IMINQA

Implementation and Innovation in QA through Peer Learning (IMINQA) WG on QA of European Universities Kick-off meeting Draft report – 17/6/2022

1) Welcome and introduction

The project coordinator and chair Magalie Soenen welcomed all participants to the IMINQA WG on quality assurance (QA) of European Universities kick-off meeting and thanked them for their presence.

She invited all participants to briefly present themselves.

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

The IMINQA project will support the work of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance (TPG C on QA). The project foresees the organisation of TPG meetings, offer a staff mobility scheme, organise three peer learning activities and work 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. It builds on the previous EUniQ project, with a focus on the policy perspective. A working group (WG) is being set up, with the aim to offer peer learning to increase mutual awareness and understanding of QA expectations between the different stakeholders. As foreseen in the application, the WG would consist of max. 30 participants. 19 countries[1] and 6 organisations[2] have responded to the call to participate in the group. This resulted in a mix of representatives of ministries and QA agencies, but also of countries with a high number of HEIs taking part in European Universities and with no participation yet.

Next, an analysis will be carried out on legal obstacles in the participating countries in the WG to apply the EUniQ framework (July 2022 – December 2022). Based on the analysis of obstacles, 5 European

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[1] Albania, Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belgium/Flemish Community, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Georgia, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Malta, Norway, Romania, Slovenia, Sweden, The Netherlands.
[2] EUA, ETUCE, ESU, European Commission, EQAR, ENQA.

Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries will be selected for a feasibility study (April 2023 – October 2023) on how to integrate the EUniQ framework into the national legislation in these countries. It was noted that the EUniQ framework (see further explanation below) is a starting point, but there is still room for adaptations and alternative solutions. For this feasibility study, cooperation with national stakeholders will be set up through national working groups involving the European Universities present in the respective countries. Each country involved will set up their own roadmap. The feasibility study will be reported back on to the full working group during the third WG meeting, ensuring that the full WG can learn from the feasibility studies. Two small PLAs (March 2023 & November 2023) with the 5 selected EHEA countries will be organised in order to compare systems, learn from each other and come to a similar approach for the national work.

There are links with two of the PLAs that will be organised as part of the project, namely PLA2 on Cross-border QA (CBQA) & QA of TNE and PLA3 on European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes. A preparatory analysis for the PLAs will be made. Together with the colleagues of EQAR (leading the PLAs) it will be discussed how the outcomes of the WG on QA of European Universities can be incorporated in the PLAs and vice versa.

3) Presentation of the outcomes of the EUniQ project: framework & policy papers, followed by Q&A

Mark Frederiks (NVAO) presented the EUniQ project (Developing a European Approach for Comprehensive QA of (European) University Network). This project was carried out between May 2019 and November 2021. The project's aim was to develop a framework for the QA of European University Networks. The project included 17 partners: 6 ministries, 8 QA agencies and 3 European stakeholder organisations.

The main outcomes of the project were the development of a European Framework for the Comprehensive QA of European Universities, 4 pilot evaluations of European University alliances, the publishing of policy papers by the resonance group (ministries) with recommendations and an analysis of the proposed methodology, and a QA development roadmap.

EUniQ framework

The aim of the QA framework was to allow European University alliances to be evaluated with one single European QA Framework and one QA procedure. We are still in the starting phase of European Universities. They are setting up internal QA and still have possibilities to experiment. However, at some point their joint provision will likely be subject to external QA (e.g. accreditation of joint programmes, institutional reviews). Multiple, potentially contradictory, less suitable external QA procedures could become problematic. Hence, the purpose of the EUniQ framework was to think ahead and propose a single procedure.

European Universities can make their own shared, integrated, long-term joint strategy, comprising many elements. Hence, it is not possible to propose a set of indicators for the QA of European Universities. Therefore, a more generic approach is necessary. EUniQ proposes the following elements for evaluation:

- **Criteria** describe what is expected from a fully developed European University (the criteria follow the PDCA (plan, do, check, act) cycle);

- **Reference points** indicate for each criterion relevant elements of the European Universities Initiative call;
- Evaluation of the **stage of development** allows to adapt expectations to reality of current early stage.

These criteria are based on the following questions:

- What is the European University's vision on the quality of its education and, where possible, the links to research, innovation and service to society?
- How will the European University realise its vision?
- How does the European University monitor to what extent its vision is actually realised?
- How is the European University working on improvement?
- How is the quality of the European University's provision assured in an internationally accepted manner (ESG)?

At the end of the evaluation procedure, a report is drawn up. This includes findings, analysis and conclusions regarding criteria and recommendations. In collaboration with the pilot European University alliances, it was agreed that the report containing recommendations for further development would be confidential and that a public summary would be published. However, the ESG require the publication of full reports, so after the pilot stage, full publication according to the ESG would be necessary.

The following steps are proposed for the evaluation procedure:

1. Selection of (at least one) QA agency that is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR);
2. Preliminary meeting
3. Information provided to the panel (self-evaluation report)
4. Composition of the panel (at least 5 trained experts)
5. Site visit (at 1 location for at least 2 days, involving partners and stakeholders)
6. Evaluation report (public, in English, collegiate advice)

Pilot evaluations

Pilot evaluations were carried out with four European University alliances to test the framework. The participating alliances were EUTOPIA, UNA Europa, UNITE! and YUFE. Due to COVID-19, online evaluations were carried out with the four alliances and their stakeholders.

Based on the pilot evaluations, the framework was adapted. The following remarks were made regarding the elements of the framework:

- Criteria: the four criteria are suitable, although if an alliance is still in an early stage, it will be hard to evaluate certain criteria, notably the evaluation of improvement policy. The site visit should preferably be organised after setting up an internal QA system.
- Reference points: the focus of the evaluation should be on long-term development. Therefore, the long-term perspective should be clarified and flexibility is necessary regarding reference points, in order to be able to adapt to new developments (including on policy level).
- Stage of development: all reviewed alliances were in a starting phase, with different timelines, which sometimes was confusing for the panel. Therefore, it is important to include a first

meeting between the alliance and the panel to clarify the development stage of the alliance and mutual expectations.

Review Resonance Group

The proposed methodology was reviewed by the EUniQ Resonance Group (composed of ministries). They indicated as possible obstacles:

- Unequal QA treatment of HEIs in or out of alliances ("lighter touch?") within national procedures;
- In some countries accreditations by a foreign EQAR-registered agency are not accepted;
- Procedures and accreditations must be in national language: translation from English.

Furthermore, the Resonance Group proposed a number of recommendations:

- Focus on the level of the alliance;
- Take the complete remit of each European University alliance into account;
- Respect and strengthen Bologna key commitments;
- Define a clear focus of the quality assurance process;
- Facilitate collaborations and support trust among actors.

Based on a survey carried out during the EUniQ project, it was shown that the applicability of the EUniQ framework varies between countries according to national legislation. This is something that will be further looked at within the current IMINQA WG on QA of European Universities.

Roadmap for Implementation

The EUniQ project also developed a Roadmap for the implementation of the European Framework. The following principles should guide the implementation of the framework:

1. Internal and external QA for European Universities compliant with the ESG;
2. The European University is the primary responsible for QA of its provision;
3. Evaluations of European Universities should respect internal QA, diversity, academic freedom and autonomy;
4. Evaluations should include all missions (education, research, innovation, service to society), respecting choices made by the alliance;
5. Evaluations should focus on the joint provision of the alliance (not assessment of each HEI/programme/course);
6. Evaluation could support and simplify assessment with European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes;
7. Flexibility and openness in applying European Framework is needed;
8. European Universities can choose 1, 2 or more EQAR registered agencies;
9. National authorities should consider how the evaluation results can be used in national QA procedures;
10. The ultimate aim is evaluation of European Universities through 1 QA procedure with the European Framework instead of multiple QA frameworks and procedures that may be conflicting, burdensome or less suitable.

The framework is ready to be used by European University alliances.

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Stakeholder involvement will be crucial for the further implementation. There are roles for all players (QA agencies, national authorities, European Commission, European University alliances, recognition bodies, EQAR, …) on giving information, promoting the framework, providing additional guidance, etc.

Q&A

- The issue of the **added value** of the European University alliance was discussed. It was noted that it is up to the alliance to define the added value of their alliance. The added value is therefore different for each alliance and this should be respected by an evaluation panel. The evaluation is done on the basis of the information that the alliance provides.
- It was noted that **different types of alliances** participate in the initiative. There are differences between e.g. technical universities, young universities, research universities, UAS, art schools. The evaluation always needs to take the context of the alliance into account. Those alliances that are highly committed and have a long-term vision will likely succeed; for others it may be a more short-term project.
- The question on whether the framework should **replace the national institutional approach** was asked. Its aim is to avoid a situation – as it was with joint programmes – where multiple, sometimes contradictory legislations apply. We must start to think about this already, and not in 10 years from now. The evaluation focuses on the joint provision of an alliance, not the full provision of all the single universities in this alliance. Therefore, it cannot replace national procedures. Perhaps it could however be possible in the future to exempt (partly) joint provision from the institutional review.
- It should be noted that the framework cannot be immediately **implemented** in all countries, due to different national legislations and requirements. At the moment, there is no political commitment at European level to implement it. The framework can however already provide a useful tool for voluntary assessment of European Universities, with the aim of enhancing the QA (procedures) within the alliance.
- The question was raised **who the framework is for** and whether we are not over-evaluating. The framework was set up to support European University alliances, to provide a procedure that avoids burdensome, duplicate and potentially contradictory processes in the different countries of their participating universities. It allows for diversity and a tailor-made approach. European ministers have committed to the Joint Approach, but it has not been properly implemented yet. This framework aims to provide solutions ahead of time.
- If the framework is mostly for the alliances, it was said that it should be up to the alliances to set the procedures they want. It was argued that right now, this would indeed be the case, but as policy makers, it would also be necessary to think about the **long-term implications**. National authorities should consider whether more structural changes will be necessary.
- **Social inclusion** and **access to higher education** were highlighted as areas that may need to be more included in the framework.
- It was mentioned that the project should focus on what can be realistically achieved and focus on positive encouragement. Communication and clear expectations are important.

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4) Discussion on state of play and challenges in participating countries

The WG continued to discuss the state of play and challenges regarding the QA of European Universities in the participating countries. On the basis of mentimeter polls, initial thoughts were gathered.

what is today the biggest challenge for European Universities in your country?
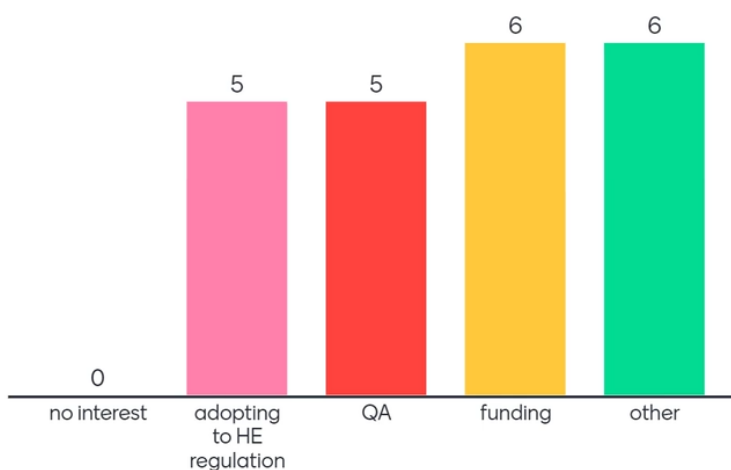
Answers regarding the biggest challenges for European Universities were spread fairly even. One of the main problems that was noted are the different legislations and rules in the different EHEA countries, relating to different topics. This also includes 'practical legislation', such as different academic yearly timing and student funding.

It was also highlighted that challenges will differ greatly per alliance and the type of activities that they want to do. The provided funding is generally considered to be limited, but it will also be up to the alliances to decide how far they want to integrate with the limited money that they receive for this initiative.

Regarding the 'other' category, some additional challenges were mentioned:

- Hurdles to start new programmes;
- Language barriers;
- Geographical distance and additional needed funding for students and staff to travel from peripheral parts of Europe;
- Justification of the alliance (and its composition) to university management and staff.

The group continued to discuss the pertinent topics to be discussed between national authorities/QA agencies and representatives of EUNs.

If you have/will have a meeting with representatives of European Universities, what would be on the agenda??
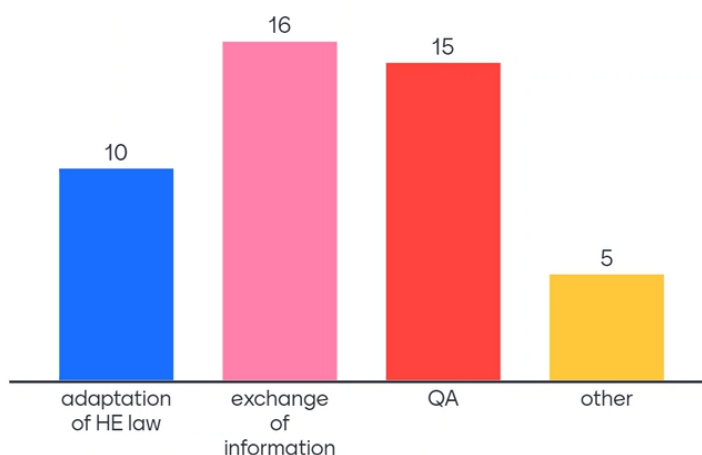
The members of the group mostly focus on the exchange of information. A framework for external QA would be useful for producing information. One member mentioned that the discussions in their country are related to topics that are high on the European agenda, e.g. micro-credentials, qualifications, QA.

The non-EU countries present were asked to explain how they see the added value for them to be in this WG and whether they have similar alliances other than European University Networks. One person explained that participation in the WG provides a chance to be exposed to European best practices, which can be taken on board in their education system renovations, in order to work on the sustainability of the system and introduce new values. Their participation could furthermore be useful to allow for possible future engagement of universities from their countries in the alliances and/or other joint programmes.

5) Way forward

- July 2022 – December 2022: carry out an analysis of legal obstacles in the participating countries in the WG to apply the EUniQ framework and/or possible other approaches.
    - July-September 2022: preparation of the analysis. EQAR will prepare a desk research, based on the EQAR overview of legal systems. For the moment, no survey is foreseen. The desk research should build on existing information and find synergies with other initiatives, such as the QA-FIT project (on the state of play of QA across the EHEA).
    - October-November 2022: analysis to take place.
    - November-December 2022: analysis of the results and writing of the report. Some WG members will be asked for their help.
- January 2023: next meeting of the WG.