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Title:

Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems: a cross-border intercultural approach to ESG 2015

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Key words: **ESG; Internal Quality Assurance Systems; Intercultural Communication (in QA)**

Abstract:

Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) in Europe are collaborating closer and closer, through different kinds of partnerships, as is the case of formal associations like EUA, ENQA, EURASHE, EQAR, CEENQA or ECA and other arrangements for special projects with the aim of developing common Quality Assurance (QA) tools and methodologies. Internationalisation is therefore currently a major strand in the accreditation agencies in Europe. The Erasmus+ project 'Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems' – EIQAS - is one example of such initiatives and is running from 2014 to the end of 2016. EIQAS is a joint initiative of QAAs, rectors' conferences and HEIs of four countries: Poland (coordinator), Portugal, Bulgaria and Slovenia. The originality of EIQAS approach and its potential added value to QA in Europe lies in the quest for a common understanding of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and on the intercultural awareness of internal quality assurance (IQA) with the development of common methodologies for external quality assurance (EQA) and transparent information provision by the different stakeholders (HEIs, students, QAAs, experts, etc.). This paper focus on a special strand of EIQAS project: intercultural training for international partnership work and includes the methodology and the results of an intercultural training process. The paper also aims at the dissemination of some innovative outputs of EIQAS project that can be applied elsewhere.

Introduction and concept background

The project 'Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems' – EIQAS - is a joint initiative of national quality assurance agencies, rectors' conferences and higher education institutions (HEIs) of four countries: Poland (coordinator), Portugal, Bulgaria and Slovenia.

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EIQAS is concerned with internal quality assurance (IQA) in higher education and has two objectives: to increase the capacity of HEIs in the participating countries to develop internal quality assurance systems by enhancing their awareness and understanding of Part 1 of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area (2015 version) and identifying, developing and disseminating good innovative practice in internal quality assurance (1); and to increase the capacity of the participating QAAs in external quality assurance by comparing their methodologies for the assessment of internal quality assurance systems and exchanging and developing good practice in IQA assessment at a broader context (2).

EIQAS is the first project (as far as we know) specifically designed to support the development of IQAS and bringing together both national QAAs and HEIs. To date, EIQAS project includes the development of a reference framework for comparative analysis of the participating Agencies' methodologies for the assessment of IQA as part of EQA, a Guide to IQA including more detailed practical guidelines on Part 1 of the ESG 2015 and examples of good practice as well as a Student Guide to Part 1 of the ESG. The project is directly targeted at all HEIs, the QAAs and their external experts, including students, in the participating countries. While only selected HEIs directly participate in the project activities either as the project partners or as members of the National Consultation Groups, the Guide to IQA and the Student Guide to Part 1 of the ESG are available to all HEIs and students in other countries of the European Higher Education Area.

The originality of EIQAS approach and its potential added value to QA in Europe lies in the quest for a common understanding of ESG and on the intercultural awareness of IQA with the development of common methodologies for EQA and transparent information provision. Through EIQAS project new definitions of quality assurance are emerging as a result of partnership working. EIQAS is expecting to foster experts exchange between QAAs of the different countries and the recognition of their accreditation certificates. EIQAS has a strong research and development component linking to the empirical material gathered in the training events. EIQAS is fostering new approaches to ESG, from different stakeholders and aims at the inclusion of the project outcomes into QAAs' own methodologies and trainings for experts (academics, students and professionals).

Linked with the concept of Quality Culture and Quality Assurance is the concept of trust. Trust corresponds to the core concept of quality assurance and quality culture. A recent article by Bjørn Stensaker and Peter Maassen summarises the main theoretical proposals on trust in international quality assurance and presents a framework that can be considered as well for any regional or national context (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015). Considering two main governance perspectives, a rationalist – instrumental perspective and a normative- cognitive perspective and two main types of instruments or tools – hard and soft, the authors have redesigned a general framework for higher education and classified four basic trust-producing mechanisms, identified earlier by other authors for organisations in general (idem, p. 33). The use of *legal legislation* (1) and *certification* (2) are mechanisms that fall in an instrumental or rationalist perspective, the first one a hard instrument and the second one, a soft instrument. On the other hand, *reputation* (3) and *community norms, structures and procedures* (4) fall into the cognitive or normative perspective and on the category of hard and soft instruments respectively (idem, p. 34).

Most IQAS correspond to a mix of those four basic mechanisms depending on the legal national framework or on the nature of the HEIs. Besides, IQAS can be designed differently, using one or another of those mechanisms with the aim of attaining the same target. Stensaker and Maassen give the example of assessing learning outcomes; each of the four mechanisms has a different potential to deliver information about learning outcomes (Stensaker & Maassen, 2015, p. 36). IQAS models in Europe are very diversified and dependent on national contexts; there is a continuous evolution and adaptation of procedures, with different balances between accountability and enhancement (although there is an evident trend towards a dominant quality enhancement policy) in order to contribute to a lighter-touch approach on external QA (Santos, 2011).

In brief, three main distinctive features characterise quality assurance (QA) in higher education (HE) in the Bologna European context, at present: institutionalisation, internationalisation and innovation. Quality assurance shares the main characteristics of the higher education systems and the recent evolution of the latter; thereby QA in HE is nowadays more prevalent, i.e. there is a wider participation, more diverse, stratified, internationalized and focused on the student-centred learning and on learning outcomes assessment, taken as the core institutional activities. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are each time more engaged in "doing right", "the right things", improving continuously and looking at what they do, from above, through a monitoring system. QA in higher education in Europe began to emerge at the beginning of the 90's and the first initiatives correspond to a disperse evaluation of programmes in specific areas, carried out by international teams of experts. A learning process began with this first international assessment processes that led to the development of the concept and the tools of quality assurance (Harvey & Williams, 2010) (Rosa & Amaral, 2014). Later, the systems of quality assurance became one of the most relevant drivers for the implementation of the aims of the Bologna Declaration and turned out to be the pillars of the mutual recognition of degrees and study periods, supporting the transferability of academic and professional qualifications and the mobility of students, graduates and workers over Europe (Santos, 2011) (Sursock, 2015). Institutions at all levels and regional contexts have by now travelled a long way and have built up much knowledge on QA. At present, a complex system of supra-national institutions as well as national agencies and other structures exist in Europe and outside, regulating QA in higher education, researching and developing new concepts and tools, modernising and innovating constantly in a way that QA in higher education (HE) is currently taken for granted all over the world (Sursock, 2015, p. 39). After the initial period of implementation of the Bologna Process, somehow "turbulent" in the wording of Andrée Sursock (2015) and a second phase of development and consolidation, QA schemes attained a mature stage and a greater awareness of all the specific features of higher education. The first initiatives on the design of IQAs were strongly influenced by the methods of QA on the industry and management sectors and some instruments were imported. There has been, since then, a great evolution and modernisation; QA development in HE is characterised by a very dynamic process of innovation and creativity. At present, IQAS are more tailored to each HEI and the involvement of actors has widened to more stakeholders (European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015). As already mentioned the nature of the HEIs changed rapidly having become more complex organisations, more open to the outside with a wider range of stakeholders involved on its management (Maassen, 2000) (Amaral, 2011). Quality expanded beyond the quality departments. It is no longer an exclusive issue of quality experts (Yorke, 2000, p. 28); academics and students have become less and

less skeptical towards IQAS and have been taking progressively ownership of the quality assurance instruments (Jungblut, Vukasovic, & Stensaker, 2015). That is probably a reason why IQAS are nowadays much more focused on teaching and learning than they used to be in the first phases of development. At the same time, the actors involved in HE include an equally large and complex network of internal and external stakeholders (Kettunen, 2015). The agency of all those stakeholders, understood as the capacity to act, has gained each time more importance and relevance, from the teaching staff to the students, at the internal level, or from the state to the QAAs and other regulatory bodies, private entities and transnational corporations, from the external side.

The European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) are considered the most important milestone in the recent development of QA systems. Launched in 2005, they cover internal and external QA and QA in the accreditation agencies (QAAs). Ten years after the launch of the ESG, in July 2015, a revised version was approved at Yerevan.

Quality, however, is still not an easy concept when it comes to QA in HE; there are different understandings of the concept of quality, not only by the different stakeholders as well as by the individual higher education institutions, countries or even regions. The perception of "quality" is different among stakeholders and scientific areas. Stakeholders are also very diverse as is the case of students and so the perception of "quality" varies also inside groups of stakeholders. The ESG are, as the name indicates, guidelines or references, subject to custom applications.

Methodology, rationale and structure of the paper

In the above introduction we included a summary of EIQAS project and a short summary of the recent development of the theoretical framework of quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA in which the project is inserted. One of the pillars of the project is the development of an intercultural approach on IQA and EQA. The tendency and the actual practice, at least in Europe, in the accreditation processes is that the evaluation panels should include an expert from abroad. Therefore, intercultural training makes it easier for the exchange of foreign experts in the evaluation panels. In fact, one of the essential parts of each Quality Assurance Agency is a group of well-trained independent experts who perform the external evaluations at the HEIs. Those experts include academics, professionals and students. The main advantage of the intercultural training events is the exchange of good practices between the experts from different European QAAs, the representatives of the HEI's and students.

The second part of the paper as will follow, presents the reflections and results of the intercultural training events on the perceptions of the different stakeholders towards the ESG Part 1. The outcomes of those events and the workshops that took place there have been worked out in order to contribute to the construction of a guide to the implementation of the ESG in Europe. EIQAS developed 3 training events; one for representatives of the HEIs, the second for student experts involved in QA and the third one for experts (academics and professionals). There were approximately 40 participants per event; one or two representatives of the involved stakeholders per country and project partner and other local guests from the same stakeholders type. Each workshop gathered together representatives from the four countries in order to get an intercultural experiment during each session. Each event took 5 days

and included several workshops with interactive parallel sessions in working groups (WG) encouraging people to discussion and sharing their views on Part 1 ESG. Participants moved from WG to another in the several rounds of the sessions in a way that there were representatives of the four countries in all the WG in all the sessions. Each session of each WG had a rapporteur, selected among the participants belonging to the partners of the project. The main goals of workshop were to enrich the quantitative research which was conducted as an online survey on Part 1 of the ESG and to gather stakeholders' perceptions through the contributions of the participants. Going through the standards, one by one, the perceptions gathered on the intercultural workshops of the training events of the project were analysed in a critical way and confronted with the tools and methodologies of the QAAs of the different countries in order to develop the guide for IQA as the main output of the project.

The project partners developed commonly a set of focus questions that structured the different intercultural workshops of the training events for the different stakeholders:

1. What is the most important/crucial part of given standard/or guidelines having the potential impact on the quality enhancement/or on the development of quality culture?
2. What are the main obstacles in the implementation of given standard and why? Are they derived from the content of the standard?
3. What are the needs for further interpretation of given standards? Which aspect of standards are unclear for HEI and why?
4. Do you identify any good practice in relation to a given standard?

The last 2 workshops included a site visit of several HEIs and the participation in a role-playing experience. The results of that training event are therefore more comprehensive in what concerns the perceptions of the stakeholders.

Reflection on the findings

Overall and considering the country reports based on the initial comprehensive questionnaire of the project and the results of the 3 training events and the perceptions of the participants, there is a good knowledge of the ESG and all stakeholders express the capacity for a adequate interpretation of the standards. The big issue is its application due to some barriers for the widespread and effective involvement of some stakeholders, especially teachers and students. The training of experts for the panels and the generalization of the preparation and publication of reports in English are two of the most referred priority actions.

Going through the standards one by one of Part I of ESG, we will start with a short snapshot of the state of the art in the four countries of the project, based on the country reports and on the initial cross-country report. The results of the intercultural workshops will be presented thereafter, which include a list of potential questions for a site visit and the contributions addressing the focus questions worked out at the workshops. The relevance of the topics lies on the fact that these are the result of an intercultural debate carried out in several rounds of discussion by groups of participants from the 4 countries of the project. The debates were complex due to the necessity to understand each other perspective and perceptions in order to get to a common conclusion.

Besides the 10 ESG, three other standards created by the Portuguese Agency in its audit model to IQAS have been further analysed, although in a more superficial way; those three extra standards cover the following areas: research, internationalization and relations with community.

The authors did not added new questions or topics facing relevance, barriers or good practices to those gathered in the training events, in this paper. There were only some arrangements merging similar sentences with different wordings. The aim of the present paper is to highlight the topics or issues that get most attention from the different stakeholders, represented by the participants on the training events of the project.

ESG 1.1. Policy for quality assurance

Approximately 60% of the HEIs that responded to the survey that took place in the four countries have a published policy for quality assurance and external stakeholders were involved in both the development and implementation of the policy. In most cases quality strategic goals are directly incorporated by HEIs into strategic plans and they do not develop separate documents for their quality assurance policy. Cooperation with external stakeholders shows an increasing tendency for the last few years and confirms the response of the HE sector to the labour market needs. This standard corresponds to the procedure for initiating, discussing, implementing and assessing QA strategy and or policy. The institution's policy for QA must be visible and planed for all dimensions of HEIs operation (teaching, learning, research, collaboration with environment, strategic planning, involvement of internal and external stakeholders etc.).

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ What is your framework for building your IQAS?
↘ How is your QA policy linked to the strategic management of your institution?
↘ Who did create the mission, the vision and the QA mission? Did all the stakeholders participate? Students?
↘ Are the strategic goals in line with the mission?
↘ How are internal and external stakeholders involved in the development and implementation of your IQAS? What are the good practices in this area? Do you have some innovative methodologies?
↘ How the effectiveness of IQAS assured and measured?
↘ How do you guarantee that all internal and external stakeholders have a common view and understanding of your quality assurance system?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ Quality Assurance has to be part of the institutional strategy; a policy of continuous improvement must be embedded in the HEIs.
↘ Not all institutions have or need a complex and formal system.
↘ Internal quality assurance systems should be tailored and respond to the needs and expectations of the stakeholders.
↘ The most important thing is the development of a Quality Culture visible in all levels and inserted in the academic tradition.
↘ Involvement of external stakeholders is very important.
↘ There is a risk that the HEIs establish very complex and not flexible structures for Quality Management.

↘ Some problems of conservative culture vs. innovative structures may occur.

ESG 1.2. Design and approval of programmes

The procedure for design and approval of programmes is not followed in all fields of study in all the HEIs of the four countries of the project. While the approval procedure does not generate a problem for respondents, the designing procedure is declared as a weakness. Nevertheless, the majority of programmes are designed in line with institutional strategies, mission statements and vision and refer to the National Qualification Framework. The involvement of external stakeholders in the procedure of design and approval still require more attention. External stakeholders include, for example, alumni, graduates, employers from the business or public sector, other business partners, mentors, etc.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ Who is involved in designing, approving and implementing your QA procedures? What is the procedure for designing and approval?
↘ How are the external stakeholders involved into the design of the programme? Any examples?
↘ How are the LOs concept implemented? How do you check the alignment of ILOs with NQF and EQF?
↘ How does the institution relate the learning outcomes with the national qualification framework? How do you verify the achievement of ILOs?
↘ Why and when do you decide to launch a new program?
↘ How are the programmes linked to the labour market needs, social needs, development of the scientific disciplines?
↘ What is the system of the identification of achieved learning outcomes (only teachers, external examiners ….)?
↘ How do you validate the learning outcomes? (Both intended and achieved Learning Outcomes).

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ HEIs need two properly construct and implemented processes for design and approval of programmes.
↘ The design of the programmes must take into account the definition of the learning outcomes in line with the qualification framework (national and European)
↘ Definition and validation of intended learning outcomes represent a crucial part of the standard. HEIs should become aware of the fact that establishing intended learning outcomes represents »a promise« to the students and HEIs must thus ensure that the intended learning outcomes have been achieved.
↘ Intended learning outcomes should encompass all three aspects – the knowledge, skills and competences obtained, and not merely focus on the competences achieved.
↘ Recognition of formal and informal learning should be improved in line with the implementation of the European and National Qualification Frameworks. (Although this issue is partly related to the standard 1.4).
↘ Internal and external stakeholders should be included in the process. Internal stakeholders should be represented by not only teaching staff and students but also administrative staff. Concerning external employers special attention should be devoted to alumni, most of whom are familiar with both, the university and its programmes and, on the other hand, the current situation in the labour market.
↘ Teaching methods are elevant to the achievement of learning objectives and outcomes

- Procedures, institutional regulations and other mechanisms have to comply with the national law In some countries there is some over-regulation, frequent changes of the national legislation, too much bureaucracy and lack of autonomy of HEIs are regarded as the main obstacles.
- The issue of employability should be taken into account when adopting this kind of strategic approach
- The aspect of internationalisation should be considered as part of the standard (a missing topic).
- A cyclical link should be established between standards 1.2 and 1.9.
- In what concerns this standard there are important barriers to implementation. There are difficulties in the definition and validation of the intended learning outcomes; difficulties to involve external stakeholders (distance between HEIs and external stakeholders); random design of the programmes without internal consistency between courses design can be found more often than desired.
- The mismatch between HEIs and the external stakeholders takes different aspects and exists at several levels: both stakeholders have different aims, different timeline and, above all, speak different languages. Accordingly some aspects of the standard need further clarification in order to get a common understanding of the concepts by all stakeholders.

ESG 1.3. Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Students are systematically involved in IQA activity, and student-centred learning, teaching and assessment is said to be well understood by HEIs all over the four countries. However, the actual implementation of this range of issues in the revised ESG should be more fully addressed.

Fairness and consistency achieved through the procedure of student assessment was quite misunderstood by most HEIs and over 62% respondents decided to skip the question.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

- How do you encourage students for active learning and self-reflection process?
- How do you motivate the teachers for changing their approaches, methods, innovation in teaching, i.e., their teaching strategy?
- How did you change the assessment procedures in order to meet the students' active role in creating the learning process?
- How do the assessment system do reflects the student centred approach, critical thinking, new didactic methods?
- What is the policy of the improvement of the teaching methods?
- How the outcomes of the surveys are communicated with students and staff?
- How do you ensure that the programmes are delivering? Which methodologies do you use to measure the learning outcomes achievement?
- how do you assure / maximise the engagement of the students in the learning process? Any examples?
- How do you identify and address students with special needs?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

- Participation, collaboration and feedback of students is critical to the development of a student-centred learning.
- Institutional support for good teaching practices and regular pedagogical monitoring are relevant.
- The institution should stimulate the motivation of the teachers to improve their pedagogical methods and develop flexible learning paths.

↘ The institution should stimulate the engagement of the students in research activities. Institution should stimulate the dialogue and self-reflection of students.
↘ Some founded good practices include the creation of commissions for teaching and learning pedagogy, a project of innovation laboratory for teaching and learning, among others.

ESG 1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Standard 1.4. addresses student's life-cycle, from admission, to progression, recognition and certification. HEIs apply consistent regulations concerning student admission, recognition and certification in the four countries. At present, the development of regulation on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning pose a great challenge for the development of IQAs. The recognition of progression in joint programmes and foreign qualifications are the most critical issues in the frame of this standard.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ What is the biggest problem in selections of the candidates? 2nd and 3rd level?
↘ What is the policy of the institution for fair recognition of previous learning achievements (formal, informal and non-formal paths must be taken into account)?
↘ How do you deal with the issue of recognition of the progression of the joint programmes' students?
What kind of procedures and mechanisms/indicators have you developed/ put in place to successfully evaluate and recognise previous formal, non-formal and informal learning?.
↘ How do you address the problem of recognition of foreign qualifications?
↘ Traceability of graduates? Do you identify the best students?
  ↘ Are there processes to create a functional network of alumni?
↘ ? What kind of mechanisms do you have in place to monitor and prevent drop out?
↘ How do you ensure the sufficient resources (human, material, financial) in order to guarantee the quality of teaching and learning?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ Institutional mechanisms for recognition of prior learning need to be developed.

ESG 1.5. Teaching staff

In the four countries of EIQAS project, teaching staff is assessed on a regular basis since, in some cases, it is required by national regulations. The remaining activities which include professional development opportunities provided to teaching staff, incentives to encourage the professional development of teaching staff, incentives to encourage the use of new technologies in teaching, or mechanism for rewarding teaching achievements vary greatly among units and fields of study. The main problem is linked to the regular monitoring of teaching staff satisfaction.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ What is your policy for recruitment and development of the teaching staff?
↘ How do you balance among research, teaching and organisational skills of your teachers and staff?
↘ What are the motivational scheme / methods adopted in the HEI?
↘ What are the assessment methods / procedures of the performance of the teaching staff? How are they connected with the development opportunities? Any examples?
↘ How does the HEI attracts the foreign academic staff?

↘ What are the procedures or mechanisms for recognition of academic excellence (excellence in teaching)?
↘ What are the indicators and definition of excellence in teaching, research, mentoring, motivating?
↘ How do you incorporate results of students questionnaires in the Self Evaluation Report?
↘ How often do you monitor the student satisfactions with teachers/staff and what kind of mechanisms do you have in place to periodicaly/annualy/sufficiently react in case of detected opportunities for improvement?
↘ How do you measure/evaluate staff satisfaction and how do you react in case of reduction of their satisfaction?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ Some of the HEIs still report limited mechanism for teachers support in the process of their development.
↘ Weaknesses in the area of motivation and assessment of faculty can be observed (there are only formal assessments or written statements, generally)
↘ Questionnaire system and development of pedagogy for teachers could be developed.
↘ Annual evaluation of the activities of teaching staff can be improved.
↘ Manual of good practices could be developed.

ESG 1.6. Learning resources and student support

The implementation of ESG 1.6. varies greatly among different fields of study and units through the four countries. At present, all of responding HEIs provide academic, financial and personal advice to students. Besides, they have in place a mechanism for informing students about the support and services available. At the same time there are still HEIs which declare that they do not have a mechanism for assessing the adequacy and accessibility of learning resources or student support, or do not have in place procedures to ensure that administrative staff is properly qualified to deliver support services.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ How do you asses the student support system, research and didactic infrastructure?
↘ Which new technologies have been implemented in the training process to achieve the learning outcomes?
↘ How do you asses the financial sustainability?
↘ What is the learning resources funding policy?
↘ What are the latest achievements in improving the learning resources?
↘ What are the development opportunities for the administrative staff?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ Some contradiction exists in what concerns Standard 1.6. and most of the stakeholders are well aware of them. Although very good resources and excellent learning means exist, most of the HEIs do not have in place any procedures for assessing them.
↘ Some good practices and innovative tools are available in many HEIs, as is the case of Rooms for students open 24h a day, support for students with special disabilities, tutorial programs for students, social support, among other infrastructures and services.
↘ There is a need for efficient implementation of processes covering development, monitoring, assessment and improvement of learning resources and students support.
↘ Massification and diversification of higher education' increases need adequate learning resources and students support. Increasing numbers of students as well as the need for equally and actively

including all strata of students in the study process requires paying ever more attention to student groups with particular needs.

↘ Economic and political restrains are still a great challenge for HEIs.

ESG 1.7. Information management

The majority of HEIs have a formal mechanism for analysing and using data collecting for quality assurance enhancement purposes e.g. key performance indicators, profile of the student population, student progression, success and drop-out rates, students' satisfaction with programmes, etc. It shows a fairly good observance of standard requirements by HEIs.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ Is your information system comprehensive enough to enable good management support?
↘ How do you use the collected data for the enhancement of the quality of teaching and learning?
↘ Are student questionnaires included in the IT system?
↘ What kind of analysis do you publish in order to assure the accountability of the institution?
↘ What kind of data is collected by the HEI? What kind of analysis are done and how they are used?
↘ what are the HEI's KPIs?
↘ Does the HEI perform any meta-analysis of the KPIs?
↘ Are there any preventive-oriented analysis? Any analysis?
↘ How does IM support responsible decision making and policy making processes?
↘ How do you assure up to date informations to support more responsible and efficient action plans and to assure transparency of HEI's operations?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ Very complex and advanced information systems are being developed all over Europe in the HEIs. Business intelligent systems, automatic analysis data tools, various open source tools for data warehouse, etc. etc.
↘ There are differentiated systems, according to the nature of the HEI, the dimension of the data bases and the need for analysis.
↘ Efficient and effective internal quality assurance system needs to be supported by a reliable information management system.
↘ There is a good feedback between data and decisions.
↘ One weakness can be found at the level of the lack of indicators of internationalization

ESG 1.8. Public information

HEIs in the four countries provide full information about the programmes they offer, including admission criteria, full curricula, syllabuses etc. However, some of them declare that some legal requirements (data protection law) might hinder public information activities.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ What kind of data and to what extent are public available? In what form?
↘ What kind of public relations strategy (including internationalisation)do you have in place?
↘ How does the HEI assure the actuality of information?
↘ What are the ways of updating the information?
↘ How do you assure that relevant informations are distributed to the target groups?

↘ How do you locate your target groups?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ The website is the most common vehicle for information dissemination.
↘ A good dissemination of the information is critical.
↘ It is important to keep the feedback from students updated.
↘ There is a need for a day by day monitoring.
↘ On the framework of the accreditations reports should be fully published and HEIs should define in which language(s) official documents will be written and published.

ESG 1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic reviews of programmes

Standard 1.9 is strongly linked with Standard 1.2. The most important critical issue is also the involvement of the external stakeholders in the on-going monitoring and periodic reviews of programmes all over the four countries.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ How is the continuous improvement of the programmes assured?
↘ How do you build the system of monitoring to enhance IQAS?
↘ How are students involved?
↘ How are the external stakeholders involved into the periodic evaluations?
↘ Do you perform and analyse surveys on students, employers and alumni?
↘ Are the surveys statistically representative?
↘ Why have you decided for this period, not longer/not shorter?
↘ How are different stakeholders included in the monitoring system?
↘ How are the reviews organised?
↘ Is the workload of the periodic reviews an issue?
↘ How are the needs of society identified and included into the programmes?
↘ How do you check the adequacy of learning environment and support service for purpose for the programme delivery?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ A formal procedure for on-going monitoring and periodic review should exist.
↘ Periodic revision of program with participation of stakeholders – although mainly internal.
↘ The review must be done regularly.
↘ There should be an annual review of programmes with the participation of stakeholders, including alumni and employers; HEIs should raise the awareness of all stakeholders concerning the importance of their participation in the process.
↘ Evaluation must be linked to the intended learning outcomes.
↘ A combination of top-down and bottom-up approach should be used.
↘ Effective communication and providing feedback to all stakeholders involved are crucial to ensure the successful closing of the »quality circle«.
↘ Formal and informal approaches should be used. In most of the HEIs the procedures to on-oing review are poorly formalized
↘ In terms of providing on-going and regular monitoring and review of programmes, the diversity of various scientific disciplines covered by the programmes at a certain HEI should be taken into account.

ESG. 1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance

According to the HEIs of the four countries the external evaluation methodology of quality assurance agencies could be improved in the aspect of the criteria and methodology of assessment, time and quality-related costs, trainings of experts as well as further support and consultancy. The complex and multi-area impact study on influence of EQA on IQA could improve the knowledge of quality assurance agency and its adjustment to relevant expectations and needs.

Guiding questions for a site visit:

↘ To what extent does the external evaluation contribute to the enhancement of your IQAS?
↘ Would you apply for a non-mandatory external evaluation?
↘ How EQA outcomes integrated into IQA?
↘ What kind of mechanisms do you have in place for follow-up activities?
↘ Do you observe/measure the positive or negative impact of external quality assurance? Do you observe any impact? What are the main hinders or challenges?

Relevance, obstacles, further development and good practices (topics addressed in the focus questions):

↘ The interest in the analysis of EQA impact on IQA is still very limited.
↘ Legislative framework may disturb the efficiency and relation among EQA and IQA processes.
↘ The gap reduction between EQA and IQA is still relevant and challenge for HEIs and QAAs.
↘ Some good practices are identified such as organizing public presentations of audits reports and following discussion on further improvement across HEIs, increasing interest among HEIs in international external quality evaluation, reference to ESG in the national legislative framework.

Conclusions

In the last two decades HEIs in the four countries of the project – Poland, Portugal, Slovenia and Bulgaria, have witnessed a pronounced and dynamic development of IQAs. In all countries appeared external bodies responsible for QA. Besides some crucial changes in law on higher education systems took places that imposed in some cases legal requirements to establish IQA system. HEIs turned to a more systematic approach to IQA and to the formalisation of solutions to this issue. HEIs have IQA systems in place whose functioning varies greatly among faculties/units and fields of study. Partial lack of consistency and complexity may be caused by rather low awareness of quality management principles among internal stakeholders, especially teaching staff and students. Quality managers still meet internal and external obstacles in developing sufficient IQAs but at the same time they provide many good examples of activities undertaken in that area and observe beneficial qualitative and quantitative changes. Besides, frequent changes of legal requirements cause some dissatisfaction among people involved in IQA at management as well as operational levels, particularly in some countries. HEIs and representatives of the different stakeholders declare difficulties related to bureaucracy which can be considered a hot potato in the higher education and quality assurance system at the moment.

The development of those systems and their effectiveness is monitored on an ongoing basis and evaluated by the QA agencies. All agencies from partners' countries were externally reviewed. The continuous improvement of the external quality assurance systems of the agencies is a priority for their future operations.

In the terms of revised ESG 2015 the HEIs are willing and ready to follow them, in spite of the short history in IQA systems development in some countries and their maturity. Some of the HEIs that were aware of beneficial changes in the quality management area as well as quality culture importance decided to introduce and develop IQA systems on their own initiatives without external pressure Nevertheless, further clarifications of individual standards and their popularization is highly required since majority of the stakeholders still identify internal and external obstacles in applying revised ESG. The results of the project express a need by HEIs for further support in IQA enhancement and should imply the activities at the national level (policy makers, QA agencies, conferences of rectors) as well as at European level (ESU, EURASHE, ENQA etc.).

In what concerns the core issues of the implementation of the ESG, a short list can be highlighted:

↘ All stakeholders should be aware of the fact that the set of standards is not a »checklist«, i.e. a compliance exercise to be performed, therefore the methodology referring to the implementation of the given standards should be explained and largely discussed.
↘ Learning outcomes definition and assessment; student-centred learning and mutual recognition of qualifications delievered in other HEIs or country are still poorly developed even if each time more discussed.
↘ The involvement of the stakeholders, internal and external is still far below the desirable.
↘ There is some low engagement and low motivation of students (in certain cases also of staff) in what concerns evaluation and quality assurance procedures.
↘ Sometimes the low level of participation is a result of a lack of understanding of the objectives. In fact, internal communication inside the HEIs corresponds in some cases to the dissemination of information but a real discussion and critical analysis does not always take place.
↘ A general lack of funding in the Higher Education Systems affects the implementation of the standars, since the institutions are understaffed and lack financial resources.

On balance, we may conclude that policies are more complex than what is formulated in written documents. The agency of the different stakeholders is a long learning process.

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