External accountability of agencies** is widely accepted – and expected (ENQA/EQAR)

  → basis for better recognition of QA decisions (but not there yet)

• **Wider involvement of stakeholders** accepted and required, **BUT**
  – employer involvement is challenging
  – student participation stagnating

• By far most EHEA countries have now an independent QA agency, compared to a minority 10 years ago

BUT

• national contexts are strong and important
• different levels of implementation of the European tools
Thank you!

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