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New EUA study maps quality assurance processes and ‘quality culture’ in Europe’s universities

A new study published today by the European University Association (EUA) analyses the implementation of quality assurance (QA) processes within European universities and how they are being used to develop a ‘quality culture’ within higher education institutions.

Over the last decade, there has been an increasing rise in demand for QA within higher education. This has been driven a number of factors including rising student numbers and massification of higher education and also at the European level by the Bologna Process reforms, which have as a stated aim to raise the quality of European higher education provision. As part of the Bologna Process, Ministers of education adopted in 2005 the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area which reinforced the role of universities as having primary responsibility for quality assurance.

The new study is a result of the first part of an EC-supported project “Examining quality culture in European higher education institutions”. 222 institutions from 36 countries responded to a questionnaire to enable EUA to map the processes and structures used by universities to support internal quality and respond to the increasing demands of accountability.

Co-author of the report Tia Loukkola said: “This report underlines the remarkable progress made in QA in recent years. According to our results, the overwhelming majority of European universities now have fundamental policies, structures and processes in place. This was certainly not the case ten years ago, so things have moved quickly in a relatively short space of time. Nevertheless, the survey also underlines that developing a ‘quality culture’ takes time and that there are a number of areas where universities can improve QA processes, notably in terms of widening student participation and stakeholder involvement.”

These are just a selection of the key findings from the report that will be presented next week at the European Quality Assurance Forum for Higher Education (18-20 November):

QA structures and organisation

- The **Bologna Process and subsequent changes in national frameworks have promoted a growing awareness and insights** into the need for QA in teaching and learning
- **Remarkable progress has been made in QA** in recent years. QA systems are now largely in place across Europe, although their development in the current format is a recent phenomenon. 93% of institutions surveyed have a strategic plan or document which tackles the issue of quality/quality assurance
- A **wide range of organisational structures for implementing QA exist**. Most commonly (64% of cases) the rector or vice rector has direct responsibility for QA issues within universities. In terms of supporting structures 62% of respondents have a centralized QA unit with specialised staff. However, it is clear that there is **no one size fits all solution** to deciding what a institutional QA system should be

Stakeholder participation (university leadership, administrative and academic staff, students, alumni, external experts)

- **Participation of staff and students is a key principle** in developing both a quality culture and QA processes. Institutions with a longer history in using QA are more likely to give importance to the influence of student surveys as well the importance of a feedback loop and informing the students about the follow-up of QA activities they participated in. While the involvement of academic staff seems to be systematic and common, from curriculum design to involvement in formal QA processes, student involvement is not as widespread.
- **External stakeholders (employers, experts, alumni...) are commonly involved in QA processes** (80% of responses) but the level and the nature of their participation varies, from sitting on governance bodies to being consulted as sources of information

Quality assurance in teaching and learning

- About **two thirds of responding universities have designed 'institution specific' QA frameworks** for teaching and learning but these largely follow national frameworks and guidelines. Few universities chose to adopt external QA models (such as CAF, ISO...)
- **More than 90% of institutions reported to have developed learning outcomes** but they do not all make them publicly available. Less than half measure the student workload needed to reach the described learning outcomes through student surveys.

Future challenges and recommendations

- Institutions should be **encouraged to adopt or reinforce an all-encompassing approach** to quality assurance, rather than resorting to a culture of compliance aiming to satisfy external requirements
- Institutions should **develop explicit feedback loops between strategic management and quality** assurance processes, including ways to monitor, in particular, the results and quality of activities with the aim of feeding the information into the strategic planning process
- Although there has been much progress, promoting the participation of all stakeholders in quality assurance processes in order to enhance the commitment to quality continues to be a challenge. **Participation of students, in particular, needs to be further strengthened in the follow-up activities of QA processes and in measuring student workload.**

This project is carried out by EUA with its partners, The German Rectors Conference (HRK) and QAA Scotland.

Ends

A full copy of the report is available on request. For more information, please contact Andrew Miller, European University Association (EUA) Direct phone line: + 32 2 743 1 159; E-mail: Andrew.Miller@eua.be

Background notes for editors

Quality assurance in European higher education comprises three levels:

1. Institutional level. EUA has taken the lead in developing the capacity of higher education institutions to create internal quality processes through the [Institutional Evaluation Programme](#) (IEP) and various projects such as this project

2. National level: Enhancing external accountability procedures. Many countries that have signed the Bologna Declaration have at least one quality assurance or accreditation agency. Many of these agencies, as well as EUA's IEP, are members of the [European Association for Quality Assurance \(ENQA\)](#).

3. European level: Since 2001, EUA has been meeting regularly with ENQA, ESIB and EURASHE (E4 Group) to discuss how to develop a European dimension for quality assurance. This partnership resulted in the [European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance \(ESG\)](#) which were adopted by the European Ministers for Education in Bergen in 2005. The E4 also organises an [annual European Quality Assurance Forum \(EQAF\)](#) . The EQAF gathers together QA agencies and higher education institutions at European level in order to bring forward a European QA agenda based on a broad understanding of what constitutes best QA practices in the context of European higher education trends. The next EQAF will take place next week (18-20 November in Lyon, France). More details are available here: <http://www.eua.be/eqaf-lyon.aspx>

EUA is also one of the founding members, along with other E4 Group members, of the [European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education \(EQAR\)](#).