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Working together to take quality forward

Paper proposal form

Deadline 2 August 2013

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Proposal

Title: Closing the gaps: next steps towards transparent, consistent and credible European quality assurance

Abstract (150 words max):



Although European quality assurance (QA) can be considered a recent phenomenon, it has come a long way in a short time. Still, a large degree of heterogeneity between external QA systems remains apparent. This paper argues that for a transparent, consistent and credible European Higher Education Area (EHEA), more effort is required. The authors propose a number of practical recommendations aimed to improve transparency, consistency and credibility of European quality assurance QA for the benefit of all its stakeholders.

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Although European quality assurance (QA) can be considered a recent phenomenon, it has come a long way in a short time. External Quality Assurance is aligning itself with the ESG. Since the Bologna Process was launched, 22 countries have established national Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs), with half of these being set up since 2005 (Eurydice, 2010). Agency compliance with the ESG, as evidenced by their membership in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) or the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), has grown considerably. Participation of stakeholders such as students and international experts in QA is increasingly being seen as one of the key elements of the „European approach” to QA. Among European QAAs and other stakeholders, there is a growing understanding that QA must be integrated with the other Bologna action lines such as recognition, qualification frameworks, and learning outcomes.

Still, a large degree of heterogeneity between external QA systems remains apparent. This paper argues that for a transparent, consistent and credible European Higher Education Area (EHEA), more effort is required. The paper proposes a number of practical steps to ensure a more transparent, consistent and credible European QA for the benefit of all its stakeholders.

A transparent European QA requires ...

Transparency is easily reduced to a buzzword but is generally understood to denote an openness to public scrutiny. In the context of QA, it implies not just openness, but also communication and accountability. When looking at the transparency of European QA, we wanted answers to the questions: Is it easy to understand external QA in a HE system, to find and access outcomes of QA procedures and to understand QA reports? Although practically all European countries have established some form of external QA system, there are significant differences in the philosophy and approaches behind these systems.

understandable external QA

Despite the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for QA in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), external QA systems are indeed still quite diverse in their orientation (EACEA 2012, p. 60). To put trust into another QA system, stakeholders need to be informed in a clear and evident way about the philosophies and approaches behind the different external QA systems in Europe. EQAR, as an institution founded to promote the trust in foreign QA agencies, documents compliance with the ESG, but does not and cannot currently explain the QA systems of its member agencies. Instead, there should be a uniform communication tool or template not unlike the diploma supplement to explain the goals of QA system, the criteria it uses when assessing programmes and institutions and the processes it employs to do so. This tool or template can then be used to publish information about the QA system on QA agencies' websites, as an annex to QA reports, and, why not, on European QA portals such as the ENQA and EQAR-websites.



accessible outcomes of external QA

The ESG include a standard (2.5) that states: “Reports should be published and should be written in a style, which is clear and readily accessible to its intended readership. Any decisions, commendations or recommendations contained in reports should be easy for a reader to find”. Is this common practice? Not necessarily. Out of 47 QA agencies, 36 (77%) stated that positive outcomes of QA evaluations are made available to the public (Rauhvargers et al. 2009, p. 8). Still, very few QA agencies publish the full reports written by their assessment panels. In many cases, neither the decisions nor summaries of the reports are published. It should come as no surprise that difficult access to outcomes such as decisions, summaries and assessment reports makes external QA less than useful for external stakeholders; where internal or external stakeholders take an active interest reduced access may indeed reduce the effect transparency could have on stimulating quality development through higher internal or external accountability. The authors have the opinion that all QA agencies should publish all external QA outcomes. As a good practice, European QA agencies should make these available through a search engine on their website’s homepage. This means that QA outcomes should be neither hidden away and difficult to find nor only available through a tedious application of the freedom of information law. In addition, all HE systems should centralise QA outcomes in a national – or European – register of recognised higher education. The emergence of cross-border provision of higher education, cross-border QA and multi-agency QA systems, in which an institution from country A may franchise its degrees out to country B and be accredited by an agency from country C makes easy access to outcomes of QA procedures increasingly relevant¹. As the vision of a European Higher Education Area without borders becomes a reality, there should be a European portal to centrally access the information from national QA systems and provide a search engine to ensure pan-European accessibility of outcomes of external QA procedures and information about all QA (and HE) systems. This portal should cater to all potential target audiences but be optimised for credential evaluators (recognition bodies) and potential students.

intelligible external QA

When the outcomes of external QA procedures are laid down in assessment reports, these reports are often not only difficult to access but also difficult to comprehend. Apart from the different language(s) in which reports are offered, they vary significantly in terms of forms, structures, quality or depth (Vercruysse, Proteasa 2012, p. 18). Assessment reports are intended to provide comprehensive information about strengths and weaknesses, and thus present a holistic view on the quality of an institution or a programme. However, in order to serve as a meaningful transparency tool, these reports should be easily comprehensible and comparable. Currently, outcomes of external QA vary in format, content and terminology. To be intelligible, reports should be written with an intention to be meaningful for all stakeholders. This is easier said than done because to this day, there is no commonly agreed-upon European QA terminology. This terminology needs to be developed by QA agencies and preferably published as a glossary on their websites and referenced to in their QA outcomes. A second step is building agreement on the format which outcomes of external QA (decisions, summaries, reports) should take in order to allow for an easy, EHEA-comparable and transparent understanding of these outcomes. By format, we refer to the

¹ For an analysis of the complexities of cross-border provision of higher education see the study by Bischof et al (2013) under http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/20130712_en.htm



norms for structure and content. The agreed formatting should be laid down in guidelines such as the EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators of Scientific Articles².

A consistent European QA requires...

Consistency describes a performance that does not vary greatly in quality over time. For HE institutions and programmes consistency ensures fair and equal treatment while for QA agencies it safeguards accurateness and the application of its own professional standards. When assessing the consistency of European QA, the following questions should be discussed: Do the ESG ensure consistency? Which of their elements contribute to consistency within QAAs? Which of their elements make European QA consistent as a whole?

coherent implementation of the ESG

The ESG state that “the consistency of QA across the EHEA will be improved by the use of agreed standards and guidelines”. The ESG thus lift consistency to the European level by establishing common standards and guidelines. To which degree do ESG ensure that a level of performance that does not vary greatly in quality over time? Standard 2.3 (Criteria for decisions) establishes the basic principle that “any formal decisions made as a result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently.” This should certainly apply when assessing compliance with the ESG as well. However, scrutiny of ENQA’s last three external review reports³ for the Standard 2.5 (Reporting) demonstrates that this is not the case. Both format of the report as well as substantiation differ widely. In one instance, “full compliance” was already granted for an agency irregularly⁴ publishing of a list of decisions along with one-page summary reports on accredited universities, but not publishing any reports on the outcome of evaluations of programmes, the largest number of procedures carried out. Two other agencies were assessed as “substantially compliant” although both actually do publish all full reports and make them accessible through a database. The ESG need decisions and reports that are “consistent in terms of principles and requirements, even if different groups form the judgements”⁵ in order to make the implementation of the ESG coherent.

sound preparation of panel members

External QA uses peers and experts. These persons are not professional assessors or auditors. Consistency between panels is therefore a constant point of attention and one of the most difficult issues for external QA. Methodological and procedural consistency depend largely on the way the panel and its members function. Different interpretations of standards or weight attributed to elements under consideration can undermine consistency. All persons which take part as a panel member in QA procedures should therefore be suitably prepared regarding the aim of external QA (preferably in international perspective), the way audit techniques can be used during interviews, the interpretation and substantiation of the assessment criteria and the effective and appropriate communication with people of other cultures.

² **European Association of Science Editors** (2013), *EASE Guidelines for Authors and Translators of Scientific Articles to be Published in English*. Available online at: http://www.ease.org.uk/sites/default/files/ease_guidelines-june2013-english.pdf (checked on 22/07/2013)

³ http://enqa.eu/reviews_reports.lasso, checked on 22/07/2013

⁴ This particular agency only published its decisions immediately before ENQA’s external review and has not published anything before or after, now 1.5 years ago.

⁵ ESG Guideline 3.7. “External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies”



re-using experienced panel members

Once they have taken part in external QA, peers and experts can more or less disappear off the radar of QA agencies. QA agencies have therefore developed ways to keep track of these panel members. Agencies should cooperate to do this in a standardised way in order to enable accessibility (expertise, QA experience, etc.) and relevance (performance in past procedures). By making sure that experienced and well-performing panel members can be reused, consistency across procedures can be enhanced. In addition, agencies should be able to share the contacts of panel members they have trained and/or which gained experience in their QA procedures. This should facilitate more non-national experts in QA procedures, thus increasing both the European dimension of QA and the independence of the panels.

A credible European QA should...

focus on quality

Many national assessment frameworks include standards that relate to structural requirements of the legal framework. These national requirements are often not about quality itself and are regularly not consistent with other national requirements⁶, thus hindering cross-border cooperation. Joint programmes are regularly confronted with these contradictions since they undergo external QA in or for several HE systems. The growing number of national requirements and legal issues brings with it a growing danger of losing sight of the fundamental purpose of QA, namely to assess quality, ascertain standards and contribute to the enhancement of quality. QA systems should therefore distinguish between assessing compliance with the legal framework and assessing the quality of institutions and/or programmes.

focus on learning outcomes

Both qualification frameworks and ECTS put emphasis on learning outcomes (LOs). In addition, credential evaluators have included learning outcomes into their recognition toolbox.⁷ In a learning outcomes-based system, education is seen as an outcome-based process expressed in and oriented towards the outcomes to be achieved by the learner. External QA, following a fitness-for-purpose approach cannot but follow the use learning outcomes at all levels of education. This requires the inclusion of intended and achieved learning outcomes in assessment methodologies. How can this be done? Intended LOs need to correspond to the relevant QF EHEA level, the state of the art of the discipline, and the requirements of the relevant professional field(s). A fitness-for-purpose-oriented QA system must then ascertain itself that the teaching and learning environment is suited to achieve the intended LOs and that the intended LOs are actually being achieved by a programme's graduates.

provide a sound basis for the cross-border recognition of the outcomes of external QA

A well-functioning European QA system area should be identifiable by the trust foreign HE stakeholders have in its procedures and results. This currently is arguably not yet the case. The ESG were developed as an instrument to build trust within the EHEA. EQAR was

⁶ One noteworthy example being the German KMK-„Strukturvorgaben“

⁷ The EAR Manual, endorsed by the ministers and part of the Bologna Process, reflects this shift. Available online at: <http://www.eurorecognition.eu/manual/Chapter%209/default.aspx> (checked on 22/07/2013)



founded to certify a QA agency's consistent application of the ESG. While a certain sense of trust is emerging, it is mainly based on "procedural" grounds since the ESG set standards for the quality of external QA procedures and of QA agencies and are thus standards *for* QA, not *of* quality. It was not the aim to establish standards for education, for teaching and learning. However, to truly justify trust in the quality of education, Europe needs a core of content-related standards for quality in education which QA agencies can include in their methodologies, such as subject-specific qualifications frameworks. The revised ESG should therefore explicitly include references to the overarching/national qualification framework and learning outcomes.

Conclusion

European Quality Assurance has come a long way since the beginning of the Bologna Process. Membership in ENQA and EQAR is rising and there is growing consensus on the core elements of European quality assurance as they are laid out in the ESG. There are clearly tentative steps towards more cross-border cooperation such as joint QA procedures and cross-border acceptance of QA outcomes.

However, a number of gaps in transparency, consistency and credibility remain. To improve trust by national stakeholders as well as (foreign) governments and recognition bodies, European QA needs to take the crucial next steps: QA processes should be understandable and reports of their outcomes should be accessible and intelligible. When applying standards and guidelines, agencies should pay great attention to the consistency in their application. European QA can be made more consistent by engaging authoritative experts as panel members and sharing information on these experts and their performance with other agencies. While governments and higher education institutions are asked to trust the results of foreign QA procedures, transparent standards of quality as the basis for such trust is still lacking in the European QA architecture. This "justification gap" arguably lessens the credibility of European QA. A stronger focus on quality could close this gap by focussing on intended and achieved learning outcomes and referencing intended learning outcomes against generic and subject-specific qualification frameworks.

The authors are confident that European QA is on a good way to close these gaps and call upon the parties involved in the ongoing revision of the ESG to debate and address the issues raised in this paper.

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Questions for discussion:

- *Which steps are necessary to "close the gaps" in European quality assurance?*
- *How could this be achieved and who would need to get active?*
- *What could and should a more transparent, consistent and credible European quality assurance look like?*
- *Do we need a European QA Portal?*

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 2 August 2013 to Ivana Juraga (Ivana.Juraga@eua.be). Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.