



**Implementation and Innovation in QA
through Peer Learning (IMINQA)
WG on QA of European Universities
Second meeting
Draft report – 17/01/2023**

1. Welcome and introduction

The project coordinator and chair Magalie Soenen welcomed all participants to the second meeting of the IMINQA WG on European Universities and thanked them all for their presence.

She invited all participants to briefly present themselves.

2. Overview of the IMINQA project & the WG on QA of European Universities

The umbrella project IMINQA supports the work of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance (TPG C on QA). The project foresees the organisation of TPG meetings, offers a staff mobility programme, organises three physical peer learning activities (PLAs) and works on three thematic work packages: QA of micro-credentials, QA of European Universities and digitalisation of QA processes.

IMINQA work package 6 focuses on QA of European Universities and builds on the previous EUniQ project. A working group (WG) has been set up, with the aim to offer peer learning to increase mutual awareness and understanding of QA expectations between the different stakeholders. The current WG consists of 27 participants including 21 countries¹ and 6 organisations², resulting in a mix of representatives of ministries and QA agencies.

Based on the conducted analysis on legal obstacles in the participating countries of the WG in applying the EUniQ framework (July 2022 – December 2022), 5 European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries will be selected for a feasibility study or in-depth study (April 2023 – October 2023) on how to implement the EUniQ framework in the countries. A cooperation will be set up with national stakeholders through a national working group involving the European Universities present in the respective countries. The countries involved will set up their own roadmap depending on the outcome. In March 2023 and November 2023 two small PLAs will take place with the 5 selected EHEA countries

¹ Albania, Armenia, Austria, Azerbaijan, Belgium/Flemish Community, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Poland, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, The Netherlands

² EUA, ETUCE, ESU, European Commission, EQAR, ENQA.

in order to compare systems, learn from each other and to come to a similar approach for the national work. The in-depth study will then be presented to the full working group during the third WG meeting to ensure that the full WG can learn from the study.

There are links to two of the PLAs that will be organised as part of the project, namely PLA2 on cross-border QA (CBQA) and PLA3 on EA for the QA of joint programmes. A prepared analysis will be made for the PLAs and together with EQAR, who is leading the PLAs, it will be discussed how to incorporate the results of the WG on QA of Universities.

3. Presentation of the draft analysis based on EQAR's Knowledge Base and DEQAR & Discussion time

Melinda Szabo and Aleksandra Zhivkovikj of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) presented the analysis of legal and regulatory obstacles for quality assurance (QA) procedures of the European Universities Alliances. The analysis is carried out within the IMINQA project under coordination of the Flemish Department of Education and Training (MINEDU-FC) and the WG on the QA of European universities. The analysis will be the starting point of the previous mentioned feasibility/in depth study in five EHEA countries and is based on the EQAR knowledge Base, DEQAR data and on ETER as of 23 December 2022.

Most countries require external QA at both programme and institutional level. However, there are six EHEA systems with only institutional level external QA³ and two EHEA systems with only programme level external QA⁴. The analysis reveals that the most common length of external QA accreditation cycle is 5 to 6 years. However, the length varies from shorter cycles (1-3 years) to longer cycles (7-8 years).

Regarding the **European Approach (EA) for QA of Joint Programmes** within the EHEA, the DEQAR data reveals a small advance in the number of procedures. In the past seven years and by seven EQAR-registered agencies, the EA has been used at least 17 times and has been used for 53% of total number of international joint programme procedures (between 2016-2021). It is not surprising that the EA is more often employed in higher education institutions (HEIs) within Germany, the Netherlands, France and Spain considering the size of the higher education systems and the requirements for programme level external QA. **Limitations** in the use of EA are considered: a limited familiarity within the procedure, difficulties in carrying out the EA due to additional requirements that go beyond the EA standards and exceptions that are being made for specific procedure but do not really enable changes in legal framework.

As for the **Cross-border Quality Assurance (CBQA)**, the analysis shows five conditions that are frequently applied in EHEA countries for EQAR registered agencies to be able to perform. These conditions can have implications for HEIs and QA agencies to undergo CBQA or can be disincentivise.

The five conditions are:

1. An obligation for the foreign agency to be approved by a competent national body;
2. The foreign QA agency needs to agree on the terms and conditions of the review with the national agency;
3. The foreign QA agency uses the regulations and frameworks of the country (or the national agency where the institution is based);

³ Turkey, Ireland and UK

⁴ Ukraine and Poland

4. An initial accreditation has to be awarded by the national QA agency;
5. The competent national body makes the decision to approve the review after the procedure.

The analysis shows that cross-border recognition of external QA results is possible in many EHEA systems. However, additional conditions can make it burdensome and complicated for the HEI's and QA agencies. The European Approach seems to be slowly becoming the preferred choice of QA in joint programmes. Some countries have up to 6 HEIs using the EA.

Q&A/Discussion:

- It was noted that there was quite some optimism about the **number of cases** (17 employments of the EA by 7 EQAR-registered agencies in the past 7 years). However, it was argued that the number is rather low or at least seems low. The optimism is however based on the fact that the European Approach seems to emerge as preferred choice for QA of international joint programmes and that it has received more attention recently. It was also noted that not everyone who had used the EA has already updated their data, so the numbers need some caution. It was agreed that in the finalisation of the report, the numbers will be more stressed/carefully mentioned to avoid ambiguities. It was stated that the draft analysis could be helpful to enhance the discussion on QA and the number of cases.
- What was identified as missing in the draft analysis, was an examination of why the EA is not widespread, what problems exist and how they should be solved. It was noted that the more HEIs ask for **CBQA**, the more authorities might offer flexible conditions and vice versa. The more universities use CBQA, the more they will have to cooperate.
- Some more thoughts were given on the **cross-border openness** and **language similarities**. Countries like Switzerland and Austria underwent a high percentage of CBQA by an EQAR-registered agency. However, both countries have most conditions and regulations. The reason may be that the more frequently CBQAs take place, the more the prescriptions get used and the more they become a routine and 'easier' to carry out. A possible explanation may also lie in the fact that the same 'work language' can be used by institutions and agencies, which would make CBQA simpler, as may be the case for Germany and Austria, for example.
- It was asked what the take-aways are from this analysis for the project. The initial idea was to focus on the obstacles for the alliances. Furthermore the alliances (and EUniQ) focus on more than only the education aspect. These topics could be taken up or referred to in the conclusions of the analysis.

4. Institutional practices and needs of European Universities regarding their QA

First lessons learnt on QA

Kevin Guillaume presented the first lessons learnt on QA in Circle U. (European University Alliance). Focusing on quality in short and long term is an important task of Circle U. or how Kevin Guillaume stated, "running a sprint and marathon at the same time". There is a short-term focus on completing pilot projects such as three current EU-funded projects⁵ and a 'trial and error approach'. On the other

⁵ E+ strategic partnership, E+ European university and SwafS

hand, there is a focus on structuring a sustainable and innovation collaboration with actions that will take time such as development of a new culture of cooperation.

The **QA of joint learning/teaching activities** is not a new QA process but is based on European, national and institutional existing tools. Circle U. does not want to add an additional 'lasagna layer' to the QA of learning/teaching activities. The starting points are the ESG and European Approach to QA for joint programmes and the experience, expertise and practices of each respective university.

The automatic recognition of credits and level of qualification are a guiding principle for the **recognition framework**. The starting points of the framework consist of all types of mobility, a focus on credits, courses, grades and the student status and LRC, ESG, European Recognition Manual for HEIs and ECTS Users' guide. Quality and recognition are central for students and a condition for the success of the alliance. So far, no Circle U. student status is yet created, but it is a possibility that can be explored.

For Circle U. QA is about building trust between academics, universities, workings groups etc. Trust prevails as activities are jointly developed.

Good practices in Institutional Quality Assurance.

The second speaker was Ilse De Bourdeaudhuij (of the ENLIGHT European University alliance), who presented good practices in Institutional Quality Assurance.

An important first step in **trusting the partners'** QA systems is getting to know the QA systems and their processes. Information on external and internal QA of the partners was collected by a template and search on the partner's websites. Central topics in the results were: QA plan core topics, internationalisation plan, overview of QA actors at all levels (from institutional to module level) and good practices per partner.

Based on the study so far, the crucial points in the quality strategy of all partners are:

- all partner universities are compliant with the standards and guidelines for QA in the EHEA (ESG);
- all partners implement the **PDCA cycle**⁶ at several levels (institution/faculty/programme) and use it for continuous improvement;
- a decentralized approach in which faculties gave a major responsibility and role;
- a participative approach involving all stakeholders such as management, teachers, students, labour markets and (inter)national experts;
- monitoring and reflection on quality of education at the programme, faculty and institutional level.



The QA work could therefore build on mutual trust on the QA systems implemented by the partner universities themselves. It should be trusted that all educational activities in all years of study and throughout the life cycle of the student experience, will follow this QA approach and principles.

⁶ Source: De Bourdeaudhuij, I. (2023) *Good practice in Institutional Quality Assurance* [PowerPoint-slides] (mentioned with YUFE and AEQES as well)

Currently, ENLIGHT is developing the common principles for the joint ENLIGHT quality approach and a **QA handbook**. The main focus of the QA approach could be on the ESGs and the QA handbook will serve as a collegial exchange of good practices within ENLIGHT and as a source of inspiration, not as a new quality approach.

ENLIGHT's future work is focused on **two short programmes** (jointly developed by ENLIGHT partners or by individual ENLIGHT universities) based on a need for more follow-up and information on the QA of these short programmes to guarantee trust in QA. Short programmes can include among others individual courses and micro-credentials.

YUFE Alliance Quality Assurance

Liesbeth Opdenacker presented the QA of YUFE (Young Universities for the Future of Europe). Students are central in the YUFE Student Journey, they can create their own personalised learning path and there are opportunities for multilateral mobility at all YUFE partners (physical-virtual or combination of both). The Student Journey includes three phases:

- phase 1 'Portfolio of courses and activities': students enrolled at a YUFE university can currently enrich their curriculum with YUFE courses and activities
- phase 2 'YUFE Minors' (currently tested)
- phase 3 'YUFE Joint Bachelor' (planned)

The foundation for the YUFE QA Framework is based on different **fundamentals** including:

Five basis principles:

- Trust and appreciative approach
- Subsidiarity, shared ownership
- Continuous improvement, PDCA
- Transparency
- Stakeholder involvement

Three QA dimensions:

- existing QA in YUFE partners
- QA of YUFE Open programmes
- QA of YUFE activities and services

For the **implementation of YUFE QA** exiting methods are used, such as a Quality Culture Task Force (consisting out of 9 QA policy experts, 6 academics and 3 students) in which the task force members serve as liaisons between the YUFE Alliance and their own university while the QA team is in constant contact with coordinators of other working groups. Surveys for different types of users, focus groups and elementary data analytics are the QA indicators and instruments in the YUFE QA.

In order to contribute to building a European QA system for European Universities, a peer review of the YUFE QA system was performed. There seems to be a **good match between the EUniQ framework and YUFE Foundation of QA**. The use of the EUniQ framework in YUFE seems to be rewarding so far: YUFE QA is on the right track, it offers instructive insights from peers and according to YUFE it is a useful source for networking.

The **key challenges** for YUFE are upscaling the existing QA while staying lean, adapting the existing QA to new ways of teaching and learning (such as the micro-credentials), complying with the various national requirements and legislations of the YUFE partner countries and gathering and managing data conform the GDPR. The key solutions include the full implementation of the Bologna Process by all countries, their acceptance of the European approach, more flexible study structures and adjustments of the mandatory national requirements.

QA Subgroup of the “second wave” alliances

The final presentation on the institutional practices and needs of European Universities regarding their QA was given by Frank Wehinger of the European Reform University Alliances (ERUA). He offered us three remarks on the European University Initiatives (EUIs) and Cross-border Quality Assurance.

Firstly, low knowledge leads to low dissemination and this leads to low knowledge. The 17 employments of the EA by 7 EQAR-registered agencies in the past 7 years is a very limited number. There should be more knowledge about the use of the European Approach. With the thought that when the knowledge is there, the dissemination will follow which will result in more knowledge.

Secondly, Quality Assurance is more than an accreditation of joint programmes. Bachelors, masters or short programmes, they are an important part of it but not the whole story. QA includes the entire spectrum of activities within the alliance. This whole spectrum is also taken up in the EUniQ framework.

The last remark is about whether QA systems of European University alliances can provide an alternative to national QA systems. Alliances should develop institutional integration, starting from a legal entity. In the end, maybe QA at alliance level could be developed, leaving opportunities to have discounts on national level.

Q&A/Discussion

- The question was raised on how much time and work is put in the **joint QA programmes**. It was said that it is a lot of work but it is not seen as a burden or challenge. There is made use of what is already present in the universities and the European Approach is used for joint programmes.
- The **ideal size for an alliance** was discussed. A recurring response to the question was that 9 partners was enough. We saw similar numbers in the presentations. However, some wanted less than 7 partners and some more, up to 10, because a large number would yield given the economies of scale. An important element to keep in mind is that universities can have different resources but also different goals.
- The last question concerned the need for a **general European framework** like EUniQ. It was argued that education and quality need to be and remain the most important. There is no need for an extra framework, which will only create more work and burden, and duplicate what is already there. Another layer of procedures is not necessary. Realistically, it will also take too long to create a general framework, given the time that it took for the European Approach. The focus should be on expanding the use of cases and encouraging the government to have more discussions with the alliances.

5. Do countries review their QA procedures and methodologies along with the development of the European alliances?

European Universities Initiative Quality Assurance and UKÄ

Maya (Maria) Wikse informed the group about QA and UKÄ Sweden. UKÄ shares the responsibility for the Quality Assurance (QA) in the higher education and research with the HEIs. The Quality Assurance consists of **four components**:

- Institutional reviews of HEIs' QA systems;
- Programme evaluations;
- Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers;

- Thematic evaluations (sustainable development, widening participation, and ability and skills in nursing education).

The **shared responsibility** is the core principle of UKÄ in its work with the governments assignment to develop a new system of QA in higher education. The reviews are conducted to assess the performance of study programmes and to contribute to the quality enhancement. Failing in meeting the quality standards can result in a withdrawal of degree-awarding powers. It is the government that decides on the legal status of the HEI: **universities** (both state and private universities have general degree-awarding powers for 1st, 2nd and 3rd degrees and must apply to UKÄ for regulated professions) or **University Colleges** (state: have degree power for 1st and must apply for 2nd and 3rd degree & private: must apply to UKÄ for all degree-awarding powers and the decisions is made by Government).

For UKÄ to be able to review European University alliances, foreign HEIs as well as programmes or research and to automatically accept other QA organisations' reviews, **changes in the Swedish law** and mandate will be needed.

One of the next steps for UKÄ is the start of **the internal project** – Transnational Quality Assurance which looks at both the European Approach (programme level) and at the continuation of EUniQ (institutional level). The two main tasks of the project are mapping legal obstacles for transnational QA and finding solutions (in the short and long term). The first steps include a questionnaire and data collection form HEIs in Sweden about the European Approach (their policies and procedure for the joint programmes) and what their plans are and if they need support or consultation. As well as workshops about the EUniQ model and a collaboration with the Swedish Council for Higher Education, to map legal obstacles and funding possibilities EUIs.

Toward the implementation of A European Framework for the QA of University Alliances

Following Maya Wiske, Marilena Maniaci of ANVUR presented ANVUR's working in enabling the implementation of a European Approach for QA of joint programmes possible in Italy and to facilitate the participation of the Italian Universities in European Alliances. Currently, 27 Italian Universities participate in University Alliances which is equal to almost a third of the university system.

The establishment of **new universities** is allowed periodically by the Ministry within its three-year programming, if the following three verified conditions by ANVUR are met:

- Ongoing multi-year activity;
- Proposed study programmes not ready delivered at short distance or not well represented at national level;
- Financial, logistical, scientific sustainability of the project.

Ex ante accreditation of **new study programmes** is granted by the Ministry after the assessment by ANVUR based on the overall quality the project, and the number and qualifications of the scientific staff. This evaluation is carried out yearly and on approximately 200 study programmes. In case of substantial changes that may affect the initial accreditation judgement, ANVUR may provide its evaluation on already ongoing courses.

The **periodic accreditation** of universities (five-year duration) and their study programmes (three-year duration) is granted by the Ministry following ANVUR proposal. The quality requirements⁷ are defined in compliance with the ESG and verified by a panel of ANVUR experts.

Current legislation does not allow ANVUR to recognize EQA activities or decisions of other agencies, nor to make decisions based on reviews carried out by other bodies or to evaluate, audit or accredit education institutions or programmes belonging to other countries. The mandate is limited to Italy. Branches of Italian HEIs operating in other countries are accredited according to the same rules and procedures applied to other Italian institutions. However, discussions are with the Ministry to implement the regulatory changes needed to allow ANVUR to operate fully internationally.

Q&A

- A question was raised concerning information spread and how or where to find information on the alliances. Kevin Guillaume informed the group about the “Observatory of European universities alliances”⁸. The [website](#) contains information for anyone who wants to get an idea of the activities in the EUI landscape. It offers an overview of the existing alliances and their university members. The data is based on datasets such as ETER and UNICS.

AEQES – Belgium/French-speaking community

The last presentation of the day was given by Cath Duykaerts of **AEQES**.

The higher education system in the French-speaking community of Belgium is quite varied with students spread across multiple universities, university colleges, Art schools and adult education centers. For the higher education institutions to have their programmes evaluated, the HEIs must comply with the requirement by AEQES on a regular basis. There are **three EQA activities**:

1. Initial programmatic evaluation: quality of the study programme
2. Continuous programmatic evaluation: continuous improvement (what happened compared to last evaluation?);
3. Institutional review: every 6 years (pilot phase) - QA relating to learning and teaching.
An ‘optional summative judgement procedure’ was tested during the pilot. The procedure allows institutions to receive a positive, conditional or negative judgement at the end of the institutional evaluation on their ability to independently manage the external evaluation of their programmes. In case of a positive judgement, the consequence is that the planning of programmatic evaluation is terminated for the duration of the evaluation cycles (6 years).

Higher education programmes that fall in the scope of agency’s evaluation are required to be evaluated by law. Institutions that want to use other evaluation or accreditation bodies are allowed by AEQES to do so, but only under certain conditions and without duplicating the process with the formative AEQES’s evaluation. Initially, AEQES authorized joint evaluations in cooperation with quality assurance agencies. These were very time demanding given the time that was needed to get into the details or in the ‘DNA’ of the organisations. So, in September 2017, AEQES took another step and adopted a procedure for recognizing an evaluation or accreditation process **conducted by another body**.

AEQES is willing to commit itself in implementing the methodology and framework developed by the EUniQ project given that it focuses on the EQA of the alliances, the clear and simple guiding questions,

⁷ the strategy of the University (in teaching, research, third mission and administration), the programming and management of resources, the structure of the QA system, the quality of teaching and the services offered to the students and the quality of the planning and management of research and third mission activities

⁸ Link: [Observatory of EU alliances \(sirislabs.com\)](http://sirislabs.com)

the PDCA cycle and it allows/recommends coordination among QA agencies to coordinate EQA. AEQES has also informed the identified HEIs about the EUniQ project.

Q&A

- It was noted that it is not allowed to make **cross-border reviews** and the question was raised whether there is an interest in doing cross-border reviews and what it would mean for the agencies and the ministries. It was replied that while there is interest in it, the reason it is not happening is the lack of resources to do so. It is known that cross-border reviews are essential for working altogether. In addition, it was stated that it is essential to be aware of what is going on outside. There is often only one agency, so you need to work with others in order of not just working with yourself.
- It was mentioned that evidence shows that alliances will find a specific framework useful. In the EUniQ framework, there is an indication that the European Approach is the one to be used for joint degrees. Two frameworks are already there so we must think about what is still missing.
- A final statement was made that all the **European universities are different**. Some focus more on for example micro-credentials than others. This needs to be kept at mind and while adaptations are being made, things keep on happening.

6. Discussion on the methodology for the feasibility study & call for participation of the 5 EHEA countries

As a next step in the project, a the feasibility study will take place. One of the main discussions concerned the **role of the national authorities** (ministries) in this in-depth study. Should the ministries be part of the conversations and being consulted during the process or should agencies and alliances cooperate and invite members of the ministries in a later phase and inform them about the work of the national working group? After discussion it was decided that given the goal of the study was to enhance the dialogue between partners, it is essential that ministries are part of the whole process.

It was noted that the alliances are still in exploring phases and differences can occur between them. Some understanding is still missing of what alliances exactly are. However, alliances know what quality is, so there is no need to interfere. The trust in alliances will strengthen over time.

The discussion continued whether the possibility of using the European Approach for the QA of joint programmes should already be possible within the five participating EHEA countries. In the original set-up of the in-depth study, this should already be possible in the involved 5 EHEA countries. A remark was made that it might be better to have a **mix of countries** – countries with and without the European Approach – in order to increase interest in the European Approach via the in-depth study. We should also opt to have a mix of countries (with big/small alliances, many/little, ...) and not exclude the non-EU countries.

Regarding a potential participation in the feasibility/in-depth study, the participants were asked about their interests. Sweden, France and Italy already showed an interest in participating. Concerning the mix of countries, a suggestion was given to engage countries that are already interested in the European Approach.

7. Way forward

- February 2023: finalisation of the Research Analysis
- February 2023 – November 2023:
 - February 2023: selection of 5 EHEA countries for the feasibility study
 - March 2023: 1st Peer Learning Activity (PLA) with the 5 EHEA countries
 - March – October 2023: feasibility study
 - November 2023: 2nd Peer Learning Activity (PLA) with the 5 EHEA countries
- November 2023: next meeting of the WG