European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities

1. Introduction

In the European Universities Initiative the European Universities[1] are defined as transnational alliances of higher education institutions from across the EU that share a long-term strategy, promote European values and identity, strengthen mobility of students and staff, and foster the quality, inclusiveness and competitiveness of European higher education. The European Universities are expected to implement:

- A **shared, integrated, long-term joint strategy** for education with, where possible, links to research and innovation and society at large.
- A European higher education **inter-university 'campus'** with a diverse student body following student-customised, joint and flexible curricula that foster an entrepreneurial mind-set and are based on cross-disciplinary approaches, innovative pedagogies, digital technologies, and civic engagement; with embedded mobility on all levels and at least 50% student mobility within the alliance and its associated partners.
- European knowledge-creating teams of students and academics, possibly together with researchers, businesses, regional actors and civil society actors, that address together societal and other challenges of their choice in a multi-disciplinary approach ("**challenge-based approach**").

Naturally each European University makes its own choices on the joint strategy, work plan of activities, management structures, engagement of stakeholders, and also the set-up of its internal quality assurance (QA) system for reaching its strategic objectives.

As the expectations are ambitious and as the development of European Universities is a long-lasting process, the purpose of this Framework is twofold: 1) contributing to the enhancement of the internal QA of the alliance; 2) supporting the fulfilment of national QA requirements by providing evaluation results from one European QA procedure so that the burden of multiple QA procedures for European Universities can be reduced as much as possible whilst respecting national responsibilities and QA requirements. Therefore, the focus of evaluation according to this Framework will be on the effectiveness of the internal QA and quality enhancement mechanisms of the alliance, taking into account the developmental process towards achieving the evaluation criteria. The evaluation criteria reflect the plan-do-check-act cycle of internal quality assurance. European Universities that have just started will not have completed this cycle yet; the phase of development is therefore relevant for the evaluation. A panel of independent experts will carry out the evaluation.

The rationale behind this Framework is to simplify existing QA requirements for European Universities. External QA requirements for higher education institutions are determined by national authorities. This Framework does not require any additional external QA requirements of institutions, programmes or courses. National authorities are encouraged to consider whether evaluation reports according to this Framework and provided through the evaluated European University can simplify or support national QA requirements for institutions and programmes. Self-accrediting universities should not be obliged to use this Framework, although they may voluntarily choose to apply the Framework for enhancement purposes or to support their partner universities that are subject to national QA requirements.

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[1] "European Universities" and "alliances" are used interchangeably in the European Universities Initiative and in this Framework.

Some European Universities are planning the development of joint programmes. These joint programmes can be assessed with the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, as adopted by European Ministers responsible for higher education in Yerevan (2015). The assessment of joint programmes according to the European Approach could be supported by the evaluation of the European University that provides these joint programmes. For instance, the evaluation of a European University according to this European Framework could provide evidence and trust when assessing its joint programmes with the European Approach standards on Eligibility (standard 1), Admission and Recognition (standard 4), Transparency and Documentation (standard 8), and Quality Assurance (standard 9).

The ultimate aim of the European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities is that the alliances can be externally evaluated with one European Framework and one corresponding suitable QA procedure instead of being subject to multiple (national) frameworks and procedures that may be conflicting, burdensome or less suitable for European Universities. As we are currently only at the start of the development process of European Universities, the internal and external QA of the alliances is still a learning process.

2. Evaluation criteria

The European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities is based on a set of criteria for the evaluation of European Universities in relation to their stage of development. The evaluation criteria with their respective reference points describe what is to be expected from a fully developed European University. The reference points indicate for each of the criteria the elements that may be relevant considering the long-term expectations from the European Universities Initiative. It should be noted that, especially in the first years of existence, it is realistically impossible for European Universities to meet all expectations. Whilst the criteria have general validity in view of the development of internal QA systems, the reference points should be handled with flexibility, respecting the autonomous choices and the developmental stage of the European University.

The criteria are organised around the following inter-related questions:
1. What is the European University's vision on the quality of its education and, where possible, research, innovation and service to society?
2. How will the European University realise its vision on the quality?
3. How does the European University monitor to what extent its vision on quality is actually realised?
4. How is the European University working on improvement?
5. How is the quality of the European University's provision assured in an internationally accepted manner, respecting the EHEA principles and objectives?

2.1. Strategy and Policies

The European University's strategy and policies enable the realisation of an inter-university 'campus' which assures, in close collaboration with internal and external stakeholders, the quality of a joint provision that responds to societal challenges.

Reference points
- The strategy and policies of the alliance integrate a vision on the quality of its provision (teaching and learning with links to research, innovation and service to society).
- All internal and external stakeholders, including affiliated entities and associate partners, play an active role in the development of the alliance's strategy/policies and the realisation of the inter-university campus.
- The alliance's strategy and policies aim at contributing to regional development and reflect the societal and other challenges that are deemed relevant by the alliance and its stakeholders (challenge-based approach).
- The QA policies for the provision of the alliance are aligned with Part 1, and where relevant Part 2, of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015).

2.2. Policy Implementation

The European University takes adequate measures to implement its strategy and policies in an effective manner and to enhance the quality of its provision (teaching and learning with links to research, innovation and service to society).

Reference points
a) The alliance has set specific, relevant and attainable objectives relating to the quality of its provision (teaching and learning with links to research, innovation and service to society).
b) The alliance has allocated sustainable resources to achieve the objectives.
c) The alliance is supported by relevant and efficient management structures with a clear distribution of responsibilities and tasks, demonstrating the financial, structural and organisational commitment at highest institutional level while giving staff and students the opportunity to be part of the co-creation of the alliance.
d) The alliance demonstrates effective involvement with key stakeholders and the local community to foster societal engagement, diversity and inclusiveness of students and staff, as well as their entrepreneurial key competences.

2.3 Evaluation and Monitoring

The European University guarantees the effectiveness of its policy implementation for the benefit of the quality of provision (teaching and learning with links to research, innovation and service to society), by organising appropriate evaluation and quality monitoring systems.

Reference points
a) The alliance has developed an evaluation and monitoring system that includes specific measures for the evaluation of progress, processes, deliverables and cost-efficiency of the alliance, and provides relevant information pertaining to all policy domains, allowing for effective governance and decision-making.

b) The scope of the evaluation and monitoring system includes the application of innovative pedagogical models; the links between education and research and innovation (e.g. how research results and innovation feeds back into education); and, the measurement of the appropriateness and impact of mobility (for students and researchers as well as for academic and administrative staff), including mobility with other organisations than   higher education institutions.

c) The system of regular internal and external evaluations ties in with the management model pursued and is characterised by an active role of students, staff, alumni, the professional field and external independent experts.

d) The alliance monitors whether enhanced cooperation is sustained across different levels and areas of activity, building on complementary strengths and synergetic effects of the alliance's network.

2.4 Improvement Policy

The European University takes measures to improve the realisation of its policy objectives and the sustainability of the alliance.

Reference points

a) The alliance pursues an active improvement policy based on the outcomes of its evaluations, thereby demonstrating its ability to innovate and adapt in order to improve.

b) The alliance demonstrates its capability for long-term sustainability, outlining how each member of the alliance will contribute to its sustainability and reducing existing (administrative) obstacles.

c) The alliance shares its outputs and good practices with relevant stakeholders.

d) The improvement policy pursued by the alliance fosters a quality culture, in which all those involved contribute to innovation and to continuous quality improvement of its provision.

3. Evaluation of the stage of development

The external assessment panel makes an evaluation regarding the stage of development of the European University and its internal QA system. The panel describes for each criterion which aspects still need to be developed, what has started to be developed, what is partially developed and what is already developed. Furthermore, the panel makes recommendations on how further developments and quality enhancement may be realised. In doing so the panel respects the timeline of development taking into account the choices made and the approaches taken by the European University, and aims to contribute to quality enhancement in a constructive way.

The evaluation findings and recommendations focus on how the internal quality assurance set-up and its possible further development can contribute to the successful realisation of the European University's strategy and its sustainability, and do not focus on the success of this strategy and the European University as such.

4. Evaluation procedure

The evaluation procedure should be carried out by at least one QA agency that is registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). The European University should decide on the number (one, two or more) and which of EQAR-registered QA agencies will coordinate the evaluation procedure, with the guarantee that all QA agencies related to the partners in the alliance will be informed on the procedure by the coordinating agency/agencies. If there are two or more coordinating QA agencies then these will agree on the distribution of tasks, costs and fees before the start of the procedure.

4.1 Preliminary meeting

At the start of the evaluation at least one online meeting between the European University and the coordinating QA agency/agencies will be scheduled to clarify the developmental stage as it is perceived by the European University and the mutual expectations regarding the purpose and the results of the evaluation.

4.2 Information provided to the panel

The information provided to the panel (that is appointed by the coordinating QA agency/agencies) should demonstrate the stage of development of the European University in view of the criteria. The European University is invited by the coordinating QA agency/agencies to write a short self-evaluation which reflects on the evaluation questions and the first 3 criteria (for alliances in their first three years of existence) or on all evaluation criteria including the reference points (for alliances that have matured beyond the duration of the EU project). The self-evaluation should enable the panel to obtain a first impression regarding the developmental stage of the alliance in view of the criteria. It is also important that the panel receives the documents it may need in order to appreciate the context in which the European University operates. Specifically, the following information should be provided to the panel:

- Mission statement
- Strategic and policy documents
- The partnership/collaboration agreement (if available)
- Work plan of activities and road map
- Quality assurance policies/manual/documents/results
- Annual reports (if available).

4.3 Composition of the evaluation panel

The EQAR-registered agency/agencies that coordinate(s) the evaluation appoint(s) the panel that will conduct the external assessment. The agency/agencies confer(s) with the European University when convening a panel. The agency/agencies should ensure the impartiality of the experts and observe fairness towards the applying European University. The European University has the right to veto an expert for valid and substantiated reasons, e.g. because of a conflict of interest.

An evaluation panel consists at least of five members, including a student, and is supported by one or more process coordinators depending on the number of coordinating agencies and the agreements made between them. The coordinating agency/agencies will appoint among the panel members a chair and a vice-chair (who can replace the chair in unforeseen

circumstances). The process coordinator is not formally part of the panel but has the responsibility of assuring that the evaluation is carried out in accordance with the methodology of the Framework and respecting the agreements made with the European University and the coordinating agency/agencies. The process coordinator acts as the communication channel between European University, panel and agency/agencies. The panel will also have a secretary who is responsible for taking the minutes of all meetings and for writing the draft evaluation report based on the findings and recommendations of the panel. The coordinating agency/agencies will decide whether an external secretary is hired for this job or the secretary role is fulfilled by a process coordinator or a panel member. The coordinating agency/agencies will ensure that the roles and tasks of panel chair/vice-chair, panel members, secretary and process coordinator(s) are clear for all.

The composition of the panel must fit the purpose of the evaluation. To this end, the panel as a group combines the following types of expertise:

- Quality assurance expertise, particularly in connection with a European University or other university network;
- Educational expertise (including knowledge on flexible curricula);
- Research expertise;
- Expertise regarding innovation and service to society;
- Senior experience with managing university networks;
- Senior university management experience;
- Student representation experience;
- Internationalisation expertise and international experience (knowledge of some of the national higher education systems of the alliance is desirable);
- Experience with e-learning and digitisation;
- Intercultural communication skills.

The panel and the process coordinator(s) shall participate in a training organised by the coordinating agency/agencies. The training will clarify the Framework, the evaluation activities, the expectations for the evaluation of the European University, and the specific roles of chair/vice-chair, panel members, secretary and process coordinator(s).

4.4 Site visit

Prior to the site visit the process coordinator(s) will organise at least one online clarification meeting between the panel and the European University to ensure that everyone understands the purpose of the evaluation and that mutual expectations are clarified. There will be a site visit of at least two days at one location of the European University. The location will be agreed with the alliance. The choice of location should allow maximum possibilities for involving the partners and stakeholders of the alliance in the interviews with the panel. In addition, online meetings should be considered to enable further participation of stakeholders who cannot be present during the site visit. Creative approaches to the format of an evaluation, taking into account the specific context of the European University, should be encouraged by the coordinating agency/agencies.

The European University will appoint a contact person who shall communicate with the process coordinator(s) of the agency/agencies on the arrangements and specific programme for the site visit and online meeting(s). The site visit should enable the panel to discuss the European University's development in view of the evaluation criteria. The site visit should therefore include discussions with representatives of all (associate) partners in the alliance and in particular the management, the staff, the students, the professional field

representatives and other relevant stakeholders. The topics of the meetings should be decided beforehand to enable an appropriate set-up of (mixed) groups of interviewees. A template for the programme of the site visit will be shared with the European University and the details regarding the interviews will be proposed by the alliance and then agreed with the panel. The interviews should be conducted in a manner that is appreciative of the European University and fosters a spirit of quality enhancement.

4.5 Evaluation report

The panel should prepare a report that contains relevant findings, an analysis and the conclusions with regard to the criteria. The report should also contain recommendations for the further development of the European University. Recommendations should always be made with respect for the context and choices of the alliance. The report will be written in English.

Thus, an important benefit for the European University participating in the evaluation is that the views and recommendations of the external independent experts can assist the alliance in the further development of its internal QA system.

The European University should have the opportunity to review the draft version of the evaluation report with regard to the correction of factual errors. The report is finalised by the panel and approved by the coordinating agency/agencies. The full report of the panel will be published by the coordinating agency/agencies. A European University that wants to lodge a complaint or appeal is referred to the complaints and appeals procedures of the coordinating agency. If there are several coordinating agencies then they will, before the start of the evaluation, agree on the complaint and appeals procedures that will be applied for the evaluation.