

Quality Assurance (Qa) in Europe (2005–2015)

From Internal and Institutional to External and International



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This article highlights the developments in external quality assurance requirements between the launch of the European Standards and Guidelines in Quality Assurance (ESG in 2005 and the forthcoming Ministerial Bologna Conference in Yerevan (Armenia) in 2015. In mid-way, i.e. at the Vienna Bologna meeting in 2010, the EHEA has been officially said to be accomplished by the ministers, at least as far as structures and legislations are concerned. Yet it has become clear that there are still a lot of challenges, both in politics and within the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), and this also concerns quality assurance matters (QA). These challenges seem to be accelerated by the economic crisis, because governments want more proofs to account for the money from the taxpayer. Thus the trust in higher education (HE) seems to have tarnished and be replaced by a transparent accountability based on detailed criteria and proofs of quality in each case. On the other hand the HEIs, sometimes joint by the Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs), are getting tired of the administrative and financial costs of QA. These contextual changes have influenced the latest evolutions of QA in Europe, which can be identified along four axes, which are the unit level of QA, the learning outcomes, quality culture, and which and how standards are used in internal and external QA. These four axes are related to the maturity of QA within the HEI and to the quality policy of the (inter)national system.

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The adoption of the ESG in Bergen 2005

1. Introduction

One of the most successful action lines of the Bologna Process (BP) has been in quality assurance (QA). The original aim of the BP was to build up an integrated European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that is also attractive worldwide. It was quickly understood that a robust QA was needed in order to improve European HE as well as to build international trust in its quality both within the EHEA and beyond. This understanding led to the historic adoptions by the Bologna Ministers of Education of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, better known as European Standard and Guidelines (ESG), as well as of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area at the same Ministerial Conference in Bergen in 2005.

The 2005 ESG

2. The ESG and the QF of 2005

Both 2005 decisions were indeed historic and have links between each other that have become clear in the following years. The adoption of the so-called ESG can hardly be overestimated. The ESG not only formulate standards and guidelines for the frameworks and functioning of internal quality assurance (IQA)(part 1)¹ as well as for external quality assurance (EQA)(part 2)², but also for the Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA)(part 3)³ themselves. The ESG are also used as full membership criteria by ENQA⁴. ENQA is the most important umbrella organisation which represents quality assurance organisations from the EHEA member states and promotes European co-operation in the field of quality assurance in higher education(HE) as well as disseminates information and expertise among its members and towards stakeholders in order to develop and share good practice and to foster the European dimension of quality assurance. Furthermore the ESG are also used as criteria to measure the degree in which QAAs are compliant with them in order to be registered by EQAR⁵, the foundation of which was also recommended in the 2005 decision. By these uses and their influence on national or regional frameworks of EQA the ESG have become quite important and have gained credibility at least for EQA and the QAAs.

¹ ENQA (2005), *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area*, 2009 3rd edition, Helsinki, available at http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/ESG_3edition-2.pdf, pp. 16-19

² ENQA (2005), op. cit., pp. 20-23

³ ENQA (2005), op. cit., pp. 24-26

⁴ ENQA stands for European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, more information on www.enqa.eu.

⁵ EQAR stands for European Quality Assurance Register and registers QAAs active in the EHEA that are proven to be substantially compliant with the ESG by an independent external review, more information on www.eqar.eu

The original objectives of the ESG were:

The ESG objectives

- “ to encourage the development of higher education institutions which foster vibrant intellectual and education achievement;
- to provide a source of assistance and guidance to higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance;
- to inform and raise the expectations of higher education institutions, students, employers and other stakeholders about the processes and outcomes of higher education;
- to contribute to a common framework of reference for the provision of higher education and the assurance of quality within the EHEA.”⁶

Whether the ESG had realized those objectives was investigated in the so-called MAP-ESG project of the E4 in 2010. The E4 consist of the four initial European organisations that take part in the BP, being ENQA, EUA⁷ (the membership organisation of the universities), EURASHE⁸ (the membership organization of universities of applied sciences and colleges) and ESU⁹ (the students’ union). In its final report¹⁰ the project steering group writes rightly: “*The ESG as a means of providing a common framework for QA in the EHEA was agreed to be a sound purpose, although ESU respondents doubted whether ESG as they currently stand really help to provide greater transparency or easier understanding of external QA or if they improve the education available to students indirectly via the QA systems for which they provide a framework. The ESU consultation reported the view that the standards in part one of the ESG appear to be more clearly defined in the national quality assurance systems for internal QA than those in part two are for systems of external QA. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are implemented in individual HEIs, suggesting that there might be a mismatch between national legislation and its implementation.*”¹¹

⁶ ENQA (2005), op. cit., p. 14

⁷ EUA stands for “European University Association”, more information on www.eua.be

⁸ EURASHE stands for “European Association for Institutions of HE”, more information on www.eurashe.eu

⁹ ESU (formerly ESIB) stand for “European Students’ Union”, more information on www.esu-online.org

¹⁰ E4 project Steering Group (2011), *Mapping the Implementation and Application of the ESG*, ENQA Occasional Paper 17, Brussels, available at <http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/publications/papers-reports/occasional-papers/>

¹¹ E4 project Steering Group (2011), op. cit., pp. 16-17

ESG via External QA

Indeed more detailed investigation shows¹² that the ESG were strongly implemented in EQA and by QAAs. As for HEIs themselves, i.e. in IQA, however, it seems that this took place only to a lesser degree, either because IQA was developed before 2005, or when after 2005, the ESG were mostly used as purely inspirational in the design and development of IQA. The influence of the ESG in IQA was mostly indirect via the frameworks of national systems of EQA and accreditation, in which the ESG were more closely followed.

3. Stocktaking QA in 2009

European QA features

Although the European Commission (EC) was not a member of the E4 group that worked out the 2005 ESG, it attended most of the meetings and gave its reaction inspired by its own recommendation of 1998¹³, which called for the support and, where necessary, the creation of, transparent QA systems. The indicative features of QA that were observed to be common in the then existing European QA systems were independence, criteria linked to the aims and nature of each HEI. The common methodology starts with an internal self-evaluation and an independent external review involving all relevant stakeholders as panel members producing a public report with assessments and recommendations.

EC recommendation 2006

Shortly after the ESG adoption, the EC published its new recommendation¹⁴. While the 1998 recommendation focuses on the principles of QA in HE, which are reflected in the 2005 ESG, the 2006 recommendation focuses on the European cooperation in QA in HE and more in particular on the creation of a register providing a list of QAAs that are trustworthy. Trustworthiness is considered to be the case if the agency in question is completely independent, recognized by the member state within which it operates, works on the basis of a common set of standards and guidelines and is regularly reviewed by peers and experts using public criteria, methodologies and publication of the reviews.

¹² EURASHE (2012), *EURASHE report on the Implementation of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education Institutions*, Brussels, available at http://www.eurashe.eu/library/eurashe_report_implementation_esg_august_2012_full-pdf/

¹³ EC (European Commission) (1998), *Recommendation 98/561/EC of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education*, Brussels: Official Journal L 270 of 7.10.1998, available at <http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Recommendation-of-the-Council-98.561.EC-of-24-September-1998.pdf>

¹⁴ EC (European Commission) (2006), *Recommendation 2006/143/EC of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education*, Brussels: Official Journal L 64 of 4.3.2006, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=OJ:L:2006:064:0060:0062:EN:PDF>

The first EC report on progress in QA in HE¹⁵ was published on 21 September 2009. It rightly observes that EQA has the role to provide all stakeholders with the necessary information on the quality of HEIs in an independent way. Together with reports such as EUA's *Trend V*¹⁶ and the *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009*¹⁷ the EC report rightly concludes that HEIs in most countries were actively working to establish IQA systems and align them with external assessment procedures, which are mostly national. This is also observed by ENQA in its second survey (2008)¹⁸, which further acknowledges that there can be a strained relationship between national traditions, legislation and the ESG, and that two-thirds of agencies use programme level procedures, while just less than half work at institutional level.

**EC progress
report on QA 2009**

The 2009 Stocktaking Report uses 3 indicators to measure progress in quality assurance. The first is the stage of development of EQA, where it states that countries score best if they have an EQA system applying to all institutions in accordance with the ESG. One of the major changes in QA issues after the ESG has been the increasing involvement of more stakeholders. The second indicator is the involvement of specifically students. ENQA's second survey¹⁹ states that only twenty per cent of agencies indicated that they do not include institutions' assessments of students in their evaluations, while there is clear evidence of an increase in student membership in panels. The 2009 Stocktaking Report states that countries score best if students participate in the governance of national QA bodies, in external reviews, in internal QA processes and in preparation of self-assessment reports. Last but not least the indicator of international participation shows that countries score best if there is an international participation within external reviews, in the governance of national QA bodies and in external evaluations of national QAAs.

**Bologna's Stocktaking
Report 2009**

All reports mentioned above point out that most QAAs had gone through quite some changes since the launch of the ESG in 2005, mainly driven by the Bologna Process and the international context. Yet the international dimension of QA seemed to be still underdevel-

**International
dimension in QA**

¹⁵ EC (European Commission) (2009), *Report on progress in quality assurance in higher education*, Brussels, available at <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2009:0487:FIN:EN:PDF>

¹⁶ (EUA), Crosier, D., Purser, L. & Smidt, H. (2007), *Trends V: Universities shaping the European Higher Education Area*, EUA report, Brussels

¹⁷ (Bologna), Rauhvargers, A., Deane, C. & Pauwels, W. (2009), *Bologna Process Stocktaking Report 2009*, Brussels

¹⁸ (ENQA), Costes, N., Crozier, F., Cullen, P., Grifoll, J., Harris, N., Helle, E., Hopbach, A., Kekäläinen, H., Knezevic, B., Sits, T. & Sohm, K. (2008), *Quality Procedures in the European Higher Education Area and Beyond – Second ENQA Survey*, ENQA Occasional Paper 14, Helsinki, also available on <http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/occasional-papers/ENQA%20Occasional%20papers%2014.pdf>

¹⁹ ENQA (2008), op. cit. p. 83-89

oped in 2009. International cooperation, joint programmes and/or degrees and international franchises of institutions were almost never subject to internal and external QA. Taking into consideration the diverse landscape of QA across Europe the first EC report had to conclude that QA still had a limited European dimension. The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO)²⁰ was the only international accreditation agency in Europe and still is. There are still only a few examples of HEIs seeking evaluations from foreign agencies, although their number is rising. Accreditation is still a very national competence. In many countries recognition of decisions by foreign QAAs still causes additional administrative burden both on the HEIs and the agencies, notwithstanding the success of EQAR and of best practices within ECA²¹, which were both highlighted in the first EC Progress Report. Due to the success of EQAR the Bucharest Bologna communiqué²² mentions EQAR as the organisation whose registered QAAs should be enough trustworthy to have their decisions recognized internationally. EQAR's own European project on international activities of QAAs²³ is making clear the rise of those international activities in a context of opening up national boundaries while at the same time still set administrative national formalities.

**EC recommendation
2009: trust and
transparency**

Notwithstanding the enormous development of QA, both internal and external, the EC report rightly recommends further efforts in a number of areas. As far as the QA infrastructure is concerned, in 2009 a higher level of trust between the agencies and hence a sufficient level of transparency for users and society was required. Independence and professionalism were and still are the essential building blocks to reach this, being a precondition for cross-recognition of degrees and other educational units successfully completed by mobile students. Agencies were also addressed to broaden the scope of their activities in order to deal adequately with lifelong learning, distance, online, vocational, transnational and private higher education. The distinction between ENQA, EQAR and ECA should be clearer, especially for the QA users and the ultimate online information of evaluated HEIs and programmes should be provided to them. It was as early as 2009, that the EC recommended a revision of the ESG, with reference to the two European qualifications frameworks, the one of the EHEA (2005) and the EQF (2008), the Diploma Supplement and ECTS. As for the EC the revised ESG should also deal with the dimensions of employabil-

²⁰ More information on www.nvao.net

²¹ ECA stands for "European Consortium for Accreditation", more information on international recognition and cooperation, in particular on joint programmes, on www.ecahe.eu

²² Bologna (2012), *Bucharest Communiqué*, p. 2, available on [http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/\(1\)/Bucharest%20Communique%202012\(1\).pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/(1)/Bucharest%20Communique%202012(1).pdf)

²³ (EQAR), Szabo, M. (2014), *Recognising International Quality Assurance Activity in the European Higher Education Area (RIQAA)*, Brussels, to be presented in Palermo on 21 and 22 October

ity, mobility, student services, financial management capacity and the European Charter and Code of Conduct of researchers. Finally the EC argued for a stronger European dimension in QA.

4. EQAF's themes as barometer

Since 2006 the E4 yearly organize the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF)²⁴. The aim of EQAF is to bring together all stakeholders of QA around a current topic. The Forum is mostly attended by HEI, specifically QA managers and some interested academics, and QAAs, but unfortunately less by representatives of the world of work and ministries. In plenary sessions, smaller paper sessions and workshops the circa 500 attendants are invited to get informed and discuss the latest tendencies of QA within the EHEA. The last sessions is traditionally a panel discussion among the E4. The first five fora were subsidized by the EC.

1st EQAF 2006: quality culture versus control

So the question whether the EC recommendations were also felt and alive among the other (European) stakeholders of QA could be answered by looking at the EQAFs. EQAF's yearly central themes and publications are also a good indicator of how QA, both internal and external, has been evolving from 2006 to 2013. The theme of the first forum in Munich, which was organized in connection with an international seminar on QA for the Bologna promoters/experts, was not surprisingly "Embedding Quality Culture in Higher Education"²⁵. Those were the times, especially after the adoption of the ESG and the preparations of the foundation of EQAR, when EQA was more on the agenda than IQA. At the time quite some HEIs felt either pushed to design an IQA under unhealthy but necessary pressure of nationally organized EQA, or (mis)used a concept of quality culture to oppose it and claim their autonomy, which was said to be given to them in counterweight of a national EQA system still controlled by ministries.

The themes of the following fora evolved from "Implementing and using QA: strategy and practice" (Rome, 2007)²⁶, on the strategic implementation of the ESG part 1 included, via the neutral "Trends in

EQAF 2007–2010: bridging common practice and creativity

²⁴ More information on EQAF is available at www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/quality-assurance/eqaf.aspx. More information on all previous EQAFs on www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/quality-assurance/eqaf/previous-eqafs.aspx

²⁵ More information on the 1st EQAF (Munich, 2006) on www.eua.be/eua-work-and-policy-area/quality-assurance/eqaf/qa-forum-2006.aspx

²⁶ More information on 2nd EQAF (Rome, 2007) on www.eua.be/events/past/2007/qa-forum/home.aspx

QA”(Budapest, 2008)²⁷ and the forward-looking perspective of “Creativity and Diversity: Challenges for QA beyond 2010” (Copenhagen, 2009)²⁸ to the comprehensive topic “Building Bridges: Making sense of QA in European, national and institutional contexts” (Lyon, 2010)²⁹, trying to bring all the QA lines, developments and approaches together. In Lyon the stakeholders’ model of QA seemed to have been approved, but widened at the same time both in the social-politic dimension and in the international context.

EQAF 2010: identifying new QA challenges

It is in the yearly publication of a selection of papers of the 2010 forum that the steering committee presents an interesting overview of the trends so far and the challenges of the future of QA³⁰. After the 2010 Lyon forum the steering committee stated that “*it was felt that QA in Europe was entering a new phase, and therefore needed new dimensions and ideas.*”³¹ The steering EQAF committee identified the new challenges for QA as the issues of rankings, of outcome-based QA linked to employability, and of the “marketization” of HE as a whole and of QA in particular. Those items will be dealt with in following chapter.

EQAF 2011–2013: back to the essence of QA

The sixth EQAF, the first without EC sponsorship, was held in Antwerp bearing the title “Quality and trust: at the heart of what we do”³². It was intended to return to the essence of QA in the midst of the above-mentioned changing context. The theme of the seventh EQAF in Tallinn was “How does quality assurance make a difference?”³³, thus asking the fundamental question for justifying the very existence of QA. Although the title refers to the impact question, in reality the issues of QA, quality culture, policy making and the relationship between IQA and EQA were dealt with. The dimension of quality culture was clearly one of the main themes of the eighth EQAF at Gothenburg

²⁷ More information on the 3rd EQAF (Rome, 2008) on www.eua.be/events/past/2008/quality-assurance-forum-2008/home.aspx

²⁸ More information on the 4th EQAF (Copenhagen, 2009) on www.eua.be/events/past/Past-Events/eqaf-copenhagen/home.aspx

²⁹ More information on the 5th EQAF (Lyon, 2010) on www.eua.be/EQAF-Lyon.aspx

³⁰ (EQAF), Blättler, A., Bollaert, L., Crozier, F., Grifoll, J., Hyland, A., Loukkola, T., Michalk, B., Päll, A & Stensaker, B., (2011), *Building bridges: Making sense of quality assurance in European, national and institutional contexts – A selection of papers from the 5th European Quality Assurance Forum*, EUA Case Studies 2011, Brussels, available on www.eua.be/Libraries/Publications_homepage_list/EUA_Building_Bridges_we_b.sflb.ashx

³¹ EQAF (2011), op. cit. pp. 9-10

³² More information on the 6th EQAF (Antwerp, 2011) on www.eua.be/eqaf-antwerp.aspx

³³ More information on the 7th EQAF (Tallinn, 2012) on www.eua.be/EQAF_Tallinn.aspx

in 2013³⁴. Most attendants felt that the existence of a shared quality culture was the right reply to the critical opening speech by professor Mats Alvesson, in which he placed QA in an empty marketing context of HE³⁵. This quality culture is then described as a dimension of organizational culture, in which participation and commitment concentrating on continuous improvement seem to be essential elements.

5. Rankings, classifications tools, and QA

The overview of the EQAF themes indicates clearly that a lot has changed in QA and indeed in HE in the ten years since the adoption of the ESG in 2005. The four main evolutions are the rise of rankings, the move towards the essence of QA of education expressed in the return to the educational triangle of learner, teacher and learning environment, where quality is generated, in the rising attention to learning outcomes, social relevance and employability, and quality culture as QA indicators, and the traditional pendulum between institutional level and that of the study programme.

**Rising popularity
of rankings**

Some of these developments are so much essential to QA that they can be identified as axes along which QA has been evolving. They will be dealt with in a separate chapter. The rise of the popularity of rankings is a development that is really external to QA, but it nevertheless has at least an influence both on impact and on transparency of quality. Indeed giving independent and checked information on the quality of HEIs and/or study programmes remains one of the most important aims of QA itself.

With the important growth of globalization and internationalization, also in HE, the yearly publication of the so-called “Shanghai Ranking”³⁶ and the World University Ranking³⁷, among other rankings, have become much awaited moments. Yet, students entering international mobility seem to refer less to them than the HEIs and their leaders and management. They seem to have a kind of double standard towards rankings, criticizing them when they are not mentioned in the

**Double standard
towards rankings**

³⁴ More information on the 8th EQAF (Gothenburg, 2013) on www.eua.be/EQAF-Gothenburg.aspx

³⁵ Alvesson, M. (2013), *The Triumph of Emptiness – Consumption, Higher Education, and Work Organization*, Oxford: Oxford University Press The slides of his speech are available at http://www.eua.be/Libraries/EQAF_2013/Pl1_Alvesson_1.sflb.ashx

³⁶ The official name is “Academic Ranking of World Universities” (ARWU) and is produced by the Shanghai Ranking Consultancy, initially by the Shanghai Jiao Tong University in 1998

³⁷ Published by the Times Higher Education since 2004 in cooperation with Quacquarelli until 2009 and since then in cooperation with Thomson Reuters

top while referring to them when they are. On the other hand, rankings seem to fulfill a basic human need to classify things in lists and discover “the best” at a glance.

Rankings primarily focus on elite research universities

In two profound reports³⁸ Andrejs Rauhvargers analyzed the methodologies used by the most important rankings and classification tools. As far as pure league tables are concerned it may correctly be concluded that, notwithstanding the latest improvements and extension of indicators, they are mainly based on (bibliometric) research indicators, where the fields of the humanities, social sciences and arts are relatively neglected while medicine, natural sciences and engineering are favoured. They also focus on elite universities and address nearly exclusively English-language publications. League tables thus tell the users little or nothing about the quality of teaching and learning that is provided, although some recent indicators, such as the scaled number of awards or figures on the international mix and staff-students ratio, could be used as QA indicators of the learning environment by HEIs themselves. Yet, some rankings also use reputation surveys that are quite questionable.

Transparency tools

The same cannot be said about the latest transparency instruments that were developed in Europe. The so-called “CHE University Ranking”³⁹ and the CHEPS-led “U-Map”⁴⁰, both partly funded by the EU, use various blocks or groups of indicators in which the learning environment is well documented, although the student surveys used can be criticized. They clearly take into account the profile of the HEIs and primarily want to lay open to what extent the HEI’s own choices in terms of profile have been realized in each given case. Both organizations work together in the related “U-Multirank”⁴¹, which is an attempt to produce a comparable league table starting from U-Map indicators and surveys. All these initiatives are still works in progress, though, and their indicators, especially the surveys, have been criticized. At least they have made clear that important data on HE are still not nationally collected and/or are not comparable at European level.

Rankings challenge QA

After a decade or more it may be concluded that rankings are here to stay. They pose a challenge to QA to produce clear, useful and checked information on the performance of HEIs and the quality of

³⁸ Rauhvargers, A. (2011), *Global University Rankings and their Impact*, Brussels: EUA report, and Rauhvargers, A. (2013), *Global University Rankings and their Impact – report II*, Brussels: EUA report

³⁹ CHE stands for the “German Centre for Higher Education Development” and was established in 1994 by the Bertelsmann Foundation and the German Rectors’ Conference as a non-for-profit limited company to develop and published its first multi-indicator ranking in 1998.

⁴⁰ More information on www.u-map.eu, CHEPS stands for the Center for Higher Education Policy Studies at the University of Twente

⁴¹ U-Multirank stands for the “European University Ranking System”, an EU-funded project carried out by the CHERPA network led by CHEPS and CHE. More information on www.umultirank.org

teaching and learning in particular. So far the impact of QA on the students' and HEI's choices has not been overwhelming because of the length, difficulty and jargon that is used in reports and decisions. The European classification instruments have confirmed that QA should start with the vision, mission and strategic policy of HEIs, and design and use their QA systems and indicators from there. Some of the indicators used in rankings and classification tools can be employed as strategic key performance indicators by HEIs if they suit their profiles.

6. EC progress report 2014

The latest report⁴² of the EC is worth reading, not only because it describes some trends in QA since its previous progress report in 2009, but also because it formulates 4 essential questions on the essence and impact of QA in HE.

The first question to be answered is how QA has supported the academic community, students and other stakeholders in reaching quality goals. The EC rightly observes that a vast majority of HEIs have established explicit QA structures and processes, in which stakeholders, especially students, are more involved. On the other hand quite some QA systems are grappling with the way how to move away from process-orientation to establishing a genuine culture of continuous quality improvement. The report also confirms EURASHE's conclusion that the ESG are less known by students and HEIs in the development of their IQA, but have come in and been useful through EQA by agencies who want to be compliant with them.

How has QA supported the academic community?

The next three questions address the impact of QA on the quality of teaching and learning in its broadest sense. Whether QA has helped HEIs to broaden access and ensure that students complete their degrees cannot be answered easily. Half of HEIs and countries at the most use dropout figures as an indicator, involve students in the programme design and evaluate their educational support

The impact of QA

In order to answer whether QA has supported HEIs in providing students with high quality and relevant skills, the report observes that while most HEIs use intended learning outcomes to define their study programmes, it is still a challenge to translate them into teaching, learning and assessment, and they are generally not assessed in EQA. Research activity still outweighs teaching in academic promotion. The involvement of alumni and employers in (IQA of) curriculum design

Learning outcomes, stakeholders and internationalization in QA

⁴² EC (European Commission) (2014), *Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education*, Brussels, available at http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/doc/quality_en.pdf

and delivery is still in the beginning. Only in a few countries relevance of programmes is part of QA. Finally the answer on whether QA has supported study mobility and internationalization is not entirely positive. ENQA, EQAR and ECA clearly foster international cooperation in QA to build more trust in order to have international activities recognized. Yet personal experience teaches that internationalization is often still not a subject of QA, and most students do still not take into account the results of QA in their choice for mobility. Therefore the EC sponsored CeQuint⁴³ project of ECA is worth following.

Quality culture versus tick-box procedures

The EC report 2014 rightly concludes that progress since 2009 can be observed, but that there are still important gaps. In the meantime the EC conclusion that “*QA has to become a support to creating an internal quality culture rather than a tick-box procedure*”⁴⁴ makes clear how much the thinking and critical attitude towards QA has evolved towards the real essence instead of into technical methodologies over the past decade. Concluding the EC calls for reflections on a sector-based approach to QA in connection with learning outcomes as defined in qualifications frameworks and the search for basic principles and guidelines in QA at the same time widening the scope of QA to cover a broader range of topics relevant to HE

7. The four axes of (European) QA

Indeed, during the past decade some quite fundamentals of QA have been thought of and changed. It seems as if QA, especially IQA, has got its second birth after the quick introduction of QA in HE. In the earlier years of the BP QA was mostly pushed by the national EQA systems. The changes that can be observed during the last decade and which are related to the heart of quality and QA can be identified on four axes or lines. Those axes apply to IQA as well as EQA.

7.1 The axis of the scope of QA: from course unit to education system

The learning triangle

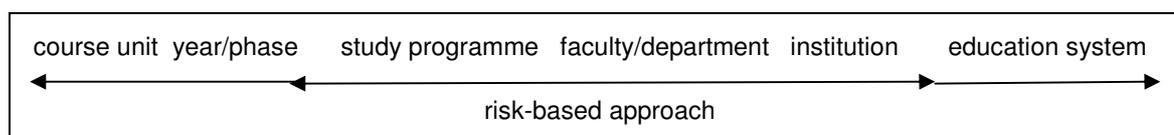
The first axis represents the well-known sway between the level of study programme and institution. In fact IQA has always been more focused on the level of the programme. This is natural because learning is or should be at the heart of the mission of any HEIs, next to research and social commitment. It is also the living place where quality is created in the triangle between learner, teacher and learning en-

⁴³ More information on <http://ecahe.eu/home/about/projects/cequint/>

⁴⁴ EC report (2014), op. cit., p. 9

vironment. The existence of this triangle is one of the most important realities that has been acknowledged only since 2007. Nonetheless, there has been a shift towards considering the institutional setup as a whole as a condition for creating quality programmes. This shift has been inspired by returning the ownership of IQA to the HEIs as well as by trying to reduce the administrative burden on the HEIs and the QAAs.

With the study programme being in the middle the axis, the line has been extended on both sides during the last decade. The extension to the left is towards smaller items than the study programme. There its study years or phases can be distinguished next to the course units. Although they have mostly been included in IQA, next to the overall satisfaction with the programme, the sudden hype of the MOOCs has emphasized that IQA should consider the quality of individual units in their learning outcomes and contents, mode of provision, didactics and assessment as well as recognition. If this is neglected, it will be hard to recognize the successful traject(s) or assessment of the learner and its place in the way to an award. So, a more detailed QA investigation is emerging, as indicated on the left side of the following graph:



QA's extension to (distance) modules

At the other end of the line recent awareness that QA should start with the vision, mission and strategy of a HEI, and thus with its profile, has extended the axis towards the institutional level. In a traditional top-down implementation the IQA was organized along institutional design, structures and choices (IQA organized by a separate, rector's office), but implemented on the level of a study programme. The institutional organization of QA was purely technical and administrative, and implemented more or less by order at the level of a study programme, being its subject, but with running the danger of not really living and being accepted on this level. With the incorporation of vision, mission and strategy of the HEI, the institutional level has also become subject of IQA. Instead of answering the question about the quality of a study programme IQA then tries to answer whether the HEI's strategic policy is being realized or not, and if so, how and why.

QA's extension to the HEI's strategy

This extension of the subject line applies to both IQA and EQA. In fact the pendulum between study programme. institution has been most visible in EQA. The report of the IBAR⁴⁵ project concluded that

The level of study programmes hand in hand with the institutional level

⁴⁵ IBAR (2012), *Identifying Barriers in Promoting the ESG for Quality Assurance at Institutional Level*, Work Package 8, p. 4, available at www.ibar-llp.eu/assets/files/wp8/WP8%20Cross-country%20comparative%20study.pdf

designing QA in such a way that a process of continuous feedback into an institution's strategic orientation, with clear accountability at all levels, remains a challenge. The swing from the level of study programmes to institutions, where vision, mission and strategy are looked upon, has been quite remarkable in some countries, such as the Netherlands, Flanders and Denmark. In most national systems there still is a kind of balance or overlap. Institutional accreditation like in the UK or as advocated by EUA's IEP is not common yet. In Denmark three of the five criteria for the institutional audit are linked to the programme level. In the Netherlands and Flanders there is still accreditation of study programmes next to new institutional reviews. In the UK the new system is risk-based in such a way that data are gathered on the level of study programmes in order to give warnings on institutional level. This approach was first developed in Australia.

QA's extension to the education system

Last but not least the first axis has even been extended by some to the national or regional educational system. This was first done when looking at the Californian educational system. This system was internationally praised for the way in which the different levels of education, also in HE, were linked in order to coach and educate more talents on the various levels of e.g. community colleges up to the PhD level at universities. Ellen Hazelkorn observed that "*perhaps efforts to achieve a 'world-class system' instead of world-class universities might be a preferable strategy*"⁴⁶. Thus it was not a surprise that in May 2012 the first "U21 ranking of National HE systems"⁴⁷ was published by Universitas 21, an international network of 23 research-intensive universities coordinated by the Melbourne Institute of Applied Economic and Social Research at the University of Melbourne.

The five development phases of QA

Another interesting observation is that the pendulum between study programme and institution is or should be best linked to the maturity of quality and QA. The following five development phases of QA can easily be recognized by everyone, be they QA layman, peers or QA experts.

⁴⁶ Hazelkorn, E. (2012), "Focusing on the Total Quality Experience", in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 15 May, available at <http://chronicle.com/blogs/worldwise/focusing-on-the-total-quality-experience/29561>

⁴⁷ More information on www.universitas21.com/news/details/61/u21-ranking-of-national-higher-education-systems-2012

Short description of simplified development phases of QA		
Phase #	Management & organisation Processes	Results
Phase 1	Quality is the result of purely individual commitment.	Quality is variable.
Phase 2	There is a beginning of thinking in processes	Quality is the result of a beginning systematic approach.
Phase 3	The organisation is managed professionally.	Quality is guaranteed.
Phase 4	The organisation as well as its management is systematically renewed.	Quality is continuously improved with innovation.
Phase 5	The organisation is outward-oriented and strives for excellence.	Quality is recognized by externals as excellent and thus an international example.

The five development phases above can rather easily be identified by both IQA and EQA. Each phase can be characterized in the following descriptions.

In **phase 1** there is the minimum of quality is quite variable and reached only accidentally on purely individual basis. Within the organisation there is mostly short-term thinking, which results in situational reactive activities in an informal culture and methods, while problems are solved ad hoc. Quality is not guaranteed and it is not formally assessed. In the current state of affairs phase 1 leads to a score of unsatisfactory in national accreditation frameworks.

Phase 1: quality is accidental and individually variable

In **phase 2** a more systematic approach of dealing with quality has started, although not all processes have been identified or are managed. Yet, notwithstanding the formulation of needs and priorities and the existence of broad, but lightly obligatory arrangements there are still often deficiencies. Quality is already measured and the real problems are discussed, but the continuation of the stakeholders' satisfaction is not guaranteed yet. The prevailing culture is varied. A HEI seems to be in this phase when it has made a start with QA on institutional level, but the implementation on the level of study programmes varies or the other way around. External evaluation or accreditation on the level of the study programme is still necessary and has different results.

Phase 2: quality starts being systematic

Phase 3: quality is systematically guaranteed

In **phase 3** the organisation is functioning in a professional and efficient way, because data is collected and used systematically, there are written arrangements and systems for improvement and the staff feel responsible and informed as a group. The decisions taken are effective and efficient. Quality is guaranteed in this unit or on institutional level. External evaluation or accreditation should adopt itself to this reality. The dividing line is not between sufficient or insufficient anymore, but more scales can be introduced. External evaluation of study programmes can start from earned trust and focus on enhancement, since on institutional or school level the score should be satisfactory.

Phase 4: continuous strive towards improvement and innovation

In **phase 4** the organisation is not satisfied with the guaranteed threshold or minimum of quality anymore, but strives towards continuous improvement and innovation. Thanks to having passed systematically through a first quality cycle using standards and indicators there is pro-active and problem-solving action and innovative thinking as well as change management causing synergy in the HEI. The culture is oriented towards quality and striving for better. The time between proposal and decision is short and the quality of the result is improved. The quality is not only satisfactory but is guaranteed as “good”. The HEI should be trusted and on this basis external evaluation can and should be sized down at least to institutional level in combination with audit trails or risk-approach.

Phase 5: quality is externally and internationally recognized

In the **final phase 5** the HEI is an international example and recognized as such by the outer world, not based on image or reputation though, but on long-term external invitation and cooperation in which the study programme or institution is recognized as expert. Quality and high results are in the veins of the organisation and thus in daily culture, not as dictated but in a natural way, and orientated towards innovation and excellence via open and critical dialogue focussing on innovation of knowledge and practice. The organisation directs its own external evaluation in an independent and objective way and accounts for it by publishing the external reports and results of its IQA of which international benchmarking is an important feature.

The link between the 5 development phases and QA

Whether after this phase the HEI can do away with its systematic IQA and only trust its high quality culture has not been experienced yet. As EQA is mostly governed by national or regional legislature this will surely remain an important actor. Trust should prevail in this phase, but is far away from the attitude of national EQA frameworks nowadays. The link between the 5 development phases of QA and the level of IQA and EQA is maybe more important than is thought. If IQA and EQA is not congruent with the phase (and with the quality culture, see axis 3), then it should not be surprising that the implementation and practices of QA are a failure.

7.2 The axis of the learning outcomes

The second axis along which QA has evolved since 2005 is orientation towards learning outcomes. Learning outcomes represent a recent development, an essential dimension or tool of the Bologna Process. ECTS, Tuning and indeed the various qualifications frameworks all put learning outcomes central. Dealing with learning outcomes in QA is even more recent and is still subject of debate. Surprisingly it has taken a longer discussion to mention the learning outcomes on the level of the new revised ESG than introducing a complete new standard on student-centred learning.

Learning outcomes have been more or less accepted in order to define a study programme. Making use of learning outcomes in order to design new curricula, use them as principles to decide on the appropriate didactics and assessment forms is still a more difficult story. Making learning outcomes explicitly subject of IQA and EQA is even further away. The OECD project AHELO⁴⁸ (Assessment of HE Learning Outcomes) has not been very convincing in its attempt to assess the learning outcomes in a particular way at almost the end of study programmes. Yet, the methodology of starting from quite generic learning outcomes in European and national qualifications frameworks and making them more specific on the levels of study field, discipline, study programme and finally course units is not an easy one, yet very innovative, especially if all stakeholders concerned are involved.

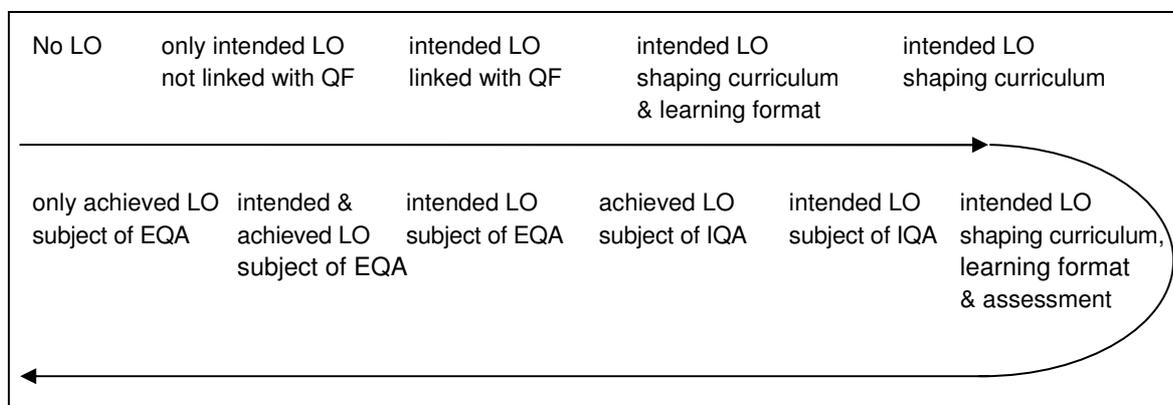
As for EQA, ECA has published an interesting overview of how different QAAs work with learning outcomes⁴⁹. Some agencies even believe that the assessment of the intended learning outcomes, the way they can be achieved and whether they are actually achieved by the graduates is at the heart of EQA. It is still a debate whether the external assessors should re-assess the theses or only examine whether the assessment system of the study programme is robust and trustworthy. The new Swedish national QA system re-examines the final papers and thus is at the extreme other end of this second line. On this axis the various QA practices with learning outcomes could be aligned as follows.

Learning outcomes in designing programmes and QA

Learning outcomes in assessment

⁴⁸ More information on OECD's AHELO project as well as its reports is available at <http://www.oecd.org/site/ahelo/>

⁴⁹ ECA (2013), *Learning Outcomes in Quality Assurance and Accreditation – Principles, recommendations and practice*, The Hague, available at http://ecahe.eu/w/images/b/ba/Publication-Learning_Outcomes_in_Quality_Assurance_and_Accreditation.pdf



The length of the axe already makes clear how many variations of working with learning outcomes can be distinguished.

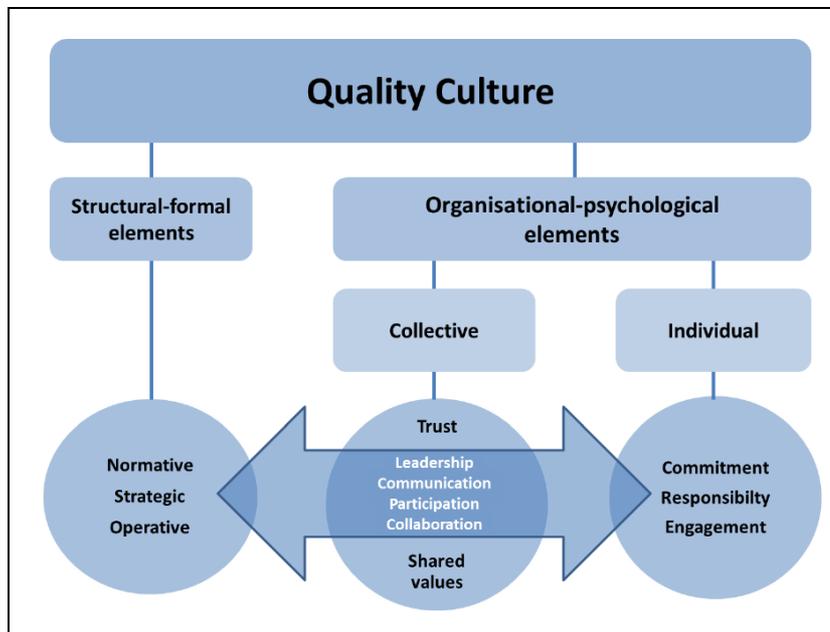
7.3 The axis of quality culture

The elements of quality culture

The third axis is concerned with quality culture. This dimension has been subject to debate for quite some years, but by now it seems to be acknowledged as one of the main and most essential factors or dimensions of quality. Quality culture being an element or dimension of the organizational culture, is not always measurable. It should at least be felt by the peer experts in a reviewing panel during the site visit. Categories as ‘drive’, ‘commitment’, ‘collectiveness’ seem to be important in identifying the existing quality culture, although values are quite often hidden underneath the behaviour of personnel and even all participants of the learning process. However, recent research has succeeded in bringing quality culture into the picture and in identifying its most important elements. The assessment model that the University of Heidelberg⁵⁰ developed appears to be fairly complete. It is also interesting in the way it combines analysis, recognition and practice, just as one of its inspirations, the Berings model⁵¹.

⁵⁰ Sattler, C, Götzen, K. & Sonntag, K. (2013), *Assessment of Quality Cultures in Higher Education Institutions – First results from the heiQUALITY Cultures Project*, paper and presentation at the 8th EQAF, 22 November 2013, see www.eua.be/Libraries/EQAF_2013/1b_4_Sattler.sflb.ashx

⁵¹ Berings, D., Beerten, Z., Hulpiau, V. & Verhesschen, P. (2010), “Quality Culture in higher education: from theory to practice”, in Blätter, A., Bollaert, L., Crozier, F., Grifoll, J., Hyland, A., Loukkola, T., Michalk, B., Päll, A., Stensaker, B. (2011), *Building bridges: Making sense of quality assurance in European, national and institutional contexts – A selection of papers from the 5th European Quality Assurance Forum, University Claude Bernard Lyon 1, 18 – 20 November 2010*, EUA Case Studies 2011, p. 39



Research in and practice with quality culture is very young and still developing. Yet, this cultural dimension really seems to underpin (the generation of) quality. This essence is the creation and delivery of quality in its broadest sense. Beneath this concept of quality culture, quality is described as the added value between input and output, to the highest and longest satisfaction of all stakeholders. It should be kept in mind that QA (management) and all its systems and models are only tools to create or reach the highest possible quality. At the same time the underlying concept of education is not as a service with value for money, but as a transformational process starting from the competences of the incoming student (input) to those of the successfully outgoing student (output).

It should also be clear that the relationship among QA, quality culture, and the resulting quality itself is a dialectic one. The table below is an oversimplification in an almost algebraic way, as it does not distinguish among several categories of quality culture and quality assurance (systems). Yet, it already makes clear the complex relationships and possible impacts. Each time the table makes a difference between the overwhelming factor (O) and the minor (M) one, and whether they are positively (+) or negatively (-) oriented towards quality.

**The dialectics
among quality
culture, QA and quality**

Quality culture	+	Quality assurance (system)	=	Possible quality output
O +		M +		++
M +		O +		++
O +		M -		+
M +		O -		Presumably +
O -		M +		Presumably -
M -		O +		Presumably -
O -		M -		--
M -		O -		--

The table above shows that while both quality culture and QA are major factors to generate quality, their relationship can be quite varied. Each possible combination can occur in any HEI. In fact they are quite easily identifiable at the level of the institution or study programme. Who does not know a study programme where QA is laughed away with, but the quality of teaching and learning is still good, because of the natural cultural commitment of the (team of) lecturers. While, even in the same institution, one can have faculties or departments that are very strict and methodical on the technicalities of QA, the administrative and/or managerial burden of QA can work that contradictory that nobody bothers about systematically dealing with quality anymore .

7.4 The axis of the standards

Quantitative and qualitative criteria in closed or open standards

The final fourth axis of the latest evolutions in QA is that of the standards. This line starts with QA, again both internal and external, that uses numerous prescriptive criteria, initially only quantitative. This approach leads to a type of QA that consists of controlling and using check-lists only, the administrative burden of which is mostly felt as oppressive and counter-productive by academics and other stakeholders, and which is not supportive of creating a positive quality culture. At the other end, open standards are used, which focus on the essential questions to be asked and in which the stakeholders can and should define in concrete terms what they consider as essential and alive in their own learning environment. The essential question is then: does the organisation know what it wants, how to achieve it, and does it accomplish its objectives? The several variations and combinations of criteria and detail are made clear in the picture below:

many	many	essential	essential	many	essential
detailed	detailed	detailed	detailed	open	open
quantitative	quantitative	quantitative	qualitative	qualitative	qualitative
criteria	& qualitative criteria	& qualitative criteria	criteria	standards	standards



It is clear that this axis, too, is related to the development phases and maturity of QA as described earlier.

8. The future up to 2015

Following the four lines along which QA and its agenda has evolved, we can identify the following challenges for the near future:

QA challenges for the near future

- the consciousness of the dimension of quality culture will be intensified through research, QA pilots and eventually in redesigning IQA.
- EQA will have to follow such a stronger attention for quality culture, both in institutional reviews, but also in the site-visits on the level of study programmes. Unfortunately this dimension, which is more based on trust and internal reality, is contrary to the rising distrust by national authorities in (the aftermaths of) a global economic crisis.
- The dimension of learning outcomes will receive more attention both in IQA and EQA. This can be formalized in different approaches. The upgrading of learning outcomes to a new standard in the revised ESG proposal will have to be transferred into in EQA. The debate on how and by whom achieved learning outcomes will and should be assessed will intensify and will be linked with the issue whether EQA will still look at input, process and output, or only consider results. The identification of learning outcomes limited to practical, short-term competences and skills or including more generic, transferable competences to be ready for citizenship and lifelong learning in the 21st century will be linked to it as well. With the formal introduction of the learning outcomes in QA sectoral and subject-specific EQA will rise and the link with existing national QA systems will be debated.
- The dimension of social relevance of study programmes will grow even more in attention due to the prolonging of the global crisis and (inter)national unemployment. The meaning of social rele-

vance of HE will be more debated. Whether and how employability will and should be mentioned and dealt with as a criterium, indicator or even standard of QA will be linked to it.

- IQA and EQA will incorporate the vision, mission, profile and strategy as starting point more decisively, primarily on institutional level. QA systems, models and instruments will and should be adapted to this fundamental shift. While this is a good angle to re-think QA and focus on quality in its broadest sense as well as choose the appropriate standards and indicators, there is also the danger that QA will become a management tool only to measure and monitor the realization of the institution's strategic policy instead of the quality of education, research and social commitment.
- The international recognition of (E)QA findings and decisions has already been put on the agenda of the next ministerial Bologna conference in Yerevan 2015. The international dimension will and should be intensified. Unfortunately international members of reviewing panels are only mentioned as good practice in a guideline of the revised ESG proposal to Yerevan. ECA practice has learnt that this is the place where international trust could start, as ECA practice has proved. EQAR registration will play an important, if not essential, role in gaining international trust as a precondition for international recognition.
- As the challenges of HE have grown global and the EU agenda has gone global as well (e.g. Erasmus+ and Horizon 2020), QA will be debated, functioning and practised more and more on a global scale. This trend has been forecast by the intense meetings and mutual contributions in EQAF, the activities of INQAAHE⁵², and the global projects of ENQA as well as those funded by the EC, such as the new peer learning activities, as well as the creation of the global Bologna Policy Forum⁵³ linked to the Bologna ministerial conferences.

⁵² INQAAHE stands for 'International Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education' and is the global membership organization of QAAs. More information on <http://www.inqaah.org>

⁵³ The first Bologna Policy Forum took place at the 2009 Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve ministerial conference. It gathers representatives of nations out of the EHEA and of global organisations to come in consensus to a policy statement. Its statements are available on <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=44>

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Biography:

Lucien Bollaert has been member of the executive board of the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) since 2009. Since its foundation in 2008 he has been vice-chair of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) Committee. In 2012 he became a member of the Board of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). He was also member of the E4 group that worked out the ESG in 2005 and a member of the working group organizing the annual European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) from its 1st edition in 2006 to the 6th in 2011.