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Internationalisation in a changing world. New trends and challenges for QA

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Proposal

Title: Collaborating in a “meta-organisation”: IQA on the level of a European university alliance

Abstract:

The international dimension of quality assurance in Europe has been a key element of the European Higher Education Area for more than two decades now. In the outline for an “European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes”, which the Ministers of the EHEA adopted in 2015, the international dimension was further promoted, encouraging and requiring higher education institutions and agencies to collaborate across national systems and legislature.

However, the focus so far has been largely on external assessments. With the European Universities Initiative, this started to shift, as alliances began exploring options for aligned and/or alliance level internal quality assurance (IQA) systems.

This paper will delve deeper into the issue of challenges for collaborative internal quality assurance, which go far beyond the legal and technical difficulties of sharing data, and include important differences in culture, organization design and methodological emphasis. Drawing on the authors’ own experience as delegates to the Quality Board of the ENGAGE.EU European university alliance, the paper presents some carefully selected “lessons learned” on how an internal quality assurance system for a multi-institutional environment can be developed and taken to the next level, while paying heed to the different national legal systems and cultures and the European level discourse.

Introduction: European level QA and the role of the European University Initiative

The international dimension of quality assurance in Europe has been a key element of the European Higher Education Area ever since the responsible Ministers of Education committed to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level in the Berlin Communiqué (2003). Two editions of the European Standards & Guidelines (ESG, 2015, 2005) defined common “rules” for institutions and quality assurance agencies alike. In the outline for an “European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes”, which the Ministers of the EHEA adopted in 2015, the international dimension got even further promoted, encouraging and requiring higher education institutions and agencies to collaborate across national systems and legislature. The focus so far, has been largely on external assessments of individual programmes, though (European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, Yerevan, 2015). This is not even limited to the European Higher education area: Yung-Chi Hou et. Al. (2016) have compared Europe and Asia, in light of the growing number of joint degree programs, differentiating between national, joint, single and international quality assurance approaches to such programmes. In principle, the formation of a European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) also allowed for a stronger international dimension of external quality assessments on the institutional level, as some European countries allow their higher education institutions to choose any agency from the register for a review. But those agencies still typically need to operate under the national quality assurance framework, and even if the higher education institutions maintain campuses in different countries, the individual national legislation prevails.

With the start of the European University Initiative (EUI) from 2019, the situation slowly started to change. The EUI is considered a key element of the European level strategy for universities, aiming for 60 alliances by 2024. Currently, 41 of these alliances exist, with facts on each of them, including their different profiles online ((<https://education.ec.europa.eu/european-universities-factsheets>, retrieved 15/10/23). Overall, the EUI aims to strengthen the international competitiveness of higher education institutions in Europe and to foster European identity and values.

In order to facilitate exchange among the alliances, the European Commission encouraged (and co-funded) different thematic subgroups within the so-called “Forum of European Universities - FOREU” (for the first cohort of alliances) and “Forum of European Universities – FOREU2” (for the second cohort), with one subgroup dedicated to quality assurance. The subgroups were tasked with sharing good practices and identifying potential (regulatory and/or financial) obstacles for the alliances’ work. Additional European Commission funded projects such as EUNIQ (<https://www.nvao.net/en/eunig>, retrieved 20/10/23), with the goal to develop a European approach for comprehensive quality assurance of European university networks laid an important basis for further discussion.

The authors of this paper are all members of the Quality Board of ENGAGE.EU, one of the alliances from the “second cohort”, which started in 2020, and just got greenlighted for another four years.

ENGAGE.EU is a consortium of nine leading European universities in business, economics, and the social sciences, including, in alphabetical order, Hanken School of Economics (Finland), Luiss University (Italy), NHH Norwegian School of Economics (Norway), Ramon Llull University (Spain), Tilburg University (Netherlands), University of Mannheim (Germany), University of National and World Economy Sofia (Bulgaria), University Toulouse Capitole (France) and WU Vienna (Austria). The alliance aims to provide European citizens with the set of skills and competences needed to tackle major societal challenges, with a strong focus on aspects of economics and business.

Quality assurance was on ENGAGE.EU’s agenda from the start. Part of the alliance’s working programme was the development and implementation of a quality policy. The policy’s focus was agreed to be on internal quality assurance, as, even though all member universities undergo regular national external quality assurance procedures, aligning these procedures or finding common ground for external evaluations, much like in the EUNIQ project, did not emerge as a priority for the time being.

An ENGAGE.EU Quality Board was set up, with the mandate to manage implementation of the policy and communicate efforts across all stakeholder groups. This board was organised as a standing working group, comprising of at least one experienced quality assurance professional from each partner

institution with the additional responsibility to act as the main liaison with all relevant authorities inside the partner institutions.

Overall, ENGAGE.EU's understanding of quality is deeply rooted and connected to guiding frameworks on the European and International level. The most important contextual drivers and conditions are in addition to ENGAGEA.EU's very own vision and mission statement, the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance and relevant developments of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), national and international quality frameworks and the strategic plans and quality policies of the partner universities.

Main quality instruments and quality processes for the alliance's first phase include course and module level evaluations, programme level reviews, alumni and student monitoring schemes, a repository documenting alliance-level operational details, criteria and internal guidelines for all educational efforts – and various mutual learning and benchmarking activities. In the second phase, the focus will increasingly shift to impact monitoring and connecting evaluations to developmental processes (e.g. staff development). More than half a dozen evaluations (i.e. of two international summer schools, an alliance level joint programme and shared modules/courses) have been completed by the time this paper is written.

Challenges for IQA in multidimensional meta-organisations

As Alzafari & Ursin (2019) have shown, different country settings affect the implementation of quality standards such as the ESG in different ways. This has quite an impact on cross-border collaborative quality assurance, as is, for example, shown in the case study by Sanchez-Chaparro et al. (2022). The focus has, to a large degree, so far been set on challenges for external quality assurance, though, also when it comes to European University Alliances (see, e.g. Jungblut et al 2023). When focusing on internal quality assurance within university alliances, it is beneficial to employ a specific theoretical perspective, that helps to understand the specifics of such a type of organization – and the implications for practice.

Maassen et al. (2022) propose to approach the European university alliances as “multidimensional meta-organizations”. In this, the authors follow the Ahrne & Brunsson (2005), who regard meta-organizations as specific kinds of organizations where other organisations, not individuals are members (“organisations of organisations”). As one consequence, such meta-organisations typically face considerable governance challenges, as it is difficult to impose hierarchical structures on members that consider themselves as equals. Considerable efforts are dedicated to boundary, identity and practice work (cf. Lupova-Henry et al. 2021), and establishing trust within the group becomes a priority (cf. Maassen et al. 2022). Power in such multinational consortia can be quite uneven (cf. Tadaki & Tremewan 2013).

IQA in such a type of organization is faced with considerable challenges, stemming from the fact that there are various levels in need of alignment: contextual ones (such as the different funding and legislative systems of the partner institutions), institutional ones (including institutional specifics such as size, status or organization forms) and last but not least cultural ones.

During the first three years and from the perspective of collaborative internal quality assurance, the following challenges could so far be identified:

- The differences between organisations' cultures and contexts impact their institutional approaches to IQA immensely. This finding might seem so obvious, it is almost trivial, but the implications are quite far reaching. Different legal norms as well as the status and position of IQA units, just to name two factors where such differences occur, impact the degrees of freedom towards developing and even “rethinking” quality assurance routines. This includes the importance ascribed to formal structures and decision making processes, but also how quality is operationalized, or how risks are assessed and dealt with.
- The fact that European level QA very much follows a common framework and is making use of a highly institutionalized professional language does not necessarily lead to a joint understanding of the employed structures and procedures, but might even conceal that actors

from different national and institutional backgrounds – at least latently – follow rather different ideas and perceptions of what should be done, and how (cf. Vettori 2018). In many ways, the shortcuts offered by referring to ready made terms and concepts might even reinforce misunderstandings.

- On a more practical, but immensely important level, the exchange of data is a key challenge for aligning IQA processes and instruments across institutions, which is a necessary prerequisite for tracking joint teaching efforts and comparing evaluation results. The main problem is not so much owed to the fact that different institutions use different instruments that operationalize quality differently and with different scales, but rather to the technological and legal obstacles of sharing personalized data across institutions.
- The considerable level of fluctuation among institutional liaisons, the conflicting schedules arising from aligning timetables across up to nine institutions as well as technological and organizational obstacles, make the development of an institutionalized memory and proper knowledge management structures and routines on the alliance level a key priority, but at the same time a challenge in itself.
- And last but not least, it can also be observed that institutional level work is prioritized over alliance level work. Many institutions are already dealing with a lack of time and resources that impacts their own internal quality work, and the extra workload that comes with developing another layer of cross-institutional quality assurance and aligning processes, is often difficult to accommodate

Summing up, the issue of challenges for collaborative internal quality assurance, appear to go far beyond legal and technical difficulties, including important differences in culture, organization design and methodological emphasis. Some of these challenges might be generic, i.e. will be faced in any cross-international and cross-cultural collaboration between organizations. Yet in light of the seemingly never ending discourse on the relativity and vagueness of quality, the varied interpretations and models of “quality in use” are certainly something to take heed of, also when designing overarching external quality assurance mechanisms.

Overcoming these challenges

Addressing the above mentioned challenges is as multilayered as the underlying difficulties: There are no easy solutions or quick fixes, like setting up a shared digital workspace or defining roles and responsibilities in a document, and the way forward was and is certainly characterized by detours and dead ends. From the start, the ENGAGE.EU quality board has regularly taken stock, though, analysing what had been done and worked or not; and then carefully adapting working plans and approaches. The following principles have been extrapolated from the alliance’s quality work as factor of success so far, mirroring similar findings on collaboration among/within multidimensional meta-organizations:

Investing in a proper analysis of the organisations and their relevant environment: Understanding each partner’s specifics and context was and is a key prerequisite for developing shared processes and structures that find acceptance and do not clash with existing needs and constraints. An in depth comparative analysis of national QA systems and legislation, partners’ international accreditations, institutional strategies and quality relevant policies as well as existing practices all paved the way for developing an overarching framework which respects institutional autonomy. This was complemented by regular benchmarking and analyses of how other European University Alliances were approaching QA.

Aligning processes rather than standardizing them: One of the key success factors was the alliance’s early agreement on a subsidiarity principle: The autonomy and efforts of all partner institutions are respected, and QA processes are implemented/left to the level where they are the most meaningful. In this respect, only alliance-level activities are treated with the help of alliance-level QA instruments. In many ways, the resulting QA framework thus is complementing existing ones, rather than substituting or even overriding them.

Embracing change rather than enforcing it: Very much line with the finding that change in higher education in most cases can be regarded as incremental rather than transformational (cf. Taylor & Machado 2006), acceptance of procedures that do not originate in one's home institutions is certainly increased by carefully assessing, and ideally minimizing and underemphasizing the change potential for each individual partner. The quality board was deliberately keeping a low profile, working in the background and seizing opportunities for raising momentum in a soft power way, rather than making use of top down approaches.

Leading in an adaptive manner: Meta-organisations usually boast a multitude of different actors with different, often overlapping responsibilities and maybe even conflicting priorities. Some actors might be responsible for a specific project task, whereas others manage a process or guard an institution's interests. By employing an approach that understands leadership as a shared influence process to which several individual actors contribute through their interactions and dispersed expertise (cf. van Almeijde et al 2009), the quality board put outcomes over formal responsibilities. In the tradition of adaptive leadership, the board recognised that "(...) there are competing visions for the reality of the organization" (Lu & Laux 2017: 643). Part of the corresponding efforts was also a strong emphasis on building an effective communication architecture: Representative structures are a big part of academic self-governance cultures, yet heavily rely on the representatives passing on information. Finding ways of bringing people together and on board

Favoring process over structure: From the start, the Quality Board decided to focus on creating and aligning actual practices, much in the sense of Elken and Stensakers concept of "quality work" (2018), driven by the assumption that too much a focus on developing complicated governance structures and aligning quality cultures would take too much time and alienate important actor and stakeholder groups, resulting in further "engagement issues" (Vettori & Loukkola, 2014). This has so far proven to be effective – but also brings along the need to help other actors understand how the processes and practices are supported by actual organization structures, even if they may be latent and situative, rather than formal.

Prioritising the benefits for learner. The approach of emphasizing practical rather than structural aspects has also been taken in consideration of the fact that student needs transcend border and contexts, in particular when engaging in collaboratively provided education offers (c.f. Abebe & Ford 2019). Students – for good reasons – do not care nor need to care about all the obstacles European university alliances have to face. Prioritising the needs of the learners – in close collaboration with the alliance's Board of Learner – provided the relevant quality practices with a clear focus and trajectory, while also ensuring stakeholder buy-in.

Concludingly, the authors observe that overcoming challenges in collaborative internal quality assurance within multidimensional meta-organizations such as the ones mentioned in this paper, goes far beyond filling a quality policy with life or establishing quality processes. Finding workable solutions is also vital for maintaining and enhancing the quality, credibility, and reputation of participating institutions. If the goal is to facilitate student mobility, foster innovation, optimize resources, ensure regulatory compliance, and promote cooperation among institutions, and ultimately leading to a stronger, more competitive higher education sector, finding new models of shared governance, abandoning our obsession with formal structures and rethinking out approaches to change (management) will be key.

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