

EUREQA MOMENTS!

TOP TIPS FOR INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

ANNA GOVER AND TIA LOUKKOLA



EUA

European University Association

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Tempus

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INTRODUCTION

EUA has a long record of working on quality assurance (QA) in Europe and has supported its members in developing their internal QA systems through a variety of activities. Many of these activities have been co-funded by the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme (LLP), which limited the participation to universities from the LLP-eligible countries. Consequently, higher education institutions (HEIs) in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo¹ had not been able to take full advantage of these activities. In order to fill this gap, the project *Empowering universities to fulfil their responsibility for quality assurance* (EUREQA), co-funded by European Commission's Tempus programme, was launched in autumn 2012. The aim of this capacity-building project has been to support participating institutions in developing their internal QA systems and thereby facilitating the enhancement of quality and the strengthening institutional quality cultures. This report presents the key conclusions drawn from the EUREQA project, which build on many of the lessons learnt from previous EUA projects on quality assurance and quality culture.

The development of quality assurance in European higher education has been closely linked to the Bologna Process and the creation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). From the statement in the 2003 Berlin Communiqué that “consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself” (Berlin Communiqué, 2003) to the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in 2005 and the establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) in 2008, the Bologna Process has supported a number of measures aimed at developing and promoting quality assurance.

The Trends 2015² study identified quality assurance as the most important change driver in European higher education in the past 15 years (Sursock, 2015, p. 11). While the initial emphasis lay primarily on system level changes and the introduction of external QA, the past decade has seen a gradual shift towards internal QA.

This change in focus culminated in the revision of the ESG in 2015. While the first version was already based on the underlying premise of institutional responsibility for quality assurance,

¹ This designation is without prejudice to position on status, and is in line with UNSCR 1244 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

² EUA's Trends reports present data and examine developments from an institutional perspective in the context of the EHEA.

the revised version puts even more emphasis on this, indicated by the fact that the majority of the changes between the two versions are to Part 1, which relates to internal QA. The revision also makes the document clearer and more coherent, and brings about better alignment with other Bologna Process developments, such as those relating to learning outcomes and employability, student-centred learning and qualifications frameworks.

During the course of the EUREQA project, partners covered all these issues, through a range of capacity-building activities, including participation in training workshops and study visits to EU partner universities. These activities supported the Western Balkan partners in producing action plans for their internal QA systems, providing a basis for continued development beyond the end of the project. Further details about the project concept and the participating partners can be found in Appendices 1 and 2.

This report aims to provide a practical and concise guide to the core features of internal QA systems. The choice of topics is derived from the themes on which the EUREQA activities focused, because they were of particular interest and relevance to the partners in this project, and the accompanying examples are drawn both from participating Western Balkan institutions and the EU partners that supported them throughout the project. However, it is hoped that they will also be a source of inspiration for HEIs beyond the EUREQA partnership. Furthermore, the scope of the project, and therefore also this report, focuses only on the quality assurance of learning and teaching; nonetheless many of the principles mentioned are applicable to all areas of an institution's activity.

**EUREQA moment!**

"Institutional quality management requires a comprehensive, all-encompassing approach. This covers all activities of a university: research, teaching and learning, service to society and support services."

(EUA, 2010, p. 1)

This report focuses on three key steps in building an internal QA system and is divided into three sections accordingly. Firstly, the impact of context on the foundations of QA policy is examined, followed by a look at the frameworks required to turn policy into practice. The final section gives a practical insight into the tools and processes that are available for implementing and delivering effective institutional quality assurance.

I. LAYING THE FOUNDATION: POLICY AND CONTEXT



EUREQA moment!

“First and foremost, quality assurance must be context sensitive and thus individualised. When developing quality assurance processes HEIs and QA agencies need to take into account disciplinary characteristics, various organisational cultures, the historical position of the institution as well as the national context.”
(EUA, 2009, p. 7)

The starting point of the EUREQA project was to gain an understanding of the context in which the partners were working. The partners made an assessment of how and why internal quality assurance was introduced in their institutions and what impact this, together with the external context, would have on future development. These steps are reflected in the first chapter, which examines the internal and external contexts and their impact on institutional QA policy. It became clear very early on in the project that there was significant diversity in institutional approaches to quality assurance, and even institutions in the same country that worked with the same external QA requirements had very different internal policies and arrangements.

What kind of system makes sense for us?

The first step in developing an internal QA system is to define what exactly it is expected to do. Its goals and purposes may differ greatly from one institution to another, however, a consensus prevails in European higher education (see ESG 1.1) that the goals are expected to:

- be context sensitive and in line with the institution's strategic priorities;
- aim at enhancing quality, not only assuring it;
- support quality culture.

As highlighted in the first point above, the goals, purposes and design of any internal QA system will depend on the institution's context and specificities. Issues such as strategic priorities of the institution, its existing organisational and decision-making structures and processes, size,

disciplines and current state of development in its approach to quality all influence what kind of internal QA system is fit-for-purpose.



EUREQA moment!

“[It is] important to know in which developmental phase of dealing with quality the organisation or unit resides.”

(Bollaert, 2014, p. 287)

This is demonstrated by Bollaert in Table 1, which presents various approaches to quality that can exist within an organisation and which can be interpreted as factors that influence the design of a system as well as those which describe its maturity. Bollaert concluded that when “the understanding of quality is still on [a] personal and non-systematic level, it is not worth even considering the setting up of a heavy system” (Bollaert, 2014, p. 287).

Table 1: Short descriptions of simplified development phases (Bollaert, 2014, p. 87)

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 recognised by externals as excellent and thus an international example.

The question of what the role of QA processes is in creating quality is often asked, particularly in higher education, which traditionally relies heavily on individual members of academic staff relaying their expertise to the next generation. Beyond describing the approaches to quality, Table 1 can also be understood as a response to this question. It seeks to demonstrate that by establishing and implementing a more organised approach, the likelihood of high quality is increased.



EUREQA moment!

“[T]he introduction of quality culture requires an appropriate balance of top-down and bottom-up aspects.”

(EUA, 2006, p. 11)

Nevertheless, there is wide consensus that given the specificities of higher education, the mere existence of formal and structural measures alone will not lead to high quality. As Williams has pointed out, in many ways quality assurance is a misnomer concept (2012, p. 14): “Quality can only be *assured* by those who are involved in the teaching/learning activity: everything else is observation, commentary, facilitation (or interference).” This is why the concept of quality culture has become central to the discussions on quality in higher education.

In the EUREQA project, EUA’s much used definition of quality culture provided a framework for reflections on how to develop institutional QA systems. It identifies two distinct elements in quality culture: i) “a cultural/psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality” and ii) “a structural/managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts” (EUA, 2006, p. 10). This definition sees an internal QA system as the latter element, which has an important role to play in nurturing the cultural commitment to quality, but cannot replace it.

In a report resulting from a previous EUA project, Vettori (2012) provided a framework with questions that may assist an HEI in reflecting on the dynamics in place in their own institution between the internal QA system and the existing quality culture. He concluded that “[i]t is, generally spoken, the interplay of the manifest and formal QA processes and the latent and informal values and assumptions that lie at the heart of enhancing an institutional quality culture”. According to him, and along the same lines as Bollaert above, one needs to understand the interaction between these two elements in one’s own institution in order to support quality culture.

The discussions during the EUREQA project confirmed once again that while institutional contexts and approaches to quality may vary, fostering the cultural commitment and ownership of QA processes remains a common challenge for a large majority of institutions. A possible strategy to address this is to promote the cultural element by designing a system that includes and balances both formal and informal aspects – an approach that will be addressed throughout this report.

Internal institutional contexts

The EUREQA partner institutions had a variety of reasons for settings up their internal QA systems. Some of these were related to external QA requirements, but beyond that, each individual institutional context resulted in a different motivation and approach. Three examples are provided below:

- At the University of Mostar (Bosnia and Herzegovina), the implementation of Bologna reforms was an important goal due to their focus on regional and international recognition and engagement. Quality assurance was seen as a key component of this and its implementation at the institution was driven by a desire to be internationally competitive. The need for structured and formal institutional quality assurance was also a recommendation of a report provided by EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) following an evaluation of the university.
- The University of Prizren (Kosovo) is a very young university, established in 2010, by which time quality assurance was already on the national agenda. As a result the institution was able to think about integrating QA staff and processes into the governance and management of the institution right from the start, and was supported in this through a Tempus funded project in which the university participated. The small size of the university also made it easier to forge and maintain good relationships between the QA office and other units within the institution, contributing to the development of quality culture.
- The University of Tirana (Albania) was established from the merger of a number of separate institutes. As a result, the university has had a decentralised approach from the beginning. This is reflected also in the QA processes and management, which operate largely at faculty level, initially through ad hoc groups to support curriculum development, but are now becoming more formalised.

What is our policy context?



EUREQA moment!

“The key success factor will be finding meaningful ways of improving the articulation of internal and external quality assurance processes so that they are in balance and thus complement each other in support of a sustainable quality development.”
(EUA, 2010, p. 3)

In addition to the internal context, an institution that is planning or revising its internal QA system also needs to understand the wider context in which it is operating, in particular taking into consideration the external QA requirements. While the internal QA system should primarily be directed towards serving an institution's own goals and priorities, it is nonetheless indispensable to ensure that it also accommodates the needs of external demands. With the diverse array of external QA arrangements in place, it is not surprising that this has led to very different institutional systems (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010, p. 35).

In the context of the EUREQA project, the institutions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo were operating in different external QA frameworks, some of which are also in a process of change and development. A brief overview of the external QA arrangements in these countries is provided below.

Albania

Public and private HEIs in Albania should gain accreditation at both institution and programme level every six years. External reviews are carried out by the Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (PAAHE), or institutions can choose to be reviewed by another agency listed in EQAR. The reports produced by the reviewing agency are used to inform a final decision on accreditation, which is taken by the Minister of Education and Science, based on recommendations by the Accreditation Council of PAAHE.

At the time of writing Albania is undergoing a reform of the higher education sector, with quality assurance playing a key role. All institutions are undergoing evaluations carried out by the UK Quality Assurance Agency in partnership with PAAHE, the results of which will inform initial accreditation decisions under the new system.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

The legal basis and responsibility for implementation of external QA processes in Bosnia and Herzegovina are shared between the Higher Education Agency (HEA) at national level, and relevant ministries at regional level (Republika Srpska, Brčko District and various cantons).

Higher education institutions in Bosnia and Herzegovina follow a licensing procedure in order to have permission to operate. Separate accreditation procedures are also in place, but have so far been applied to a limited extent in practice due to the complex legal provisions and unclear division of responsibilities.

Significant efforts are underway in 2013-15 to improve accreditation processes as part of the project “Strengthening Institutional Capacity for Quality Assurance”, supported by European Union pre-accession funds. The project aims to support the full implementation of the ESG at all levels and to carry out accreditations of all HEIs in the country.

Kosovo

Although not formally part of the EHEA, Kosovo has nonetheless taken steps to implement the Bologna reforms, including in quality assurance. Evaluations of public and private HEIs in Kosovo are carried out by the Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) or any EQAR registered agency, with decisions on institutional and programme accreditation then taken by the National Council of Quality, the decision-making body of the KAA.

Accreditations are conducted on a cyclical basis, usually every five years for institutions and every three years for programmes. The accreditation criteria incorporate the ESG, and the international perspective features heavily, with evaluation teams being composed entirely of foreign experts. KAA also has responsibility for monitoring institutions between accreditation cycles.

However, in the European context, the ESG play a key role in providing common principles for both HEIs and QA agencies in developing their QA processes. A revised version of the ESG, which brings about a number of new implications for institutional QA systems, was adopted by the Ministers for higher education in May 2015 and is therefore worth mentioning here. An outline of the issues covered by the standards in Part 1 of the ESG is given in Table 2. This report will refer to these standards in subsequent chapters.

Table 2: Headings of the standards in Part 1 of the ESG

1.1	Policy for quality assurance
1.2	Design and approval of programmes
1.3	Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment
1.4	Student admission, progression, recognition and certification
1.5	Teaching staff
1.6	Learning resources and student support
1.7	Information management
1.8	Public information
1.9	On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes
1.10	Cyclical external quality assurance

II. FROM FOUNDATION TO FRAMEWORK: STRUCTURES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In order for internal QA to function efficiently and effectively, an institution should have in place the appropriate framework to support this. It was clear throughout the EUREQA project that partners approached this in different ways and, as discussed in the previous chapter, this was influenced by the contextual factors surrounding the introduction of internal QA in their own institutions and ongoing developments regarding external QA arrangements. Similar differences were identified regarding the distribution of responsibilities among staff, and the roles played by different institutional actors were discussed at length, as was the importance of fostering participation and ownership among a range of stakeholders with the aim of generating a good quality culture.

What should our QA structures look like? Who does what?

Before the EUREQA project, EUA studies had already shown that HEIs across Europe have very different institutional QA structures in place (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010, p. 20). However, assigning responsibility for quality assurance to one of the vice-rectors and establishing a unit, or at the very least appointing a QA officer, to support QA processes is becoming a widely used model. The exact tasks of these actors then vary from one institution to another, as does the choice of whether to take a centralised or decentralised approach, which may be largely dependent on the structure of the institution as a whole. For example, in many Western Balkan institutions there is a strong tradition of relatively autonomous faculties, which is reflected in the fact that QA structures and processes are largely decentralised, though central units are gradually being introduced to coordinate the work at the institutional level. Experience also shows that in systems where programme accreditation is the dominant model of external quality assurance, the responsibilities are likely to be further devolved to the programme level.

Both centralised and decentralised approaches have their strengths and weaknesses. Table 3 lists some of the pros and cons of different approaches identified by EUREQA partners.

Table 3: Pros and cons of centralised and decentralised systems

	Pros	Cons
Centralised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unified approach to QA across the institution • Reduced workload for individual faculties • Better opportunity to concentrate resources to develop professionalised QA staff • Easier to link to overall institutional strategy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less flexibility to reflect specificities of individual faculties and disciplines • Risk of perceived distance/disconnect between central unit and faculty staff • Risk of being irrelevant in the daily practices of faculties
Decentralised	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Better opportunity to adapt to specifics of each faculty • In-depth knowledge of the faculty culture/history • Easier to communicate the results back to the relevant staff • Empowerment/buy-in at faculty level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Risk of having too many diverse and unequal approaches • Risk of poor comparability within the institution • Risk of duplication of tasks across the institution • Uneven availability of resources

Regardless of the organisational structure chosen, it was underlined by those involved in the project that the best results were achieved by ensuring that the responsibilities and processes were well-defined and transparent. The Trends 2015 report also drew attention to the need to keep arrangements under review to ensure that they remain fit-for-purpose in changing environments (Sursock, 2015, p. 97).

The distribution of responsibilities at Instituto Politecnico do Porto

The Instituto Politecnico do Porto (Portugal) comprises seven schools, which have diverse histories and internal cultures, and which operate quite independently at pedagogical, scientific and administrative levels. Nonetheless, there is a central QA unit that has both external and internal responsibilities. Externally, the unit is the central point of responsibility and communication with the supervisory authority (the Ministry of Education and Science) and the body responsible for evaluation and accreditation at national level (the Portuguese Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education). The unit also serves to promote the institutional image of the Institute Politecnico do Porto and to disseminate information to the local community. Internally, the unit takes responsibility for monitoring the fulfilment of QA policy and strategic action plans. It also acts as a central point for fostering the sharing of feedback, resources and good practices between schools and seeks to encourage the harmonisation of procedures across the institution. There are also QA units at school level and these have the responsibility to promote engagement with and discussion of quality assurance, ensuring the involvement of teaching staff, students, non-teaching staff and external partners in the promotion of quality enhancement. They also act as the main channels of communication between the central QA unit and the rest of the academic community.

One relevant development over the past ten years has been the professionalisation of higher education management with the emergence of “higher education professionals”, who are qualified and recruited specifically to manage institutional processes and support organisational change and decision-making (Kehm, 2015). Quality assurance is just one of the areas in which this change has been observed and the past decade has seen the rise of specialised QA units and staff, whose principal responsibility is to manage QA processes. This was the case for the EU partners of the EUREQA project, who have staff focusing full-time on quality assurance; however it was recognised that this was not the situation in many of the Balkan partners, who have QA units that are formed of academics, for whom quality assurance is an additional task, to be carried out on top of their other duties.

EUA's Examining Quality Culture project (Sursock, 2011, p. 32-33) identified several tasks commonly carried out by professional QA staff and concluded that the challenge is to find the right balance between these different functions:

- providing support and expertise to the faculties and departments for their QA work;
- coordinating QA activities across the institution, ensuring a certain level of consistency in implementation;
- interpreting external requirements, such as instructions from the external QA agency, and adapting them for the institutional context;
- monitoring and collecting information about the performance and quality of the operational units, for example for the purposes of strategic management; and
- handling administrative tasks related to quality assurance such as dealing with student questionnaires or preparing the documentation required by the external QA agency.



EUREQA moment!

“[B]eyond the priorities of the QA officers and the functions of the office, the more successful quality officers are those who have ready access to the senior leadership, the social skills to communicate effectively with and to engage and support academics.”

(Sursock, 2011, p. 34)

How can we get the whole institution on board?



EUREQA moment!

“A culture of quality is one in which everybody in the organisation, not just quality controllers, is responsible for quality.”
(Crosby, 1986, cited in Harvey & Green, 1993, p. 16)

Formal structures and bodies provide a secure framework for QA processes, but in order to foster quality culture, all actors should feel ownership for quality and that they can make a contribution towards it. Therefore, the primary consideration for a QA unit and its staff is that it cannot and should not function in isolation. Their work will have much greater impact if they engage with the whole institution, interacting through informal channels as well as through formal structures.

While EUA's previous projects highlighted that the core element of supporting quality culture was to find a correct balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches to developing quality assurance, they also underlined the importance of the role of leadership (EUA 2006, Loukkola & Zhang 2010, Sursock 2011). Lanarès (2008, p. 22) identified two challenges faced by institutional leadership with regard to internal quality assurance. Firstly, “establishing and maintaining the coherence of the system throughout the whole institution” and secondly, ensuring “the appropriation of the system (values and practices) by all members of the institution”.

Although it is clear that any institutional leader in Europe nowadays is aware of the importance of quality assurance to their institution (as demonstrated by the Trends 2015 findings mentioned previously), experience shows that as a result of the professionalisation of quality assurance and the concentration of responsibilities in the QA unit, there is a risk of quality assurance drifting away from the focus of the top institutional leadership. This poses additional challenges for those dealing with QA processes in their daily work and was also raised during the course of the EUREQA project.

In this regard, one suggested solution was to re-examine the purposes and design of the internal QA system and evaluate whether it provides the leadership with sufficiently valuable information about the institution and how to improve it. If the opposite is true, and it has become a bureaucratic exercise to accommodate formal, external requirements, it is advisable to return to the drawing board and, in consultation with all actors, seek ways to change the system so that it plays a crucial role in providing information for institutional decision-making. This should help in engaging the support and demonstrating the commitment of the leadership in a way that will also set an example throughout the institution.

Developing ownership of quality assurance at University of Banja Luka

The QA committee at the University of Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina) decided to involve the faculty deans more intensively in quality assurance at the university. It was recognised that although QA officers could propose actions for the improvement of quality, the support of the deans was vital in ensuring genuine implementation. Although this responsibility was formally documented in the university's QA policy, it became clear that more efforts were needed to ensure it in practice. Therefore, deans are now periodically invited to special meetings of the QA committee in order for them to better understand developments and to give them the opportunity to make their own direct contributions to the discussions. It also means they are more in touch with and interested in QA policies because of an enhanced sense of involvement and ownership.

When it comes to involving staff in QA activities, a survey carried out by EUA found that the most common way of achieving this was through formal participation in governance and consultative bodies (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010, pp. 24-25). While this was also the case in EUREQA partner institutions, the way to motivate staff to take ownership of these processes and – more importantly – to further engage in informal ways, was also discussed. In this context, it is important to recognise that staff input and involvement in assuring quality goes well beyond the formal QA processes, which are only effective if they bring an added value to the learning and teaching processes.

A suggestion was made to invest in dialogue with staff on their individual roles in assuring the quality of their own work and the role of QA processes as support mechanisms for this. During such discussions, it is best to avoid QA jargon and encourage individuals to speak about the matters and processes that specifically affect them and with which they are familiar as this helps everyone understand the value of their contribution and encourages them to be proactive. These suggestions reflect the observations previously presented by Loukkola and Vettori (2014), who also pointed out that not everyone needs to know about all aspects of a QA system. This demonstrates the need for QA staff to interpret external requirements, filtering the information for each stakeholder group, so that they can concentrate on what is relevant to them.

Encouraging QA initiatives by staff at Dublin City University

The central Quality Promotion Office of Dublin City University (Ireland) encourages staff involvement in quality assurance through its Quality Improvement and Development funding programme (QuID), which provides financial support for small budget initiatives by staff members in academic and support units across the university. In order to qualify for funding, each proposed project should demonstrate that it contributes to quality improvement both in the applicant's department and also at the institutional level, as well as have clear timelines and deliverables. Examples of projects so far include focused evaluations of modules for specific target groups; physical improvements to the learning environment; and a self-service kiosk to allow students to print formal documents provided by the university. QuID not only supports the institution's ongoing strategic objectives, but has also proved valuable in promoting quality culture outside the formal internal review process, particularly as its tangible outcomes make it more visible than other QA processes.

Quality training for staff and students at University of Eastern Finland

In addition to specific training for quality officers and managers, as well as audit training for internal staff and student auditors, the University of Eastern Finland provides general QA training for all its staff and students in the form of an annual online course, which is worth one ECTS. The aim is to ensure that all members of the academic community have the opportunity to know the basic principles of the university's quality management system and are aware of the ways in which they, as individuals and as part of a team, can contribute and help to improve the processes. This promotes an understanding that quality assurance is the responsibility of the whole institution, and not only of the QA manager and officers. In addition, the university also organises on-demand training sessions, which have proven to serve as a good platform for communication and sharing of good practice among staff from different disciplines.



EUREQA moment!

"[W]e will actively involve students, as full members of the academic community, as well as other stakeholders, in curriculum design and in quality assurance."

(Yerevan Communiqué, 2015, p. 2)

Many of the observations made on how to motivate staff to become involved in quality assurance also apply to students. The European Students' Union (ESU) has carried out substantial work on the involvement of students in quality assurance, particularly in their series of QUEST publications.³ From a student perspective, the two main barriers to participation in quality assurance were identified as being the lack of information among students, and the view that the processes served no purpose as there were no consequences (ESU, 2012, p. 21). Similar observations were made in EUA's Examining Quality Culture project (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010) and in the EUREQA project.

But student involvement in quality assurance does not only mean providing feedback and receiving information. ESU identifies three main ways in which students participate in quality assurance: i) by giving feedback (for example, through surveys); ii) by involvement in the preparation of self-assessment reports; and iii) by participation in the governance and management of an institution (for example, as members of decision-making committees) (ESU, 2012, p. 16). HEIs can support student involvement in quality assurance by ensuring all of these opportunities are open to them. By combining these roles, students have the possibility to become fully involved in institutional development as equal partners and are thereby encouraged to assume their own share of responsibility for the quality of their education and student experience.

The involvement of students in quality assurance at Shkodra University "Luigj Gurakuqi"

During the course of the EUREQA project, Shkodra University "Luigj Gurakuqi" (Albania) developed a renewed awareness of the role of their students as partners rather than customers. As a result, a variety of initiatives have been introduced aimed at increasing student involvement in governance. For example, in the economics faculty, students are invited to monthly meetings of the faculty council to contribute to discussions and decision-making on matters including curriculum development, quality of teaching and improvement of infrastructure. This provides a structured way in which students can voice their opinions and ideas and be part of the strategic planning process of their institution.

³The ESU project "Quest for Quality for Students" aimed to identify students' views on quality in higher education and develop practical capacity-building tools to support student involvement in quality assurance.

III. FROM FRAMEWORK TO ACTION: PROCESSES AND TOOLS



EUREQA moment!

“[I]t is important not to rely on a single instrument [...] There must be a mix of several instruments to ensure good intelligence.”
(Sursock, 2011, p. 50)

A variety of tools are available for institutions to implement their QA policies. The exact mix used will depend on the nature of the policies and the choices made about the purposes and design of the internal QA system. In the framework of the EUREQA project, there was a focus on the tools for improving the quality of learning and teaching, from the design and implementation of study programmes through to the monitoring and evaluation in order to ensure standards are met and to identify areas which require attention. Finally, substantial emphasis was placed on the importance of incorporating the information gathered into strategic planning, taking concrete action to tackle the identified problems and communicating this to the academic community. In practice, these topics reflect the stages of the commonly used “plan-do-check-act cycle”, which forms the basis of so many QA processes and provides a cyclical framework for continuous improvement.

How do we plan and support the delivery of our programmes?⁴

The content and delivery of programmes are at the centre of a university’s teaching mission. This is addressed in ESG 1.2, which highlights thoughtful and transparent programme development as an important part of quality assurance. Many stakeholders, from students and staff to employers, influence and benefit from programme development. The EUREQA partners therefore identified a range of considerations to be taken into account.

Developing a curriculum in a systematic and informed way is a core element of ensuring good quality programmes. The key steps towards this could be identified as follows:

⁴ Parts of this section are adapted from presentations prepared for the 4th Regional Training Workshop (Shkodra University “Luigj Gurakuqi”, Albania, 5-6 February 2015) by Elisabeth Augustin, University of Graz; Manica Danko, University of Ljubljana and Tommi Haapaniemi, University of Eastern Finland.

1. defining the programme goals and the intended learning outcomes, clarifying what the students should learn and accomplish;
2. determining content, selecting the major topics and establishing the structure of the programme;
3. choosing and developing the teaching methods and tools;
4. selecting the supporting literature and other materials; and
5. determining how the students will be evaluated in a way that will assess the achieved learning outcomes.



EUREQA moment!

“The development, understanding and practical use of learning outcomes is crucial to the success of ECTS, the Diploma Supplement, recognition, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – all of which are interdependent.”
(Bucharest Communiqué, 2012, p. 3)

Of the tools available to support programme design, increasing importance is being attached to the use of learning outcomes and many of the EUREQA project partners had already taken steps to implement this approach in their programmes. The learning outcome approach is linked in particular to the focus on student-centred learning and is reflected in the revised version of the ESG, which now includes explicit references both to learning outcomes (ESG 1.2) and to student-centred learning (ESG 1.3).

There are several different definitions given to learning outcomes, but perhaps the most accepted one describes them as statements of “what a learner is expected to know, understand and be able to do after successful completion of a process of learning” (EC, 2009, p. 11).⁵ Further distinction should be drawn between intended learning outcomes, as a description of the knowledge and skills expected to be acquired by the end of a course, module or programme, and the achieved learning outcomes, as verified through appropriate assessment procedures.

The introduction of the concept of learning outcomes has represented a big change in learning and teaching cultures at HEIs throughout Europe but its benefits can be hindered by

⁵ A revised version of the ECTS Users’ Guide was adopted by the Ministers for higher education in May 2015.

a lack of resources, knowledge and training. The 2012 Bologna Implementation Report noted that the implementation of this approach has been uneven and there does not seem to be a shared understanding of learning outcomes across the EHEA, neither at national policy level nor among individual staff members who have to use them in practice (EACEA, 2012, p. 52). Further challenges were identified in the findings of Trends 2015, which reported that although there was general consensus that the introduction of learning outcomes has improved the overall quality of teaching, this approach is only meaningful when linked in practice to other elements of the learning and teaching reform, including “qualifications frameworks, teaching methods, examinations, and the need to develop curricula as part of academic teams” (Sursock, 2015, p. 79).

Despite the well-documented challenges in using learning outcomes, there are a number of potential advantages to this approach. These include increasing the transparency of programmes and the contents covered; giving a clearer understanding of expectations for teaching staff and students; helping to define the assessment criteria; and encouraging active reflection on teaching and assessment. Furthermore, Adams highlighted the impact of having explicit learning outcomes on facilitating mobility, recognition of prior learning (including non-traditional learning) and lifelong learning (Adams, 2013, p. 21).

Training staff in the use of learning outcomes at University of Ljubljana

The Faculty of Administration at the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) is home to a Centre for the Development of Pedagogical Excellence, which offers, amongst many services, regular training for the faculty teaching staff on all aspects of the learning and teaching process. There is a particular emphasis on programme design and planning, including defining objectives, choosing teaching methods, setting learning outcomes (using Bloom’s taxonomy) and selecting relevant assessment methods. In addition to the initial training, peer observation is used to support the pedagogical process. Teaching staff observe each other to review how learning outcomes are set (pre-observation session), how they are used in the classroom (during the observation) and how they are recognised by teachers and students (post-observation session).

The recent focus on learning outcomes coincides with the much-discussed paradigm shift from teaching to learning and has been further promoted by changes in the modes of delivery brought about by advances in technology. Through the introduction of student-centred learning, students increasingly expect a more flexible and varied approach to their studies and teaching staff need to choose the appropriate methods for transmitting knowledge to their students and allow them to develop the necessary competences. Furthermore, there is

increasing pressure to balance the acquisition of academic knowledge with gaining transferable skills for career development, which are a key contributor to employability in an ever-changing labour market. As a result, many teaching methods now involve the development of students' communication skills, teamwork and problem solving through practical experiences as an integral part of the approach, for example through project-based learning or service learning. Making the most efficient use of the time and expertise available is also a priority: this can be addressed by the use of methods such as team teaching or the flipped classroom.



EUREQA moment!

"[I]t is a key responsibility of institutions to ensure their academic staff are well trained and qualified as professional teachers... this responsibility extends to providing opportunities for continuous professional career development ..."

(EC, 2013, p. 15)

All this places additional expectations on teaching staff and the changes in the teaching profession, together with the increased need to ensure a supportive environment for staff development, which are included in the revised ESG (standard 1.5). Thus, this is considered to be an element of internal QA systems as a means to ensure the quality of learning and teaching, and evidence shows that institutions are paying increasing attention to this. Over 80% of institutions responding to the Trends 2015 survey reported that they had a didactic or pedagogical development unit offering courses to enhance teaching skills, which was a significant increase compared to previous years (Sursock, 2015, p. 83).

The importance of the role of HEIs in supporting both new and experienced staff in embracing different approaches and finding the appropriate balance with traditional teaching methods, which are by no means obsolete, was also discussed by the EUREQA partners. As with any aspect of quality assurance, it was found that HEIs should consider both formal and informal ways for academic staff to develop as a means to foster a culture that values high quality learning and teaching. As such, the division between structural and cultural approaches to improving the quality of teaching (see Table 4), as discussed by Brockerhoff *et al.* (2014), may be useful for mapping the existing processes and structures in an institution and for considering complementary measures.

Table 4: Elements of teaching excellence (Brockerhoff *et al.*, 2014, p. 239)⁶

Structural approach	Cultural approach
Provide infrastructure	Provide arenas for dialogue
Provide information/counselling	Value teaching in the recruitment process
Learning/teaching situation	Reward/recognise teaching
Systematic evaluation	Offer staff development
Adjust organisational structure	Develop strategy for teaching
Programme structure/contents	

Pedagogical training for academics at University of Sarajevo

The University of Sarajevo (Bosnia and Herzegovina) is introducing pedagogical training for its staff with the support of an international project in which young academics are offered training opportunities to underpin not only their work as researchers, but also their teaching duties. Through the project, courses are offered that focus on topics such as designing curricula, higher education didactics and research methodology. Furthermore some participants are taught how to train others in these skills so as to create a multiplier effect within their home institution and beyond. Participation in this programme supports one of the institution’s strategic goals, which is to promote a lifelong learning approach within the university.

How do we know what and how to improve?

According to the standard 1.7 of the ESG, HEIs are expected to “collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities”. This information can take a variety of forms, including qualitative and quantitative data, and can be collected in a range of different ways. Most commonly it will at least include gathering institutional data, tracking alumni, and collecting feedback using tools such as questionnaires and focus groups. However, in order to avoid (the perception of) unnecessary bureaucracy, it is particularly important to carefully consider exactly what information is required, the most appropriate methods and timing to obtain it and, finally, to have in place from the start a clear plan of what will be done with the results.

⁶ The authors had in turn been inspired by Becker *et al.*, 2012 and Frost and Teodorescu, 2001.

Institutional data and indicators



EUREQA moment!

“[K]ey performance indicators have to make sense to the grassroots while supporting institutional strategies.”

(Sursock, 2011, p. 49)

The vast majority of institutions have some form of data system and the information collected generally includes at least student progression and success rates, the profile of the student population, and the teacher/student ratio (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010, p. 26). While the limitations of such indicators are well known,⁷ they form a crucial part of internal quality assurance and complement the information collected through other means.

The variety of ways in which data and indicators can be used has been documented by a number of authors. Chatelain-Ponroy *et al.* summarised these, drawing attention to the distinction between indicators used for legitimisation (reporting about activities), evaluation (monitoring outcomes), discussion (interactive use of data) and decision-making (using data for change processes) (Chatelain-Ponroy *et al.*, 2014, pp. 129; 136-37).

Another approach is to consider whether the indicators are used for internal or external purposes as this may affect the type of indicators selected. From an internal perspective, evidence-based decision-making means that the data collected should inform strategic development and help an institution to measure whether it is acting according to its own mission and goals; often this is done through the use of key performance indicators. Hazelkorn *et al.* reported on the growing awareness among HEIs of the “necessity to enhance institutional intelligence and develop an evidence base for strategic decision-making” and identified that this was partly due to the growth in popularity of rankings (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2014, p. 50). Interestingly, the same study also found that rankings have quite often led to the strengthening of internal quality assurance and data collection processes (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2014, p. 49).

In addition to being used internally for monitoring and developmental purposes, indicators play an important role in demonstrating an institution’s accountability to external parties. On the one hand, this involves formal reporting to entities such as external QA agencies and funding bodies. Indeed it was found that in some national systems covered in the EUREQA project, indicators form an important basis for fulfilling external QA standards. On the other

⁷ For a comprehensive discussion on the difficulties of having reliable indicators for the quality of teaching, see “Global university rankings and their impact” Report I (2011) and Report II (2013) by Andrejs Rauhvargers.

hand, the provision of information externally also plays a role in accountability towards the public, and is thus part of an internal QA system, as referred to by standard 1.8 of the ESG.

Regardless of the purposes for which indicators are used, the conclusion in the EUREQA project was that working on having a good internal data system is essential for any HEI. Only in that way can an institution have appropriate information for a range of audiences and purposes that is accurate, up-to-date and more readily available as and when it is required.

Use of key performance indicators at University of Graz

The University of Graz (Austria) uses key performance indicators to monitor and steer their strategic planning (including long- and short-term goals), and to inform their budgeting and financial management. The indicators used cover a range of institutional activities and some examples of these include: the increase in new enrolments, the proportion of female teaching staff, financial support received from third parties (i.e. outside tuition fees or government grants), the number of publications by university staff and the employment and salaries of alumni. The data is used not only to monitor trends and developments within the institution (including between faculties) but also for external benchmarking, to compare with data available from other institutions within the country. In order to ensure that only the most relevant information is collected, indicators are developed always with these questions in mind: what does the rectorate want to steer; what do the faculties need to know; and what indicators are therefore needed?

Collecting feedback



EUREQA moment!

“Consider ways to triangulate feedback from different feedback mechanisms. Questionnaires are just one method and should not be mistaken as the only method.”
(Harrison, 2013, p. 55)

Seeking feedback for the purposes of continuous enhancement is a core element of QA processes and is referred to on numerous occasions in the ESG (see standards 1.3, 1.7 and 1.9). The results give a valuable insight into the perceptions of various stakeholders and, combined

with other data, will contribute towards a rounded picture of the institution, feeding into internal evaluations and follow-up activities.

With regard to learning and teaching, feedback can be collected from all those involved in and affected by the process, including students, teaching staff and administrative staff. Plenty of time has been, and will be, spent discussing student feedback, but evidence shows that staff are much less likely to be surveyed than other stakeholders (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010, pp. 24-25).

Involving all staff in providing feedback

The University of Prishtina (Kosovo) uses surveys to collect feedback not only from its students, but also from its staff. In order to reflect their various roles within the institution, different questionnaires have been developed for teaching, administrative and technical staff. The questionnaires cover a range of issues from daily working environment, facilities and support, to understanding of the institutional mission and faculty goals. This has helped the university to emphasise the importance of listening to the opinions of all staff, regardless of their position and responsibilities, and encourages the staff to become involved in quality assurance at the institution.

In addition, the collection of feedback is increasingly being used as an opportunity to establish and maintain contact with external stakeholders such as alumni and employers. For example, institutions are increasingly keen to track and keep in touch with their alumni for the purpose of monitoring the impact of their study programmes on graduates' careers (Gaebel *et al.*, 2012, p. 38). Information gathered from alumni can contribute not only to overall institutional data about the student lifecycle, but also specifically to the enhancement of study programmes as a measure of the relevance of their content to graduates. This has been one of the drivers behind a developing alumni culture in Europe. An increasing number of universities are encouraging former students to stay in touch by offering opportunities for events, networking and even continued professional development. Maintaining this connection and continued interest in the institution makes alumni more likely to contribute to its development, for example by providing up-to-date information and responding to graduate questionnaires (Gaebel *et al.*, 2012, p. 43).

Involving external stakeholders at University of Ljubljana

The Faculty of Administration at the University of Ljubljana (Slovenia) pays particular attention to establishing and maintaining good communication with employers to enhance and verify the value of their programmes for

the benefit of their students. Potential employers are invited to take part in a range of events at the faculty, including career days, “coffee with employers” and student conferences, which provide both formal and informal opportunities for networking and feedback. Employers also enhance learning opportunities for students by participating in lectures and seminars, putting forward real issues that arise in professional life as case examples for students. As a result of the good relations between the faculty and local employers, many offer work placements for students to undertake as part of their student programmes, and seek candidates for vacant positions amongst recent graduates.

Gathering feedback from any stakeholder can be approached formally and informally, both of which have their value and contribute to creating an atmosphere of open communication and a good quality culture. Formal feedback is collected in a structured manner, planned for specific moments in the academic calendar. For this purpose EUREQA project partners agreed that questionnaires are the common default tool and that when used correctly, they are very effective. However, there was also an agreement that other methods such as focus groups may be more appropriate, particularly for obtaining more qualitative feedback.

But in addition to this, there should be a continuous process of giving and receiving feedback, with opportunities that are not limited to a pre-determined time and place. For example, when it comes to feedback about learning and teaching, regular dialogue between students and teachers should be integrated into the study environment and curricula should be flexible enough to respond appropriately. Even setting aside a few minutes at the end of a lecture or meeting to ask for brief comments and suggestions for improvement can help to turn feedback collection into an integral part of all learning activities.

Collecting feedback at Roskilde University

As a supplement to traditional questionnaires, Roskilde University (Denmark) has explored other ways of collecting information about the quality of teaching.

For example, a baton relay evaluation offers a way of collating feedback already at the point at which it is given. A student writes down their most important impressions of the teaching quality and then passes it to the next student who adds or elaborates on the comments already given. This could be passed forward to up to six different students and will result in a single feedback sheet representing many different views.

Another example of this is collegial supervision, which is used as a structured way to provide peer feedback. Two staff members are invited to observe a colleague while they are teaching. Feedback is then given by way of a discussion involving the teacher, who is the focal point, the two observers, and a mediator. This approach can be difficult to implement at first, particularly in some cultures where peer review is less common in teaching. However, if done correctly, it can be a valuable learning experience for all involved and contributes to the development of a quality culture.

Additional reflections on questionnaires⁸

Questionnaires are used in nearly all universities, particularly to gather feedback from students, but care should be taken to use them appropriately in order to ensure that the information received is of value. The first step is to consider what sort of questionnaire and questions are appropriate for the purpose in mind. A questionnaire for evaluating a single course will be very different to one that evaluates a study programme or a whole institution. Further considerations when preparing a questionnaire include how the results of the survey will be used: whether or not comparisons need to be drawn with the results of previous or parallel surveys and the mode of delivery (on paper or electronically). In this context it is important to specify at the very beginning who has access to the results and in which format. For example, in order to motivate teaching staff, it is important that they receive the results in a timely manner so as to be able use the information to improve their own teaching. In terms of whether and in which format the programme director, the dean or relevant person in charge of the programme delivery receives the results, the practices are varied.

When using questionnaires, it is advisable to involve all stakeholders already at the design phase, particularly those who will be completing them and those who will be using the results. This will help to ensure that time is not wasted collecting information that is either unusable because the respondents do not understand the questions, or irrelevant because it does not address topics that are of institutional importance.

So as to avoid a situation whereby students, for example, are faced with multiple questionnaires, sometimes even with identical questions in a short period of time or are asked to fill in the

⁸ This section is adapted from a presentation prepared for the 3rd Regional Training Workshop (University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4-5 September 2014) by Janneke Ravenhorst, Royal Conservatoire, University of the Arts, The Hague (the Netherlands).

same questionnaire for all courses and programmes, it is advisable to carefully coordinate and plan the timing of different questionnaires and also consider varying or combining them.

The structure and questions should be created based on the type of feedback the institution is trying to generate. Collecting quantitative feedback is very useful when dealing with large target groups, for gathering statistical information, for monitoring trends and improvements (or deterioration) and for finding out if there are issues that need further attention. However, using a long list of multiple-choice questions for a questionnaire sent to a very small group of students is not very effective. At the other end of the scale, open questions sent to a large group will provide a great deal of information that is difficult to analyse in a systematic way, but, if addressed to a smaller group, they can draw attention to problems and even solutions that may not previously have been considered.

Furthermore, for everyone who provides feedback, it is advisable that self-evaluation forms a key part of the process. For example, students should not only be asked to evaluate the teaching staff and the methods used, but should also be encouraged to reflect on their own approach and input to the learning process as part of their personal development.

Involving students in questionnaire design at Royal Conservatoire

The Royal Conservatoire, University of the Arts, The Hague (the Netherlands), held workshops where students were actively involved in designing the questionnaire for the annual student survey. Not only was the feedback very helpful in producing a relevant and effective survey, but an added effect was that the students involved had a much better understanding of the importance of the questionnaire and its use as a tool through which they could influence their institution and study programme. When students realised that their feedback was indeed deemed very valuable by the Conservatoire, they became ambassadors for the survey among their fellow students. This had a significant impact on the number and quality of responses.

Finally, the formulation of questions is very important and it is worth spending some time perfecting this. A good questionnaire will offer questions that:

- are unambiguous, so that they can only be understood in one way;
- allow for clear answers, so that there can only be one interpretation of the answers;
- are unbiased, so as not to lead respondents to a particular answer;

- are relevant, keeping the questionnaire short by only asking questions specific to the topic of the survey; and
- address one issue at a time, because if several issues are included in one question, it is likely the respondent will only answer one of them.

Experiences of a national survey

There may be opportunities to join an existing national or international survey, which can provide useful data if a sufficient number of other comparable institutions are also involved. Dublin City University (Ireland) took part in the national-level Irish Survey of Student Engagement (ISSE), which aimed at gathering feedback on the experience of students across the Irish sector in a range of areas. The data may be used to inform policy development at the national level, and for DCU it provided interesting information to reflect and act on at both institutional and programme level.

Conversely the Royal Conservatoire, University of the Arts, The Hague (the Netherlands) decided not to participate in a Dutch national survey. Because of the very broad and generic approach of the survey, the institution felt that many of the questions did not address the special characteristics of professional music training, while other relevant questions were lacking. Instead, the Conservatoire developed a tool with a set of key questions, that are repeated annually, and a flexible component with very specific questions on recent improvement measures and their effects. Some of the key questions are similar to those in the national survey so that it is still possible to benchmark the results with other institutions nationally.

Additional reflections on focus groups⁹

Focus groups can complement other methodologies for collecting feedback, by offering an opportunity to verify and further explore issues in a concentrated manner. Because focus groups are structured and directed, but also allow for free expression of opinions, they can yield a great deal of information in a relatively short time. The results of focus groups may be less easy to collate and analyse, but can better reflect the complexity of the topics discussed.

⁹This section is adapted from a presentation prepared for the 3rd Regional Training Workshop (University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 4-5 September 2014) by Cristina Pinto, Instituto Politécnico do Porto.

In order to make a focus group a success, careful attention should be paid to its composition:

- Facilitator: to ask the questions and to guide and stimulate the discussion. It is important that facilitators know the topic but are able to remain impartial and not express their own opinions, which could influence the views of the participants.
- Note-taker: this is often neglected, but it should not be left to the facilitator to take notes and observations during the focus group. An alternative to having a note-taker is to record the discussion. This might provide a more accurate record, but is significantly more time-consuming as the tapes then have to be transcribed before any analysis can be made.
- Participants: they should be a representative sample of those whose opinions are being sought. When selecting participants a number of aspects should be taken into account:
 - Homogeneity vs. diversity: selecting participants who all belong to the same category (e.g. students, administrative staff) but ensuring that within that group there is some diversity.
 - Status: it is important not to mix power or status levels within a focus group. For example, senior managers should not be in the same group as junior staff, and students not in the same group as teaching staff, as this may inhibit junior or younger people from expressing their opinions.
 - Number: ideally, a focus group should be composed of 5-10 participants so as to obtain a broad range of opinions while still keeping the discussion manageable and giving each person a chance to speak.

A focus group should normally last between 60 to 90 minutes. Realistically, five to eight key questions and their follow-up can be covered in this time. Questions should be short, focused, unambiguous and open-ended. A focus group provides an opportunity to obtain in-depth information and clarify responses to avoid misunderstandings in a way that is not possible via questionnaires. Therefore, good preparation of the questions is vital in order to make the most of this opportunity.

After the focus group, analysing the data involves looking for the common themes and emerging patterns, but also noticing new issues that have not already been raised. Before drafting the report that summarises the findings, it can be helpful to have someone who was not present review the data independently and compare interpretations so as to help avoid misinterpretation. The results, and eventually any consequential decisions, should then be shared with the participants of the focus group in order to show them the value of their input.

Beyond questionnaires at University of Banja Luka

The University of Banja Luka (Bosnia and Herzegovina) recently introduced practices to gather qualitative feedback about the quality of learning and teaching. It was noticed that both students and teaching staff viewed the existing approach, which relied primarily on end-of-term questionnaires, as being too formal and superficial, with little positive effect. To tackle this, members of the university QA committee started visiting the faculties to carry out semi-structured interviews with all stakeholders (students, teaching staff and administrative staff). The aim has been to foster a more frequent and informal discussion to examine the quality of learning and teaching, raising awareness of the significance of providing feedback and demonstrating an institutional commitment to quality enhancement. This is now leading to a QA system that is more fit-for-purpose and also to the development of a quality culture within the institution.

Internal reviews



EUREQA moment!

"Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes aim to ensure that the provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students."
(ESG, 1.9)

All the feedback and data collected will typically feed into another key tool of internal QA: the internally organised review. These might cover anything from an individual programme (see also ESG 1.9) through to the whole institution and they provide an opportunity for a comprehensive and critical self-reflection. To be effective, internal reviews should be carefully planned so that the timing, focus and follow-up are appropriate for the institution and feed into future actions. Good communication about all these aspects will help to ensure it is a meaningful exercise and will contribute to the development of quality culture.

Internal reviews can be a formalised approach to quality assurance with established procedures and reports, which are used as part of an institution's or sub-unit's strategic planning cycle. They might also be planned so as to coincide with, or form part of, an evaluation carried out by a QA agency for the purposes of external quality assurance. The reviews may be fully internal or

also include some external elements. For example, some of the EUREQA partners have in place a regular cycle of internally organised reviews during which external experts are invited by the institution to provide feedback to the relevant unit.

However, as with other aspects of internal QA already discussed, the potential of informal approaches to yield valuable information and contribute to fostering quality culture should not be underestimated. As it was pointed out in the EUREQA project, regular department workshops, university leadership retreats or quarterly coffee room discussions are examples of approaches that can function well as opportunities for collective self-evaluation in between more substantial evaluations. By using more informal and dialogue-based approaches, it may also be possible to avoid evaluation fatigue, whereby an apparently endless stream of internal and external reviews prevents any of these from making a genuine contribution to quality enhancement.

Internal evaluations at “Fan S. Noli” University, Korça

At “Fan S. Noli” University (Albania), annual self-evaluation reports are prepared as part of internal evaluations by a small working group within every faculty. Each working group usually consists of two full-time academic staff members and one student and is supported by the central QA office. In addition to quantitative data and qualitative information gathered from staff and students, the report includes a full SWOT analysis about learning and teaching in the faculty. The conclusions are discussed at faculty level, but also at the level of the institutional leadership in order to identify institutional trends and to see if any of the issues raised apply to all faculties and could be tackled centrally. In addition, the evaluation reports feed directly into the creation of a quality improvement action plan for the institution, and also form an important part of the external accreditation process.

What do we do with all this information?



EUREQA moment!

“[I]t is important to point out that if the academic community, including the students, do not see positive results from internal quality processes, discouragement and cynicism will set in and lead to an erosion of the quality culture that will be difficult to put right again.”
(EUA, 2006, p. 18)

Following up on the results of data collection, feedback and internal and external evaluations is widely recognised as a core element of a successful QA system and a major contributor to the development of quality culture. Loukkola & Zhang (2010, p. 38) identified this as a challenging step, which is unfortunately often lacking. Evidence seems to indicate that many challenges prevail in this respect and this topic was a subject of intensive discussions during the EUREQA project.

When a significant amount of time and effort has been put into collecting information and carrying out evaluations, it is essential to ensure that sufficient resources are invested in studying the results and discussing and implementing the follow-up actions, not to mention communicating these actions to those concerned. These deliberations and activities would be expected to take place at various levels of the organisation, depending on the nature and focus of the information being reviewed. In this respect, well-organised internal reviews will normally result in a variety of ideas on how to address some of the problems identified.

The partners in the EUREQA project focused on two crucial ways to address these challenges:

First, while previous studies have demonstrated that implementation and communication of activities resulting from the information collected are vital to the development of quality culture and the commitment of staff and students to quality enhancement, it should be remembered that the dynamics also work the other way around. The more responsible everyone feels for quality and their own role in assuring it, the more likely they are to take charge and initiate ways of improving it.

Second, the transparency and clarity of the governance of internal QA systems are vital to efficient and effective follow-up. This reflects the issues discussed in previous chapters: the responsibilities between various actors in the system should be well-defined so that it is clear who is expected to deal with findings related to different issues; the follow-up procedure should be integrated into the planning of any QA activity and communicated to those involved beforehand; and, importantly, the internal QA system and its results should be explicitly linked and feed into the decision-making structures and processes of the HEI.

Closing the feedback loop at University of Eastern Finland

Using the information gathered through a variety of means is a core element of the quality assurance policy at the University of Eastern Finland, which states that strategic management and continuous operational development should be based on analyses produced by evaluations and feedback. When follow-up actions are identified and

planned, care is taken to ensure they are well defined and communicated; there is a clear schedule for implementation; a specific person is assigned responsibility; and indicators to measure implementation and impact are agreed upon in advance. In this way there is a transparent approach to follow-up activities and they are well integrated into institutional strategy and management processes.

CONCLUSION

A number of key areas crucial for any well-functioning internal QA system have been discussed in this report. However, these ideas are not meant to be all-encompassing; there are other methods, tools and processes that a HEI can use to ensure and enhance the quality of its activities. The exact kind of internal QA system a HEI chooses to put in place depends on the external and internal context of the institution as discussed in Chapter I.

The aim of this report has been to discuss some of the central questions while giving tips for practitioners in the field of quality assurance. However, just as higher education and institutions are constantly changing, so does quality assurance. In order to be innovative in responses to these changes, one needs to have a thorough understanding of the existing processes and structures. Thus, it is essential to regularly review the fitness-of-purpose and effectiveness of the internal QA systems and remember that the aim is not to have processes for the sake of processes. They should ultimately allow an institution to ensure, demonstrate and, importantly, enhance the quality of its activities.

Finally, there has been one recurrent theme discussed in the EUREQA project, and it is only appropriate to conclude this report with it. This is how to overcome the challenge of minimising bureaucracy while promoting participation and ownership of the whole higher education community in quality assurance; in other words, how to promote a quality culture? Neither the project nor this report have produced a miracle solution to this question, but they suggest that an appropriate balance between formal and informal – or structural and cultural – measures could be one key to success and seek to provide some practical examples that complement EUA's earlier work on this topic.

APPENDIX 1:

ABOUT THE EUREQA PROJECT

The objectives of the EUREQA project were:

- to support higher education institutions in Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo in improving their internal QA processes and linking them into a comprehensive, all-encompassing system that leads to the enhancement of quality and the creation of a quality culture;
- to foster the transfer of good practices from EU countries to promote innovative approaches to internal quality assurance;
- to develop networks between the partner institutions to facilitate future cooperation; and
- to facilitate the involvement of the Western Balkans' institutions in European-level discussions on quality assurance.

In order to achieve the project objectives the following activities have been carried out:

- four regional training workshops
 - 13-14 June 2013, University of Prishtina, Kosovo
 - 5-6 September 2013, "Fan S. Noli" University, Korça, Albania
 - 4-5 September 2014, University of Banja Luka, Bosnia and Herzegovina
 - 5-6 February 2015, Shkodra University "Luigj Gurakuqi", Albania
- translation of Examining Quality Culture Part II and Part III into Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian
- participation in the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQUAF) 2013 and 2014
- study visits to participating EU partner institutions in spring 2014 and 2015
- national level events
 - 20 May 2015, University of Prizren, Kosovo
 - 4 June 2015, University of Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina
- development of institutional action plans for internal quality assurance
- this final project report, produced in English, Albanian, Bosnian, Croatian and Serbian
- final project conference, 3 September 2015, Brussels, Belgium.

APPENDIX 2: PROJECT PARTNERS

Albania

“Fan S. Noli” University

The University of Korça was established on 7 January 1992, as an expansion of the Higher Agricultural Institute of Korça (1971-1992). It was initially composed of three faculties – Agriculture, Education, and Economics, with a School of Nursing added in 1994, the same year in which the name changed to “Fan S. Noli” University. The university has approximately 6 500 students with 160 full-time and 145 part-time teaching staff. Programmes are offered at Bachelor and Master level, on both full-time and part-time basis.



Shkodra University “Luigj Gurakuqi”

The University “Luigj Gurakuqi” of Shkodra in northwest Albania was established in 1957. Today, it has six faculties, 14 departments and more than 140 professors. The university has particular strengths in the technical and scientific fields. Currently there are over 10 000 students studying courses in economics, education, foreign languages, law, natural sciences and social sciences.



University of Tirana

The institution was founded in 1957 as the State University of Tirana through the merger of five existing institutes of higher education. It is the largest university in Albania, currently with over 14 000 students and 900 academic staff. It includes 50 academic departments, offering programmes at Bachelor, Master and Doctorate level. Most of these are offered in Tirana, however the university also has campuses located in other parts of the country, including Saranda in the South and Kukës in the North.



Bosnia and Herzegovina

University of Banja Luka

The University of Banja Luka, established in 1975, is the second largest higher education institution in Bosnia and Herzegovina, with more than 18 000 enrolled students. It consists of 16 faculties, offering 55 different study programmes. There are more than 750 full-time and almost 500 part-time academic staff and about 550 administrative staff. The university is involved in a large number of Tempus projects and has bilateral cooperation agreements with universities from all over the world.



University of Mostar

The University of Mostar was founded in 1977 and now consists of 10 faculties and an Academy of Fine Arts. Today, over 16 000 students study at the university, enrolled in over 60 programmes at the undergraduate level and 30 programmes at the graduate and postgraduate level. The university is internationally oriented and its intention is to become fully integrated into the European Higher Education Area.



University of Sarajevo

The University of Sarajevo is the largest and oldest university in Bosnia and Herzegovina, established in its current form in 1949; as such it plays an important role in an exceptionally diverse scientific community. Its academic work is centred around the fields of social science, humanities, medicine, technical studies, science, bio-technology and art. The university has strong ties within the fields of developmental projects as well as scientific research and also has experience and capacities in training of partner universities' teaching staff on new teaching methods, and cooperation with universities from the SEE region and abroad.



Kosovo

University of Prishtina

The University of Prishtina is a relatively young university, which celebrated its 40th anniversary in 2010. Currently, the university has 17 faculties, 14 of which are academic faculties, with three faculties of applied sciences. The core values of the university are diversity, freedom of expression, gender, culture, age, etc. Its mission is directed towards Europeanisation and internationalisation, with the aim of increasing the quality of education. The university was one of the first higher education institutions in the country to implement thorough reforms in accordance with the Bologna Process.



University of Prizren

The University of Prizren was established in 2010, with the aim to be modern in its structures and methodologies. The university strives to be in line with modern standards, not only regarding teaching and study programmes, but also with respect to governance structures, organisation, management and services. The university now has around 10 000 students, studying in five different faculties: Education, Law, Economics, Computer Science and Philology.



World University Service – Kosova (regional coordinator)

WUS Kosova is a Kosovar non-governmental organisation located in Prishtina. The organisation is engaged in promoting and facilitating the implementation of the Europe 2020 Strategy in Kosovo and translating the EU targets into national targets through local and regional cooperation. To achieve this, WUS Kosova is engaged in different activities: research, consultancy services, projects and events. WUS Kosova has a vast experience in projects on curricula development in line with the Bologna Process and is also represented in different professional bodies in Kosovo and especially within higher education.



European Union

European University Association (project coordinator)

The European University Association (EUA) represents and supports higher education institutions in 47 countries across Europe, providing them with a unique forum to cooperate and keep abreast of the latest trends in higher education and research policies. Members of the Association include over 850 European universities, 34 national associations of rectors and about 40 other organisations active in higher education and research. EUA plays an essential role in shaping tomorrow's European higher education and research landscape thanks to its unique knowledge of the sector and the diversity of its members. EUA's mandate in the Bologna Process, contribution to EU research policy making, and relations with organisations from across Europe and European institutions, ensure its capacity to debate issues which are crucial for universities in relation to higher education, research and innovation.



Dublin City University, Ireland

Dublin City University (DCU), is a young university with a distinctive mission to transform lives and societies through education, research and innovation. Located just north of Dublin city, DCU has an alumni of over 50 000 students, many of whom are undertaking significant roles in enterprise, science, and business globally. In 2015, DCU offers more than 200 programmes to over 12 000 students across its four faculties – Humanities and Social Sciences, Science and Health, Engineering and Computing and DCU Business School. DCU is currently undergoing a process of incorporation with three teacher education colleges, which will result in a fifth faculty – the DCU Institute of Education – as well as an enhanced Faculty of Humanities & Social Sciences that will incorporate the combined strengths of the four institutions.



Instituto Politécnico do Porto, Portugal

Porto Polytechnic Institute (IPP) was established in 1985 and is the largest public polytechnic in Portugal, with seven schools and an academic community of over 17 500 students studying first and second cycle programmes in five scientific areas: Music, Theatre and Audiovisual Arts; Education; Management; Engineering and Technology; and Health Sciences. IPP is a socially responsible community that seeks to create and disseminate knowledge, science, technology and culture, providing its students with technical, scientific, artistic and transversal skills, linking knowledge with action and therefore contributing to the development of society. IPP was the first Portuguese HEI to implement a quality management system according to ISO 9001:2000 and underwent evaluations under EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme in 2006 and 2010.



Roskilde University, Denmark

Roskilde University was founded in 1972, focusing on interdisciplinarity, research-based teaching, and problem-oriented and collaborative work. There are 8 500 students including foreign and PhD students, 750 researchers and supervisors, and 250 administrative and technical staff. Since the 1990s, staff and students have been involved in the development of quality assurance systems and are experimenting with different tools to support this. The university has invested greatly in developing a participative quality culture (bottom-up approach), empowering the programme committees and involvement at the departmental level, and lessening the need for a central QA unit. The university has a unit for pedagogical training, offering new support tools for teaching.



University of Eastern Finland

With approximately 15 000 students and 2 800 members of staff, the University of Eastern Finland (UEF) is one of the largest universities in Finland. It was created in 2010 through a merger of the University of Joensuu and the University of Kuopio. The activities of the new university underline its multidisciplinary nature. The four faculties – the Philosophical Faculty, the Faculty of Science and Forestry, the Faculty of Health Sciences, and the Faculty of Social Sciences and Business Studies – offer teaching in more than 100 major subjects. The UEF has extensive international relations and it is involved in several international networks. The UEF has long experience in quality work. Its quality management system (QMS) is based loosely on the ISO 9001 standard, and is a mature system covering all the UEF processes.



University of Graz, Austria

The University of Graz was founded in 1585, making it one of the oldest universities in the German-speaking region. The university offers study programmes and research in the fields of Catholic Theology, Law, Economics, Business Administration, Humanities, Social Sciences and Sciences. Six Nobel laureates and a number of alumni in high professional and academic positions are proof of their academic potential. About 30 000 students are enrolled and 3 200 staff members work at University of Graz. The aims of the university's quality management system are, among others, to support quality culture, the implementation of the university's strategy, and the transparency of processes.



University of Ljubljana, Slovenia

The University of Ljubljana (UL) is the oldest (founded in 1919) and the largest higher education and research institution in Slovenia, with over 51 000 students of which over 21 000 are postgraduates. It is a comprehensive public university, with 26 member institutions: 23 faculties and three academies. In the light of UL's strategic orientation towards growth and quality development, quality management plays a major role. The university has a comprehensive quality monitoring and quality management system, which helps to inform the activities of the management, administration and designated bodies at central and members' levels.

Univerza v Ljubljani



University of the Arts, The Hague – Royal Conservatoire, the Netherlands

University of the Arts, The Hague is the oldest conservatoire in the Netherlands, having been established in 1826, and presents itself as a centre for education, research and production, equipping young talent with the skills to perform in a highly demanding and constantly changing professional environment. It is a highly specialised university with particular experience of the need to respect an institution's disciplinary culture and characteristics when developing QA measures.



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The European University Association (EUA) is the representative organisation of universities and national rectors' conferences in 47 European countries. EUA plays a crucial role in the Bologna Process and in influencing EU policies on higher education, research and innovation. Thanks to its interaction with a range of other European and international organisations EUA ensures that the independent voice of European universities is heard wherever decisions are being taken that will impact on their activities.

The Association provides a unique expertise in higher education and research as well as a forum for exchange of ideas and good practice among universities. The results of EUA's work are made available to members and stakeholders through conferences, seminars, website and publications.

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