Policy Paper
on
Quality Assurance and
Transparency Tools

EURASHE

European Association of Institutions in Higher Education

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1. Preamble

EURASHE's Overarching Policy Paper (2012) was well received at the Ministerial Conference in Bucharest this year, which acknowledged the paper's garnering of current issues, underpinning the organisation as the voice of Professional Higher Education. The Policy Paper also valiantly reinforces the fundamentals of all higher education institutions (HEI), which have within their orbit, a three-fold mission, comprising: teaching, research and services to the community.

What is set out below, as a new and current policy paper on Quality Assurance (QA) and Transparency Instruments, is the first EURASHE publication in this area of work for a number of years and, as a review of current emphases and practice, *inter-alia*, highlights in Professional Higher Education, the intensifying role of stakeholders, employment–related study programmes and multi-dimensional practice in internal quality assurance (IQA) and external quality assurance (EQA). EURASHE has taken part in E4 discussions and debates on QA, has been active in *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* (ESG) survey work, and benefits from the expertise of a well-established *Working group for Quality Assurance and Transparency Tools.* Its members*,* whilst maintaining the overarching precepts described in the *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance,* have produced this policy paper and are now working towards an operational policy-document centred on the practical apparatus of QA designed for Professional Higher Education.

2. General context

During the 1990s, following the rise of international markets and informatics in the preceding decade, fundamental world-wide economic shifts occurred. These changes can be summarised in terms of globalisation, individualisation, digitalisation and the information boom. The economic and financial crisis of the 2000s has not only deepened and hastened these changes, but also set new challenges to the world, in terms of restructuring the knowledge society through creativity and innovation and specifically the formulating of new responses to climate change, issues concerning immigration as well as attempts to address the widening gap between rich and poor.

Higher education (HE) is, and should be, deeply involved in these new-world developments, both through education and training in the practical application of new competencies for new jobs in lifelong learning (LLL), through applied research and new knowledge implemented by innovation. The current world also needs more highly-educated graduates. Thus, sensitive and responsive HEIs will feel the need to reformulate their missions and strategies.

Bologna, and associated education reforms recommended by the European Union (EU)/European Commission (EC), have endeavoured to formulate responses and answers to these international new challenges. Yet, in virtually all their immediate and prospective policy and influence, they have been implemented mostly in and across diverse national structures, rather than being directly influential to the reshaping of structures and processes in most HEIs. Although the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) is, structurally, a nationally multi-cultural fact, the pulse of this is not yet felt at the heart of educational higher education in Europe

At the same time, whilst the economic crisis creates not only budget problems, paradoxically causing HEIs to feel the pressure to fund and produce short-term consumer-based policies and outcomes, they are being mistrusted more and more by myopically stringent governments who wish to cut funding for (higher) education and research.

QA is being considerably influenced by these tendencies. Whilst there is a need to evaluate many more mission structures and strategies assembled by HEIs, QA is confronted with models of consumer stakeholders and demands for rankings at all levels, including research. This situation is set against the valued mission of QA, which in its internal and external mechanisms, is the establishing of creative and transparent solutions towards the maintenance of a quality culture where all stakeholders function and invest as democratically-empowered participants. An effective quality culture can briefly be described as a deeply-active facet of the organisational culture that reveals the attitudes, values and practices shared by all staff, colleagues and management. Such a culture encourages sustained open-mindedness and constructively critical minds within the continuous aim to enhance all academic and support practices within HEIs. The corollary of this culture and practice is the effective inculcation and synthesis of attestable quality enhancement and transparent public accountability. This complementarity provides both the spearhead and vanguard positions from which HEIs should be able to mount arguments and deploy answers in relation to ever-intensifying global challenges.

3. Overarching policies

Amidst these global developments, within the EHEA, a robust and reliable framework has evolved, providing the basis for the recognition of periods of study and degrees which further the cause of mobility. The framework is a Qualification Framework (QF) for higher education (QF-EHEA) underpinned by QA procedures which follow the principles of the ESG.

The QF-EHEA has been implemented in the EHEA countries as an overarching framework, and has been transferred and integrated into National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) for higher education in the respective national systems. Earned qualifications are described on the basis of learning outcomes (LO), which are articulated with study programmes and their respective quality-assurance procedures, an articulation that requires further development and intensification. These structures, are aligned to the overarching European Qualifications Framework (EQF, 2008) which refers to all levels and forms of learning, within the paradigm of LLL.

Whilst LOs are being formulated in a well-defined framework for the QF-EHEA, these, and the principles of the ESG, are also generic, which are applicable to different types of institution, focussing in the broad sense on what quality assurance should cover. There is evidence in this understanding for the general success of the ESG across the EHEA, although the MAP-ESG exercise has shown some gaps in implementation, especially concerning the information to the public (ESG, Part II). Nonetheless, in identifiable practice, the ESG have been incorporated across the diverse, national quality-assurance systems in the EHEA at the same time as the generic European LOs are being more defined in the NQF.

The ESG also provide the criteria with which Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) need to comply, should they wish to be listed in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) of agencies. This Register is a further source that supports diversity whilst, in the first place, functioning as a transparency instrument.

Within a different policy framework, the EC has been promoting feasibility studies on so-termed 'transparency instruments', namely the U-Map and the U-Multirank projects. These instruments highlight the practice of well-known global rankings (Times Higher Education, Shanghai Jiaotong ranking) that concentrate on very specific research indicators and do not take into account the quality of study and teaching or services to the community. As a by-product in the provision of public information, easy-to-read league tables and rankings indicate streamlining of communication in the higher education sector, which fails, as such, to describe the necessary diversity of institutions. These shortcomings amount to ready and easy comparatives without the in-depth analysis to inform a broader public of the wider functions of HEIs. Conversely, whilst transparency instruments and quality assurance do not have the same objectives, they are not necessarily contradictory, but rather complementary. It is just that they serve different purposes, which for the former is to inform about quality, and for the latter is to evaluate quality. In holistic evaluation and assessment, transparency instruments can and should make use of wide-ranging institutional information, verified by IQA and EQA.

There are also a number of national and international publications purporting to rank HEIs, and some commentators refer to these in terms of their relationship to the "quality" of institutions. Such lists generally tend to give weight to research intensity, or reputation and tradition, and these criteria can disadvantage some professional higher-education institutions. EURASHE keenly supports efforts to improve the transparency of higher education to stakeholders but considers that ranking tools are rather less helpful in this holistic process.

4. **Specific focus of Professional Higher Education**

Distinctive features of quality assurance in professional higher education

Professional higher-education institutions, as represented by EURASHE, have particular distinctive characteristics that bring some distinctive contributions to the EHEA. Moreover, these characteristics have implications for the role and form of QA within these institutions. And more precisely, the relationship between Professional Higher Education, in its widest sense, and the external stakeholders, is typically much stronger and transparent than that found in purely academic institutions and programmes. Professional Higher Education prepares and trains for particular professions both in the short and longer term. Thus, it is found to be the norm that the professional world finds more involvement in both the professional higher-education institutions and their IQA and EQA.

The *European Standards and Guidelines* emphasise the fundamental importance of the institution in QA, subject to the operation of a satisfactory system of independent EQA. In some countries, Professional Higher Education falls under different quality-assurance legislation and/or QAAs to those associated with traditional universities. In such instances, it is important for whatever arrangements are in place in the support of Professional Higher Education that neither operate on an assumption, nor generate or sustain an impression amongst external stakeholders, that "quality" is inherently lower or more critically suspect in this sector that in traditional higher education.

Professional higher-education institutions do place high value on responsiveness to the needs of students who venture into the workplace and the employability-competencies which businesses and local communities seek from their graduates. The QA systems of professional higher-education institutions typically emphasise consultation with employment-related actors (e.g. employers, professional associations, regulators, trade-unions, economic-development agencies) in specific sectors and localities, to ensure that professional higher-education programmes are designed and orientated to meet the education and skills demanded for employment. Specific forms of education linked to the workplace, whether on part-time alterance, or delivered through blended-learning models, are often offered by professional higher-education institutions, and these require their own appropriately designed quality-assurance mechanisms. Such mechanisms apply to continuing professional development as well as initial professional formation and induction. Further examples of responses to learner and employer needs, often found with professional higher-education institutions, include the short-cycle programme. The elaboration of programmes of this type, in accordance with NQFs, and the development of appropriate accreditation mechanisms and other QA instruments in support of them, is a current concern of professional higher-education institutions.

The close association of many professional higher-education institutions within their locality gives them particular and sometimes distinctive roles in encouraging and supporting permeability between vocational education and training and HE, especially for disadvantaged members of their communities. This may require cooperation in QA with Vocational Education and Training (VET) institutions, or in the quality-assured recognition of prior-learning, acquired in the context of formal or non-formal VET. On the other hand, the articulation of progression arrangements for professional higher-education institutions' graduates into particular higher-level learning, including advanced research (post-doctoral and other advanced university qualifications) may well require cooperation with the QA systems of universities. The professional requirement for professional higher-education institutions to serve as bridges within national education and training systems, places demands on the QA systems of professional higher-education institutions to be workplace-sensitive, flexible, yet also transparent, robust and credible to a highly-skilled and wide-ranging audience of stakeholders.

5. Recommendations for professional higher education institutions

The starting point for institutional QA should be an up-to-date mission and overall institutional strategy, whilst diversity within the institutional goals should be a priority in the IQA and EQA approaches. EURASHE recommends that institutional goals are driven by the institution itself, in consultation and partnership with all relevant stakeholders.

As the real basis of quality is 'quality culture,' and QA, an instrument evaluating that culture, institutions should bear in mind the following guidelines in the development and functioning of their IQA:

- a constructive combination of leadership with staff commitment;

- an organigram, both top-down and bottom-up, respecting the fact that quality is generated and maintained in the learning process and environment in order to create the ability for the management to stimulate and intervene, build and realise the right policies and services;

- to combine qualitative and quantitative indicators;

- and last, but not least, to identify and involve all stakeholders at all levels in order to set out the goals and aims through formulating the strategic policy of the institution, as well as formulating intended LOs; being involved in the programme design and realisation and also in the assessment of the achieved LOs at programme level.

As a basis for their (international) recognition process, institutional QA should be framed in both a national and a European context, that is by connecting QA with QF-EHEA/EQF and LOs, by taking into account student-centred learning, by focussing on internationalisation and LLL and, where appropriate, by addressing national needs and objectives.

IQA should remain the responsibility of the institutions, which should respond to academic and professional needs and protocols, and not to any bureaucratic instincts of external pressure groups to control. If national laws or QAAs run counter to the ESG – especially in ways that might impose limits on Part I of these guidelines, institutions should raise such matters, via rectors' conferences and via EURASHE. In order to expand the impact of EURASHE, all HEIs are invited to contribute actively; practically, this means that institutions should benefit from sharing instruments for IQA and services amongst each other. In order for such interchange of practice to occur, considerable cooperative trust between institutions needs to be established.

It is important for there to be active involvement in national and European policy-making, and also in various developments as they arise, and particularly in the fine-tuning of the EQA procedures. Acknowledging improvements in EQA and its accountability, based on sound understanding and trust, should influence the policies and procedures of IQA.

Crucial to the rightful demand for institutional autonomy, is meeting the demand for accountability. Institutions should, therefore, implement the QA procedures correctly, transparently and be confident in their involvement of stakeholders. Greater transparency in IQA and EQA results will enhance public confidence and minimise the temptation of governments to enforce additional, and sometimes over-elaborate EQA-procedures.

Institutions should benefit from transparency instruments that present the diversity in HE in an accessible way. EURASHE, therefore recommends collaboration in the development of these in order to ensure that they are free from marketing impulses, independent supervision, and are clear and unequivocal in policy. It has been articulated earlier that QA should not be 'driven' by the procedures or desired outcomes of transparency instruments, in particular, ranking instruments.

6. Recommendations for collective action

Stakeholders' organisations in HE have a specific responsibility towards HEIs for communicating with them and informing them on trends and evolutions in QA and its underlying support instruments, such as QF and LO. Stakeholders form the link between institutions and other parties concerned, and at the same time they can often offer help in the European context. Through such policy and practice this has recently happened, in that the four leading organisations in QA (the so-called 'E4-Group'), in response to requests from members of the Bologna Follow-up Group (governments and the EC), decided to survey their respective membership on the implementation and deployment of the ESG. The outcomes of this cross-cutting consultation can demonstrate to the stakeholders' organisations, including EURASHE, how to mount future exercises in collaboration.

However, there still remains much to understand and achieve in the objectives, purposes, means and processes of QA, which need greater definition and clarity. For EURASHE, this is best achieved within the *Working group on Quality Assurance and Transparency Tools*, which assists the association in shaping a QA policy, partly through project-based surveying of our membership, partly through our contribution to events organised by other stakeholders and also in taking part in European QA projects.

The immediate benefit of this EURASHE working group should be for the institutions, which often need clear guidelines for recognition, in support of their mobility processes. This can be achieved more concretely, by both HEIs and their rectors' conferences, and other representative bodies becoming more familiar with the international instruments for QA and related processes, such as the QF-EHEA, EQF, and the ESG for QA. Better understanding in these will help overcome the challenges presented earlier (cf. Part IV Recommendations for Institutions).

Secondly, by sharing QA instruments and services, institutions can substantially reduce the cost of implementing QA and withstand other external pressures which are possibly harming their own quality and QA processes.

The so-called Transparency Tools can be a help in this, by exemplifying good practice, and therefore EURASHE and other stakeholders' organisations, must be active in the analyses of the next EC-inspired feasibility study. Taking part in decision-making processes will strengthen formulations and recommendations for the general principles, which will ensure that the transparency tools offer accurate and meaningful benefit to Professional Higher Education. It is the role of stakeholders' organisations to communicate with their members and share information on transparency tools via their regular channels, such as conferences, workshops and publications.

7. Recommendations for policy makers

In developing QA models and systems, the Bologna process is always a governing principle and therefore it should be ensured that national objectives and priorities are in line with the European/Bologna objectives and roadmap which can also be inspired by a corresponding, identifiable national vision. Whilst QA models and systems have a duty to identify, verify and evaluate quality in HEI courses and programmes, the creation and development of trust in the promotion of quality cultures are essential, if QA models are to be more than check-list structures.

Moreover, the instruments of QA must serve to identify, verify and evaluate the overall quality of higher education and training within broad, sustainable quality cultures. Institutions are the owners of the IQA (quality enhancement) but should demonstrate that quality enhancement can be guaranteed and be accountable. This means that there is an overriding need to stimulate and invigorate IQA (on the basis of the principles of Part I of ESG), not as an imposed task, but so as to strengthen the institutions and their programmes. It should also be clear that whilst EQAR-registration reflects a shared trust, it does not advocate a prescribed type of QA model or QA system. EQAR welcomes diversity in QA models and so it is for the policy-makers to choose a model. However, there is a high degree of congruence between the various models.

Concerning LLL and Professional Higher Education, it is important to demonstrate, develop, explain and implement the links and relationships between QA, QF and LO. Of course this requires each national authority and government to have developed, or to soon develop, a NQF in line with the QF-EHEA and EQF. The objectives and significance of these frameworks must be explained and the advantages of them demonstrated to stakeholders' organisations as well as to institutions, students and graduates. In the context of LLL and Professional Higher Education, EQA should assess whether the principles of the integration of LO, NQF and EQF are met, whether the LO are developed (in consultation with professional stakeholders) and whether the developing methodologies of LO, in relation to the assessment of students, are adequate and accurate.

The academic practice of LO must be stimulated and be self-integrating within the NQF, towards increasing the visibility, recognition and applicability of these for the achievement of educational exactitude, and valued professional purpose, particularly in respect of mobility.

Clear communication to stakeholders and society about the EQA-ranking and classification systems used in HE is a priority, explaining that each specific practice, such as research, distance-learning, student facilities etc. needs an appropriate approach to enable meaningful QA evaluation. QA, its extensive coverage and concomitants, need careful and very full explication.

8. **Conclusion**

Whilst it is the intention of EURASHE to identify and develop the technical QA precepts and needs of Professional Higher Education, the organisation remains mainstream within the E4 partner structures and debates. Accountability is identified as a major area for the type of transparency needed for modern QA systems, together with an openness of spirit amongst participants towards QA's constant evolution and fluidity concerning the policies of tomorrow. In accordance with the Overarching Policy Paper, 'robust and systemic investment in (higher) education and learning' is paramount towards our shared tomorrow. And it is a vital corollary that all QA policy and practice should lead to the better learning experience for our students, many of whom will be amongst the next generations of European leaders and policy-makers.

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