# EuniQ: Developing a European Approach for Comprehensive QA of (European) University Networks

## *Paper Resonance Group: Analysis of the proposed methodology*

### *Situation*

The EuniQ-project aims to develop a methodology for comprehensive quality assurance of (European) University Networks.

A comprehensive quality assurance assessment methodology takes into account supra-institutional policies and will examine the quality of learning and teaching in higher education, including learning environments and relevant links to research and innovation, as well the service to society. The principles stated by European standards and guidelines (ESG) will be observed.

This project supports QA agencies in addressing evolving methodological challenges, considering the various shapes and levels of integration of transnational alliances called "European universities" by developing supra-institutional QA procedures, taking into account the development of cross-border HE, the policy integration of university networks, the expanding offer of joint programmes, and the establishment of European Universities.

In this project, partners both from QA agencies and from ministries cooperate to develop and trial an assessment methodology for (European) university networks resulting in a development roadmap for QA agencies, from a needs analysis to a developed QA methodology.

The objectives of the EUniQ project are:

- to explore various approaches to assess the quality of (European) university networks;

- to demonstrate the feasibility of organising assessments of (European) university networks;

- to develop an assessment methodology that takes into account supra-institutional policies;

- to undertake four pilot assessments of (European) university networks, and to, as a result, produce a development roadmap for QA agencies in assessing the quality of (European) universities' alliances as sustainable networks of higher education institutions.

*Role of the Resonance Group and expected deliverables*

Within the project there are two groups defined:

- a Roadmap Group, composed of QA agencies and stakeholder organisations
- a Resonance Group, composed of ministries' representatives

The Resonance Group which meets adjacent to the three Peer Support Events is meant to guide, monitor and evaluate the work of the Roadmap Group.

Furthermore, as EUniQ is set up as a peer learning project, the choice was made to combine different categories of partners: partners from countries with a fully developed QA system that are already using the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes, with partners from countries that are still in the process of rolling out this approach.

The members of the Resonance Group are the six Ministries partnering in the EuniQ-project: Albania, Bulgaria, Belgium (Flemish Community), France, Georgia and Romania. All ministries have one representative (including the HCERES QA agency, which is mandated as such by the French Ministry) in the Resonance Group. The lead partner is the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, who chairs the meetings and writes the minutes of the Resonance Group meetings.

The Resonance Group has a reflective role and provides an analysis from the viewpoint of national authorities, by giving feedback and thinking about ways forward for the assessment methodology as developed by the Roadmap Group.

*Discussing the framework at the Peer Support & Kick-off event (Rome, October 2019)*

The current framework for Quality Assurance of European Universities was developed by the Roadmap group and can be found in annex 1 to this paper. A first draft of this framework was discussed during the first Peer Support & Kick-off Event in Rome in October 2019. There, it was the topic of discussion for all participants of the meeting, namely institutions, students, agencies and ministries. The resonance group also gave input and comments on the following drafts of the framework.

With this group paper, the Resonance group makes a first analysis of the proposed methodology as developed by the Roadmap Group and as discussed during the kick-off event in October 2019 with the input from stakeholders and QA agencies.

The discussions during the Kick-off event and afterwards by the resonance group came to the general conclusion that the framework for Quality Assurance for European Universities needs to focus on the added value of the alliance of the European University, and not on the basic quality of the institutions and programmes, especially during the initial start-up-phase of the European Universities. In the long run it would be useful if the framework for QA of European Universities could also be linked or replace national QA procedures and lead to joint external quality assurance procedures. As such, and building up further on commitments made by

EHEA Ministers[1], a European-wide QA-system could be developed that would reduce greatly the administrative burden in the context of QA for the European University Alliances.

Therefore, the discussion during the Resonance group meeting was opened up to the possible inclusion of basic quality of institutions and programmes within the framework. A first round of discussion showed that just as for the European university alliances themselves, also for national governments the QA-framework would focus best on the added value of the alliances. National regulations on quality assurance are not easily adaptable and need some specific procedures to be followed in order to give the necessary accreditations.

⇨ The legislation in the different countries is too different to come to one framework in the short future.

⇨ The task of this group is to find a framework that is fit for the national accreditation systems.

Possible obstacles for the proposed framework of QA of European Universities if it would take basic quality into account and if it would be integrated in national QA-legislation:

- Unequal treatment within a country between institutions who are or are not related to a European University alliance (e.g. if QA agencies would put "an extra layer" of QA on universities taking part in an alliance.). We need to guard the issue of discrimination.
- The aim is to try to achieve a framework that could be used by all EQAR-registered agencies, while in some countries accreditations by a foreign EQAR-registered agency are not accepted.
- Specific procedures for new programmes are different in every country. For example: separate procedures for programmes/institutions at different locations or in different languages.
- Procedures and accreditations need to be in the national language and therefore the reports need to be translated from English.

In the short run the added value of the alliance will be the focus, but in the long run also the basic QA of each institution within the alliance should be taken into account. For the moment, and considering the joint programmes' assessments made under the Erasmus+ calls for the pilot phase of European University's alliances, it is however more feasible to develop a framework for the added value of the alliance, on to and compatible with the national accreditation systems for each HEI.

Overall, the proposed framework, especially if used as a supplementary framework for the QA of the European Universities with a focus on the added value of the alliance, is sufficiently

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[1] Bucharest Communiqué (2012) : "*We will allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements. In particular, we will aim to recognise quality assurance decisions of EQAR-registered agencies on joint and double degree programmes » ; Yerevan Communiqué (2015) :« II. Commitments : (…) to enable our higher education institutions to use a suitable EQAR registered agency for their external quality assurance process, respecting the national arrangements for the decision making on QA outcomes »*

general, which enables it to be used in various national and institutional contexts and therefore will ensure its broad usability.

*Further analysis*

A lot of the obstacles to include the basic quality within the procedure are similar to the obstacles that prevent the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes[2] from being widely used up until now. In this regard it is interesting to look at the obstacles mentioned by the IMPEA project[3]:

"Challenges were identified in a number of areas, including the following:

• definition of terminology;

• eligibility to use the European Approach;

• administrative burden related to joint programmes;

• quality assurance;

• legislative frameworks;

• adequate information and relevant information sources."

Therefore it would be useful to take into account the discussions related to this specific procedure when analyzing the obstacles and possibilities of a framework for QA of European Universities.

Through the EQAR website some general information concerning the use of the 'European Approach of Joint Programmes' is made available. Also one can check in which countries foreign (EQAR-registered) QA-agencies are allowed to work. The table below sums up some basic features of the legislation for cross-border QA within the countries of the Resonance group:

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[2] https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf
[3] http://impea.online/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/IO2_report_formated.pdf

| Country | Can HEI's choose a foreign, EQAR-registered QA-agency? | Eligibility requirements for foreign agencies | Conditions for the agency's work (criteria to be followed) | Recognition of reviews carried out by foreign agencies | Can the European Approach for Joint Programmes be used in your country? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Albania | Yes, *under certain conditions* | The Albanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL) must aprove the request of the higher education institution to be accredited by a foreign QA agency. | *National QA-criteria* | Approval of the Accreditation Board of the Albanian Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (ASCAL). | No |
| Bulgaria | Yes | registration on EQAR and/or ENQA membership | the foreign agency will have to use *the same criteria and mark-based system* as the national agency, NEAA. | accreditation is given by the National Evaluation and Accreditation Agency (NEAA) based on the results of the assessment. | Yes |
| Belgium/ Flemish Community | Yes, for QA at programme level | registration on EQAR or formal agreement with NVAO outlining requirements to meet the ESG | own criteria (of the agency) | | Yes |
| France | Yes, *under certain conditions* | | criteria and procedures for external quality assurance must be validated by the High Council for Evaluation of | HCERES checks the external quality assurance activity, whether it corresponds to the national qualifications | Yes, *subject to the general conditions for recognising QA results of* |

| | | | Research and Higher Education (HCERES). | framework and whether the foreign quality assurance has effectively involved students in the review. | *EQAR-registered agencies*. |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Georgia** | Yes, *under certain conditions* Accreditation of higher education programs, including a joint higher education program, may be carried out by a foreign organization with the relevant competence recognized by the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (the NCEQE). Recognition is carried out in accordance with the procedure established by the [Accreditation Provision](#) | NCEQE recognizes the accreditation granted by the organization operating on the territory of the European Union and belonging to the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, which has such an authority according to the rules established by the legislation of the relevant country". | Criteria and procedures for external quality assurance must be validated by NCEQE | The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement of Georgia (NCEQE) checks the *compatibility of the evaluation with National Standards and Procedures* and recognises the accreditation granted by other foreign QA agencies, provided the agency meets these conditions and if the condition of recognition is indicated in the international agreement. | Yes, *under certain conditions.* |
| **Romania** | Yes | EQAR - registered | National criteria in line to ESG; additional criteria can be added, but those will not be used for judging on compliance | The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Edcation – ARACIS has to check that the procedure of the evaluation is in line to ESG and the report of the external evaluation | No |

| | | | | performed by a foreign agency and advise the Ministry Education and Research on the compatibility with national regulations. | |
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Both the ability for foreign EQAR-registered agencies to perform QA-procedures, as the possibility to use the European Approach, are not in all countries of the Resonance group possible. Often it depends on certain conditions and in some cases it is just not permitted.

*Survey among members of the Resonance Group*

In addition to the information on cross-border QA, some more information on the specific QA-procedures in the resonance group-countries was gathered in order to reflect on the common features of Quality Assurance. The members of the resonance group were inquired about their national QA-procedures in order to find common ground to work on for the further development of the framework. The following questions were posed to the member countries:

1. Which basic national criteria are required in your country in order to accredit study programmes?
    a. Which documents/information concerning the programmes are/is needed? Can these documents be in English?
    b. What procedures are there to be followed to grant accreditations for study programmes? What are the minimal steps to be followed in the procedure?
    c. Are there guidelines for the final evaluations reports? Language/publication?
    d. How does the final accreditation process work? Accreditation given by the QA-agency/government? Recognition by the government?
2. Could the framework for QA of European Universities (as it was presented during the EuniQ-meeting) be used in your country? If not, what additional procedures would need to be added in order for the framework to be recognized?

The answers to these questions were very diverse and gave a divergent image of national QA-legislation. All countries have developed separate guidelines, manuals and regulations which are not easily presented, let alone adjusted to one another in light of the application of the new framework for QA of European Universities. Instead of focusing on the differences between national QA-legislation, it seems more useful to try to find common ground when looking at the QA of European Universities.

*Conclusions*

Within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), a lot of efforts are made to better align quality assurance in higher education. Especially, the work of EQAR and ENQA, within the so-called 'E4[4]' group, is worth mentioning in this context, namely on the renewal of the ESG and on the development of the European Approach for QA of joint programmes (EA), which tries to overcome national boundaries, before these texts were adopted by EHEA Ministers in Yerevan (2015). In particular the European Approach has gained a lot of interest these recent years and is a hot topic in many conferences and Peer Learning Activities. The obstacles that are faced, when using the EA in practice, are increasingly being questioned by several stakeholders.

Furthermore, there are several projects and discussions at European level which focus on topics that will be crucial for European Universities' alliances as well, such as the quality assurance of distance and online learning and the quality assurance of micro-credentials. Equally as focusing on the quality assurance legislation or national QA systems as a whole, it could be fruitful to also try to focus on QA subtopics, which will become essential in the further development of the European universities' alliances and of which their activities will benefit greatly. Therefore, it could, in this stage, be useful to gain more insight into how the Resonance group's member countries are dealing with matters of QA of distance and online learning, considering the increasing digital revolution and the Covid pandemic, micro-credentials and joint programmes.

Moreover, reflection that goes beyond the scope of this project, should be started at European level. We should investigate what legislative changes are needed at the higher education system level itself. This concerns for example functional issues such as registration of students or delivery and format/legal value of diplomas, in order to create an enabling framework for the European universities' initiative.

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[4] ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU