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European Quality Assurance from a policy perspective: where did we come from, where are we heading?

Abstract

The article presents some key developments in quality assurance (QA) on a European level over the last ten years. Particular attention is paid to discussing the impact of European QA policies (e.g. the European Standards & Guidelines) at the European and national level. This is done through a literature survey of recent policy studies, such as the Bologna Process progress reports. Taking stock, the article not only explores important issues related to QA (e.g. diversity or stakeholder participation) but also presents some likely future developments.

Keywords

Quality Assurance, European higher education area, higher education policy, European Standards and Guidelines

Die Entwicklung europäischer Qualitätssicherung aus einer Policy Perspektive: Woher kommen wir, und wohin geht die Reise?

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag diskutiert die wichtigsten Entwicklungen europäischer Qualitätssicherung in den letzten zehn Jahren. Im Fokus steht dabei die Analyse des Impacts aktueller Qualitätssicherungspolicies (z. B. die European Standards & Guidelines) auf europäischer und nationaler Ebene. Basierend auf einer Literaturanalyse aktueller Policystudies wie den Bologna Progress Reports erkundet der Beitrag nicht nur Themen, die im aktuellen Qualitätssicherungsdiskurs als besonders relevant erachtet werden (z. B. Diversität oder Stakeholderbeteiligungen), sondern bietet auch einen Ausblick auf wahrscheinliche Entwicklungen der nächsten Jahre.

Schlüsselwörter

Qualitätssicherung, Europäischer Hochschulraum, Hochschulpolitik, Europäische Standards und Guidelines

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1   Introduction

In Europe, quality assurance in higher education falls under the remit of national authorities, just like higher education in general, and is considered an essential part of each higher education system (national or regional). This has greatly impacted the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and in the course of the last decade the crucial role of national authorities has not been questioned. In return, the respect for and recognition of the value of diversity have become central and highly regarded features of European higher education. In relation to quality assurance this has led countries and higher education institutions to having a variety of methods in place as well as adopting new practices, but at different paces depending on the country.

Meanwhile, in the framework of the Bologna Process,[2] several inter-governmental agreements have been reached that have led to the creation of EHEA with its common features, such as the three-tiered degree structure, European Credit Transfer System, European Qualification Framework etc.. Some of these agreements have also defined a shared European understanding of quality assurance and facilitated the rise of European co-operation in quality assurance during the last decade.

This paper discusses the developments in the field of quality assurance (QA) at European level, in particular in the last decade, as well as what further developments might lie ahead. While doing this, it also makes an attempt to discuss the impact of European QA policies at the European and national level. This is done through a literature survey of recent policy studies, such as Bologna Process progress reports, on the state of play and through a discussion on central features of European QA. In this context, a crucial undercurrent of European QA landscape, the diversity in terms of approaches and level of development is explored.

2   The main elements of the European quality assurance landscape – How did we get here?

Some European countries, i.e. Denmark, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and France, started to develop their national QA systems in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and informal co-operation between quality assurance agencies and governments was established by the mid-1990s. However, it is only in the course of the last decade that QA has become one of the main steering mechanisms in higher education and a crucial response to the increasing demands for accountability (see e.g. STENSAKER & HARVEY, 2011).

One of the stated objectives of the Bologna Declaration in 1999 was to create a European dimension in QA with comparable criteria and methodologies. This was considered crucial to achieving a coherent EHEA (BOLOGNA DECLARATION,

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[2] Intergovernmental voluntary co-operation in higher education of European countries. Currently involves 47 countries: www.ehea.info.

1999). In 2003, the ministers responsible for higher education committed "to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level" and stressed "the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance" (BERLIN COMMUNIQUÉ, 2003). A crucial milestone in this regard was reached with the adoption of "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area" (commonly referred to as European Standards and Guidelines, ESG) two years later. They were adopted in the ministerial meeting in Bergen following a proposal by the E4 Group.[3]

The ESG include three interrelated parts: one that applies to internal QA that takes place in the higher education institutions, a second one referring to the external QA of higher education institutions carried out by agencies and a third part that concerns the QA of quality assurance agencies themselves. The ESG include and embody some key characteristics and principles that have formed the basis for European QA developments and discussions.

Firstly, the starting point for European QA development is that "consistent with the principle of university autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself" (BERLIN COMMUNIQUÉ, 2003). This was also included as one of the fundamental principles of the ESG, which recognised the heavy responsibilities for higher education institutions and called for external quality assurance processes that respect this institutional autonomy and make use," wherever possible, of the results of institutions' own internal quality assurance activities" (ENQA, 2005, p. 11, 15).

Secondly, strong stakeholder participation is considered as one of the key elements. It is demonstrated by the fact that at European level, the stakeholder bodies of QA agencies (ENQA), universities (EUA), students (ESU) and other higher education institutions (EURASHE) were asked to develop the ESG and have continued to cooperate with the governments in issues related to QA. The ESG themselves list among the fundamental principles that should permeate all QA the interest of students as well as employers and the society at large (ENQA, 2005, p. 10). In recent years, the stakeholder role has extended to the grass-root level as the student participation in internal and external QA processes has become a standard practice. The participation of employers and other stakeholders does not seem so widespread, but is expanding as well.

Thirdly, while the ESG provide a set of principles for good practice, they are not intended to "dictate practice or be interpreted as prescriptive" (ENQA, 2005, p. 13). Thus, they respect the diversity of national (as well as institutional) QA procedures recognising also that QA can be taken up for a variety of purposes (ENQA, 2005, p. 15). This respect for diversity is very much in line with the overall Bologna Process, which acknowledges diversity of the European higher education as one of its biggest assets.

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[3] The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE).

Fourth, the ESG highlight the importance of the independence of external QA and thus also the QA agencies. The concept of autonomy or independence of QA bodies had previously been featured in a recommendation of the Council of the European Union in 1998 (European Union 1998), but has since gained further importance through the Bologna Process. By including part 3 on QA of quality assurance agencies in the ESG, the aim was to "ensure that the professionalism, credibility and integrity of the agencies are visible and transparent to their stakeholders and must permit comparability to be observable among the agencies and allow the necessary European dimension" (ENQA, 2005, p. 23).

Finally, one important feature of the ESG to keep in mind is that their focus is on QA procedures, not quality, and in particular academic quality, as such. When providing a set of principles on how to organise QA procedures and what kind of issues should be addressed through them, the ESG provide some indications regarding the components of a programme of good quality, but they do not define academic standards for higher education.

The next step in enforcing the European quality assurance framework was the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). EQAR's role is to manage a web-based list of "trustworthy" agencies that have been reviewed against the ESG. It was established as an association under Belgian law in 2008 following an endorsement by the ministerial meeting in 2007. The concept of a register had already been included in the original report of the "E4 Group" on the ESG (ENQA, 2005) and also included in the European Parliament and Council Recommendation on future QA cooperation in 2006 (EC, 2006). EQAR, the association, is managed by the "E4 Group" whose representatives constitute the executive board. European governments are invited to join the association as paying members and to-date 30 governments have done so. The register committee that takes decisions on the inclusion of agencies is made up of independent experts in QA nominated by the stakeholders.

The European QA framework described above has been closely linked to the development of the European Higher Education Area and thus its aim has been to provide a framework to ensure the quality of degrees, in particular in the first and the second cycle of higher education. It does not address research activities or other non-educational activities of higher education institutions.

3   Lessons learnt – Stocktaking

The last decade has seen major changes in the European QA landscape with new QA systems having emerged. Many lessons can be drawn from these developments but in this section the aim is to focus on just few of them in order to discuss the effectiveness of agreements at European level. In this article effectiveness is considered from the perspective of whether European policies have impacted national and institutional realities, whereas the question on their impact on quality of higher education is not pursued in this article.

3.1   QA in continuous change

The ENQA survey of QA agencies in 2008 found that one key characteristic of the external QA in Europe in the first decade of the 2000s was its dynamism. QA agencies were in transition: new agencies were being created, existing ones were restructured and merged, their methods and approaches reformed and this trend has continued, if not even increased since then (ENQA, 2008, p. 84-85). In fact 22 countries established national agencies for quality assurance between the year 2000 and 2010, with half of them having been set up since 2005 (EURYDICE, 2010, p. 25). Two years later, only 11 countries in the EHEA have not set up a QA agency, including many small countries (EACEA, 2012, p. 60).

In 2008, three-quarters of the agencies indicated that they had changed their QA approach recently or that they will do so in the near future (ENQA, 2008, p. 26). Four years later, in a similar survey, 60% of the respondents answered that they were planning to introduce major changes in external QA procedures (ENQA, 2012, p. 28).

With regards to major changes in external QA, there are usually two axes that the changes take place in: 1) whether the external QA adopts a institution or programme level approach and 2) whether the method chosen is evaluation, accreditation or audit. In 2012, a vast majority of countries in the EHEA focused on a combination of institution and programme level approaches (24 cases) rather than programme level (7 cases) or institution level (4 cases) approaches in their national quality assurance systems (EACEA, 2012, p. 60). This has also been confirmed by an ENQA survey to agencies which found that a certain trend towards institutional approaches exists. However, this does not seem to necessarily mean that these agencies are giving up on the programme approach, but that agencies are increasingly carrying out a mixture of institutional and programme level approaches (ENQA, 2012, p. 28).

Relatedly, internal QA is also undergoing change, which is not surprising given that EUA's Examining Quality Culture (EQC) survey to HEIs showed that nearly two thirds (64.9%) of the HEIs have institution-specific QA systems for teaching and learning which follow national QA frameworks and guidelines, most commonly provided by the QA agency (LOUKKOLA & ZHANG, 2010, p. 28). From such a perspective, the changes in external QA seem to have a direct impact on developments within the institutions. This was also confirmed by a recent EURASHE study (EURASHE, 2012, p. 30).

The EQC survey, which aimed to map the state of affairs in terms of internal QA processes, further found that just over half (52 %) of the responding universities had introduced their internal QA system after 2005 (36 %) or were planning or designing it at the time of the survey in 2010, with an additional 21 % having done so between 2000 and 2005 (LOUKKOLA & ZHANG, 2010, p. 21). This confirms the Trends 2010 finding that higher education institutions considered enhanced internal QA processes to be one of the most important changes in the first decade of 2000 (SURSOCK & SMIDT, 2010, p. 84).

3.2   On the effectiveness of European QA policies

While the changes described above are partly results of the Bologna Process, it still seems that there is no one-size-fits-all approach to European quality assurance: there are still considerable differences between the national and institutional QA systems. While the ESG do not aim to reduce the diversity of QA, one might still have expected that the changes taking place would have clear trends and would lead to harmonisation. Have European policies had an impact or changed anything in this particular regard?

As mentioned above, the Bologna Process is ultimately a voluntary intergovernmental process. While European stakeholders take part in the discussions and preparation of issues, governments are responsible for the implementation of any agreements in the respective national contexts. The Bologna Process or Bologna Follow-up Group – which oversees the Bologna Process between ministerial meetings – does not have any means to enforce the implementation. It can only monitor the progress individual countries make and this has been done through regular reporting to the ministerial meetings,[4] which puts a certain amount of pressure on some countries to implement changes they have committed to undertake. These reports compare how selected features of EHEA have been implemented in national systems. In addition some other studies, such as those referred to below, have looked into the impact that the ESG have had on QA in Europe. Interestingly enough, most of these studies have been carried out by stakeholder organisations involved in policy discussions, whereas the academic research on the topic has been rather scarce.

All in all, these studies indicate that, despite various national agendas, the ESG and Bologna Process in general, have impacted QA in the EHEA in a major way. Perhaps the most thorough analysis of the impact of the ESG and how it has been perceived by the stakeholders has been carried out by the 'E4 Group' in the context of the "Mapping the implementation and application of the ESG" project (MAP-ESG project). The final report of the project concluded that:

> "The ESG have clearly impacted on QA in the EHEA in various ways and at several levels, both directly and indirectly. There is evidence to suggest that, for example, in some national contexts, legislation has been drafted to ensure that the ESG are enshrined in the procedures for QA in higher education, in others new QAAs have been created or existing QAAs have ensured the implementation of part one of the ESG through their external QA processes. Students are increasingly involved in external and internal QA processes, although the ESU consultation shows that there is a great variety in the degree of student involvement in internal QA; on average, students are less involved in internal QA than in external QA processes. Finally, but perhaps most importantly in terms of the ESG impacting on HEIs' primary responsibility for QA, HEIs have developed QA systems that take into account the ESG." (ENQA, 2011b, p. 20-21)

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[4] Reports are available on http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=21

Most remarkably the ESG have managed to promote the harmonisation of European QA without prescribing ways, procedures and methods, while embracing diversity (ENQA, 2011b, p. 6; EURASHE, 2012, p. 39, 50).

Both ESU and EURASHE consultations as part of the MAP-ESG project identified a link between the maturities of the national QA system and how the ESG had been integrated in it. "In countries where a national QA system was developed before 2005, the ESG are regarded more as a theoretical framework, whereas in countries where this happened later, the ESG are regarded more as a practical instrument" (EURASHE, 2012, p. 48, see also ESU, 2012, p. 35).

The studies show that national QA systems are now in place in all but eight countries[5] in the EHEA with independent agencies having been established in most of the countries (EURYDICE, 2010, p. 25). Furthermore, the external QA processes are on the whole in line with the ESG (ENQA 2011a).

Based on an analysis of external reviews of QA agencies for the purpose of ENQA membership, the ENQA report concluded that "[t]hey have provided a focus against which agencies can assess their own activities and standards and, importantly, society's expectation of how higher education across Europe can provide reassurance/accountability for what it (says it) offers" (ENQA, 2011a, p. 15).

With regards to internal QA, in all but four countries (UK, Estonia, Ukraine and Slovakia) HEIs are formally required to establish internal QA systems (EACEA, 2012, p. 68), which is exactly what they seem to be doing: the Bologna Follow-up Group's Stocktaking report in 2009 found that the implementation of internal QA systems aligned with the external QA procedures was making progress, while some work still remained to be done (RAUHVARGHERS et al., 2009, p. 55). This observation has since been confirmed by EUA's studies such as EQC, which concluded that whereas HEIs do integrate elements of ESG part 1 into their QA systems, most of them "do not apply the ESGs as an integrated whole, but tend to show interest in one or several aspects of them" (LOUKKOLA & ZHANG, 2010, p. 35).

Furthermore, it seems that the impact of the ESG on internal QA is more indirect: the HEIs follow the instructions of their national QA agency that has revised its criteria to include the ESG part one. However, the HEIs in Europe are aware of the ESG (ENQA, 2011b, p. 16, 42; EURASHE, 2012, p. 33). In fact, when ESU asked students how they see the impact of the ESG in their respective contexts, the students seemed to think that it had more impact on the internal QA systems than external, while they noted that implementation of the ESG within HEIs lacked some consistency (ESU, 2012, p. 18, 36).

To conclude this section on the impact of the ESG there are a few remarks regarding one of the characteristics of European QA: stakeholder participation. In this regard the participation of students is one of the most remarkable changes in the

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[5] In six countries – Azerbaijan, Iceland, Moldova, Slovakia, Turkey and Ukraine –the ministry remains responsible for external QA and in two countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina and Italy – transition is ongoing.

past years. Whilst there is no specific standard in the ESG, it has become a given that students must be involved, for example in the external QA processes if an agency wishes to be considered to be working in compliance with the ESG. As a result, student participation or involvement has become standard practice in QA and the change has been rapid in many countries, where this concept was still considered radical a few years ago. However, the evidence shows that there is still room for improvement, in particular in terms of involving the students in decision-making and follow-up procedures of external QA (EACEA, 2012, p 66; ESU, 2012). In terms of participation by other stakeholders, there is even greater variety between systems and no clear trend for progress can be identified.

3.3   On the limitations of European QA policies

Whilst the ESG have evidently contributed to the development of internal and external QA processes in the past ten years, ESU's report on the implementation of the ESG also noted that they have the potential to act as a stabilising influence as students saw them "as a mechanism to prevent ad hoc changes to the national system that might occur due to political changes in the country which might endanger stability" (ESU, 2012, p. 18). This is an interesting observation and it brings us to another topic: one crucial limitation that impacts the implementation of European policies.

While it would be tempting to argue that the changes presented above are a direct result of European policy decisions, it is important to keep in mind that QA developments take place in the context of respective national higher education systems. Thus, at national and institutional level, they are always closely related to the context in which they were developed and also influenced by the other national policies, priorities and reforms.

The fact that QA in higher education remains a national responsibility means that while European policies are having an impact at national level, national interests are also guiding European policies in a reciprocal manner. Therefore, first of all, European agreements are always to some extent a compromise and while they often introduce new perspectives to many participating national systems (which was for instance the case with the ESG), the countries signing up for the agreements usually have considered these new perspectives acceptable from the national perspective. Secondly, developments at national level feed into European policy discussions. For instance, some consider that the principles presented in the ESG were highly impacted by the experiences and views on QA that prevailed in the UK at the time.

As a result, the ESG highlight the respect for diversity in quality assurance approaches, while defining the common principles for good practice for all approaches. The recent analysis of the implementation of the ESG showed that the inclusive nature of the ESG and their flexibility to different national contexts is in fact their biggest success factor (ENQA, 2011). However, occasionally discussion arises whether the ESG should be more concrete and descriptive to ensure a greater level of convergence among the QA approaches across the EHEA, thus also facilitating the comparability of QA results.

When it comes to actual details of each national QA system, the decisions are made on a political basis. Usually a compromise is reached after consulting the views of different stakeholders and considering the particular context and status of the system (issues to resolve, resources, demographic trends etc.) as well as international or European commitments. In terms of how the dynamics for change work at national level in a hypothetical situation, Hopbach has described it as follows:

> "due to (assumed or really existing) quality deficiencies, programme accreditation is introduced into a national higher education system. After a couple of years this approach is being criticized for being too burdensome and expensive and for not supporting institutional learning processes in the higher education institutions. As a consequence it is replaced by an institutional approach, maybe an institutional audit, in order to strengthen the enhancement purpose and in order to give a lighter touch. Again, after a couple of years esp. students and public authorities criticize this approach for not giving enough information on the actual quality of certain programmes. Hence, a move to programme oriented approaches, maybe even accreditation-like is introduced." (HOPBACH, 2011, p. 281)

4   Where are we heading?

The latest ministerial meeting in Bucharest in April 2012 added to the impetus for change. In the meeting the ministers concluded that QA continues to be "essential for building trust and to reinforce the attractiveness of the EHEA's offerings" and announced the revision of the ESG in order to "improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope. The revision will be based upon an initial proposal to be prepared by the E4 in cooperation with Education International, BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), which will be submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group" (BUCHAREST COMMUNIQUÉ, 2012). This revision work has begun and the ministers are expected to adopt the revised ESG at the next ministerial meeting in spring 2015, ten years after adopting the original ESG.

The ministers also promised to "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" (BUCHAREST COMMUNIQUÉ, 2012). This is not a new idea, it was in fact one of the ideas underpinning the establishment of EQAR in the first place. However, experience has shown that many countries are reluctant to devolve responsibility for external QA beyond national boundaries (EACEA, 2012, p. 70).

These commitments have livened up the discussion regarding some features of the European QA framework and whether it is fulfilling all its goals and objectives. For example, when considering the reasons for the reluctance of the countries to allow HEIs to choose their external QA provider, one wonders if part of the reason for this reluctance is the fact that being listed in the EQAR is based on compliance with the ESG, which are not so much focussing on the academic standards the agency uses in its procedures for evaluating HEIs or programmes, but on the pro-

fessionalism and procedures of the agency. The specific standards and criteria used, which are defined at national level clearly continue to be crucial for countries to be able to recognise decisions on QA.

This brings us to one criticism often expressed toward the ESG: the fact that they do not address the quality of higher education directly. What is the link between QA, as described in the ESG, and the quality of higher education? While the studies referred to in this article also demonstrate that QA has made progress, there is not much evidence as to how this has impacted the quality of education.

Further, how can the three parts of the ESG (internal quality assurance, external quality assurance and quality assurance of external QA) be made more interlinked and give more emphasis to internal quality assurance (ENQA, 2011b)? Another matter, brought up in many discussions is how to make the links between QA and other Bologna action lines (namely qualification frameworks and recognition) more explicit (EC, 2009; ENQA, 2011b). All three action lines are often mentioned as those aiming to promote trust and thus also mobility within EHEA, among other aims. The desire to further develop the links between these is also currently reflected by the Bologna Follow-up Group's work, as they have been grouped in to a "Structural reforms" working group together with transparency tools.

And finally, finding an appropriate balance between respect for diversity and consistency in the implementation of the ESG plays an important role in the revision process. On the one hand, there have been demands for the ESG to be more concrete and detailed in order to ensure a higher degree of harmonisation of QA processes. This is seen as crucial for facilitating mutual trust and recognition of QA decisions, an expectation that QA has perhaps not quite fulfilled. But, on the other hand, the ESG still need to be useful and applicable in different national and institutional contexts, thus still allowing the diversity of the approaches, as discussed previously in this article. When revising the ESG these two expectations need to be met.

Thus, the QA landscape in Europe continues to be in transition and works towards a fine balance between national and European interests. For example it will be interesting to see whether the market of external QA will actually open as envisioned by the register, as such a development has the potential to significantly affect the relationship between institutions and national agencies as well as that between agencies and ministries and perhaps also that between different agencies.

5   Concluding remarks

As described in previous sections of this article, major changes have taken place in European QA in recent years and QA has acquired a prominent role in the institutional realities in the HEIs and continues to play a critical role in the higher education policy discourse. It is evident that European commitments have had an impact at national level, while the nature of this impact varies from one country to another. This is due to the fact that national agendas and policies continue to play an important role in the decision-making process.

Nevertheless, it seems more than likely from the existing evidence that the ESG have made a difference and have managed to create a common European understanding of QA while respecting the existing diversity. This impact is easier to identify at the level of external QA, while at the institutional level the impact is less researched, whereas existing evidence indicates a rather indirect impact, taking into account the diversity of institutional contexts and forms.

As the revision of the ESG is discussed, many of these issues will be pondered upon. But one should not lose sight of the bigger picture, described by Sursock as follows: how higher education is changing, where it should be heading and how QA can support the changes" (SURSOCK, 2011, p. 258). In other words, QA is to be developed as a means to assure and improve the quality of higher education, not as a goal in itself.

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