Guidelines for Training of Experts
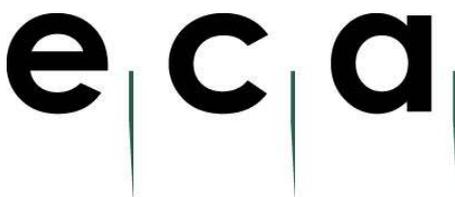
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Guidelines for

Training of Experts

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1.   Introduction to the E-TRAIN project

1.1.   E-TRAIN: Aims and Objectives

P eer reviews are often said to be the backbone of external quality assurance. The interdependence between the quality of the procedure and the quality of the team members is obvious: However excellent the standards and procedures may be designed, if the experts are not conversant with the application of these standards, the quality of the procedure may suffer considerably. That is one reason why the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) point out that quality assurance agencies (QAAs) should provide "appropriate briefing and training for experts".

As cooperation across borders becomes more and more a given (especially within the European Higher Education Area), the field of work for experts is no longer exclusively restricted to their own national system. Therefore the training of experts should not be restricted to the national level, either.

The project European Training of Quality Assurance Experts (E-TRAIN) intends to strengthen the European dimension in quality assurance by making it possible for QAAs to identify trained and experienced experts from other European countries. The overall aim of E-TRAIN is to facilitate the sharing of trained, knowledgeable, and internationally experienced experts who will be better equipped to participate in quality assurance procedures to the benefit of the higher education institutions under review. Drawing on international experts also helps to ensure the independence of the assessment decision from the influences of national conflicts of interests and fosters the orientation towards European and international developments for standards and procedures.

There are two main objectives developed to support this overall aim: The first objective of the project is to develop a European training programme for experts in quality assurance procedures. This programme will provide training for staff members of quality assurance agencies and for training of experts (peers) who will be part of assessment panels. The second objective of the project is to develop a programme to share experts among quality

assurance agencies in Europe. This programme will develop a template portfolio for panel members and a database providing easy access to quality assurance agencies to these portfolios.

A comment: It is important to be aware of the fact that trainings – maybe especially those that comprise the target group of adult academics – cannot have the aspiration to profoundly influence or even change the attitude or behaviour of the trainees. There is no guarantee to actually reach any of the intended learning outcomes. That depends on many factors; the most influential one is perhaps the individual trainee. What trainings can do, however, is to offer inducements for learning. If they are adequately designed, they can be an environment to stimulate the experts to learn; it is all about offering opportunities.

1.2. About this document

This publication should serve as a basis for the development of the expert training programme. It is mainly a structured summary of the Focus Group's reflections and ideas, including feedback from the Stakeholder Group. The Focus Group is one of the three E-TRAIN project groups (in addition to the Stakeholder Group and the Steering Group, both of which comprise representatives from quality assurance agencies). The Focus Group consists of six quality assurance experts (including a student member) who have a track record in more than one European higher education system. This small but representative part of the European group of experts that are active in external quality assurance procedures embodies one of the most important target audiences of E TRAIN. The experts of the Focus Group have experiences with different quality assurance procedures (quality assessments, programme accreditation, institutional audits, etc.) and quality assurance systems (on a European/international and national/regional level).

At the time of writing this document, the project still is in an early phase. That means that its direction is not totally determined yet and that there are still a number of open questions. Thus the main aim of this publication is to explore promising ways forward concerning the training of experts on a European level. It tries to depict the range of possibilities and to name crucial issues which should be considered when talking about devising trainings. Despite the open character of this publication, there is one key point

which is indeed fixed: The European dimension. Our main aim is neither to extend the experts' subject-specific knowledge nor to train them to be able to apply all different sorts of European standards and procedures but this project pursues a broader approach. What exactly that could mean and could include is to be discussed hereafter.

2.   Target group(s) of the training

The first logical step when setting up a training programme is to clearly identify who the intended target audience should be and could be: Only when you know who you want to train you can think of ways and, to a smaller extent, contents you want to include in your training. Depending on varying levels of prior knowledge and depending on the motivation of the considered trainees, the training design would look differently, but should at the same time have the capacity to cater different needs and expectations.

What kinds of target groups are possible when it comes to training of experts? The Focus Group identified the following possibilities:

2.1.   Newcomers or experienced experts

It was discussed whether the training should aim primarily at "newcomers" who might just recently have discovered the field of quality assurance in higher education and want to broaden their knowledge in that area with the help of the training. Another possibility is to only admit experts who already have quite extensive experiences with quality assurance.

The Stakeholder Group discussed the proposed possibilities and came to the conclusion to focus on experts who already have a solid experience in the field of quality assurance. Since the experts should be able to link national and institutional contexts with European and/or international standards and they should be able to show ways in which the institutions can improve their practices, they need to have quality assurance knowledge and understanding already.

To narrow down the target audience to experienced experts could have the (unintended) side-effect of homogenising the assessments in such a way that a selected and trained small group of "certified experts" is doing a "closed job". In a worst case scenario this could lead to disrespecting the dynamics of academic developments and the diversity of higher education institutions. A mediating solution would be that less experienced experts can join the trainings after undergoing more basic online modules leading to an entry level. A

modular approach to the training could be of help here: The (online) modules could have a "tree structure", i.e. the trainees themselves should be able to decide which modules they want to take according to their own prior knowledge and their needs. (This requires that the trainees are able to judge whether they are familiar with the module's content. Therefore rather explicit summaries of the modules' contents would be necessary).

Nevertheless, it was emphasised that in the end, the training should try to lead to the same level of expertise for every trainee, but the ways towards achieving the intended learning outcomes might vary.

2.2.   Students; Experts from the professional field

It was discussed that a differentiation in training design could make sense for trainees from different professional backgrounds. For example, students might need other (foci of) input than professors. It was also mentioned that students should be more "professionalised" because they will serve as student expert only for a limited period of time and it is most efficient if within this short time frame they can participate in a number of procedures. Another possible target group could be experts from the professional field.

After further discussion of the Stakeholder Group it became evident that there should be no separate trainings for students but to have one experts training with the same learning outcomes for everyone. Less experienced experts then would have to focus more strongly on the online materials in advance so that the gap in knowledge is not too large on the training day.

2.3.   Motivation

The question of motivation is closely connected to the considered target groups. If the aim of the training is to include as many experts as possible then the requirements of the training should not be too high, especially time-wise. If the target group mainly consists of very active quality assurance experts who want to acquire more knowledge and skills, then one could assume that they enter the training with an appropriate level of internal motivation. In any case the training and its contents have to be considered to be relevant by the future trainees.

3. A European training for experts: contents and didactics

Learning, as it is commonly understood, is acquiring new knowledge, skills, behaviour and preferences. It takes place within three different but interrelated dimensions: a cognitive, a behavioural/interactive and an emotional dimension. For our purposes, a division into the three dimensions (loosely based on the aforementioned definition) *knowledge – skills – awareness* seems to be practicable: What should a good reviewer, seen from a European perspective, be able to know, be able to do and be aware of?

During the discussions of the Focus Group it became apparent that a mere concentration on the cognitive dimension, meaning fact-based, theoretical knowledge, will not be sufficient for a European training. On the one hand it is mainly the national agencies' task to take care of acquainting the experts with the "hard facts" concerning specific national regulations, standards and guidelines. It is the national agencies who know their own work best. The knowledge part of the trainings will thus focus on the overarching principles of European quality assurance such as the ESG. On the other hand, theoretical knowledge alone will not suffice anyway. What is equally important, if not more, is to lay the focus on a practical, interactive element, including the raising of an awareness of the European dimension, the development of an openness towards "European differences" and the fact that quality of education can be reached in different ways across different countries.

But of course knowledge, interaction and awareness are closely linked to each other and therefore it is mainly for the sake of clarity to divide them up into three separated chapters.

Before focusing on possible contents of the training programme, some words on its general structure.

3.1.   How should the training be structured?

The rough structure of the training is twofold: One part of the training should be carried out online, follow an e-learning approach. The other part of the training programme should consist of a face-to-face session. The Focus Group discussed some general issues concerning e-learning and face-to-face sessions:

E-Learning Approach/Online Part

The online part should be the starting point of the training and therefore it should not be too demanding time-wise. The contents should be divided up into several modules which follow a tree structure, meaning they should accommodate the fact that there are different levels of prior knowledge amongst the users. The single modules should be easily manageable and clear information on how much time it will take to work through a module should be given. The online part of the training should not merely consist of downloadable documents but it should be made as appealing as possible, for example through the inclusion of audio and video elements.

A Knowledge Base should include information on different national external quality assurance systems. These facts should be presented in a consistent and comparable way – a template should be developed. The Knowledge Base should further include a variety of topics which are not necessarily presented during the on-site trainings, e.g. Joint Programmes, Internationalisation of Higher Education etc.

The e-learning part of the training should be openly accessible for everyone who is interested. This also gives national agencies the opportunity to use (and adjust) some of the material for their own national trainings as well.

Direct interaction/face-to-face sessions

Regarding the face-to-face sessions the question was raised if different groups should be provided with different contents, for example according to prior knowledge or the respective function in the panel (e.g. special session for chairs). It was concluded that a separation according to the function is not really making sense since the function of one expert in different panels is not always the same. Another suggestion was to consider

having student trainers if students were a target group of the training because they could probably cater better to the students' needs (at least for some parts of the session).

Issues like the intended length of the training, the group size and the relation between theoretical and practical parts should be considered as well when devising the training.

Different contents demand different didactical approaches. Which methods appear to be appropriate for which contents will be elaborated on, amongst others, in the next sub-chapters.

3.2. Awareness Dimension: What should experts be aware of?

As mentioned before, it is not the intention of the training to extend the experts' subject-specific knowledge. It is also hardly feasible for a training of European experts to prepare the trainees for every imaginable assessment situation in every imaginable national system with every imaginable set of standards. It could be argued, though, that within the limited situation of a quality assurance procedure, a site visit, there are only a limited number of similar situations which experts have to deal with. That might be true for procedural aspects like "there will always be a self-assessment document to be reviewed" or "during the site-visit there will always be interviews with different groups of representatives of the institution". But in every quality assurance procedure, however predictable it might appear to be, there are new participants with other professional, personal, motivational etc. backgrounds involved. And there are not only changing participants in every procedure but as well different sets of standards or different interpretation of standards. That holds true even more for quality assessments with participants from more than just one national and/or cultural background. Even the most intensive and comprehensive training cannot enable the experts to know how to act in many different situations in "the right way". Each new situation calls for the experts' ability to appraise, to evaluate, and to judge anew – ready-made "recipes" might work, but they do not automatically have to.

Facing these findings it was concluded that an expert does not necessarily need a huge amount of knowledge, of accumulated facts. A manageable and more realistic approach to the training would be to focus on a "meta-level" and on "meta-competences" that would

enable the experts to (re-)act in many different situations in an appropriate and adequate manner. The key word is "awareness". Being aware of a wide range of possible different, difficult or problematic situations in site-visits is a key competence in reviews. The training should enable the experts to avoid jumping to conclusions but to be aware of their own prior perceptions, to step back and wait for a moment before judging and try to come to "justified" conclusions. It might of course be quite a challenge to train external quality assurance experts – whose main job it is indeed to judge, to evaluate and to come to conclusions – to suspend their judgments.

The Focus Group thinks that the training should try to raise awareness at least in the following areas:

- **Different organisational cultures, different quality cultures**

  The notion of "quality" can differ considerably between (and even within) different higher education institutions as well as its realisation. There is not necessarily the "right" way to understand quality and quality assurance but there might be different concepts which are equally valid. The experts should be aware of this and of their own understanding and perception. They should try to retain a certain "openness of mind" which allows them to acknowledge that there might be more ways than just one to reach a goal [for example: be aware that all kinds of higher education institutions (not only traditional universities) can provide good education; be aware that a system in one country can achieve quality even if it does not fulfil requirements which are considered highly important in another country etc.].

- **Being biased (prior perceptions/prejudices)**

  It is natural for a human being to have prejudices or stereotype ways of thinking (otherwise, we would not be able to structure and understand our complex environment, let alone act in it). People tend to enter new situations with preset images in their minds that raise specific expectations. These in turn could influence the way we perceive and evaluate things. The experts should be aware of the process of forming judgments and they should be able to reflect these processes.

- **Intercultural awareness/Intercultural communication**

    The target group of the planned training are experts who should be able to take part in quality assurance procedures in more than just one national system across Europe. They will have to work together with representatives of universities, other panel members etc. who might have different cultural backgrounds and different mother tongues. A lingua franca, most probably English, will be used. The experts should not only be able to deal with different levels of fluency but, more important, they should be aware of the possibility that in spite of using the exact same terms or words, the involved individuals could have different, sometimes even contrary, interpretations which in turn could lead to mutual misunderstanding.

    In intercultural settings, the ability to "meta-communicate" is essential. The experts should not take everything for granted or consider situations and intentions to be self-evident. Instead, they should be able to act in a careful, attentive and emphatic way and to develop a meta-perspective on their own behaviour (role distance).

Didactics

The awareness component could most probably best be dealt with in the face-to-face sessions. Some topics are suitable for theoretical input/presentations, for example an introduction to different concepts of organisational cultures or different quality cultures. In this context the trainees could presumably draw on their own experiences.

There is a wide range of role plays and (intercultural) awareness-raising exercises which could be adapted for the European quality assurance context. One should make use of the fact that representatives with different backgrounds (culture, professional experience in different systems etc.) are present during the face-to-face-sessions. This could prove to be very fruitful for example in role plays, (parts of) culture assimilator trainings, case studies (ideally dealing with real assessment situations, including good practices and pitfalls) or linguistic analyses of intercultural situations.

Parts of the theoretical input could be provided by the online tool as well. For example basic facts on the influence of the cultural background on perceiving and/or evaluating the same situation in different ways could be integrated into a downloadable module. Video-

input, for example of intercultural situations where something went wrong ("critical incidents"), could be used for illustration.

3.3. Cognitive dimension: What should experts know?

Everything that is mentioned under the previous and the following subchapter, namely the "awareness dimension" and the "interactive dimension", has of course a strong cognitive component as well. You cannot raise awareness or act adequately without any theoretical input. Therefore, the so-called cognitive dimension is by no means limited to the following points. However, the desirable contents for a training programme which are listed in this chapter are to an extent more restricted to fact-based learning than the other two dimensions.

The Focus Group identified three sub-dimensions in which the training programme should try to convey knowledge: Knowledge of the European dimension of quality assurance, of the national dimension of quality assurance and knowledge of cultural differences/ intercultural knowledge.

The first dimension (**quality assurance in Europe**) should try to (at least) cover the following topics:

- different notions of "quality" and "quality assurance"
- different notions (even philosophies) of "university" (and other higher education providers)
- different national approaches to institutional quality management/autonomy of Higher Education Institutions
- typology and/or comparison of different approaches towards quality assurance throughout Europe with special regard to institutional audits (in online modules: provide links to the national examples in the knowledge base). Possible other topics could be institutional vs. programme accreditation; internal vs. external quality assurance; enhancement vs. accountability approach; fitness for purpose, fitness of purpose
- brief introduction to basic elements in external quality assurance (e.g. common structures in a quality assurance procedure)

- different roles and responsibilities of different panel members with special regard to institutional audits
- up-to-date information on/newest developments of relevant European organisations/standards/policies like the Bologna Process, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), etc.

The second dimension is the **national dimension**. As already indicated, it would go well beyond the scope of the planned training programme to try to convey to every trainee information on every single European quality assurance system. This kind of information should be available nevertheless. It could be included in two different ways: On the one hand, in a "Knowledge Base" there should be structured and comparable information about as many European quality assurance systems as possible (including a brief discussion of the range of universities/higher education institutions within the different countries, e.g. private, state, size differences, different philosophies), on the other hand, the national dimension is always included in the rest of the training on an exemplary basis.

The third dimension includes knowledge about **intercultural aspects**. It is closely related to the learning objective "intercultural awareness". It should comprise input on topics like the cultural influence on perception, on thought/reasoning, on judgment and on acting. The specifics of intercultural communication processes should be introduced. It would also be useful to deal with the subject of prejudices and prior perceptions: What is their function, how do they work, what are their dangers and how to deal with them would for example be worthy of discussion.

It is important to point to the fact that acquiring knowledge must of course be followed by understanding and by being able to put the theoretical knowledge into practice.

Didactics

It was discussed that an obvious way to deal with the "facts dimension" of the training would be to have it in online modules. However, the theoretical part should not be restricted to e-learning but it would make sense to have (short) theory input sessions in the face-to-face training programme as well. This would not only offer the chance to

directly explain and discuss issues which might have remained unclear after the completion of the e-learning modules but also to apply the knowledge in different exercises. An example could be to carry out a comparative analysis between different national systems.

## 3.4.	Interactive dimension: What should experts be able to do?

The Focus Group concluded that the interactive dimension, related to specific skills, should not be underestimated. After all, a considerable part of the success of a site visit is closely connected to the atmosphere: the atmosphere between the experts (and agency staff) and the atmosphere between the experts and the representatives of the institution. If for example the latter get the feeling of being treated in an unfair way, of being controlled or patronised, then they will probably lapse into an attitude which is merely defensive instead of cooperative. Another example is the interviews with students: if the interviewer is not able to create a trusting atmosphere the students might not come forward with their actual opinions.

Since the "right chemistry" is pivotal for getting an as realistic picture of the institution under review as possible, the training of the following skills (and the corresponding knowledge) should be included in the programme:

- audit techniques/"tools & tricks", e.g. how to conduct interviews (how to "break the ice", how to listen and ask questions effectively under time pressure, how to handle opposition from the interviewees etc.); how to deal with "image management techniques" and window dressing of higher education institutions (i.e. mention tricks which are applied in self-reports and in oral presentations to hide deficiencies with regard to certain criteria)
- team work: how to effectively work together as a review team, including how to handle possible disagreements, how to come to (joint) conclusions, how to lead a team effectively
- how to write a (joint) report that includes the opinions of all the entire expert team and is fact-based and consistent; how to give oral feedback to the institution or programme at the end of the site visit

- "Do's and Don'ts" at the site visit: what makes a site visit successful, what should experts avoid doing?

- how to act in intercultural situations, how to deal with cultural differences, how to suspend judgments, how to retain "openness"

Didactics

At first glance it might be obvious to integrate the more practical part of the training exclusively into the face-to-face sessions. On second thought, however, it would also be possible to convey some practical contents online. Videos for example could give a first insight in the subject interview training and audit techniques.

In the face-to-face sessions there is a range of possible methods to convey the above mentioned contents. For example one should have case studies, where e.g. parts of self evaluation reports are analysed according to a selected standard. The composing of (parts of) the review report can be exercised in group work. Role plays can train skills like audit techniques (simulating interviews) or social interaction. There should also be de-briefing after role play sessions where the trainees can reflect and share experiences. Practical exercises on team building or on acting in intercultural situations should also be included in the training.

Even with some practical topics like for example "Do's and Don'ts" could the need arise to have some input speeches before commencing with the actual training.

4.   Some thoughts on testing/certification and organisation

4.1.   Testing/Certification

The idea came up to give the trainees the possibility to take a (voluntary) test after completion of the training (at least the online part) and to award a certificate. Obtaining a certificate might especially prove to be useful for students and for experts who are self-employed. If students take the (same) test this might probably make their position towards the professors stronger. Some practical questions to be considered:

- Which elements of the (online) modules would be mandatory for the test, which would be optional?
- How (if?) could prior experience be credited/recognised?
- Test design: Is "European awareness", one of the main goals of the training programme, testable? How (if?) will practical skills be tested? Should the test be completely online or also partially face-to-face?

For the project phase the Stakeholder Group thinks an attendance certificate will suffice; maybe testing could be implemented if the training will be continued.

4.2.   Organisational issues

The question how the European training programme should be implemented on an organisational level was as well raised by the Focus Group. If the project turns out to be successful, it would be desirable to continue with the training programme in the future. To continue with the online modules should not pose too many difficulties, how to proceed with the face-to-face sessions however is not that obvious. Some questions related to the actual organisation of the training programme:

- Who is going to organise the training (ECA, ENQA, ...)?
- Where should the face-to-face sessions be held? Same location or circulate between different places across Europe?

- The question was raised if one should leave the training of practical skills to the national agencies for the purpose of subsidiarity (with internationally developed material, though). It was concluded that it would be better to have mixed groups for the face-to-face sessions, since that would for example provide a better setting for the dimension of intercultural learning: If the trainings always include experts from a variety of countries the intercultural communication skills can be practiced and the experts will have the opportunity to learn about the systems (and terminology) of the other participants.
- How many times a year should trainings be offered?
- Will the training be free of charge?
- It was discussed that open access to the online modules would make sense. That would not only allow that people who do not have an interest in the certificate could nevertheless have the chance to use the modules but it would allow as well national agencies to take over (and possibly adjust) some of the material for their own national trainings.

5.   Conclusions

This publication indicated ways forward for the devising of a European training programme for external quality assurance experts and contributed to the outline of the training. It identified possible target groups and gave suggestions regarding the contents (three dimensions: awareness, knowledge, skills) which should focus on the awareness and practical dimension in order to enable the trainees to deal with different contexts and procedures within a European framework. Possible didactical approaches and examples were presented as well. In the end, some questions on the continuation of the training in the medium-term future were raised.

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