

Study to evaluate the progress on quality assurance systems in the area of higher education in the Member States and on cooperation activities at European level

Final report

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Final report

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Abstract

In line with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (2006/143/EC), the European Commission and the Member States support cooperation between higher education institutions, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, national authorities and other bodies in the field. The European Commission is required to regularly report on this process and to support its further development through insights and suggestions for further actions.

This study provides the analytical background for the European Commission's next progress report on quality assurance in higher education. One of the key objectives of the study was to assess the extent to which the recommendations provided in the previous "Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education" have been taken on board by the quality assurance community. The study has three main conceptual parts. The first part describes and analyses the recent trends and developments in quality assurance of higher education in the EU Member States and other countries of the European Higher Education Area. The second part focuses on the topics that are currently high on the agenda of the quality assurance community, such as broadening the scope of quality assurance to include newly emerging topics and building quality culture(s). The third part analyses the European cooperation on quality assurance, the impact of the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, the scope and quality of cooperation between quality assurance agencies and the impact of key EU-level stakeholders: the European University Association (EUA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and The European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

Introduction

Policy context

Higher education aims to fulfil multiple equally important purposes. It should prepare students for active citizenship in democratic societies and for sustainable employment in contemporary labour markets. It should also support personal development, create a broad, advanced knowledge base and stimulate research and innovation. Public responsibility should be assumed for the implementation of these important functions, which include setting out the framework within which higher education is conducted, ensuring swift recognition of skills and competences, providing sustainable financing of higher education, and ensuring that all citizens have equal access to higher education.

Several current and emerging trends are transforming higher education. Since digital skills have become a core literacy, it is important to equip students with these skills. Digital technologies and innovation offer new opportunities for teaching and learning that need to be exploited in higher education institutions. Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary solutions are required to solve complex challenges, while entrepreneurship is necessary for innovation and economic growth. Some skills (including critical thinking, information evaluation or consensus-seeking) can help address new societal challenges, such as fake news or radicalisation. As demands for competences in the labour market are constantly evolving, it is also necessary to invest in lifelong learning and to teach students how to learn continuously.

The renewed EU agenda for higher education of 2017¹ identified several challenges facing the European higher education systems and four key goals for European cooperation in higher education: tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development; building inclusive and connected higher education systems; ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation; and supporting effective and efficient higher education systems.

More recently, the 2017 Communication from the Commission on "Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture"² set out the vision of a European Education Area and identified several specific policy suggestions. The proposals relevant to the field of higher education include: boosting the Erasmus+ programme for all categories of learners; setting out a benchmark for good knowledge of two foreign languages; working on a Council Recommendation on the mutual recognition of higher education, school leaving diplomas and study periods abroad; and working towards truly European universities, which would be able to network and cooperate seamlessly across borders and compete internationally. The Communication acknowledged that implementing the shared European agenda must be a common endeavour, involving EU institutions, national administrations, higher education institutions and other higher education stakeholders.

On 22 May 2018, the European Commission took further steps in explaining and developing the European Education Area by publishing the communication called "Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies."³ The

¹ Communication from the Commission on a renewed EU agenda for higher education, 30 May 2017, Brussels: https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/education/files/he-com-2017-247_en.pdf

² Communication from the Commission "Strengthening European Identity through Education and Culture", 14 November 2017, Strasbourg: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/sites/beta-political/files/communication-strengthening-european-identity-education-culture_en.pdf

³ Communication from the Commission "Building a stronger Europe: the role of youth, education and culture policies", 22 May 2018, Brussels, COM(2018) 268 final: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1530529323717&uri=CELEX:52018DC0268>

Communication clarified the Commission's vision for the European Education Area and was accompanied by a package of initiatives related to different levels of education. Regarding higher education, the Commission further explained the ongoing work to build truly European Universities⁴ and described the initiative to develop the European Student Card⁵, which will enable every student to easily and safely identify and register themselves electronically at higher education institutions within the EU when moving abroad for studies, eliminating the need to complete on-site registration procedures and paper work.

Most importantly in the light of this study, the Commission's Communication of 22 May 2018 was accompanied by the proposal for a Council Recommendation on the Automatic Mutual Recognition of Diplomas and learning periods abroad.⁶ As observed by the Commission, after 30 years of Erasmus+ mobility and considerable progress under the inter-governmental Bologna process on higher education, many people still face obstacles when they ask for formal recognition of their tertiary or upper secondary level qualifications in another Member State. The same applies to learning periods abroad during both tertiary and secondary education. This creates uncertainty and unjustified barriers to mobility. To overcome this problem, the Commission has proposed to establish automatic recognition of qualifications as a default position by 2025: any certificate or diploma – and the outcomes of learning periods abroad of up to one year – awarded by an accredited institution within the EU should be automatically recognised for the purposes of further learning in all Member States. However, as the Commission emphasises, such an ambitious plan cannot be implemented in one go. It requires a step-by-step approach, building on strong and reliable quality assurance that brings the transparency and trust needed for automatic recognition. A number of European countries are already pioneering automatic recognition schemes. Drawing on this experience, EU-wide solutions will be developed in close cooperation with the Member States.

Finally, a "quality culture in higher education" concept is gaining increased attention from the EU institutions and national authorities because of its potential to improve higher education outputs and outcomes, as well as to ensure the accountability of higher education institutions to the public. Higher education institutions cannot only comply with external quality assurance requirements but should also actively promote the development of an internal quality culture. Since quality results from the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment, it is a collective responsibility of the institutional management, staff and students. To constantly improve the quality of learning, teaching and research, managers of higher education institutions and academic professionals should adopt a strategic approach and strong leadership while collaborating with various stakeholders.

The development of a quality culture should be effectively steered by national and sub-national authorities and agencies with responsibility for higher education policy and external quality assurance. These institutions should define adequate rules and regulations, provide effective financial incentives and offer guidance and information to higher education institutions. It is also important to monitor and evaluate the execution of higher education reforms, transnational cooperation projects in higher education or new quality assurance measures to learn from implementation experience and to spread

⁴ For more information, see: https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-universities-initiative_en

⁵ For more information, see: https://ec.europa.eu/education/european-student-card-initiative_en

⁶ Proposal for a COUNCIL RECOMMENDATION on promoting automatic mutual recognition of higher education and upper secondary education diplomas and the outcomes of learning periods abroad, 22 May 2018, Brussels, COM(2018) 270: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1530526890119&uri=CELEX:52018DC0270>

good practices among public authorities, higher education institutions and other stakeholders.

About the study

This Final Report is submitted for the fulfilment of the specific contract No EAC-2017-0393 on the "Study to evaluate the progress on quality assurance systems in the area of higher education in the Member States and on cooperation activities at European level", implementing the Framework Contract No. EAC/22/2013. The study was carried out by PPMI Group in partnership with the AIT Austrian Institute of Technology and an external expert Lukas Bischof.

In line with the Recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council of 15 February 2006 on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (2006/143/EC), the Commission and the Member States support cooperation between higher education institutions, quality assurance and accreditation agencies (QA agencies), national authorities and other bodies in the field. The Commission is required to report on this process every three years and to encourage beneficial developments through insights and suggestions for further actions.

The Council Recommendation of 2006 set out the following objectives for the Member States:

- To encourage their higher education institutions to introduce or develop rigorous internal quality assurance systems, in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG);
- To encourage QA agencies to be independent in their assessments, to apply the features of quality assurance laid down in Recommendation 98/561/EC4 and to apply the ESG for assessment purposes;
- To encourage representatives of national authorities, the higher education sector and quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with social partners, to set up a "European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies" (EQAR);
- To enable their higher education institutions to choose from the quality assurance or accreditation agencies in the European Register an agency which meets their needs and profile, provided that this is compatible with their national legislation or permitted by their national authorities;
- To allow higher education institutions to work towards a complementary assessment by another agency registered in EQAR;
- To promote cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust and the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation assessments, thus contributing to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country;
- To ensure public access to the assessments made by the quality assurance or accreditation agencies listed in EQAR.

The 2014 Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education⁷ indicated many areas where progress has been achieved by the QA community:

- The existence of explicit quality assurance structures and processes, including public strategies in the majority of higher education institutions, which enhances trust across the national systems.
- The remit of some QA agencies was extended to review broader higher education objectives such as widening access, lifelong learning and internationalisation. In some cases, doctoral training and human resources strategies were also subject to quality reviews.

⁷ Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Brussels, 28.1.2014, COM(2014) 29 final.

- There had been an on-going shift in external QA from the traditional focus on accreditation of individual programmes offered by institutions to the evaluation of the entire institution. Institutional evaluation empowers academics and higher education institutions to build curriculum and to ensure its quality as a whole, while avoiding the need for formal, external accreditation of each individual programme and allowing them to adapt to the changing labour market needs and to the changes in the make-up of the student population.
- Students' involvement in quality enhancement was improving: around 9 in 10 said that they had a chance to take part in evaluations of the study programmes.
- While there is a formal requirement in many countries for employer organisations to participate in external quality assurance, there is still a challenge to involve them meaningfully or at all.
- More external QA reports are being published, but there is a tendency to avoid the publication of more critical reports and the language of the published reports is not always accessible to less-informed readers.
- The ESG have supported convergence of QA across countries and provided a framework for cooperation between QA agencies; however, their generic nature meant that they were often understood differently and applied unevenly.
- Growing international cooperation in the field of higher education has created peer pressure for institutions to develop strong QA procedures, which has meant that higher education institutions intending to develop their international profile wanted to be able to demonstrate their quality standards as a prerequisite for the trust that underlies international partnerships.
- ENQA and EQAR contributed to fostering cooperation on QA at European level.
- Although the national ministries tended to prefer working with their own rather than foreign QA agencies, a positive development since 2009 was the growing willingness to include international experts in QA panels.

However, the overarching problematic issue the Commission's report in 2014 emphasised was that QA was still often perceived as focusing on procedure rather than content of higher education. The Commission has expressed the need for change. As it was vividly put in the 2014 Report, "QA has to become a support to creating an internal quality culture rather than a tick-box procedure."⁸ To tackle this and related issues, the 2014 report has recommended:

- To widen the scope of quality assurance so that it covers a broader range of topics relevant to higher education. This would include helping to develop adequate responses to societal challenges such as widening participation in higher education, reducing dropout rates, improving employability, internationalisation, and adapting to less conventional learning pathways and new delivery modes (blended learning, massive open online courses, the so-called MOOCs).
- QA should engage with all areas of activities in higher education institutions, to keep up with change in how higher education is designed and delivered and involve the entire institution in creating a quality culture that underpins teaching and learning.
- To incorporate intended learning outcomes for students into teaching, learning and assessment. QA agencies should encourage the higher education institutions to improve on this through external quality assurance. The application of the learning outcomes approach can be also supported through ensuring the proper use of the European tools based on this approach: qualification frameworks, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), the Diploma Supplement.
- QA should support institutions to better involve employers in designing work-based learning around relevant learning outcomes. Related to this, QA processes

⁸ Ibid, p. 9.

should be adjusted so that they can assess whether study programmes meet labour market needs. This could be done, for example, through tracking careers of alumni.

- Since research activity still tends to outweigh teaching accomplishments in academic promotion, QA should support the development of national and institutional strategies that promote staff training; recognise teaching skills in career development; promote teaching awards or fellowships; use student feedback in promotion decisions; incentivise international experience of teachers.
- To assess the pros and cons of a sector-based approach to QA and whether it is possible to identify some basic principles and guidelines valid across education sectors and applicable to all qualifications. In this light, it would be valuable to inquire if there is a good case for closer coordination of all European instruments for transparency of the education process and QA (including EQF, ECTS, ESG, EQAVET, Europass and others) as a way to achieve a full European area of skills and qualifications.
- Continue to improve the articulation of European transparency tools mentioned above that support quality assurance, recognition and mobility;
- To revise the ESG so that it puts more emphasis on raising quality standards rather than on procedural approaches, widens its scope to include the issues raised by the report and opens to cooperation on quality assurance with other education and training sectors.
- The Member States should be convinced to encourage more quality assurance agencies to apply to EQAR and allow foreign EQAR-registered agencies to operate in their higher education systems.
- Progress should be made in ensuring the effective quality assurance of the cross-border higher education. For example, QA agencies in the hosting country could be informed about quality assessments of the foreign higher education institutions located in their country or could carry out joint assessments. Bilateral agreements mandating a QA agency in the receiving country to act on behalf of the sending country QA agency, or to allow an EQAR registered agency to evaluate the institution providing cross-border higher education, would help meet the quality concerns.
- Continue to promote cooperation on QA at international level through policy dialogue with key international partners and as a basis for partnerships with higher education institutions around the world.
- To continue providing support for QA community through Erasmus+ for cross-border cooperation arrangements and support for higher education reforms.

The current study provides analytical background for the next Commission's triennial progress report. One of the key objectives of the study was to assess the extent to which the Commission's suggestions in the 2014 Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education (listed above) have been taken on board by the quality assurance community. The report has six main parts. The **first part** presents the methodology of the study. The **second part** describes and analyses the recent trends and developments in QA of higher education in the EU Member States and other (non-EU) European Higher Education Area countries. Since the Commission will be the main user of the study results (in the framework set by the Council Recommendation of 2006), this study prioritises the analysis of developments in the EU Member States. However, all main data collection and analysis methods of the study (surveys, interviews) covered both EU and other European Higher Education Area countries. The **third part** focuses on the topics that are currently high on the agenda of the QA community, such as broadening the scope of QA to include newly emerging topics and building quality culture(s). The **fourth part** analyses the European cooperation on QA, including cross-border QA, impact of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes, quality of cooperation between QA agencies and the impact of key EU-level stakeholders (EUA, ESU, EURASHE, ENQA and

EQAR). The **fifth part** summarises the main conclusions of the study, while the final **sixth part** provides recommendations for the future.

The following annexes are attached to the report:

- Annex 1: 17 good practice examples;
- Annex 2: More detailed information on recent developments in non-EU European Higher Education Area countries;
- Annex 3: Interview questionnaires;
- Annex 4: Survey questionnaires.

1. Methodology

This section concisely presents the methodology of the study, including:

- A thorough analysis of the situation and the most recent developments in the national QA systems. We have produced 28 detailed country-level fiches for each EU Member State and implemented synthetic analysis of the findings;
- A large interview programme, including 94 interviews;
- A large-scale survey programme that consisted of 3 separate surveys targeting (1) higher education institutions, (2) quality assurance agencies, (3) national umbrella organisations of higher education institutions, students, employers and workers;
- Analysis of 17 good practice cases in the field of QA;
- Participation in four major stakeholder/ policy-making events that took place during the implementation of the study;
- Delphi survey (on-line expert panel) to validate study conclusions and recommendations.

Producing country-level fiches and a synthesis report

The major work package of the study involved preparation of 28 detailed analytical country-level fiches for each EU Member State and their synthesis. Country-level fiches were prepared based on extensive country-level desk research and 2-3 national-level interviews, on average: one with the relevant national authority and one with the national QA agency; in some cases, an interview with one of the national higher education institutions was also carried out. After finalising country-level fiches, they were analysed according to the pre-defined list of research questions in order to arrive at the synthesis report. These country fiches served as analytical documents and will not be published separately.

At the same time, we have implemented a more general desk research and 7 selected interviews on QA trends and developments, as well as good practices, in other European Higher Education Area countries, focusing in particular on Eastern Partnership countries. Separate country fiches were not produced for each of the non-EU European Higher Education Area country. The final output of this analysis is a chapter of the report on developments in non-EU European Higher Education Area countries as well as Annex 2 presenting a detailed picture of developments in each non-EU European Higher Education Area country.

Interview programme

As indicated in Table 1, during the study we have implemented:

- 57 interviews with the national authorities and quality assurance agencies (including interviews in non-EU countries).
- 17 interviews with the EU-level stakeholders: officials from the European Commission, EQAR, ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ECA, Education International, EACEA, ETUC and Business Europe.
- 14 interviews with the selected higher education institutions.
- 6 interviews to enrich analysis of good practices.

Table 1. Number of interviews with different types of stakeholders

Group of stakeholders:	No. of interviews implemented
EU-level interviews: European Commission, EQAR, ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU, ECA, Education International, Business Europe, ETUC	17
National authorities	24
Individual QA agencies	28
Individual higher education institutions	14
Interviews with stakeholders in Eastern Partnership countries	5 (plus interviews in Moldova implemented as part of Lukas Bischof PhD thesis research)
Additional interviews (mainly, to enrich analysis of good practices)	6
Overall:	94

Survey programme

As part of our methodology, we have implemented three surveys:

- Survey of quality assurance agencies;
- Survey of higher education institutions;
- Survey of national umbrella organisations.

Table 2 provides the key indicators defining the scope of the surveys. Surveys of higher education institutions and QA agencies were especially successful. The number of responses that we have received enabled high-quality quantitative analysis of the survey results. While the survey of national umbrella organisations achieved a rather high response rate, a relatively low number of total responses allowed the data to be analysed only in a qualitative way.

Table 2. Implementation of the surveys

Survey	Invitations	Responses	Complete	Partial	Response rate	Countries covered
Survey of higher education institutions <small>(launched by the Commission)</small>	5449 <small>(ERASMUS charter holders;</small>	1551	494	1057	28.5 %	41 countries, including all EU countries, 2 candidate countries, 1 EFTA country and 1 Eastern Partnership country (Georgia)
Survey of quality assurance agencies	93	57	53	4	61.3 %	Received responses from 37 countries, including: 23 EU countries, 3 Eastern Partnership countries, 3 EFTA countries
Survey of national umbrella organisations	282	46	33	13	16.3 %	19 EU countries (Austria, Belgium Flemish Community, Belgium French Community, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, The Netherlands, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia, United Kingdom)

Social network analysis of the QA agencies' survey data was also performed to determine the inter-agency cooperation patterns between the European QA agencies, the key areas and purposes for which QA agencies cooperate and the intensity of these cooperation ties.

Analysis of good practice examples – see Annex 1 for a full list

In addition to this final study report, Annex 1 provides in-depth descriptions and analysis of 17 good practices in the field of QA that we have indicated via stakeholder events, desk research, interview programme and survey programme. Selecting good practices to be presented in the report was a lengthy process and involved many consultations with stakeholders and policy-makers throughout the study duration. The majority of good practices were first indicated during the stakeholder events in Oslo and Riga, where some of them were already presented as notable cases or suggested by experts and stakeholders during face-to-face conversations (e.g. good practices no. 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 13, 14). Other cases were either already well-known by many stakeholders as good practices (e.g. no. 3, 12) or were suggested by interviewees and then validated as interesting cases through other interviews (e.g. no. 8, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17). In any case, each selected good practice was thoroughly validated during consultations with many stakeholders. Those practices, which ended up in our list, have received support from a wide variety of stakeholders. This allows us concluding that there exists a consensus that these activities are notable for their ability to achieve good results.

The following good practice examples are presented in Annex 1:

Number	Good practice	A short explanation
1.	HowULearn student engagement tool at the University of Helsinki	HowULearn IT tool applied at the University of Helsinki allows students to get individual suggestions on how they can enhance their learning process. This is based on the on-line survey, where their responses are being compared to those of other students. The tool also allows teachers to get information on the students participating in their courses. This tool is a good example of support for student centred learning.
2.	The revival of the Inholland University of Applied Sciences	This good practice example analyses the role that new leadership played in improving the quality of studies provided in the Inholland University of Applied Sciences, the Netherlands. This university was on a brink of closure due to poor quality of studies provided previously. However, a new leadership managed to turn the situation around and to build a high-quality university of applied sciences. This example showcases the importance of institutional leadership in building the quality culture.
3.	International quality reviews at the University of Graz	The University of Graz is well known for regularly using foreign quality assurance agencies to review and enhance the quality of their studies. This good practice example focuses on how foreign reviews can contribute to quality improvements.
4.	New quality management system at the University of Zurich	The University of Zurich has recently established an elaborate new quality management system. Its aim is to provide better evidence/data on the quality of study programmes and to improve the coordination and transparency of the process. This good practice example focuses on the ways how this new model contributes to quality enhancements and building quality culture at the university.
5.	Graduate tracking system in Poland	Poland has recently established a country-wide graduate tracking system based on administrative data, which has an ambition to significantly contribute to national QA processes. This good practice example analyses how the model is being developed and implemented and the ways in which it contributes to better understanding employability of graduates.
6.	Norwegian white paper on quality culture	This good practice example looks at the recent white paper on quality culture in higher education launched by the Norwegian Ministry of Education and Research. The white paper provides a "toolbox and framework" to raise standards in higher education. It focuses on many areas ranging from improving teaching to introducing practical training and compulsory international collaboration in all study programmes. The good practice example will focus both on its implementation process and first impact. The way stakeholders were engaged in the process is particularly worth looking at.
7.	University networks for mutual quality assurance	This good practice example looks at a number of voluntary networks that universities in different countries have set up in

		order to support each other in quality assurance tasks. This example showcases the willingness of universities to take an extra step (even without EU or national government funding) and to collaborate with peers in supporting each other in quality enhancement processes.
8.	MusiQuE – a truly European quality assurance agency	MusiQuE is an independent European-level external evaluation body, which has the aim to assist higher music education institutions in their own enhancement of quality and to improve the quality of higher music education across Europe and beyond. This agency is an interesting example of an organisation working in particular at the European level. This good practice example sheds light on the benefits and barriers of running a truly European QA agency.
9.	Development of social impact analysis in the new external quality assurance model in Finland	Currently, a new external quality assurance model is under development in Finland. A part of the upcoming model will be a methodology to analyse social impact of higher education institutions. Learning about the social impact of higher education was stressed as an important topic by many QA practitioners and experts interviewed for this study.
10.	Thematic reviews in the UK (and potentially other countries, where they are implemented, e.g. Sweden)	Thematic reviews, implemented by national QAs, allow to focus on specific areas that are regarded as particularly worthy of further analysis or enhancement. For example, in 2015-2016 thematic reviews in the UK have analysed student employability and digital literacy. This good practice example analyses the capacity of thematic reviews to draw the attention of the higher education sector to the most important issues.
11.	Annual monitoring of higher education institutions in Ireland	Annual monitoring of higher education institutions in Ireland allows QQI (a national QA agency) to monitor how IQA systems in higher education institutions are operating, identify good practices and areas for concern, assist them in the development of procedures and monitor the overall functioning of the system. It includes topical questions that help to widen the scope of QA and adapt to HE sector's changes. Recent topics included: gender imbalance in QA, implementation of the ESG, etc. It allows periodical reviews focus on enhancement instead of compliance.
12.	Analysis of the application of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes: ITEPS experience	The joint bachelor programme International Teacher Education for Primary Schools (ITEPS) is offered by Stenden University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands), University College South-East Norway (Norway) and associate partner University College Zealand (Denmark). Although the Zealand University withdrew as a full consortium partner due to objections from the Danish government, otherwise the European Approach was fully applied by this consortium of self-accrediting organisations.
13.	Meeting employers' expectations in Latvia	Employers are in the best position to provide a valuable insight into employability competencies and desired improvements in higher education QA systems. A survey of employers, who participated in the evaluation of higher education as members of the experts' pool, was conducted in Latvia based on the importance-performance analysis. We analyse this survey as a good practice example of learning about the expectations of employers.
14.	Innovative ways of student engagement at Erasmus University College Brussels	In many HEIs, student involvement has been primarily realised by giving students representation in institutional bodies and by student satisfaction surveys. Erasmus University College Brussels aims to go beyond that by using innovative engagement tools: focus groups, social media, etc. This good practice example analyses the outcomes of using these innovative tools.
15.	The impact of educational development centres (follow-up of a good practice indicated in the previous report)	This good practice example studies the impact of educational development centres, such as the Teachers Academy at University of Helsinki or the Teaching and Learning Team at University College Dublin, among others. Since a number of such centres were indicated in the 2014 background study as good practices, it is useful to follow-up on their performance since then.
16.	Performance agreements/quality agreements in the Netherlands	This good practice example looks at the performance agreements/quality agreements in the Netherlands and their impact.
17.	New QA developments in Belgium: institutional audits planned in Flanders region and	This good practice example looks at two new developments in the field of QA in HE in Belgium: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Institutional audits planned in Flanders region;

	Walloon approach for creating a new quality system based on quality culture	2. Walloon approach for creating a new quality system based on quality culture.
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We hope that these good practices will inspire QA practitioners to implement similar actions in their work.

Participation in stakeholder events

Throughout the duration of the study, members of the study team participated in four stakeholder events:

1. Peer Learning Activity on "Enhancing Quality Culture in Higher Education: government incentives and the role of HEI leadership" on 16-17 November 2017 in Oslo;
2. The 12th European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) on "Responsible QA: committing to impact" on 23-25 November 2017 in Riga;
3. ET2020 Working Group for the Modernisation of Higher Education, 30 November – 1 December 2017 in Brussels;
4. Meeting of Directors-General for Higher Education on 20-21 February 2018 in Sofia. During this event, we have organised three breakout sessions to validate conclusions of our study.

Participation in these events helped the study team to achieve a deep and state-of-the-art understanding of opinions of various stakeholder groups, especially related to creating quality culture in higher education. In addition to this, participation in these events has also provided an opportunity for the study team members to approach some of the most relevant attending stakeholders and policy-makers for a quick talk or a more detailed interview.

Policy Delphi survey (on-line expert panel)

As a final step of our data collection/ validation strategy, we have implemented a policy Delphi survey (on-line expert panel) to validate conclusions and recommendations of the study and to ensure that they are relevant to the European quality assurance community. In total, our expert panel involved 26 selected experts throughout Europe representing different groups of stakeholders: national authorities, QA agencies, higher education institutions, researchers in the field and EU-level stakeholder organisations (ENQA, EQAR, EUA, ESU, EURASHE). Most of the involved experts were previously interviewed for the study and showed particular knowledge about the subject and motivation to contribute, but some additional experts were also suggested by the European Commission.

The validation process was performed in the form of an on-line survey, which listed all preliminary conclusions and recommendations of the study. The survey questionnaire was composed only from open questions. We asked the respondents to carefully read each segment of the text on conclusions and recommendations and comment if they are valid/ relevant, or if any important aspects were missing. The questionnaire was on-line from 6th to 23rd March. After the first invitation on 6th March, we have sent three reminders to complete the survey. Overall, we have received 11 full and 6 partial responses, while 1 person unsubscribed, and 10 experts decided not to participate in the survey.

Strengths and weaknesses of the methodology

The table below provides analysis of key strengths and weaknesses of the applied methodology.

Method	Strengths	Weaknesses
Survey programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> High number of responses from the key groups of stakeholders: higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. This allowed having a good overview of views and opinions of everyone involved in quality assurance of higher education in Europe. Quantitative analysis of results allowed recognising the major trends of opinions held by higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. Quantitative analysis was especially helpful to indicate areas where (1) there is a consensus among stakeholders and (2) there is a clear disagreement. This provided a good ground for subsequent interviews by allowing the study team to focus on the most relevant issues. The Commission's willingness to send survey invitations to ERASMUS charter holders was especially helpful and has significantly contributed to success of the survey and high response rate. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Low number of responses from umbrella organisations (national rectors' unions, university associations, student unions, trade unions, employer organisations). The survey clearly showed that quality assurance in higher education is not tackled as a specific and distinct topic by these organisations in their everyday work. Therefore, many of these organisations did not feel that they can contribute significantly via the survey. In the future, we suggest addressing this group of stakeholders only via interview programme. While the survey is good for revealing overall trends, by definition it cannot provide in-depth analysis of stakeholder's opinions. This is why it worked in tandem with the interview programme described below. Survey is always an administrative burden on those, who need to respond.
Interview programme	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews helped to gather detailed and nuanced opinions of the key stakeholders involved in quality assurance of higher education. Unlike in surveys, interviewees can explain or clarify the issues in detail, minimising chances of misinterpretation. Interviews allowed implementing in-depth analysis of the most relevant issues. Interviews also allowed capturing subjective assessments and opinions of different stakeholders and therefore understanding a full array of existing opinions. As most of the institutional interviewees were directors or high-level officials in their institutions, this reduced the subjectivity of evidence provided and, in many cases, allowed treating interview data as official opinion of interviewed institutions. Interviews were indispensable in collecting additional rich data about good practices and clarifying how certain good practices were developed and why they work well. Large number of interviewees from all EU countries and all relevant stakeholders ensured the reliability of the evidence gathered by the interview programme. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As interviews capture individual standpoints of interviewees, they necessarily provide evidence that is subjective at least to some extent. Interviewees may want to promote the opinion/ interest of their own institution or their individual interest. We tried to be sensitive to this issue and take such cases into account. Although we tried to ensure that no interviewee can be personally indicated by reading the study, some interviewees may have refrained from bolder statements having in mind the risk that this opinion may be traced back to him/her.
Desk research at country level & synthesis of	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The fact that in-depth desk research was done at the level of each EU country ensured high quality and reliability of collected 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interpretation of desk research findings requires additional methods, such as interviews and surveys.

country findings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> evidence. It allowed collecting rich information on each EU country. To the extent that desk research was based on analysis of official documents (strategies, laws, etc.) and statistical data collected by the EU countries, it has provided objective information. Desk research is a holistic and detailed method, because it has covered all issues analysed by the country and built on all previous studies in the area. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Official documents do not necessarily reflect true perceptions of decision makers and stakeholders. As the situation in the field of higher education is rapidly changing, some of the official information may prove to be outdated and checking it with the survey respondents and interviewees was necessary.
Analysis of good practices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Good practice analysis provides in-depth information about various activities that are considered to lead to the best results. Good practice cases may inspire learning by other stakeholders in order to improve their practices. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This method has to indicate only a selected number of good practices and therefore is to some extent related to value judgments of study team members and consulted experts.
Social network analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Social network analysis allowed for the first time to assess inter-agency cooperation patterns between the European quality assurance agencies, the key areas and purposes for which quality assurance agencies cooperate and the intensity of these cooperation ties. The social network analysis allowed to provide a visualisation of the network of quality assurance agencies, which allows understanding the key characteristics of the network from a quick glance at the graph. A very high survey response rate by quality assurance agencies ensured high reliability of evidence provided by social network analysis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Additional methods (especially, interviews) were necessary to interpret the findings of social network analysis.
Participation in stakeholder events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Participation in stakeholder events allowed the study team members to be aware of the latest developments in quality assurance of higher education and to ensure that conclusions and recommendations of the study respond to the current developments in the quality assurance community. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Rather resource-intensive method, because it requires participation of key study team members.
Policy Delphi survey / on-line expert panel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Policy Delphi provided very rich and detailed comments from the key experts on conclusions and recommendations of the study. Allowed a more objective formulation of conclusions and recommendations based on the wider expert knowledge, rather than only on the expertise of the study team. Allowed the study team to avoid biases in formulating conclusions and recommendations by feeding the different views into the study process. Involving stakeholders and experts in the formulation of conclusions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expert panels always involve a limited number of most knowledgeable stakeholders and experts, which means that the overall number of responses collected is small. Experts and stakeholders that have a particularly strong opinion on specific issues might have too great an influence on the views of the whole group and thus distort the final output (conclusions and recommendations).

	and recommendations renders the recommendations more practical and relevant to the policy-making process.	
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The key overall strength of the methodology was the richness of evidence gathered as a result of a high number of methods applied to analyse each study question. While previous analytical studies supporting the Commission's reports on Quality Assurance in Higher Education were mainly based on literature review, this is the first report that collected large amount of primary evidence through surveys and interviews. This also allowed bringing new perspectives to the subject and gathering feedback from all types of stakeholders, both policy-makers and practitioners, involved in quality assurance of higher education in Europe.

The methodology was clearly enriched by participation of the key study team members in the major stakeholder events that took place throughout the duration of the study. This allowed the study team members to be aware of the latest developments in quality assurance of higher education and to ensure that conclusions and recommendations of the study respond to the current developments in the quality assurance community.

2. Recent trends and developments in quality assurance of higher education in the EU Member States and in other European Higher Education Area countries

This first section of the study covers the recent developments in internal and external QA at the level of national QA systems and individual higher education institutions. We also assess how well internal and external QA processes have worked together and reinforced each other in operating as coherent national QA systems. Throughout this section, we also analyse whether the ESGs and other European Higher Education Area tools have been applied in practice by the QA agencies and higher education institutions. Finally, we investigate the effectiveness of communicating the Bologna process tools and the added value they bring. This thematic section provides an in-depth analysis of the developments in the EU Member States, while a more general overview is provided on the developments in other (non-EU) European Higher Education Area countries, focusing in particular on activities in the Eastern Partnership countries.

2.1. Recent developments in quality assurance in higher education in the EU Member States

In this section, we present findings from the qualitative (interviews) and quantitative (survey) research conducted in the EU Member States concerning the most recent developments in quality assurance of higher education. However, as developments are path-dependent, and it is often meaningful to interpret them in the historical or wider policy context, in many cases we also describe the historical developments and national contexts. Therefore, this part provides not only general insights about the developments in EU as a whole, but also many interesting and revealing examples about the developments in different EU Member States. Due to the overlap between internal and external quality assurance processes, some of the more general issues are discussed in both of the two sections dedicated for each of these themes. Before we present the recent developments, we briefly give an introduction on quality assurance in higher education, the expected role of internal and external QA and the role of QA agencies in this process.

2.1.1. The role and organisation of quality assurance in the higher education sector

Over the past two decades, quality assurance in higher education has evolved to become one of the top priorities of higher education policies at an international level. Already in 1998, against the background of the UNESCO World Conference on Higher Education, the UNESCO noted that increased attention needs to be devoted to the topic of quality assurance in higher education, especially due to an increasing number of students. The relevance of quality assurance was also underlined in 2009, when UNESCO published a communiqué in the area of higher education in which 10 out of 52 statements addressed quality assurance in higher education. The main emphasis was not only to ensure quality in future higher education study programmes, but also to improve current higher education provision at regional, national and international levels.

Against this background, the members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) have developed a number of initiatives in order to improve quality assurance processes in higher education and to build awareness about the importance of QA. The importance of quality assurance in higher education on a European level was particularly underlined

in the Berlin Communiqué⁹ in September 2003, where European ministers in charge of higher education from 33 countries committed to further foster the development of QA on an institutional, national and European level. Furthermore, in cooperation with the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the National Unions of Students in Europe (ESIB), the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) was invited to set up a system of norms, procedures and guidelines for QA until 2005, which would have validity in all the partner countries (later it became what we now know as the ESG – the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area). The 2006 recommendation of the European Parliament and the Council on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (2006/143/EC¹⁰) encouraged the Member States to introduce or develop rigorous internal quality assurance systems, in accordance with The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) proposed by ENQA in cooperation with higher education institutions, quality assurance and accreditation agencies, and other bodies active in the field of higher education. In addition, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was established in 2007-2008 pursuing the objective of furthering the development of the European Higher Education Area by enhancing confidence in higher education and by facilitating the mutual recognition of quality assurance decisions.¹¹

Key developments concerning quality assurance followed: the 2014 Council conclusions on quality assurance in supporting education and training, the Yerevan Communiqué of the Bologna Ministerial conference (14-15 May 2015) and the 3 measures adopted therein¹². The Council Conclusions of 2014 have acknowledged that quality assurance mechanisms play an important role in helping education and training institutions and policy makers to meet the key challenges, including:

- broadening access to higher education;
- reducing dropout and improving retention rates;
- supporting innovative learning;
- ensuring that learners acquire the knowledge, skills and competences required for an inclusive society, active citizenship, lifelong learning and employability, regardless of their social and economic backgrounds.

The Yerevan Communiqué outlined the main objectives in relation to the mission of quality in European Higher Education Area: to enhance the quality and relevance of learning and teaching, to implement a common degree structure and credit system, and to develop more effective policies for the recognition of education gained abroad.

In May 2015, the revised ESG 2015 were adopted by the European Higher Education Area ministers responsible for higher education taking into account the developments in the European higher education since 2005, such as the shift to student-centred learning, the need for flexible learning paths, the need to recognise competencies gained outside of formal education, the increased internationalisation of higher education, the spread of digital learning, and new forms of higher education delivery. The revised ESG have provided a common framework for higher education quality assurance systems at European, national and institutional level. The ESG 2015 were divided into three parts and provided standards and guidelines for 1) internal quality assurance mechanisms

⁹ http://media.ehea.info/file/2003_Berlin/28/4/2003_Berlin_Communique_English_577284.pdf

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[http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Parliament_and_Council_Recommendation_on_further_European_cooperation_in_quality_assurance_in_higher_education_\(2006\)](http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Parliament_and_Council_Recommendation_on_further_European_cooperation_in_quality_assurance_in_higher_education_(2006))

¹¹ EQAR (2008), EQAR Statutes, Art. 2., 2008-04-10

https://eqar.eu/uploads/media/EQAR_Statutes_FINAL_v3_1_EN.pdf

¹² <http://bologna-yerevan2015.ehea.info/files/YerevanCommuniqueFinal.pdf>

(internal QA), 2) external quality assurance mechanisms (external QA), and 3) quality assurance agencies. The main objective of external quality assurance is monitoring a wide spectrum of processes at the higher education institutions with the goal of maintaining and improving higher education quality. Typical instruments are external evaluations, audits and accreditations at programme and institutional level. Internal quality assurance processes aim at improving the quality of teaching and learning at individual higher education institutions. The standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies concern the way in which quality assurance agencies implement and assess their activities.

2.1.2. Recent developments in the EU Member States related to internal quality assurance of higher education

National legal frameworks and responsibility for the focus of internal quality assurance

In all EU Member States, higher education laws and sometimes specific QA-related laws or directives set out the framework and role of internal quality assurance in general and in relation to external quality assurance. Quality assurance in general, and internal quality assurance in particular, has recently become an important part of higher education reforms in many EU countries.

The national legal frameworks usually define the key principles of internal and external quality assurance, while the QA agencies are responsible for establishing specific QA procedures and providing support to higher education institutions in implementing them. While in a number of countries these regulations were established before 2014 (e.g. 2001 in Spain, 2005 in Poland, 2007 in Portugal, 2009 in Croatia, 2012 in Austria and Ireland), in some countries the laws and regulations governing QA in higher education have been established or amended more recently. For example, in the Czech Republic, the amendment to the Higher Education Act, introduced in 2016, has imposed a duty on higher education institutions to set-up and maintain an internal quality assurance system. The country is, however, currently still in a transition period between setting up the QA rules and implementing them.

In almost all EU countries, national legislation requires that higher education institutions should develop and publish their internal QA policy or strategy. Usually, internal QA is part of the general long-term strategy of individual higher education institutions. The extent of requirements for such strategies varies from country to country (university autonomy is an important issue within this context). To illustrate:

- In Portugal, for instance, institutions are free to decide on the implementation detail of their internal QA processes according to their own regulations in the framework of institutional autonomy.
- In the Netherlands and Flanders, for example, NVAO (a national QA agency) defines the framework for institutional reviews and determines to a large extent the focus of internal QA with a strong requirement to establish an inclusive and student-centred-learning-oriented system.
- In Denmark, the national Universities Act specifies the role of deans, heads of department and study boards, respectively, in assuring and developing the quality of education and teaching.
- The general framework for internal QA in Poland is rather loose providing higher education institutions with substantial freedom to decide the focus of their internal QA processes.
- The QA system in Finland is decentralised and leaves significant autonomy for higher education institutions to establish and develop their own QA systems and cultures. There, the national QA agency (FINEEC) serves predominantly an

advisory role; its decisions are consultative and do not carry formal/ legal consequences. It carries out enhancement-oriented work that helps higher education institutions to identify the best practices in their operations as well as to identify areas of improvement.

- In contrast, in countries such as Lithuania, Greece and the Czech Republic, the internal QA systems are highly regulated with a significant focus on quality control.

The national higher education laws usually also define the required frequency of conducting evaluations of the study programmes, ranging from one to ten years (depending on the subject). In Greece, for instance, the internal QA systems and study programmes are accredited every four years. In Slovenia, higher education programmes are assessed by the institutions themselves through self-evaluation on a yearly basis. In Denmark, in contrast, the frequency of the internal evaluation is not regulated by law, but overall, the specific subjects/ courses are evaluated at the end of each semester. In the UK, all higher education institutions must annually assess their internal QA systems.

In countries with strong decentralised systems (e.g. Germany, Spain) there is less of national-level regulation on how internal QA should be implemented in higher education institutions; such issues are often defined on the regional level. In Germany, for instance, the Länder require higher education institutions to prepare strategic development plans, driven partly by the Excellence Initiative.¹³

In most countries, one single national quality assurance agency is responsible for quality assurance (e.g. ANVUR in Italy, ASHE in Croatia, A3ES in Portugal, FINEEC in Finland, HQA in Greece, SQAA in Slovenia, AIKA in Latvia). In contrast, in some countries (e.g. Germany, Belgium, France, Spain) QA is performed by several agencies. These may be regional (e.g. Flanders and Wallonia in Belgium, with the first organised by NVAO and VLUHR, and the second by AEQES; autonomous communities in Spain) or they may be responsible for specific fields (e.g. some agencies in Germany). Until 2014, Austria had different agencies and regulations for different kinds of higher education institutions (e.g. public universities, private universities, Fachhochschulen) but has since harmonised the regulative framework and merged the quality assurance agencies. Spain has also aimed to harmonise the different systems of the autonomous communities: ANECA and the regional QA agencies are organised into the Spanish Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (REACU). Main goals of REACU include cooperation between the QA agencies and contributing to creating the conditions for the mutual recognition of decisions. In France, apart from HCERES, there are specific QA agencies for engineering training (CTI) and for business schools (CEFDG).

Luxembourg and Slovakia are the only EU Member States, which have no independent QA agencies.¹⁴ In Luxembourg, the University of Luxembourg has a self-accrediting status, but the University and the Ministry regularly contracts an EQAR-listed agency to carry out an institutional evaluation of the University¹⁵. Foreign higher education institutions operating in Luxembourg must carry out evaluations by an EQAR-registered agency. Slovakia has a specific national committee, which carries out evaluations of study programmes and higher education institutions. The Accreditation Committee of the Slovak Republic (AC) is under the direct authority of the ministry.

During the interview programme, a number of QA agencies stated that they also serve as advisory organisations and thus help higher education institutions to improve their

¹³ See: http://www.dfg.de/en/research_funding/programmes/excellence_initiative/index.html

¹⁴ Liechtenstein, Iceland, Andorra, Belarus and Ukraine do not have a national QA agency.

¹⁵ See: https://wwwen.uni.lu/research/research_in_numbers#EvaluationReport

internal QA procedures. Portugal's A3ES, for example, is providing advice to higher education institutions related to enhancement and improvement of their internal QA procedures. In Spain, ANECA provides support to higher education institutions by training their experts before they commence external evaluations. The interviewed QA agencies have also emphasised that they are very careful in ensuring that the advisory activities do not interfere with their objectivity in evaluating/ accrediting the study programmes of those higher education institutions that receive advice.

In almost all countries, the existence of an internal QA system is a prerequisite to receive external QA as defined by the ESG standards 1.1 and 2.1. Vice versa, the external QA system in the majority of countries is based on self-evaluation, which is part of the internal QA system in the higher education institutions. However, in Spain, for instance, the evaluation of universities' internal QA systems is voluntary and is not a prerequisite for the ex-ante and ex-post accreditation of programmes, but most universities still choose to complete the voluntary evaluation of their internal QA systems.

Apart from QA of study programmes and institutions, quality assurance agencies in some countries (e.g. Czech Republic or Spain) also explicitly deal with the appointment of professors or the habilitation procedure. This is however not included in the scope of the European QA framework (the ESG).

In some countries, the national law and guidelines require the establishment of specific organisational units, bodies or commissions at higher education institutions in charge of internal QA. In Italy, for example, two mandatory bodies – the "Internal Assessment Commission" consisting of the "Joint Committee of Teachers and Students", and the "Council for Quality in University" – are responsible for internal QA. In the Czech Republic, for instance, the obligations and competences of internal QA lie mainly with the Scientific Council of a Higher Education Institution, the Scientific Council of a Faculty and the new self-government body – Board for Internal Evaluation. In Greece, higher education institutions are obliged by law to set up a Quality Assurance Unit to coordinate the internal QA processes. Since 2014, there has also been a trend to establish organisational sub-units or to nominate QA representatives in departments or schools that are responsible for evaluations. In Greece, for example, every university department has a departmental quality assurance unit.

Existence of institutional quality assurance strategies

In accordance with the above-mentioned frameworks and duties, the majority of European higher education institutions are required to have institutional strategies for quality improvement, which in most countries are required explicitly by laws. An exception is Estonia having no requirements for an explicit internal QA policy in a separate document and internal QA compliance with ESG is not explicitly checked. Estonian higher education institutions tend to have their QA-related provisions integrated into their strategic and planning documents rather than having a separate stand-alone quality policy document. In its external evaluations, the Estonian QA agency has determined that the way higher education institutions have addressed the requirement to have QA policy is sufficient to comply with the ESG requirements in principle and, therefore, does not require higher education institutions to draft separate stand-alone QA policy documents.

Survey results show that 57% of responding higher education institutions have adopted and published an institutional strategy for continuous education quality improvement, as shown in Figure 1. For more than half of these institutions, the establishment of an institutional strategy was a recent development within the past 3 years. Only 7% of responding higher education institutions said that no strategy has been developed nor

are there plans to develop such strategy in the future. The majority of these institutions (with the main focus of providing VET) are located in France (15) and Spain (24), which explains the high number in both countries.¹⁶ The remainder are either in the process of developing or of publishing their strategy.

Figure 1: Existence of a formal strategy for continuous quality improvement

Q: 'Has your institution adopted and published a formal strategy for continuous education quality improvement?', N = 1551



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

The 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report (published after the fieldwork and analysis for this study were already completed) noted rapid developments in the publication of higher education institutions' internal strategies for quality assurance.¹⁷ In 2012, in only 12 countries all higher education institutions had published an internal QA strategy, while this number has increased to 20 systems by 2016-17. In Croatia, for instance, during the first re-accreditation cycle between 2010 and 2016, only a minority of higher education institutions had institutional strategies, while now the majority of them already have one or are developing such strategies, according to interviews. In Portugal, according to a survey within the ERASMUS+ Project "Enhancing internal QA Systems" in 2015, about half of the universities have a formal internal QA system and policy.¹⁸

However, during interviews a number of country representatives reported that in many higher education institutions these strategies are quite formal, and they are not necessarily followed by the staff in their everyday work (e.g. in Italy, Bulgaria, Malta, Czech Republic). All universities in Bulgaria, for instance, have formal institutional QA strategies, but the interviewees indicated that these are implemented only in some of the universities, while in others they exist mainly as a formality.

Nevertheless, our analysis of interview data showed that in the majority of countries institutional policies are not only driven by external pressure or laws. There is a clear involvement and commitment from the higher education institutions themselves to develop institutional QA policies. While in some countries all higher education institutions already have institutional QA policies (e.g. Germany, Austria), other countries are still in the diffusion process.

¹⁶ In Spain, internal QA is not a prerequisite for the accreditation of individual programmes. Some of the higher education institutions without a published QA strategy are not heading for an institutional accreditation in the next round of evaluations, where evaluated internal QA based on a QA strategy will be mandatory.

¹⁷ https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report_en

¹⁸ <http://ec.europa.eu/programmes/proxy/alfresco-webscripts/api/node/content/workspace/SpacesStore/b7c1eb0a-86b8-49c3-ac42-9350a167b24e/R10%20Country%20Report-Portugal.pdf>

Recent key developments in internal quality assurance in higher education

The number of programme and institutional evaluations has increased considerably since 2014, and this has also led to a significant increase in staff of higher education institutions working exclusively on QA issues. In Greece, for example, in 2014 and 2015 internal evaluation processes at all 36 higher education institutions and of 400 programmes were conducted. Higher education institutions in Germany, for instance, are required to have at least two full-time positions to work on quality management and quality assurance. This development has increased the number of individuals working on quality-related activities.

This is also related to a positive trend: in many higher education institutions, permanent staff is now taking care of assuring compliance with the formal quality criteria, which frees up time and capacity of academics within reviews, QA committees or boards to have more time to reflect upon content aspects. However, this development raises a question whether academics will now be encouraged to pay less attention to quality assurance themselves in their daily work.

The following are notable examples of developments in internal quality assurance in the Member States in 2014-2018:

- In Germany, the **Quality Pact for Teaching** (2011-2020) is a significant development. With this federal programme, additional funds were allocated to 186 higher education institutions in order to improve the quality of teaching and study conditions through 253 projects in all 16 Länder (an investment worth €2 billion). Among other areas such as counselling, additional teaching staff, mentoring, or organisational reform projects, the Quality Pact for Teaching has funded many projects strengthening internal quality assurance, evaluation and performance indicators in higher education institutions.
- Many countries have accelerated and increased the number of QA activities considerably since 2014, which has resulted in some discomforts in higher education institutions due to the **additional workload related to QA**. The Flemish institutions, for instance, felt that the double burden of a pilot round of institutional reviews and programme assessments to be introduced in 2014, was too demanding. In Portugal, higher education institutions felt overwhelmed with programme accreditations – about 900 programme reviews per year since 2014.
- Another development has taken place in Sweden, where a number of universities on their own initiative have created **networks of universities** and these have established their own evaluation panels, which work as peer review bodies.
- There is a **growing importance of institutional evaluations** in many EU countries, which brings **additional pressure to internal QA systems** of higher education institutions. In Slovenia, for example, a revision of the Higher Education Act in December 2016 brought a list of changes to the institutional organisation of external QA including a move towards institutional evaluations. In Flanders, a pilot project was proposed in which the institutional review was to be extended to cover all aspects of the ESG, including ensuring the quality of study programmes. Institutions willing to take part in this “extensive” institutional review would be subject to transitional arrangements for programme accreditation. By introducing these changes, NVAO (Dutch and Flemish QA agency) intends to amplify institutional autonomy in quality assurance and reinforce further development of quality cultures. The pilot quickly developed into a Flanders-wide experiment in external QA. However, in the strategy document 2013-2016, the pilot was not mentioned and even though a move towards a QA system based solely on institutional reviews had been envisaged in 2013, during the site visit one stakeholder described it as a ‘jump’. Among Flemish institutions, staff and

employers, the review panel noted high enthusiasm about the pilot, as it had triggered new dynamics of internal quality assurance within institutions.

- Analysis of interview data revealed that the **full integration of QA in the daily work within higher education institutions is still a significant challenge in many countries**, for example, Portugal, Malta, Cyprus, Bulgaria, Italy and Czech Republic.
- Another issue discussed in some countries is a **possible link between funding and QA**. In some countries, performance agreements are applied in trying to foster further implementation of QA¹⁹. In Denmark, all higher education institutions' accreditation is mandatory and a precondition for attaining public funding. In France, policy measures have also set incentives to promote QA within universities by means of performance-based funding and contracts. The Netherlands is transforming performance agreements into quality agreements applicable to all public higher education institutions equally, rendering individual performance agreements between higher education institutions and the ministry obsolete. The quality agreements in the Netherlands will contain a small set of compulsory common indicators, agreed on by the ministry and higher education institutions to foster a sense of shared ownership, while leaving sufficient room for higher education institutions to translate and incorporate the agreed indicators into their institutional strategies. Since the goal is to promote quality culture, which cannot be measured immediately or in numbers alone, quality agreements will be valid for a period of 5 years with an additional 5 years to allow for their effects to materialise.

In our survey of higher education institutions, participants were asked to identify the key factors that have influenced recent changes in their institution's internal QA (see Figure 2). The following key findings emerged:

- Developments in ICT were mentioned by most participants as having a very strong influence on QA procedures and less than 10% said that developments in ICT had no influence.
- For half of all respondents the collection, analysis and use of data on the quality of study programmes has become more important over the past three years.
- Lack of funding was also reported as one of the most important factors that recently had an influence on internal QA: more than 30% of surveyed institutions attributed a very strong influence on this factor. The importance of funding, however, varied considerably by country. For example, 10 out of 11 Greek survey participants saw funding as having a very strong influence on internal QA. This may be related to the previously noted increase in the number of required QA processes in Greece, which, together with the effects of the economic crisis, have led to increasing bureaucratic burden, mostly on academics.²⁰ On the other hand, the majority of higher education institutions in the Netherlands and Norway reported no influence.
- Lack of funding was followed by such factors as institutional leadership and quality culture, which 60% of respondents in the higher education institutions' survey acknowledged as having a very strong or rather strong influence on internal QA.

Overall, the respondents saw internal institutional factors as slightly more impactful on their internal QA procedures than national policies and international context. Nevertheless, evolving national QA regulations, international cooperation and European-

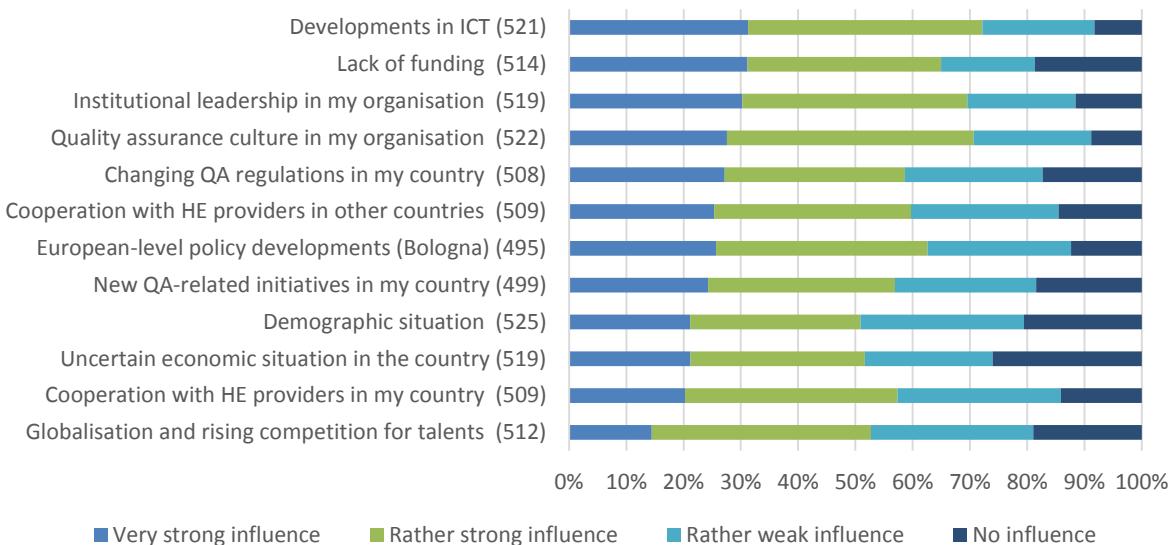
¹⁹ For examples on performance agreements see: de Boer, H. F., Jongbloed, B. W. A., Benneworth, P. S., Cremonini, L., Kolster, R., Kottmann, A., et al. (2015). Performance-based funding and performance agreements in fourteen higher education systems. Center for Higher Education Policy Studies (CHEPS).

²⁰ Stamelos, G., Kavasaki, A., 2017. Quality Assurance in Greek Higher Education in Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Studera Press

level policy developments were also seen as having rather strong influence on internal QA processes by more than a quarter of higher education institutions responding.

Figure 2: Factors influencing higher education institutions' internal QA processes

Q: 'Would you say that the following factors had an influence on the recent changes in your institution's internal quality assurance? Please assess the extent of the influence.'



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

The study revealed some possible conflict and trade-off between respecting university autonomy, on the one hand, and defining and prescribing specific roles and procedures on the other hand, and this plays out in different ways in different countries. To provide a few examples:

- Swedish higher education institutions, for example, enjoy a great deal of freedom within the framework of the statutes, ordinances and regulations laid down by the government.
- In contrast, in the Czech Republic, for instance, the national legislation defines a stricter framework with less leeway to adapt the internal QA system according to the institution's wishes.
- The QA system in Lithuania is heavily regulated and puts a significant emphasis on quality control.
- In Slovenia, higher education institutions define the criteria for evaluations in cooperation with the SQAA (Slovenian QA agency) by applying the ESG principles.

We also found some resistance against further adjustments in internal QA within universities in some countries, particularly due to expected increase in administrative burden (e.g. these concerns were raised by interviewees in Italy, France, Germany, Bulgaria, Czech Republic). Supporting the establishment of a quality culture and leadership were considered by interviewees as important measures to overcome this resistance within higher education institutions (for more details, see chapter 3). In Germany, for instance, not all higher education institutions perceive QA as a core component of institutional management and some see it as a necessary evil to satisfy the requirement for accreditation. Similarly, in Hungary, only half of all higher education institutions are satisfied with the HAC's (Hungarian QA agency) contribution to the institution's internal QA, according to a survey implemented in early 2017²¹. Interviews

²¹ Hungarian Accreditation Committee, (2017) 'Annual Report 2016 to September 2017'.

from the Czech Republic in this study made it very clear that there is lots of resistance to the notion of QA, especially among "traditional" academics. Those that are younger or have spent time abroad were found to be rather more open to QA as a means of raising quality standards.

Another recent development in internal QA is related to the establishment of (ICT-based) systems for providing comparable data and indicators, e.g. for monitoring and benchmarking. The following are notable examples from the Member States:

- In Croatia, Finland, Italy and UK, for example, there is a legal obligation to publish such indicators.
- In Italy, for instance, a monitoring system with 29 indicators was established for comparison of outputs between different study programmes.
- In Croatia, the indicators for QA are defined by the ministry. ASHE, the Croatian QA agency, collects and processes data on Croatian higher education, science and related systems and these serve as a basis for the analyses necessary to establish standards and criteria for evaluations carried out by ASHE and for higher education and science policy more generally. ASHE also provides information and unifies data on the conditions of enrolment to higher education institutions.
- In the UK, all higher education institutions are required to publish standard comparable information in different areas at course level. This information is known as Key Information Sets (KIS) and includes for example, student satisfaction rates, the costs of fees and accommodation and the employment outcomes for graduates and average salary levels. KIS is available on all higher education institutions' websites and is linked to the Unistats website. The relevant information is collected through national surveys and internal feedback.

Please refer to the section 3.9 of this study for a more in-depth discussion on the use of QA data to improve higher education quality.

Adoption of internal QA systems in accordance with the ESG 2015

In all EU Member States, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions have deliberately aimed to adopt the ESG 2015. Some selected findings from the individual countries are exemplified below:

- In Germany, ESG 2015 delivered a stimulus to reconsider internal processes and structures. However, the capacity of higher education institutions is often absorbed by the requirements of programme and systems accreditation so institutional change is very slow. The added value of the new ESG 2015 is seen by many as wider in scope and more strategic than the previous ESG.
- According to interviewees in the Czech Republic, higher education institutions are still at the stage of becoming aware of and adopting the revised ESG.
- In Austria, the entire higher education system was restructured in the past ten years due to ESG; all universities adapted their QA system according to the new standards and QA is now a constituent part of institution-wide management. More specifically, ESG 2015 catalysed activities in the area of educational data mining, learning analytics and graduate tracking, which are strongly driven by the availability of indicators and comparable data.
- The Portuguese standards and guidelines for the certification of the Internal Quality Assurance Systems (ASIGQ) are more comprehensive and include 10 Reference Points. One of the three additional "Portuguese" standards refer explicitly to external relations (stakeholder and society). Within the Portuguese EIQUAS survey of the Erasmus+ project 2014-2016, higher education institutions said that ESG 1.3 (Student-Centred Learning) and 1.5 (Teaching staff) were the standards that would be difficult to integrate in the institutions' internal QA.

- In Estonia, for instance, ESG is adopted to a high degree, but with some national particularities. Higher education institutions in Estonia are not required to have separate documents outlining their internal QA procedures, but mostly tend to integrate these aspects in their internal regulations (e.g. strategic management documents).
- Finnish higher education institutions have adopted earlier versions of ESG to a very high extent. However, the degree of adoption of the new provisions varies. In the current second round of external QA, higher education institutions are not evaluated on the new provisions, as they started prior to 2015 and FINEEC decided not to change the rules of evaluations mid-process. higher education institutions will be evaluated on how well they have adopted the new version of ESG in the next round of evaluations starting in 2018.
- The representatives from Lithuania's SKVC indicated that the core principles of ESG are implemented by all higher education institutions in Lithuania. However, interpretations of certain ESG standards vary between higher education institutions.
- According to the QA agency (ARACIS) representative from Romania, universities largely comply with the ESG 2015 mainly because of the requirements posed by external evaluators. However, compliance varies from institution to institution: some higher education institutions have already developed standards that are even higher than ESG 2015, whereas some are struggling with minimum requirements.
- According to representatives from the French QA Agency for engineering educations (CTI), the ESG 2015 are largely unknown to French engineering institutions. Nevertheless, higher education institutions still largely comply with these standards due to the requirements posed by external evaluations. However, overall, there is an impression that French higher education institutions still do not know what an effective internal QA procedure is and often ask to provide tangible tools for this purpose. Hence, French higher education institutions struggle with consistent strategies for internal QA especially regarding the switch from teacher centred to student centred learning.
- Malta's NCFHE audit standards were developed in 2015 and the manual for external QA takes into account the revised ESG but also EQAVET, since the manual applies to all non-compulsory education – both vocational and higher education.
- In Greece, internal QA systems have to be developed in accordance with the ESG.
- In Spain, the current procedures based on ESG 2005 within the ANECA were reviewed and adapted to the new ESG 2015 in 2016, but there were no big changes.
- In Hungary, new Self-Evaluation Guidelines for institutions in accordance with ESG 2015 were published in May 2017.
- In Croatia, the first cycle of re-accreditation of higher education institutions (2010-2016) was based on the ESG 2005 guidelines, the second cycle of re-accreditation (2017 onwards) will be based on ESG 2015.

Participation of various stakeholder groups in internal QA

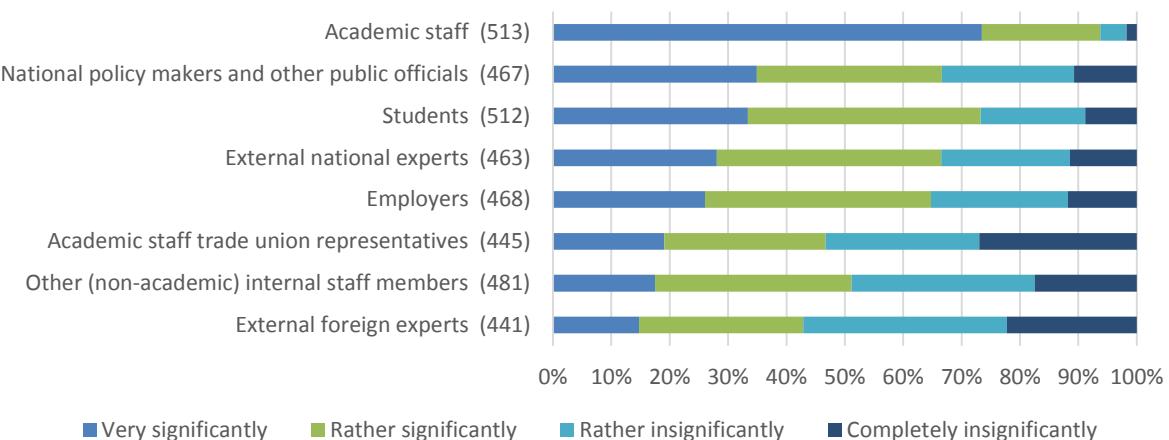
The survey of higher education institutions shows that internal QA procedures in the Members States usually include a wide array of stakeholder groups (see Figure 3). In the programme design, evaluation and curriculum development, academic staff play the largest role. Another influential internal stakeholder group, frequently included in internal QA activities, are students. More than 70% of respondents indicated that students are significantly involved in programme design, evaluation and curriculum development. The interview with an ESU representative confirmed that there is a trend towards the

involvement of students in internal QA procedures, but differences persist between the Member States in terms of governance, feedback and information provision.

Among stakeholders external to the institutions, national policy makers have the largest say in internal QA, followed by national experts (e.g. professionals and interest groups) and employers. Survey respondents have identified foreign experts as the least significant group in determining internal quality measures.

Figure 3: Involvement of stakeholders in programme design, evaluation and curriculum development

Q: 'To what extent are the following groups of stakeholders involved in the programme design, evaluation and curriculum development in your institution?'

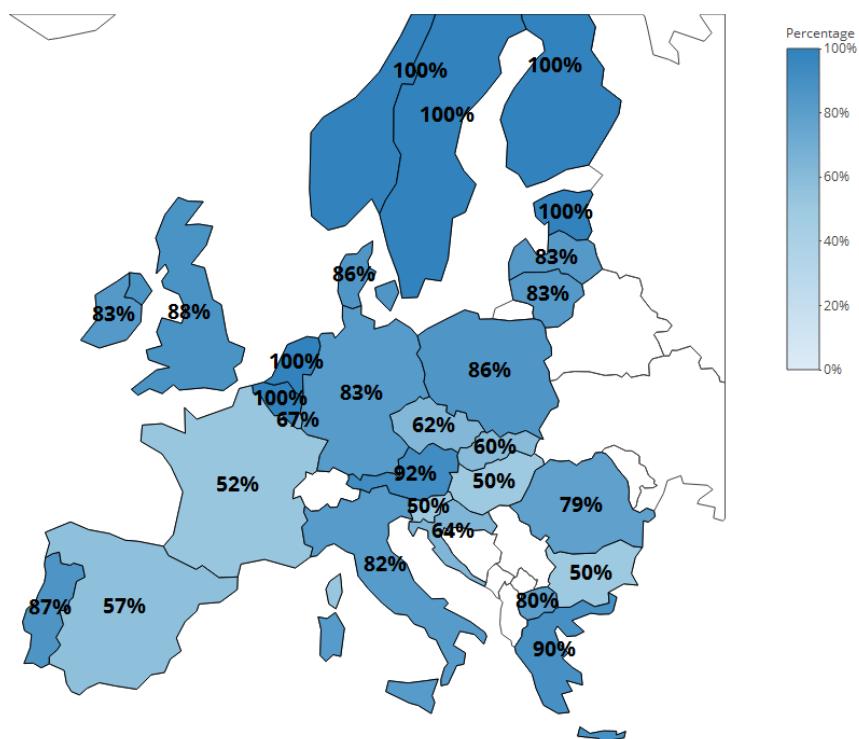


Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

In Figure 4, the geographic dimension of student inclusion in internal QA procedures is presented. In six European countries (Sweden, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands, Belgium, Estonia), all surveyed higher education institutions reported that students play a very significant or rather significant role in programme design, evaluation and curriculum development. In eight mostly Southern or Eastern European countries (Spain, France, Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Bulgaria, Luxembourg), less than two thirds of higher education institutions thought that students played a significant role in internal QA.

Figure 4: Student involvement in internal QA by country

Q: 'To what extent are students involved in the programme design, evaluation and curriculum development in your institution?' Proportion of respondents indicating that students have a very significant or rather significant influence.



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

In the majority of countries, feedback questionnaires completed by students represented the predominant way of collecting data for internal evaluations and were often required by law. However, the ESU representative emphasised that student surveys were not effective in collecting the feedback from non-traditional learners. The following examples related to student involvement were indicated in the Member States:

- In Germany, the participation of students and employers is a key feature of programme accreditation. Student representation is compulsory by law in all university boards and committees. While not obligatory, higher education institutions increasingly involve external stakeholders in the development of study programmes and several higher education institutions have made this a key component of their processes for study programme development.
- In France, previously internal QA was mostly hesitant in conducting student surveys. However, over recent years QA Agencies, for instance CTI, posed higher requirements stemming from ESG 2015 to the internal QA processes in higher education institutions. Therefore, in general there has been a substantial strengthening of internal QA aspect in French higher education system.
- In Slovakia, there are no formal requirements for students to be involved in internal QA although in practice they are involved in most higher education institutions.

- In Italy ANVUR (Italian QA agency) recognises that there is an increasing interest of students to participate in internal QA, which indicates that students acknowledge the new system.
- In Estonia, student feedback is systematically collected and analysed. Student opinions can have a significant influence on the career progression of academic staff. For instance, in University of Tartu, lecturers who receive the best student satisfaction scores are rewarded. However, there is no evidence that employers are involved in internal QA. But there is a system in place which monitors the situation in the labour market and provides recommendations to higher education institutions how their degree programmes could be adjusted to better meet the needs of the Estonian labour market.
- In Lithuania, if a course receives negative student feedback, the courses can be restructured or allocated to a different lecturer. In some higher education institutions, e.g. in Vilnius University, students can request specific courses to be added to the programme curriculum. Alumni feedback is also taken into account when making substantive changes to the study programmes. However, these good practices are not equally spread throughout all higher education institutions.]
- Bulgaria reports problems with student satisfaction evaluations, since it is not clear where the satisfaction comes from. Their analysis showed that students are more satisfied if it is easier to pass the exam, but this is not linked to the actual quality of higher education.

Promoting student-centred learning is a key goal of ESG 2015 (ESG 1.3) and our study found a number of examples how the EU Member States are implementing this standard:

- Spain's ANECA organised a big event and several meetings together with the national student associations to discuss evidence of student-centred learning and possible indicators.
- Since 2014, Estonian higher education institutions have started to pay more attention to student-centred learning and enhancing their internal QA procedures so that it is gaining traction in Estonia, although at the moment each higher education institution is taking steps to define and promote the concept individually.
- In Latvia, higher education institutions (especially in universities of applied sciences) have established links with employers both nationally and regionally. Some higher education institutions, however, have made some serious efforts to involve employers. It is mandatory to gather feedback from employers when designing a new programme and involve them to some degree when designing the curriculum. However, as the representative of AIKA indicated, in some cases, such involvement of employers is quite formal and genuine cooperation is lacking.
- In the UK, the participation of students takes different forms. There are higher education providers that treat students as experts and grant them membership of the internal bodies that are responsible for quality assurance. In this case students participate in meetings, contribute to policies, reports and analyses made by those bodies, and vote on quality related decisions. Other higher education institutions consult student representatives or gather student feedback on different aspects related to teaching and learning methods, performance of individual teaching staff, curricula, student facilities, student support services and student satisfaction. Students are involved in the preparation of self-evaluation reports and in the decision-making as an outcome of evaluation.
- In Ireland, there is a programme to encourage student involvement in QA activities called the National Student Engagement Project. It trains students such as class representatives in how quality assurance works, how to get involved in study boards for programmes or how to be involved in institutional governance activities or even external quality assurance activities such as programme

accreditation in case of private higher education institutions. This model was adopted after collaboration with Scottish representatives who already use a similar approach. It also allows higher education institutions to monitor how active their students are in quality assurance processes. This works as a way to amplify and enhance student voice and to make their input more effective.

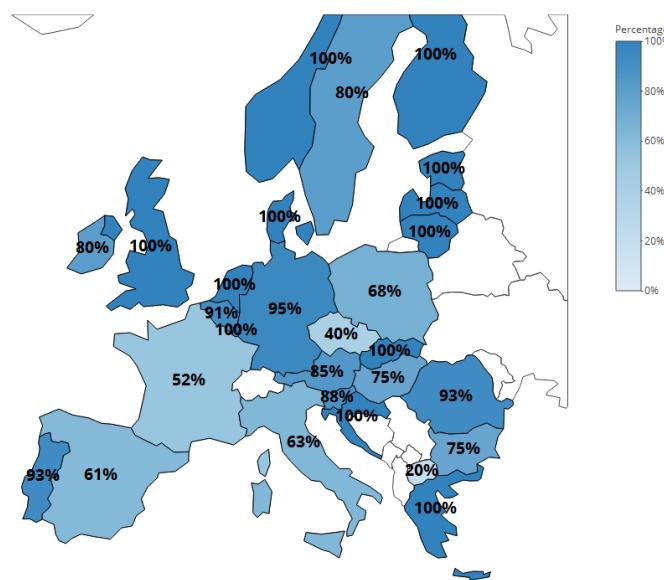
2.1.3. Recent developments in the Member States related to external quality assurance in higher education

The period since 2014 has seen several large legislative changes related to external quality assurance and the creation of independent quality assurance agencies in Cyprus, Latvia and the Czech Republic. Revisions to the law governing quality assurance were also passed in Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. With the establishment of quality assurance agencies in Cyprus, Latvia and the Czech Republic, almost all EU countries have now established systems where responsibility for QA has been delegated to one or multiple independent agencies. There are two exceptions. In Slovakia, a national committee of experts is entrusted with quality assurance, while in Luxembourg the University of Luxembourg is periodically evaluated by a foreign EQAR-registered agency (currently, NVAO from the Netherlands). The majority of EU28 countries now have at least one EQAR-registered QA agency; exceptions are Bulgaria, Czech Republic, Cyprus, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Luxembourg, Malta, Latvia, Sweden and Slovakia.

As shown in Figure 5, in the majority of EU countries more than 80% of the surveyed higher education institutions reported that they undergo external quality assurance, reaching 100% coverage in 12 countries. Only in Spain, France, Italy and the Czech Republic less than three in four higher education providers indicated that they are externally evaluated (among these are many vocational education and training institutions that also provide higher education programmes and therefore were included among the survey respondents).

Figure 5: Percent of surveyed higher education institutions saying that they undergo external quality assurance (per EU country)

Q: 'Does your organisation/study programmes undergo external quality assurance?'



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

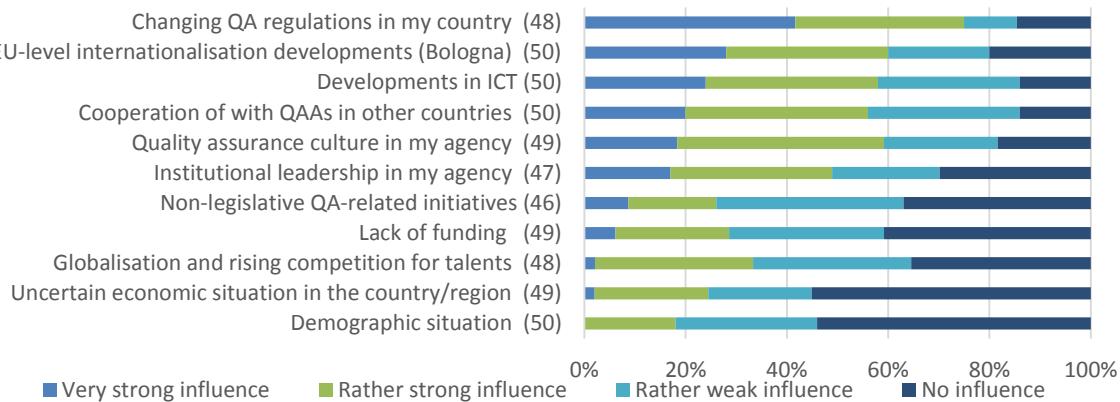
Figure 6 shows that, in recent years, the work of QA agencies was most strongly influenced by changing QA regulations in their country or region of operation. As highlighted before, multiple legislative changes altered the mandate and conditions for quality assurance agencies in a number of countries. Other very important factors that had an influence on the work of QA agencies were:

- EU-level policy (Bologna Process) with 60% of surveyed quality assurance agencies responding that EU-level and internationalisation developments (Bologna Process) have influenced their work very strongly or rather strongly;
- Developments in ICT;
- Cooperation among QA agencies from different countries (this issue is explored in more detail in Section 3.7 of the study).

Quality culture and institutional leadership at the QA agencies were also very important factors: between 50% and 60% of quality assurance agencies rated these factors as having a strong influence on their methodology and procedures. External factors such as demographic or economic developments mostly played a minor role, according to quality assurance agencies.

Figure 6: Influencing factors for QA agencies' methodology and procedures

Q: 'In your opinion, what influence did the following factors have on the recent changes in your agency's quality assurance methodology and procedures?'



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

Focus of external quality assurance

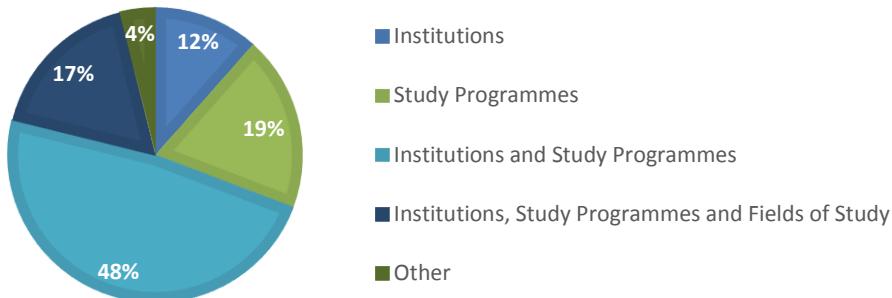
The trend towards having more institutional evaluations has continued since 2014 but QA systems were split into advocates of institutional and programme level approaches. Opinions on what should be the focus of external QA varied and interviews highlighted the importance of national context and maturity of higher education systems. During the interviews, several quality assurance agencies have indicated that the period since 2014 included an increased focus on institutional accreditation and evaluation (Belgium (Flanders), Cyprus, Czech Republic, Estonia, Greece, Lithuania). For example, Greece moved towards a system of institutional accreditation by mandating the establishment of institutional-level quality assurance units necessary for accreditation. However, only two years after completing the establishment of departmental quality assurance units, financial and staffing constraints both in the higher education institutions and in the QA agency seems to limit the effectiveness of the new policy in Greece. In Slovenia, the 2016 Higher Education Act expressed the move away from programme accreditation as it had become burdensome for the QA agency to assess more than 900 programmes in each evaluation cycle.

An interesting example is provided by the Finnish QA agency, FINEEC, which organised a national consultation aiming to provide guidelines for institutional audits. The main change introduced by these consultations is the decision to focus on the "societal impacts" of higher education institutions. The "societal impact" dimension focuses on how well higher education institutions manage to cooperate with the stakeholders both nationally and regionally as well as how well the research conducted in the higher education institutions serves to improve the communities around higher education institutions.

Figure 7 shows that **almost half of the surveyed quality assurance agencies focused on a mix of institutional and study programme evaluation or accreditation**. Another 17% also assess fields of study together with institutions and study programmes. One fifth maintains a focus on study programmes exclusively, while only one eighth of surveyed quality assurance agencies focus only on the institutional level. The agencies focusing on the latter are situated in Finland and the United Kingdom.

Figure 7: Focus of surveyed QA agencies

Q: 'Through external quality assurance carried out by your agency, you usually evaluate/ accredit'

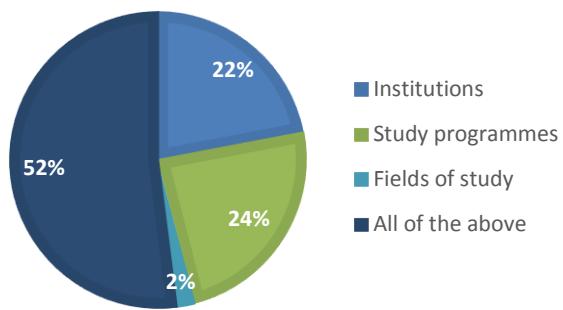


Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

Regarding the normative ideal for the focus of external QA, results show that **half of all QA Agency Survey participants think that QA can best contribute by focusing on a combination of institutional-level and programme-level approaches** (see Figure 8). Diverging opinions characterised the other half: proponents of institutional approaches highlighted the importance of institutional responsibility and autonomy as well as the development of holistic institution-wide quality management, while participants in favour of assessing study programmes mentioned the efficacy for targeting the content of teaching and learning. The respondents highlighted the importance of context and the development stage of the national QA system and higher education institutions.

Figure 8: Preferred focus of surveyed QA agencies

Q: 'In your personal opinion, external QA can best contribute to the actual quality of higher education if the assessment/ accreditation is done at the level of:'



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

According to the EQAR Annual update, in almost all EU Member States EQAR registered agencies carried out both programme and institutional QA, with few exceptions. The Portuguese QA agency, for example, focused in particular on programme accreditation until 2017, but also offered institutional audits as a prerequisite for institutional evaluations on a voluntary basis.

However, the EQAR data shows a deceptively simple picture. As Table 3 shows, the number of institutional evaluations decreased by 5% between 2014-2015 and by 19% in 2016. The trend in programme evaluation is different – the number increased by 6.4% in 2014-2015 and increased again in 2015-2016 by 3.4%. In fact, this data is difficult to interpret in terms of rates of increase, since the number of higher education institutions is stable relative to the number of programmes, which tends to change every year. Also,

there is a difference in the frequency of evaluations and accreditations at institutional and programme level and with large variations from year to year (of varying size).

According to the EQAR report of 2016, the increase in programme evaluations in 2016 was the consequence of a few national or regional quality assurance agencies focussing on the programme level (50% of the external QA activities were carried out by only 7 of the 44 EQAR-registered QA agencies).

Table 3: Number of EQAR reviews focussing on an institution or a programme between 2014 and 2016

	2014	2015	2016
Institutional	755	715	600
Programme	8261	8813	9114

Source: EQAR Annual Update 2014 – 2016.

According to the national representatives, the Netherlands, Denmark, Sweden, Cyprus, Slovenia, Portugal and Estonia are moving towards institutional assessments. Overall the qualitative data from interviews shows a growing trend towards institutional evaluation/accreditation as an integrated process and away from separate external evaluations at programme level. For example:

- Sweden reports that institutional reviews started in 2017 seem to be very helpful in supporting higher education institutions in their own internal QA procedures and more helpful than the programme evaluations carried out up to 2014, which were seen as rather imposing by higher education institutions.
- There is also a move towards institutional accreditation in Spain in order to reduce workload of the QA agency and give (back) more responsibility to the institutions.
- In Malta and Croatia, all three public higher education institutions receive institutional accreditation only.
- Amendment to the Czech Higher Education Act (2016) introduced the possibility for higher education institutions to gain institutional accreditation but so far, the realities of implementation remain to be seen, as only one application (Charles University) has so far been received.
- In Portugal, the QA agency, A3ES, is currently completing the first 5-year-round of programme accreditation and has started in 2017 to complete this process with an exercise in institutional evaluation. The institutional accreditation is expected to be more flexible, considering the results of all previous programme accreditations, and will re-evaluate only those sections and programmes of the institutions that showed weaknesses in previous accreditations.
- Germany focuses on institutional-level QA, in which internal quality assurance systems of higher education institutions in the field of teaching and learning are evaluated. As a result, a higher education institution is allowed to accredit its own study programmes. Study programmes, which were set up as specified by the accredited system or those which already have been the subject matter of internal QA as specified by the accredited system, carry the higher education institutions' quality seal in the same manner as in programme accreditation. In German system accreditation, the structures and processes relevant to teaching and learning are assessed on whether they guarantee that the qualification objectives will be achieved, and that there is a high standard of quality in the study programmes. Thereby, the ESG, the guidelines set by the Standing Conference of the Ministers of Education and Cultural Affairs of the Länder (Standing Conference) and the Accreditation Council criteria are applied.

Box 1: Denmark moving towards institutional accreditation

The Danish Accreditation Act (2013) marks the transition to institutional accreditation. Institutional accreditation enables institutions to establish a system that best strengthens and develops the quality and relevance of all their programmes. It involves an assessment of the institution's overall quality assurance system by the Danish Accreditation Institution.

Institutional accreditation in Denmark is based on five statutory criteria:

1. Quality assurance policy and strategy;
2. Quality management and organisation;
3. The knowledge base of the programmes;
4. The level and content of the programmes;
5. Relevance of the programmes.

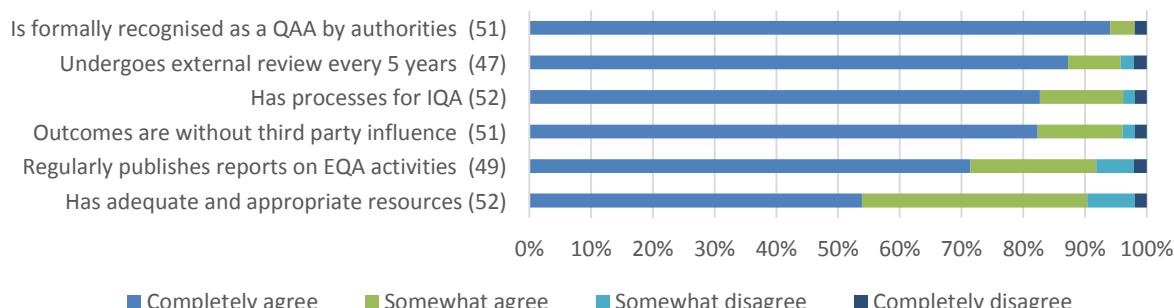
Institutional accreditation is a holistic assessment based on key figures, the institution's self-evaluation report, site visits at the institution and documentation for the performance of quality assurance in selected areas at the institution. Institutional accreditation will give staff at the individual institution greater responsibility for the quality and relevance of programmes and for quality assurance. Therefore, the primary task of accreditation is to support the internal quality assurance carried out at the institution.

Compliance with the ESG

Surveyed quality assurance agencies were convinced that they operate in compliance with the ESG standards for QA agencies (see Figure 9). There was least agreement in the responses related to adequate funding and regular publication of reports on external QA activities (but self-assessment in these areas was still very high).

Figure 9: QA Agencies' assessment of their agency following standards

Q: 'To what extent do you agree that your agency observes the following standards'



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

These results must be put into context with findings from other sources, such as recent QA agency reviews. While most interviewees from QA agencies claimed substantial compliance of their external QA standards with the ESG 2015 and that the ESG often served as the regulatory foundation for their agencies, differences among systems (especially in terms of their maturity) can nevertheless be observed.

Representatives of some advanced QA systems have reported in interviews that compliance with the ESG is seen as a minimum standard and is not very useful for further development of their quality assurance practices. In these systems, focus lies on further development of specific aspects of quality culture and enhancement (for more detailed analysis of this issue, see chapter 3).

However, for QA systems with a shorter history, compliance with the ESG 2015 can pose a significant challenge. As mentioned above, wider participation of various stakeholders and particularly adopting the goal to foster student-centred learning are huge challenges for less mature higher education sectors.

Publication of critical and negative evaluation reports

The 2015 revision of the ESG highlighted the need to publish outcomes and judgements of evaluations irrespective whether the process leads to a formal decision. Publishing QA results is an integral part of improving transparency and stimulating quality enhancement.

While most quality assurance agencies have procedures in place to publish assessment outcomes, a tendency to publish only positive evaluations was observable in the past. The 2015 Bologna Process Implementation Report attested an improvement in this area: it found that the number of national systems in which all institutions publish negative reports has doubled since 2012 but from only 6 to 13.²² However, this figure is not published in the most recent Bologna Process Implementation Report from 2018. Our study found that higher education institutions are unwilling to make negative QA evaluations publicly available through their mainstream channels.

Interviews with quality assurance agencies showed varying degrees and different ways of dealing with negative or critical assessments. In Germany, for example, assessments are often deferred in case of an impending negative decision. In Sweden and Cyprus, only negative decisions are published but not full evaluation reports. The Slovenian QA agency publishes all negative reports, except for the initial accreditation procedures.

These results indicate that the degree of transparency in national QA systems is increasing although more comprehensive publishing of outcomes as required in ESG 2015 has yet to be achieved.

Involvement of stakeholders in external QA

Study evidence shows that the inclusion of stakeholders in external quality assurance has further increased in recent years. In the survey of QA agencies, participants were asked how often external stakeholder groups participate in external QA procedures within their agency – the results are set out in Figure 10. Students and academic staff were listed as being part of all external QA activities by nearly every respondent. Interviews, however, shed light on the fact that the involvement of students varies significantly from limiting involvement to expressions of opinion via surveys to including them in evaluation panels – as required in the ESG 2015 standard 2.4 – or governance structures. For example, student representatives play an integral role of decision making bodies in Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, Latvia, Poland, the Netherlands and United Kingdom. The Danish QA agency emphasised the importance of student involvement in all external QA procedures as they are “the point around which the institution’s educational activities revolve”.

Over 90% of surveyed QA agencies indicated that external national experts (e.g. interest groups, professionals), employers and foreign experts are sometimes included in external QA procedures, as shown in Figure 10. Their involvement is institutionalised in all external quality assurance activities in around three out of four quality assurance agencies.

²² European Commission, *The European Higher Education Area in 2015*, 92.

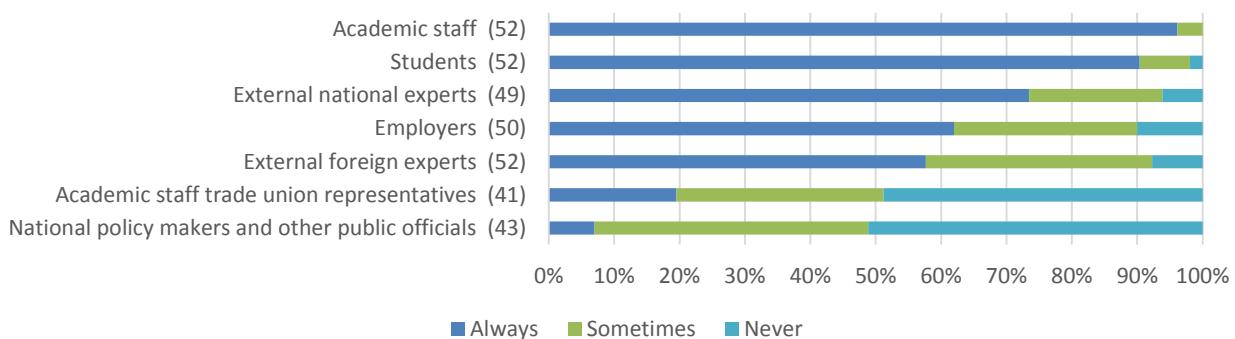
Interviews showed that the involvement of employers or the business sector is often optional or depending on the orientation of the study programme. In a few national systems, business representatives are involved in the governance structures (Croatia Estonia, Germany).

International experts are often involved in external review teams, but their involvement is rarely compulsory. An interesting example is that the 2017 ENQA report on the Lithuanian QA Agency has commended the significant involvement of international experts in the agency's activities as a best practice. National policy makers and public officials are usually not included in most external QA procedures. Only the Slovakian, Croatian and Maltese survey participants responded that this group of stakeholders has participated in their activities.

The expertise and quality of evaluation panels has been a matter of discussion in multiple interviews. The Bulgarian QA agency, for example, warned that low turnover rates in the composition of panels may yield excessive power to individual members.

Figure 10: Participation of external stakeholders in external QA procedures

Q: 'How often the following external stakeholders participate in the external quality assurance procedures carried out by your agency?'



Source: PPMI survey of QA Agencies.

2.1.4. Overall functioning of the quality assurance systems in the Member States

This part of the study tackles the question how internal QA and external QA processes interact in the EU Member States in order to build coherent, efficient and complementary QA systems.

Contribution of external QA to improve internal QA procedures and study programmes

Representatives from almost all countries claim that external QA contributes to improving internal QA in general and in the design and adaption of study programmes. According to representatives of QA agencies, higher education institutions usually take into account recommendations made to them during external QA procedures and adapt their internal QA mechanisms accordingly. We found several useful examples related to this process at the country level:

- In Estonia, for example, evaluations by EKKA (Estonian QA agency) present a list of recommendations and areas for improvement for higher education institutions and study programme groups. These recommendations often touch upon internal procedures. For example, EKKA in their evaluation of the humanities study

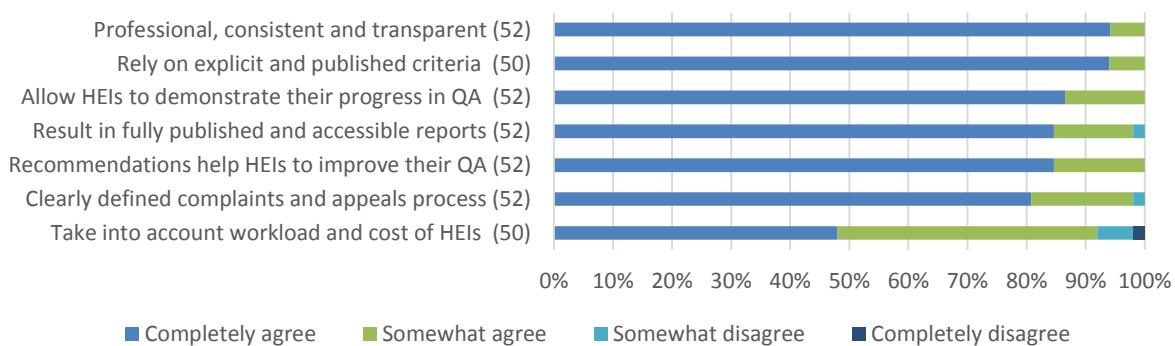
programme group at Tallinn University provided recommendations how the institution could reduce student drop-out rates and better engage university alumni to enhance the quality of studies.

- Lithuanian experts argue that external QA recommendations have often positively contributed to and shaped internal QA procedures in higher education institutions. For instance, Vilnius University, following SKVC (Lithuanian QA agency) recommendations has taken active steps to better engage university alumni and collect their feedback regarding the content of the study programmes and their alignment to labour market needs.
- Bulgarian representatives reported difficulties and some disconnection between the QA systems in higher education institutions and the external QA carried out by NEAA (Bulgarian QA agency). In the future, they would like to build a slightly different system based on a dialogue between universities and the NEAA with Portugal serving as an example of good practice.

Survey responses (see Figure 11) show that, overall, quality assurance agencies perceive their procedures to have a significant impact on higher education institutions. In this self-assessment, almost all quality assurance agencies completely agreed that their work was professional, consistent and transparent and relied on explicit criteria, although respondents were slightly less confident that their external QA methods allowed higher education institutions to demonstrate their progress in terms of quality and helped them improve their QA. More than 80% of the surveyed quality assurance agencies agreed that results of their evaluations are fully published, and complaints procedures are clearly defined. However, only 50% completely agreed that they take into account workload and cost to higher education institutions of the QA procedure.

Figure 11: QA agencies' opinions on their external QA methods and procedures

Q: 'To what extent do you agree that the external QA methods and procedures used by your agency'



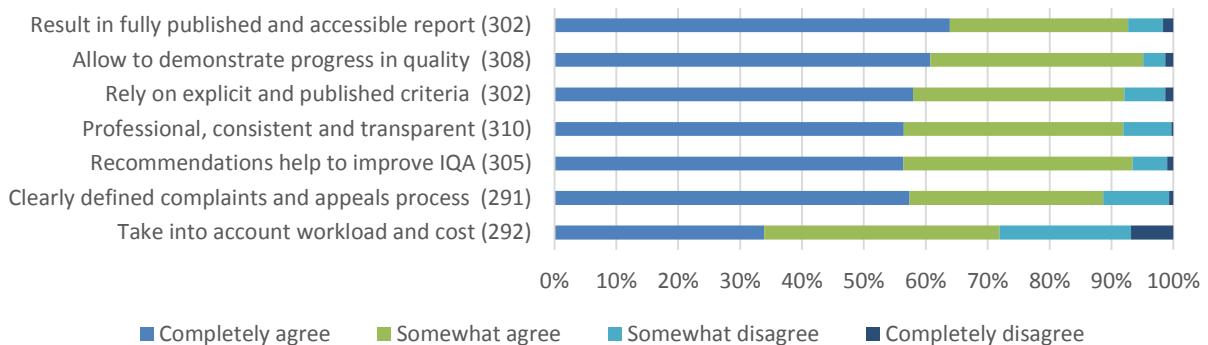
Source: PPMI survey of QA Agencies.

Higher education institutions, on average, were more critical than the quality assurance agencies in assessing external QA procedures, but their ranking of characteristics was similar (see Figure 12). There is an agreement among higher education institutions that quality assurance agencies do not sufficiently take into account workload and cost of higher education institutions in their external QA procedures and that there is room for improvement regarding clearly defined complaints and appeals processes. Respondents in the survey of higher education institutions similarly agreed that external QA methods allow higher education institutions to demonstrate progress in quality rather than help to improve internal QA. While 94% of quality assurance agencies rated their work as

professional, consistent and transparent, only 56% of higher education institutions completely agreed with this statement.

Figure 12: Opinions of higher education institutions on external QA methods and procedures

Q: 'To what extent do you agree that the external quality assurance procedures used by quality assurance agency(ies) in the evaluation of your institution/study programmes'



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

However, overall view (of both QA agencies and higher education institutions) on the extent to which external QA helps to improve internal QA procedures is rather positive. To look at a few examples:

- In Croatia, for example, a survey of higher education institutions by ASHE (Croatian QA agency) revealed that institutions felt that external QA was a valuable process for the QA of the institutions themselves – having to prepare a self-evaluation for the first time was seen as especially beneficial.
- Several interviews reported that external evaluations lead to changes; but there is often no information available on the concrete implications of QA processes in higher education institutions (e.g. in Austria), although having a follow-up procedure is a requirement of the ESG. The Estonian QA agency, for instance, mediates this issue by conducting semi-formal follow up interviews with higher education institutions after evaluations.
- Malta, like many other countries, audits the status of implementation of external QA recommendations.
- In Finland, external QA does not lead to formal or legal ramifications; yet, higher education institutions usually are implementing changes based on the QA agency's recommendations.
- In Germany, a systematic analysis of effects by external QA on internal QA is not available.²³ However, a number of studies focusing on different questions are available. The stated purpose of accreditation in Germany in the beginning was the assurance of minimum standards. The evolution of wording, however, shows a shift towards an enhancement focus of accreditation, which gained significantly in prominence with the introduction of institutional accreditation in 2008. Quantitative literature analysis by Steinhardt, Schneijderberg & Baumann (2017) shows an indication of steering effects for the governance and autonomy of higher education institutions, but no clear picture of effects on quality improvement.

²³ Steinhardt et al., (2017) 'Mapping the Quality Assurance of Teaching and Learning in Higher Education'. Higher Education: The International Journal of Higher Education Research, v74 n2 p221-237 Aug 2017.

In addition, a study by the Higher Education Information System (HIS) on the effect of institutional accreditation²⁴ shows that in the perception of higher education leadership, the implementation of quality management systems within the framework of institutional accreditation is leading to a systematisation of quality assurance within higher education institutions. In many cases, the goal of attaining institutional accreditation has been the impetus for an organisational development process. While the picture on impact is rather heterogeneous, respondents in the study point to a strengthening of institutional quality culture because of the introduction of quality management systems as a consequence of more exchange about quality beyond faculty boundaries, and a more open discourse about content quality within quality assurance.

The „Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance in HEI“ (IMPALA) project²⁵ has shown that outcomes of QA crucially depend on the attitude of higher education institutions.²⁶ If a higher education institution (or a faculty) tries to meet criteria in a formalistic way, in most cases, it will be able to do so, which impacts on the quality of teaching and learning. However, in many cases external quality assurance such as programme accreditation does seem to be an initiator of change and higher education institutions actively look for guidance and feedback from external peers on how to improve.

Consideration of internal QA results within external QA procedures

As already discussed at length above (see section 2.1.3), the results of internal QA are usually examined during external QA and the existence of internal QA is almost always a prerequisite to achieve accreditation. It is common practice that self-evaluation reports of higher education institutions serve as basis for external QA. In many countries, these reports include a part dedicated to internal QA procedures of higher education institutions going beyond a specific study programme.

Monitoring of national QA systems

A number of countries have started to conduct studies, surveys and collect data to monitor the development of their QA systems. For example:

- In Portugal, A3ES (Portuguese QA agency) is monitoring and assessing the development of internal quality assurance systems in higher education institutions according to predefined standards and criteria. In 2015, A3ES carried out a research-based study on the importance and degree of implementation of the reference points proposed by them for internal QA in Portuguese higher education institutions.
- In Cyprus, CYQAA (Cypriot QA agency) publishes a systematic analysis of national QA every three years.
- FINEEC (Finish QA agency) in Finland publishes regularly thematic reports with in-depth analysis of certain aspects (e.g. internationalisation, internal QA).
- In Romania, ARACIS (Romanian QA Agency) has launched a survey of relevant stakeholders involved in QA of higher education to assess their perception about the quality of services provided by ARACIS.

2.1.5. Application and communication of the European Bologna Process tools

During our study we found a consensus among various stakeholders that EU-level policy developments have a strong influence on internal QA procedures at higher education

²⁴ Beise & Polte, (2016), Qualitätssicherung und -entwicklung and systemakkreditierten Hochschulen - Organisationsentwicklung und Governance, Magazin für Hochschulentwicklung 2/2016.

²⁵ <https://www.evalag.de/international/wirkungsanalyse/the-project/>

²⁶ Germany, Spain, Romania, Finland, Norway and Belgium participated in this project funded by the Life-Long Learning Programme.

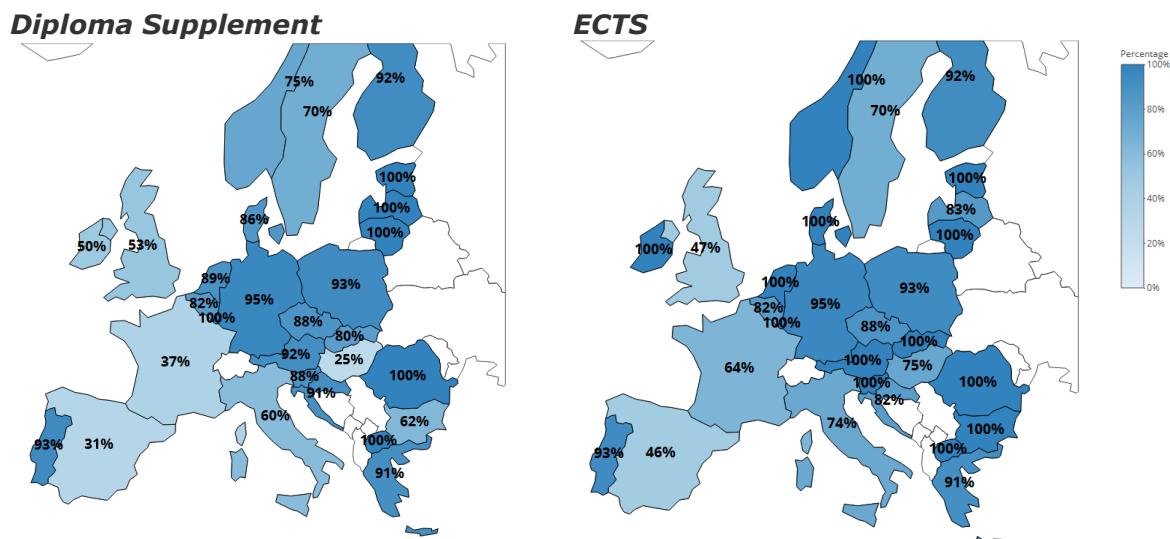
institutions and external QA procedures implemented by the QA agencies. As indicated previously in Figure 2, around 57% of respondents representing higher education institutions said that EU policy developments have a very strong or rather strong influence on internal QA processes. Similarly, for quality assurance agencies, as indicated previously in Figure 6, Bologna and EU-level developments was the second most important influencing factor for quality assurance agencies, with almost two thirds of respondents indicating a very strong or rather strong influence on their methodology and procedures.

The current application of and communication about the ECTS and Diploma Supplement still varies considerably among the Member States as the maps in Figure 13 show and are not yet fully applied throughout Europe. In 18 out of 28 countries, more than 90% of surveyed higher education institutions indicate that they have fully implemented ECTS. But overall only 74% of all respondents representing higher education institutions reported that they have fully implemented ECTS and only 62% said they have fully implemented the Diploma Supplement.

The focus on the implementation and communication of the European Transparency Tools is higher among quality assurance agencies than among higher education institutions. The survey of QA agencies showed that over 90% of quality assurance agencies assess whether higher education institutions follow ECTS and 83% assess the implementation of the Diploma Supplement.

Figure 13: Percent of higher education institutions responding they fully apply Diploma Supplement and ECTS

Q: 'To what extent has your institution integrated and applies the following European tools based on learning outcomes approach?'



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Many interviewees reported that throughout the higher education sector the Diploma Supplement and ECTS are well communicated and most respondents from national authorities did not see a need for better communication. However, communication of the Bologna tools is just one element and still more efforts – including also legal steps – are needed to fully adopt the Bologna tools.

2.2. Recent developments in other EHEA countries, focusing in particular on Eastern Partnership countries

This section analyses the most important recent development in non-EU European Higher Education Area countries, with particular focus on Eastern Partnership countries. A detailed account of developments in each country is included in Annex 2 attached to this report.

2.2.1. Eastern Partnership countries

QA agencies and national ministries in most Eastern partner countries are actively promoting institutional QA and its link to strategic management of higher education institutions

Across the region, a change is visible from a QA approach rooted in assuring compliance with centrally-determined curricular and legal norms towards one fostering institutional responsibility for quality enhancement and promotion of internal QA as an instrument of strategic development. QA agencies and ministries in most Eastern Partnership countries are actively promoting this shift.

In **Armenia**, between 2014 and 2017, higher education institutions invested heavily in the development of internal mechanisms for quality assurance. All higher education institutions now have internal QA manuals and internal QA departments. According to the national QA agency, the National Center for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA), higher education institutions are becoming increasingly introspective and analytical about their strengths and weaknesses and are – albeit slowly – developing a culture of quality improvement, aided by periodic evaluation. The first self-evaluations conducted within the framework of accreditation caused many higher education institutions to adapt their study programmes and invest in their capacity for strategic management. Since accreditation held higher education institutions accountable for the implementation of their strategies and ANQA initiated performance-based funding agreements to align their institutional strategies to government strategies, university strategies are becoming relevant steering instruments for quality improvement.

In **Azerbaijan**, since 2014, there have been several ministerial orders for higher education institutions to establish internal QA systems and higher education institutions are beginning to approach quality assurance strategically. At the time of writing, only some higher education institutions in Azerbaijan had quality assurance departments and most of them were still not connected to university strategy, did not have significant experience on how to conduct self-analyses, were isolated from the labour market and did not know how to change this systematically. Where internal QA units are established, they often do not conduct quality assurance but provide other kinds of operational support services. There is slowly growing understanding of the importance of quality assurance but still a shortage of expertise, of available training, of supervision, of national guidelines, and of qualified staff for internal QA. The Accreditation and Nostrification Department (ANO) attached to the Ministry of Education was set up in December 2015 to act as an external quality assurance administration and as a national centre of recognition of foreign qualifications in higher education. It does not have final authority over accreditation decisions, which remains with the Accreditation Council of the Ministry of Education. The Department has just started to develop its accreditation system, e.g. evaluation criteria and standards, training of evaluators, possible international cooperation.

In **Georgia**, since 2016, new authorisation standards were approved, which align internal QA with the ESG 2015, requiring higher education institutions to develop strategic development plans, and develop internal QA procedures that address teaching & learning and student-centeredness. The national Georgian QA agency, the National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE), is conducting capacity-building training on these issues to address the existing lack of knowledge and to support higher education institutions in restructuring their internal QA mechanisms.

In **Moldova**, the 2014 code of education²⁷ obliges higher education institutions to have internal Quality Management Systems (QMS) which are to be assessed through external QA. Throughout the country, institutional QA is slowly improving as the framework of external QA being aligned with the ESG²⁸. In February 2018, the government decided to change the name of the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Professional Education (ANACIP) to the National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC) and reorganise it through the absorption of the National School Inspectorate and the National Council for Accreditation and Attestation. The mission of ANACEC is to implement state policies and to contribute to the development of international standards in the field of quality assurance in general, technical professional, higher education, continuing education and research.

In **Ukraine**, Internal QA is still only beginning to develop. A small number of universities lead the way in the development of ESG-inspired internal QA systems, but most remain rather formalistic. The development of effective internal QA systems is hindered by a lack of academic integrity, nepotism, corruption and rent seeking, low wages and the quality of teaching staff, and lack of investment²⁹ in many Ukrainian higher education institutions. External stakeholders are often not involved in the development of the study programs. Efforts are underway, to enhance internal QA and EU-funded projects are ongoing to support the development of ESG-inspired internal quality assurance systems³⁰.

All over the region, with the exception of Belarus, criteria and procedures of external QA are being revisited to align them with the ESG.

Traditionally, in the region, external accreditation in the form of authorisation and accreditation was based primarily on quantitative indicators³¹. Over the past four years, a continuous shift is visible across the region towards more qualitative analysis, more attention to fitness-for-purpose, and enhancement-oriented schemes for external QA.

In **Georgia**, in 2016, new authorisation standards were approved, which reformed the approach to external QA in line with the ESG 2015. In **Azerbaijan**, new ESG-inspired standards for external QA were developed by ANO, which are currently pending ministerial approval. **Moldova** revised its QA framework with the passing of the new code of education in 2014 and the foundation of a QA agency, recently renamed to ANACEC and reorganised.

In **Ukraine**, in 2014, after the Maidan revolution, a new Law on Higher Education was adopted³², which foresaw the creation of a new independent National Agency for Higher Education Quality Assurance (NAHEQA) in line with the ESG. The QA agency's members were to be elected by stakeholders such as higher education institutions, national

²⁷ <http://lex.justice.md/md/355156/> art. 112ff

²⁸ Middell, Matthias; Reinhardt, Victoria; Bischof, Lukas (Eds.) (2016): From Quality Assurance to Strategy Development in the Moldovan Higher Education. Stakeholder Perspectives 1. Ed. Leipzig: Leipziger Uni-Vlg

²⁹ Yevhen Nikolaiev, "Higher Education in Ukraine: Agenda for Reforms," KAS Policy Paper (2017).

³⁰ <http://quaere.fmi.org.ua/>

³¹ For example, square meters of library, number of computers, qualifications of staff.

³² Law of Ukraine from 01.07.2014 No. 1556-VII On Higher Education.

academies of sciences, employers and student representatives. The formerly highly prescriptive and standardised curricula were to be replaced by intended learning outcomes and broader categories of contents. NAHEQA was to conduct accreditations of study programmes according to the new standards, accredit independent assessment institutions, develop regulations on awarding PhD degrees, and play a role in the licensing of higher education institutions³³. By the writing of this report, the implementation picture looked ambivalent. On the one hand, Ukraine had established NAHEQA as a new QA agency, joined EQAR as a governmental member and had aligned their legislation more closely to the ESG. On the other hand, progress in making the new QA agency operational had been challenging³⁴. Accreditation is still conducted by the Ministry in line with the pre-2014 procedure, which does not take account of the ESG.

ESG cornerstone criteria such as operational independence, fitness-for-purpose, the recognition of the primacy of higher education institution responsibility for quality, student-centred learning and outcome-oriented teaching and learning are finding their way into national frameworks of external QA. In Armenia, in recognition of its substantial compliance with the ESG, ANQA became region's first ENQA member in 2017. All other QA agencies in the region are currently pursuing the same goal within different timelines.

The changes are driven by ministries, enforced and facilitated by national QA agencies and often supported by the EU assistance. In the trend towards developing institutional self-steering capacity and in aligning QA frameworks with the ESG, EU-funded cooperation projects are playing an important role. Over the study period 2014-2017, a notable number of international cooperation projects took place to support the development of QA in the region. Project goals included strengthening internal quality assurance through better university self-assessment, better communication, and enhanced higher education management systems, strengthening external quality assurance through internationalisation, student participation in QA, better alignment between academic programmes and qualification frameworks, the professionalisation of QA agencies, and their preparation for ENQA reviews.

In Georgia, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Armenia, **international pilot accreditations in line with the ESG were conducted within Twinning, TEMPUS and Erasmus+ projects**, to support local QA agencies in gaining experience with the ESG-based approach to external QA. The projects have significantly contributed to strengthening personal and professional networks and involved European expertise in the development of the region's higher education systems. A full overview of projects by countries is set out in Annex 2.

Common overarching challenges

In the majority of higher education institutions in the region, internal QA strategies are still not reflected in internal management structures. QA offices, which are now mandated by law everywhere except in Belarus, often still primarily serve to produce and verify documentation and demonstrate compliance with legislation, rather than committing to the development of institutional performance. There is still often little involvement of stakeholders such as teaching staff or students. Student-centred learning is weakly developed, and study programmes are usually still subject- rather than outcome-oriented, often in contradiction to the respective national qualifications' frameworks. The forms of assessment in many cases do not correspond to the learning

³³ According to the latest revision of the law, NAHEQA's responsibility in licensing was removed.

³⁴ Sergiy Kurbatov, "External quality assurance system in Ukrainian higher education: historical background and development opportunities," in *Higher Education in Ukraine: Agenda for Reforms*, 35-41, KAS Policy Paper.

outcomes and teaching staff often do not have the autonomy to make choices on the forms of assessment.

A weak research base at universities due to the heritage of the Soviet system of separation of teaching and research and a lack of funding makes outdated curricula a constant challenge. Therefore, study programmes are often not research-oriented, making it hard for students to develop adequate research skills. The lack of funding and low salaries contribute to high staff turn-over, endangering the quality of teaching and learning and complicating continuous quality development. In summary, there are notable developments towards a stronger quality assurance culture in the region, but greatly differing levels of capacity and maturity of higher education institutions to practice internal QA and strategic management remain.

The use of cross-border QA is increasing

Across the region, cross-border QA is gaining acceptance. In **Armenia**, higher education institutions can now choose between their national agency (ANQA) or any other EQAR-registered QA agency for accreditation. The outcomes are automatically recognised in the country. In **Georgia**, since 2011, programme accreditation by ENQA member agencies from EU countries is recognised. Accreditation decisions from other QA agencies can be recognised, but higher education institutions have to get prior approval from the national agency. Authorisation remains a remit of the national QA agency. In **Moldova**, accreditation by EQAR-registered QA agencies based on national standards is recognised.

The **development of quality assurance in Belarus** diverges significantly from the other Eastern Partnership countries

Belarus

The Republic of Belarus was the last country to be admitted to the European Higher Education Area at the Summit of the European Ministers of Education in Yerevan in 2015. The country's long-term isolation in higher education policy had led to a significant gap in both legislation and educational practices. In this situation, Belarus was offered and accepted the Roadmap for higher education reforms³⁵ which provided a 3 year timeline for structural reforms relating to: a qualifications framework, quality assurance, recognition, transparency instruments, mobility of higher education staff and students, internationalisation, lifelong learning, the social dimension of higher education, as well as the commitments made by the ministers at their meeting in Yerevan to the fundamental values of the European Higher Education Area³⁶.

Regarding quality assurance, no significant changes have been made in Belarus. The system of state licensing and state accreditation³⁷ remains in place and no progress towards the Roadmap target of establishing an independent QA agency in line with the ESG has been achieved. Neither have there been any significant developments in internal QA between 2014 and 2017. An analysis by the Belarusian Independent Bologna

³⁵ Belarus Roadmap, "Belarus Roadmap for Higher Education Reform" (Bologna Process, 2015).

³⁶ The Paris Communiqué names academic freedom and integrity, institutional autonomy, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, and public responsibility for and of higher education as fundamental values of the EHEA. Source: EHEA (2018): Paris Communiqué,

<http://www.ehea2018.paris/Data/ElFinder/s2/Communique/EHEAParis2018-Communique-final.pdf>

³⁷ EACEA, "Overview of the Higher Education System: Belarus" (European Commission, 2017), https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/sites/eacea-site/files/countryfiches_belarus_2017.pdf

Committee shows that current regulation corresponds to the ESG only in 2 out of 14 standards of the ESG part 2 and 3³⁸.

2.2.2. Western Balkans

In the Western Balkans (Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo³⁹, Montenegro, Serbia, and the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia), **alignment with the ESG is continuing**. In 2014, the Serbian quality assurance agency CAQA, became a member of ENQA and was registered in EQAR. National legislation such as in Serbia increasingly reflects the ESG2015. A new QA agency is planned in Montenegro, which is to work in accordance with the ESG. Two BiH QA agencies underwent external reviews to become members in ENQA in 2017 but were not admitted. **International development projects are being conducted in many countries of the region, in order to review national higher education systems and support alignment of QA practices to the ESG**. In 2016, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, supported by a World Bank grant, has commissioned EUA's Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP) to carry out evaluations in the five public higher education institutions in the country⁴⁰. The results will help to further develop higher education institution's internal QA systems and the country's external QA methodology as a whole.

The degree of capacity and maturity to practice internal QA and strategic management within higher education institutions in the region and within individual countries are highly heterogeneous. Many of the challenges highlighted for the Eastern Partnership countries likewise apply to the Western Balkans. There are challenges to QA agency independence in Kosovo. The Kosovo Accreditation Agency, KAA, became an ENQA member in 2014 and is registered in EQAR since 2015. In September 2017, the QA agency's council and director were dismissed by the government. In a public statement by KAA, this step was criticised as interference into lawful procedures and the independence of KAA⁴¹. The EQAR Register Committee concluded that, as a consequence of the dismissal, the agency is no longer able to "act autonomously" and is no longer in a position to assume "full responsibility for [its] operations", which is required by one of EQAR's standards for registration (ESG standard 3.3). KAA was removed from EQAR in February 2018⁴².

2.2.3. Other European Higher Education Area countries

Russia and Kazakhstan are Eurasian countries, which have joined the Bologna Process in 2003 (Russia) and 2010 (Kazakhstan). The developments in quality assurance in both countries are strongly shaped by strong political control from the centre, albeit following rather different strategies and resulting in different outcomes.

In **Russia**, alignment with the ESG is apparently no longer a government priority. Throughout the 2000ies, state policy in quality assurance oscillated between recentralisation and state oversight on the one hand, and support for stakeholder-based quality development on the other hand. However, since 2009, government policy has

³⁸ Sergej Vetrohin and Tatiana Kouzina, "Regulatory framework and practice in providing the quality assurance in Belarusian higher education," in *The Quality of Higher Education: National Endeavours in the European Context*, ed. Anatol Gremelschi, 4–11, http://bolognaby.org/images/uploads/2017/01/En_QHE-22.12.16.pdf

³⁹ This designation is without prejudice to positions on status and is in line with UNSCR 1244/1999 and the ICJ Opinion on the Kosovo declaration of independence.

⁴⁰ <https://www.iep-qaa.org/reports-publications.html>

⁴¹ <http://www.akreditimi-ks.org/new/index.php/en/2016-12-22-09-23-55/claryfing-the-public-pinion>

⁴² Decision by the Register Committee of 27 February 2018: https://eqar.eu/fileadmin/agencyreports/2018-02_Exclusion_Decision_C22_KAA.pdf

strengthened the government oversight body *Rosobrnadzor* at the expense of stakeholder-based independent quality assurance in the spirit of the ESG⁴³.

External Quality Assurance is shaped by state accreditation and a government "efficiency monitoring" which is conducted by the Ministry of Education and Science with the purpose of identifying higher education institutions with low performance based on centrally collected indicator data⁴⁴. Higher education institutions that do not meet performance standards set by the Ministry of Education and Science are labelled as 'ineffective' and subsequently investigated by *Rosobrnadzor*⁴⁵. If sufficient shortcomings are found, higher education institutions can be merged with other institutions, partially restructured or lose their license or accreditation altogether and be forced to close. The national accreditation agency *Rosakkredagenstvo*⁴⁶ is effectively a department of *Rosobrnadzor* to which it provides the data its decisions. This is one of the reasons why *Rosakkredagenstvo* failed ENQA's 2015 review and was given membership under review⁴⁷. The current system of licensing and accreditation has become a powerful instrument of state steering and control in the hands of *Rosobrnadzor* and decisions on the granting or revoking of accreditation are now fully within its control.

The loss of license and accreditation of the European University in St. Petersburg is a high-profile case of the powers of *Rosobrnadzor*⁴⁸. While the official system of external QA has taken a turn away from independent peer-based quality assurance towards stronger government intervention, a small number of independent QA agencies have emerged which do comply with the ESG, namely the Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education and Career Development (AKKORK) and the National Centre of Public Accreditation (NCPA), which was founded by former staff of *Rosakkredagenstvo* in Yoshkar-Ola. Due to the comparatively small number of accreditations conducted by them and the lack of official recognition of their accreditation within the official Russian QA system, these QA agencies do not play a systemic role in the overall HE system. They do however, promote the principles of the ESG in Russia.

While state control and monitoring are getting stronger, Russian higher education institutions are developing internal QA systems. A significant part of their efforts is directed at assuring compliance with the heavy reporting requirements. Greater financial, personnel and organisational autonomy does lead to a more important role for internal QA systems. The introduction of performance-based employment contracts ("effective contracts") make measuring results even more important. The development of professional QA systems is most visible at the leading universities participating in the government-funded excellence programmes (Federal Universities, Research Universities, 5-100 and *opornye VUZy*). These higher education institutions are undergoing significant changes to their internal organisation and governance, which are coupled with growing

⁴³ Bischof, Lukas (in print). "Effects of the Bologna Process on quality assurance regimes in the Post-Soviet space: Isomorphism and path dependencies in Moldova, Russia, and Kazakhstan". In: De Wit et al. (in print). Proceeding from the "Future of Higher Education – Bologna Process Researchers' Conference" (FOHE-BPRC 3), Bucharest, 27 - 29 November 2017.

⁴⁴ Indicators relate to quality of student intake, teaching effectiveness, research, faculty, infrastructure, finance, labour market outcomes of graduates, and internationalization

⁴⁵ Isak Froumin, Yaroslav Kouzminov, and Dmitry Semyonov, "Institutional diversity in Russian higher education: revolutions and evolution," *European Journal of Higher Education* 4, no. 3 (2014), doi:10.1080/21568235.2014.916532

⁴⁶ www.nica.ru

⁴⁷ See <http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/external-review-report-of-naa-2/>. NAC passed the follow-up review under the ESG2005 and is currently a member of ENQA.

⁴⁸ In 2016, the University, which counts among the highest-ranking in social sciences in Russia, lost its accreditation after Rosobrnadzor conducted a snap inspection and revealed several violations in a series of documents accompanying the academic process. The university asserted that the results of inspection were divorced from reality and did not elaborate on the substance of the violations. Its application for license renewal were rejected and the university is not allowed to enrol new students any more.

investments, national and international consulting and efforts to change towards a quality culture.

In contrast to the Russian Federation, alignment with the ESG has been government policy in **Kazakhstan** since the first State Programme of Education Development 2005-2010. A shift from state attestation to independent accreditation began in 2011 when only accredited higher education institutions were allowed to enrol state-funded students⁴⁹. Kazakhstan was also one of the first countries to recognise decisions by EQAR-registered QA agencies in 2011. From January 2017, state attestation was discontinued completely for the majority of higher education institutions and replaced by accreditation by independent QA agencies⁵⁰. Since 2014, Kazakhstan leads the list of countries with cross-border evaluations conducted by foreign QA agencies in the country, totalling 209 procedures between 2014 and 2016⁵¹. Between 2013 and 2017, Kazakhstan created its own register of registered QA agencies, increasing the requirement for Kazakh academics to be included as panel members. In 2017, two Kazakh QA agencies were accepted as ENQA members and were included in EQAR.

Kazakhstan's government is strongly pushing for other European Higher Education Area goals such as internal quality assurance, strategic management, stakeholder involvement, and student-centred learning through its legislation and the system of external quality assurance.

2.2.4. EFTA states

QA in the four EFTA States is highly developed and well established. The main recent trends have been to promote quality culture (Norway), enhance internal quality assurance, accountability and unity of the HE system (Switzerland), and align further with the ESG in external QA (Iceland). Liechtenstein does not have its own QA agency and instead relies on other EQAR-registered QA agencies to carry out QA for its higher education institutions. For a more detailed presentation on country-by-country developments, please refer to Annex 2.

⁴⁹ While not the main source of financing for most Kazakh higher education institutions, government grants represent an important and prestigious source of funding for higher education institutions.

⁵⁰ The government retained an important role in the QA of higher education institutions through Licensing, intermediate testing and licensing controls, however

⁵¹ Data from EQAR. 2014: 58, 2015: 56, 2016: 95

3. Building quality culture(s) and broadening the scope of quality assurance

This section focuses on the topics, which have recently been of particular interest to the European quality assurance community. First, we analyse incentives and key drivers in building the quality culture in higher education, covering both managerial and cultural aspects. In this area, among other drivers, we look at the role of institutional leadership, effective communication, and available financial and time resources. Second, we look at whether (and how) the individual higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies succeeded in widening the scope of QA in the recent years, which was one of the key messages of the last Commission's report on quality assurance in 2014. In this area, we assess whether national QA systems have been further tailored to take into account the need to widen participation in higher education, reduce dropout rates, improve employability of graduates, take into account innovative learning pathways and delivery modes, respond to the need to internationalise the study programmes and to reward good teachers, among many other aspects. Finally, this section also discusses how data about higher education processes, and QA data in particular, is, and could be, used to improve the learning process.

3.1. Incentives and key drivers in building quality culture(s) in higher education

The majority of the Commission's recommendations formulated in the progress report of 2014 were related to what can be called "creating quality culture in higher education". This chapter of the study will focus on operationalising and measuring the extent to which the quality culture of higher education is being developed and practised in higher education institutions and national QA systems, with particular attention to the drivers of quality culture.

Although there is an ongoing discussion, both among academics and practitioners, as to how the quality culture in higher education should be measured and practised, there is also a good deal of agreement on what the term "quality culture" means. One of the widely supported definitions of the quality culture in higher education was coined by the European University Association in 2006.⁵² According to the EUA, "quality culture refers to an organisational culture that intends to enhance quality permanently and is characterised by two distinct elements: (1) a cultural/ psychological element of shared values, beliefs, expectations and commitment towards quality; and (2) a structural/ managerial element with defined processes that enhance quality and aim at coordinating individual efforts."

The interviews that we have carried out with the QA agencies, national authorities and individual higher education institutions, clearly pointed towards a consensus among these actors that we should rather speak about quality cultures (in plural) rather than the quality culture. While the term quality culture points towards certain beliefs, values and actions that help create quality education, these beliefs and practices can be very different in individual institutions. Nevertheless, these different sets of beliefs and practices can all lead to high quality higher education. There is no one-size-fits-all approach, when it comes to building a quality culture.

The interview programme also showed that there is no strong agreement among the stakeholders on whether the term "quality culture" is at all useful in higher education

⁵² European University Association (2006). Quality Culture in European Universities: a bottom-up approach. Report on the three rounds of the quality culture project 2002-2006. Brussels: EUA.

policy-making process. Some of the interviewees pointed towards the issue that the term quality culture is rather confusing in operational terms and does not help to find practical solutions on how to improve the actual education process. This corresponds to the view on quality culture stated in a seminal article by Harvey and Stensaker, where they wrote that "Quality culture first and foremost can be a tool for asking questions about how things work, how institutions function, who they relate to, and how they see themselves. The dominant problem with quality culture as it is used today is that the concept is thought of as the answer to challenges, while in reality, it is a concept for identifying potential challenges."⁵³ Therefore, in order to generate policy relevant insights and recommendations, it is more effective for the key stakeholders to focus on drivers and incentives fostering quality culture rather than trying to find a single definition of quality culture. The main question for the policy-makers should not be "what is a quality culture and how to measure it?", but rather "what drives the development of quality cultures and how could we incentivise it?"

Research literature has already pointed towards a number of key drivers supporting the development of quality culture. A recent report commissioned by the Norwegian Agency for QA in Education (NOKUT)⁵⁴ formulated several key lessons on what helps to develop and sustain quality culture:

- Establishing a baseline of shared values that define high quality teaching and learning. In practical terms, the shared values and objectives related to quality should not only be explained in the strategic documents of a higher education institution but should be also mainstreamed in its daily internal and external communication as well as the discourse used by the leaders of an organisation.
- Motivating academic staff to engage in quality work and consider how quality could be improved, which can be triggered by framing teaching and learning activities as having the same positive impacts on the academic career as research activities. It was found that academic staff are more strongly motivated to engage in professional development if goal conflicts are prevented (e.g. prioritising research over teaching due to time constraints) and if professional training is embedded in communication structures that allow teachers to discuss and exchange experiences.
- Effective leaders, who commit themselves to implementing changes with careful timing and convincing narratives. A blended leadership style – bottom-up collegial initiatives combined with a managerial vision – was found to be particularly relevant.

The report commissioned by NOKUT has also indicated that drivers of quality culture can be divided into individual and organisational ones:

- Individual level drivers:
 - Perceptions, values and beliefs of individual teachers;
 - Teachers' motivational factors (including avoiding potential goal conflicts);
 - Professional development activities related to teaching and learning;
 - Leadership styles;
- Organisational level drivers:
 - Support for institutional leadership;
 - Good communication;
 - Data-based reflection of enhancement activities;
 - Design of enhancement instruments;
 - Decision-making structures;
 - Provision of sufficient resources/staff development.

⁵³ Lee Harvey and Bjorn Stensaker, "Quality Culture: understandings, boundaries and linkages." The Search for Quality in the European Higher Education Area, 18 November 2008.

⁵⁴ CHEPS et al., „How Can One Create a Culture for Quality Enhancement?“, Final Report, October 2016.

Through our survey of higher education institutions, we aimed to measure the extent to which the institutions practised the key activities (drivers) related to building the quality culture, as discussed above. As you can see from Figure 14, a clear majority of survey respondents reported that leaders of their institutions constantly emphasise the importance of quality assurance and propose new initiatives on how quality of their programmes could be improved. This points to the conclusion that the high impact that leadership has on building quality culture is not only well understood by higher education institutions, but their leaders are also actually involved in this undertaking.

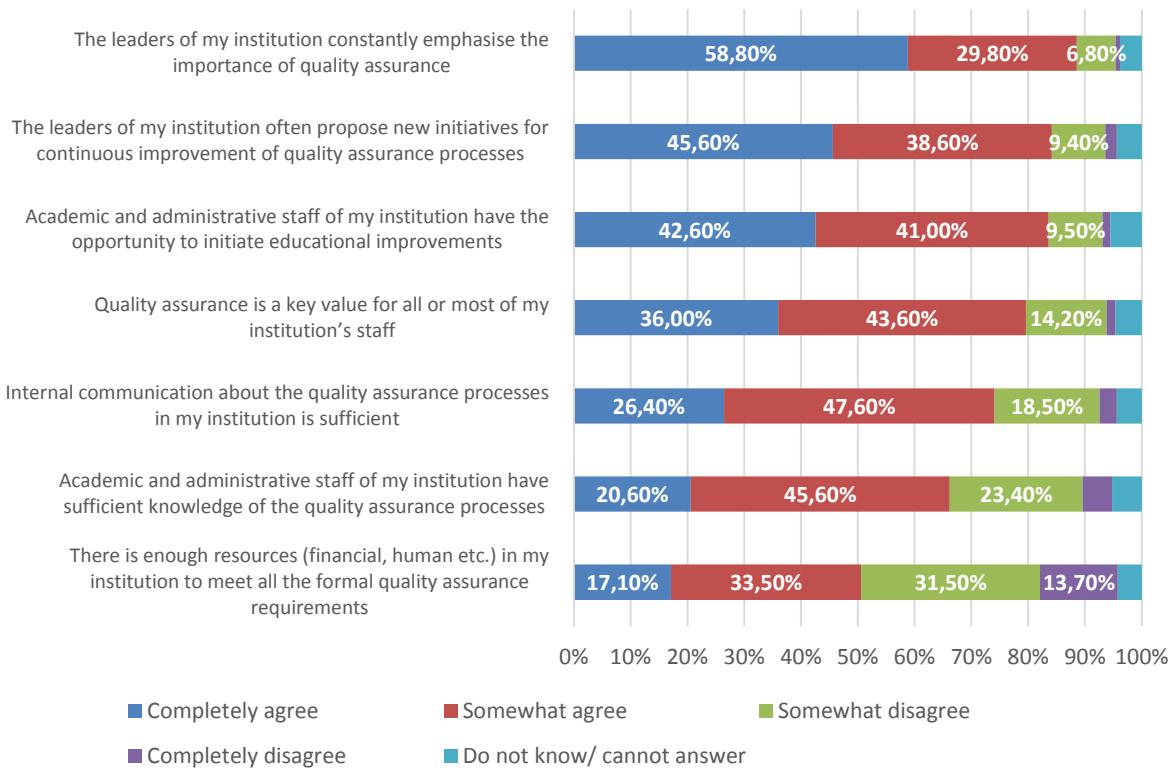
As also shown in Figure 14, more than 80% of respondents agreed with the statements that academic and administrative staff have opportunities to initiate quality improvements and that quality assurance is the key value for their institutions.

However, the survey also pointed to some problematic issues, where 20 or more per cent of respondents somewhat or completely disagreed that their institution practised activities highlighted by academic literature as fostering quality culture. The survey suggests a need to pay particular attention to the following issues (in order of importance):

- As many as 45% of respondents thought that there are not enough resources (not only financial, but also human) in their institution to meet all QA requirements;
- Around 27% of respondents thought that academic and administrative staff in their institutions have insufficient knowledge about QA processes;
- Around 22% of respondents said that internal communication about the quality assurance processes is insufficient in their institutions.

Finally, a discouraging insight indicated by our survey was that **71% of respondents from higher education institutions were of the opinion that quality assurance in their institutions is mostly about complying with external regulations and laws**. Further data analysis revealed that this finding holds for universities of all sizes and from all countries. This probably indicates that in many higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area quality assurance is still seen as a box-ticking procedure rather than an endeavour to develop an organic quality culture.

Figure 14. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about quality assurance in your institution?

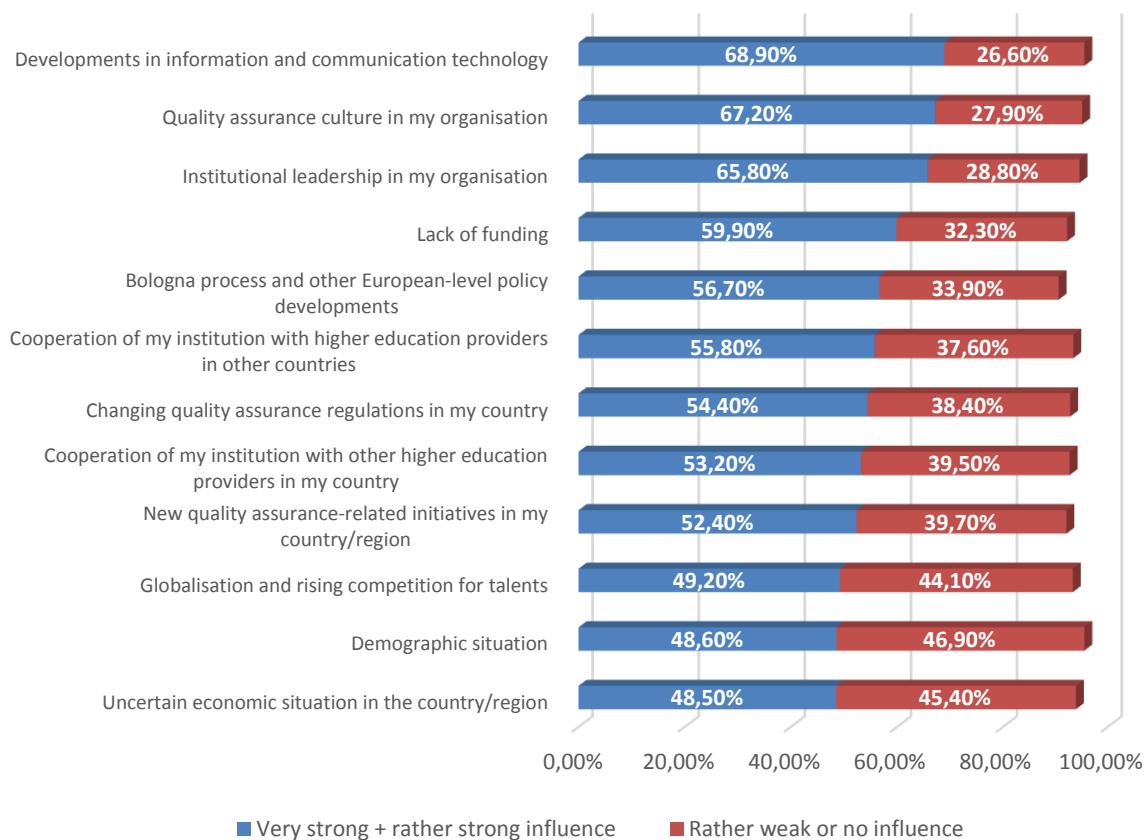


Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

During our country-level interviews, we asked the national authorities and QA agencies to indicate universities that, in their opinion, consistently provided teaching and learning of the highest quality and therefore had “a quality culture”. Then we followed-up with an open question on what helped these institutions to develop the quality culture that they seem to have. The number one instant response that we have received was that the institutional leadership and management of the university was the key driver of quality culture.

This finding is also supported by survey results. As demonstrated in Figure 15, higher education institutions regarded its leadership as one of the top 3 factors influencing the recent changes in internal QA: more than 65% of respondents were of the opinion that leadership had a very strong or rather strong influence on internal quality assurance procedures of an institution. The quality culture of an institution was also seen among the key factors influencing internal QA process, second only to the developments in ICT. It is encouraging to see that these top 3 factors had higher impact on the developments in internal QA than the (lack of) funding.

Figure 15. Would you say that the following factors had an influence on the recent changes in your institution's internal quality assurance? Please assess the extent of the influence.



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area. Note that "don't know" responses have been taken out, therefore the sum is not equal to 100%.

Among our interviewees, there was also a consensus that institutional-level accreditation/ evaluation contributed to the development of quality culture, since it pressured higher education institutions to build and sustain strong internal QA processes. However, as demonstrated previously in this report, this did not mean that the key stakeholders would be in favour of abolishing programme-level evaluations/ accreditations (see Figure 8). Quite to the contrary, our survey of QA agencies showed that they see the value in both institutional and programme evaluations.

3.2. Contribution of quality assurance to supporting teaching as the core mission of higher education

Since the publication of the previous study in 2014, teaching in higher education has received significantly more attention across the European Higher Education Area and all levels of the QA community. These developments are a part of a longer-term trend that started around the 1980's in academia, when prominent education scholars formulated the core principles of a new teaching paradigm, which places a greater emphasis on the individual needs and interests of students. In 2013, the High-Level Group on Modernisation of Higher Education presented a "Report to the European Commission on Improving the Quality of Teaching and Learning in Europe's Higher Education Institutions". The report presented a vision in which the old teacher-centred model of education is replaced by a new model which is more flexible in forms of delivery,

focusses on learning outcomes rather than learning process, and emphasises the needs and personal development of individual students.⁵⁵ The report also stated that these aims could be achieved if a parity of esteem is given to both teaching and research activities in European higher education institutions.⁵⁶

The notions and ideas expressed in the report have since been echoed by many policy documents and served as an intellectual basis for multiple projects and initiatives at both European and national levels. Most importantly, the newest edition of the ESG contain a standard 1.3 "Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment", which explicitly requires higher education institutions to incorporate student-centred-learning principles into their teaching and student assessment practices.⁵⁷

Additionally, as the concept of student-centred learning is fairly new to some the members of QA community and since the format of ESG only allows to formulate generic principles, members of the E4 Group also published their own toolkits or specifications on how these principles could be applied. The ESU and Education International published a comprehensive toolkit on how student-centred learning provisions can be implemented in European higher education institutions.⁵⁸ Meanwhile, EUA has launched the European Forum for Enhanced Collaboration in Teaching (EFFECT) project, aimed at institutional and teachers' pedagogical capacity building. Among other things, the EFFECT project has formulated a set of ten European Principles for the Enhancement of Learning and Teaching.⁵⁹

In essence, student-centred learning, as outlined in the above-mentioned documents, focuses on a few core principles:

1. Teaching in HE must focus on transversal skills and competences as well as sectoral expertise;
2. Students should be able to adjust the contents of the course and its delivery methods based on their needs;
3. Teachers must be aware and adapt to diverse student body, which might feature students from different age-groups and professional backgrounds;
4. Teaching must be conducted not as one-way knowledge transfer, but as dialogue between teacher and students based mutual respect.⁶⁰

These agenda items related to student-centred learning and the focus on learning outcomes articulated in the European-level documents and initiatives have been communicated to and adopted by the key actors at the national/regional level. In the survey of QA agencies, agencies have indicated that currently they evaluate aspects related to the student-centred learning, including innovative education delivery modes, and that these aspects have become more important in their work since 2014.

According to survey data (see Figure 16), almost all QA agencies evaluate how the student-centred learning provisions are adopted by higher education institutions and how the learning outcome approach is integrated into degree programmes. The majority of

⁵⁵ High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education (2013) "REPORT TO THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION ON: Improving the quality of teaching and learning in Europe's higher education institutions"

⁵⁶ Ibid, pp. 19.

⁵⁷ E4 Group (2015) "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area", pp12.

⁵⁸ ESU & EI (2016) "TIME FOR A NEW PARADIGM IN EDUCATION: STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING Toolkit"

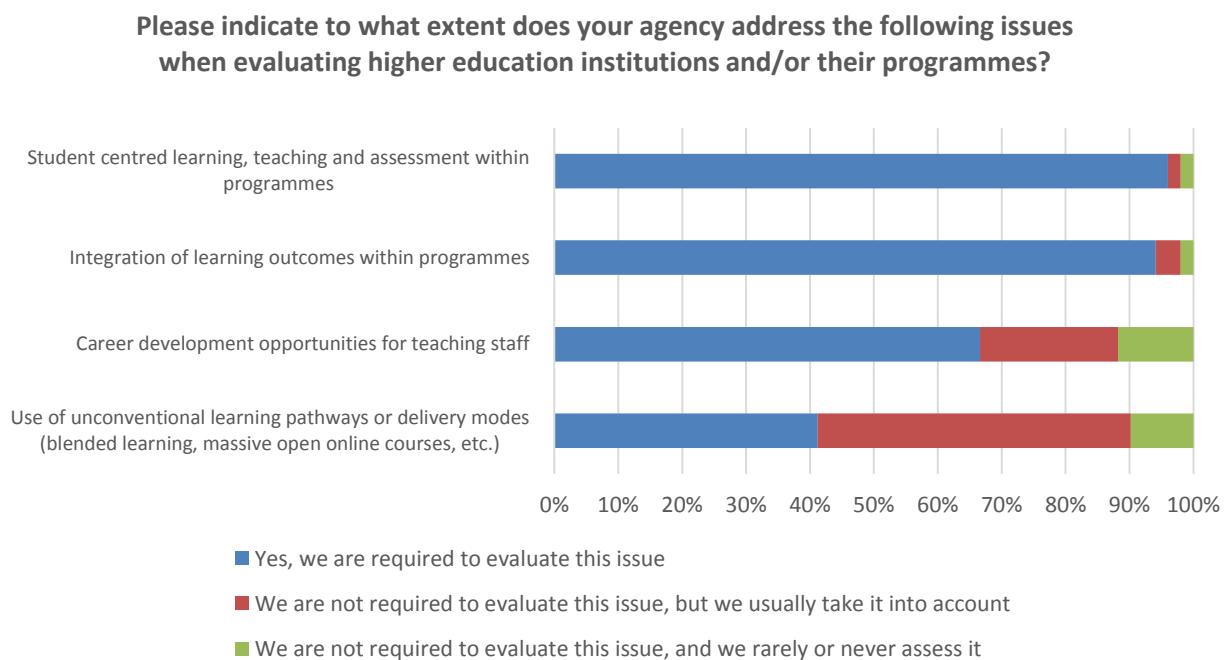
⁵⁹ EUA EFFECT project (2017) "Enhancing the education mission of European universities: A proactive response to change"

⁶⁰ Rikke Warming &Petra Frydensberg (2017) "Principal in Own Learning - Student Centred Learning Viewed Through the Eyes of an External Quality Assurance Agency" Paper presented in 12th European Quality Assurance Forum "Responsible QA – committing to impact" in Riga.

QA agencies also evaluate how teaching is rewarded in higher education institutions and is factored in career-advancement opportunities for staff of higher education institutions. Around 40% of QA agencies also assess how innovative teaching methods and delivery modes are used in the higher education institutions they evaluate.

More importantly, the majority of QA agencies indicated that provisions related to student-centred-learning and the use of innovative teaching methods have become more salient topics in external quality assurance over the last three years. Additionally, over 45% indicated that the focus on learning outcomes has also become more important.

Figure 16. Quality assurance agencies' focus areas

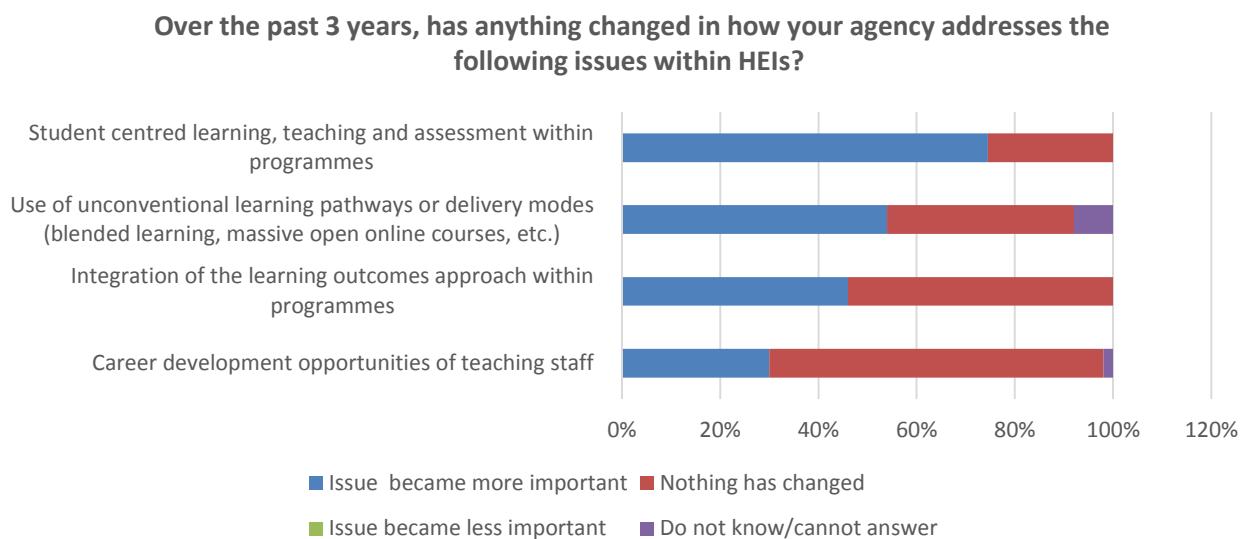


Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

For some QA agencies, provisions regarding the student-centred learning and innovative teaching methods have been the most important new development since 2014. For example, in Estonia the QA agency, EKKA, has indicated that the agency is planning to adjust its evaluation criteria and place significantly stronger emphasis on how higher education institutions are incorporating student-centred learning provisions in their teaching and course delivery practices.

However, only 30% of QA agencies reported that the importance they place on career development opportunities of the teaching staff has increased over the last three years (see Figure 17).

Figure 17. Changes in importance of areas addressed by QA agencies over the past 3 years



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

And the trend is not uniform. For instance, the Finnish QA agency, FINEEC, used to issue “Teaching Excellence” awards to higher education institutions for their efforts to promote high-quality teaching but in 2012 this practice was discontinued, as the agency decided to focus on different aspects of QA.

Meanwhile, in Slovakia, criteria for the evaluation and accreditation of study programmes hardly mentions quality teaching at all. When it is mentioned, it is understood primarily as teaching done by high-quality (i.e. established) professionals rather than teaching aimed at providing high quality skills and competences to students. However, in this regard Slovakia stands out as an exception, as in other EU member states significant steps have been taken by higher education institutions and /or QA agencies to put more emphasis on teaching.

National authorities, for most part, did not engage in efforts to promote teaching in HE. Mostly, it is due to the fact that they have delegated the tasks of defining external QA procedures and quality standards to the QA agencies and the implementation of these requirements is left to individual higher education institutions. The two notable exceptions to this trend are Germany and Poland.

In Germany, national/regional authorities supported three major initiatives which aimed at promoting student-centred learning or the use of innovative study/learning methods: Quality Pact for Teaching, Forum for Higher Education in the Digital Age, and Higher Education Pact.

The Quality Pact for Teaching⁶¹ (2011-2020) is a federal programme which provides additional funds to higher education institutions in order to improve the quality of teaching and study conditions through 253 projects in 186 higher education institutions in all 16 Länder (an investment worth €2 billion). Among other areas such as counselling, additional teaching staff, mentoring, or organisational reform projects, the Quality Pact for Teaching has funded a large number of projects strengthening internal quality assurance, evaluation, performance indicators in higher education institutions.

⁶¹Quality Pact for Teaching webpage<<http://www.qualitaetspakt-lehre.de/index.php?>>

The Forum for Higher Education in the Digital Age (Hochschulforum Digitalisierung - HFD)⁶² was launched in 2014 as an independent national platform, for discussing the wide-ranging impact of digitalisation on higher education institutions, and especially on higher education teaching. HFD is a joint initiative by Stifterverband für die Deutsche Wissenschaft, Centre for Higher Education and the German Rectors' Conference (HRK). It is financed by Germany's Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF). HFD supports higher education institutions in making digitalisation an integral part of their institutional strategy and in incorporating it in their teaching activities. Since 2007, rising student numbers have prompted the Länder and the Federal government to provide additional funding in the form of a "higher education pact" (Hochschulpakt), which, among other things, finances projects aimed at implementing new formats of teaching and learning, and the individualisation of learning.

In Poland, currently, the discussions are ongoing regarding the new law on higher education, so-called "Law 2.0". Among other things, this reform will touch upon teaching and learning in higher education institutions. Current plans seek to limit the time students spend in lectures and give more emphasis on working independently and tackling problem-based assignments.⁶³ Though these changes are only in the proposal stage, it is a strong signal that national authorities consider teaching and learning in HE to be highly salient topics and seek to modernise the teaching and learning activities in Polish higher education institutions.

Overall, the initiatives at the European and national level are mostly aimed at two things: 1. Putting student-centred learning and innovative teaching-related items on the agenda and communicating them to the institutions; 2. Providing them with know-how (toolkits, good-practices, etc.) on how these agenda items can be implemented. However, the actual practical implementation of student-centred learning provisions as well as the uptake of innovative teaching methods are left to higher education institutions themselves.

Our survey of higher education institutions has revealed that, overall, the need to put higher emphasis on quality teaching, student-centred learning, and the use of innovative teaching methods have largely been understood by European higher education institutions and that various steps have been and are being taken to incorporate these agenda-items into the institutional teaching practices.

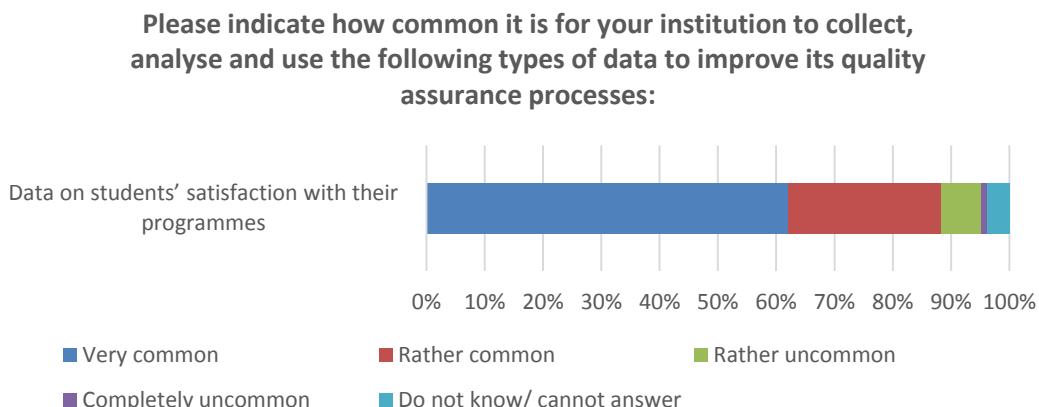
The survey results show that two teaching and learning related issues emphasised in the ESG 2015: the use of a Learning Outcomes (LO) approach and collecting student feedback data have become universally accepted and used by European higher education institutions (see Figure 18 and Figure 19). Though the focus on the LO approach was not explicitly mentioned in the earlier version of the ESG, it has nonetheless been almost universally adopted by higher education institutions. Monitoring whether forms of assessment verify the learning outcomes is slightly less universal but nevertheless well established (see Figure 19).

Furthermore, collecting student satisfaction data in order to assess the teaching performance of the academic staff and for other internal QA purposes has also become a mainstream practice by European higher education institutions, as indicated in Figure 19.

⁶² HFD webpage <<https://hochschulforumdigitalisierung.de/>>

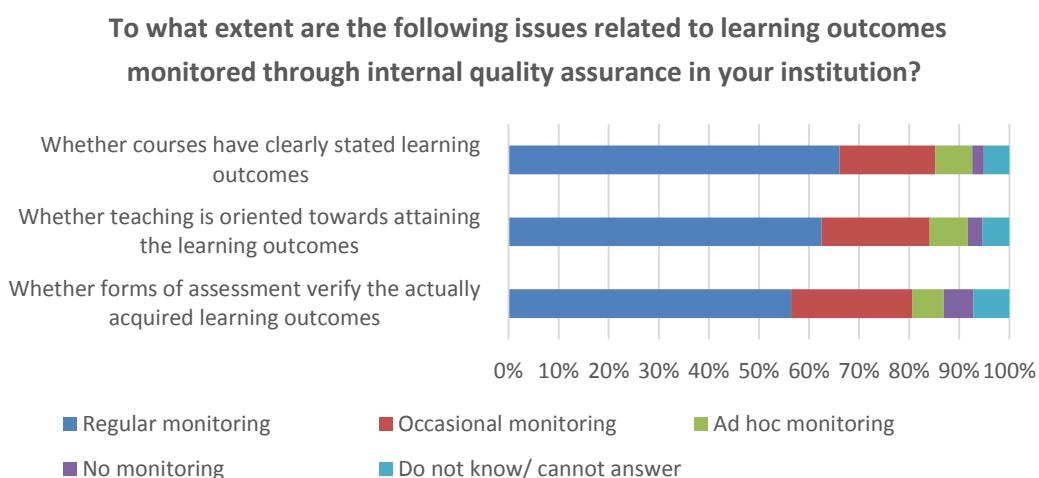
⁶³Science in Poland: Law 2.0 Takes Shape < <http://scienceinpoland.pap.pl/en/news/news%2C414305%2Claw-20-takes-shape---changes-at-universities-in-the-announcements-of-the-ministry-of-science.html>>

Figure 18. Share of higher education institutions collecting student satisfaction data



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Figure 19. Issues related to learning outcomes approach and monitored by higher education institutions



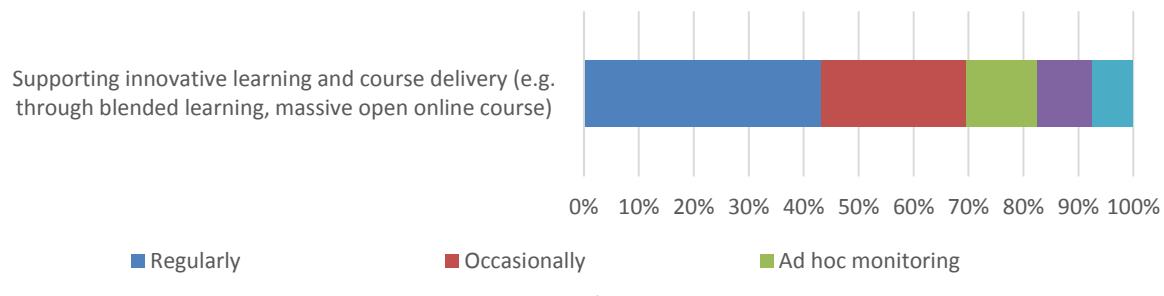
Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

The other teaching and learning-related issues, such as student-centred learning, enhancing the role of teaching in academic career progression, and the use of innovative teaching methods have been adopted by European higher education institutions, but to a slightly smaller extent.

Figure 20, Figure 21, and Figure 22 demonstrate that the majority of European higher education institutions monitor the use of innovative teaching methods in their IQA procedures at least occasionally. Furthermore, they consider various learning and teaching-related aspects, like (i) the use of innovative teaching methods, (ii) emphasising the role of teaching in staff career progression, (iii) the adoption of student-centred learning and (iv) use of the learning outcomes (LO) approach as either "important" or "very important". Finally, it is almost universally acknowledged that these issues related to teaching and learning have become more important over the last three years. However, out of all teaching and learning-related issues, the smallest share of respondents considered staff career advancement opportunities through teaching to be important or have increased in importance.

Figure 20. Support for new course delivery modes

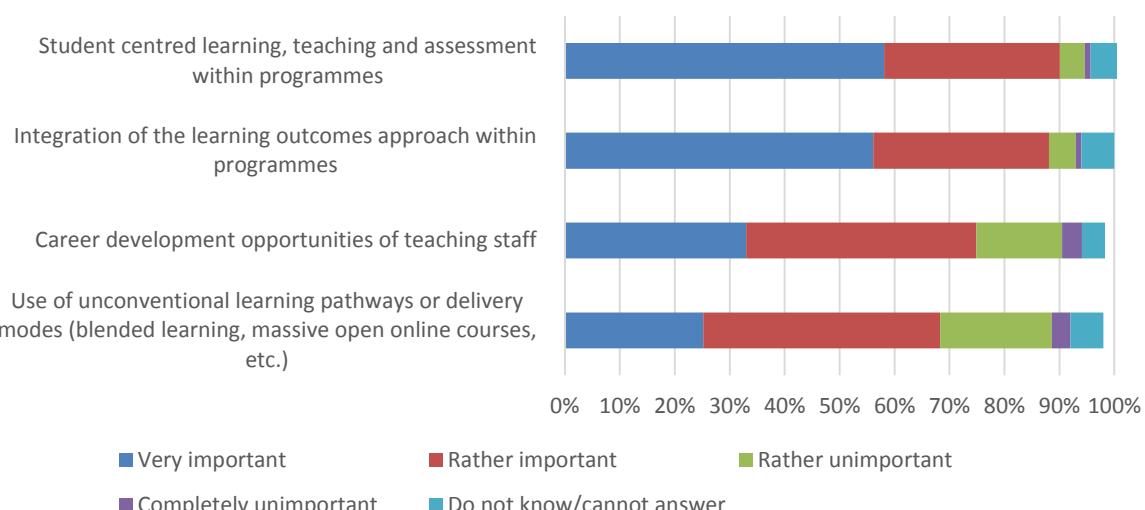
As part of your internal quality assurance system, how often does your institution monitor the following issues:



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

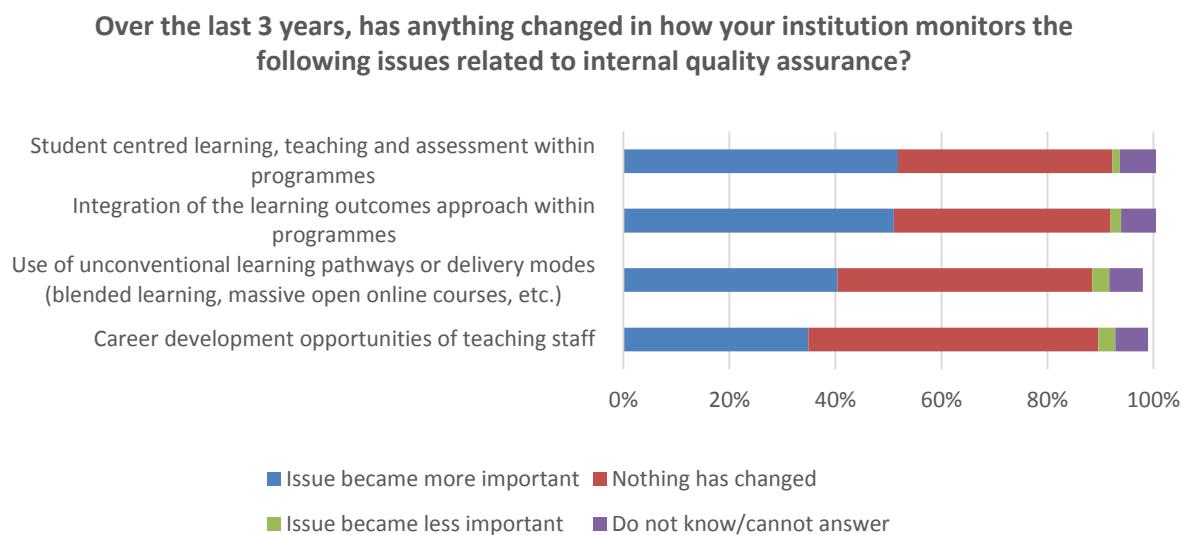
Figure 21. Teaching-related areas of importance in internal QA

Overall, how important are the following issues in your institution's internal quality assurance system?



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

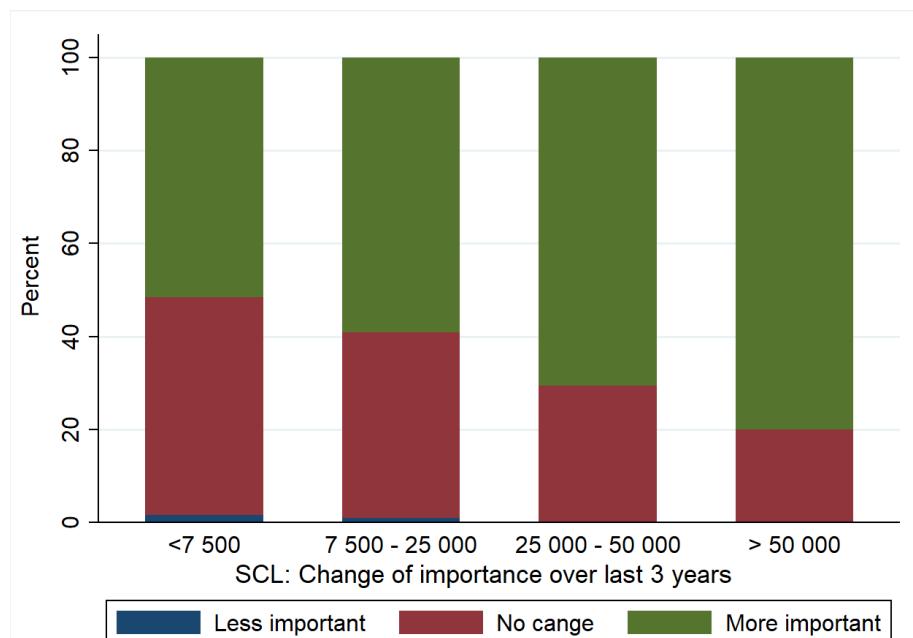
Figure 22. Teaching-related areas of importance in internal QA: changes since 2014



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

While the relative importance of these issues was mostly uniform across higher education institutions of different types and sizes, the survey results indicate that larger higher education institutions have considered that student-centred learning related provisions have become more important by a significantly larger margin than smaller institutions (see Figure 23). This can be explained by the fact that more sizable effort is required to introduce significant changes to larger institutions, which makes such changes more strongly felt by the members of these institutions.

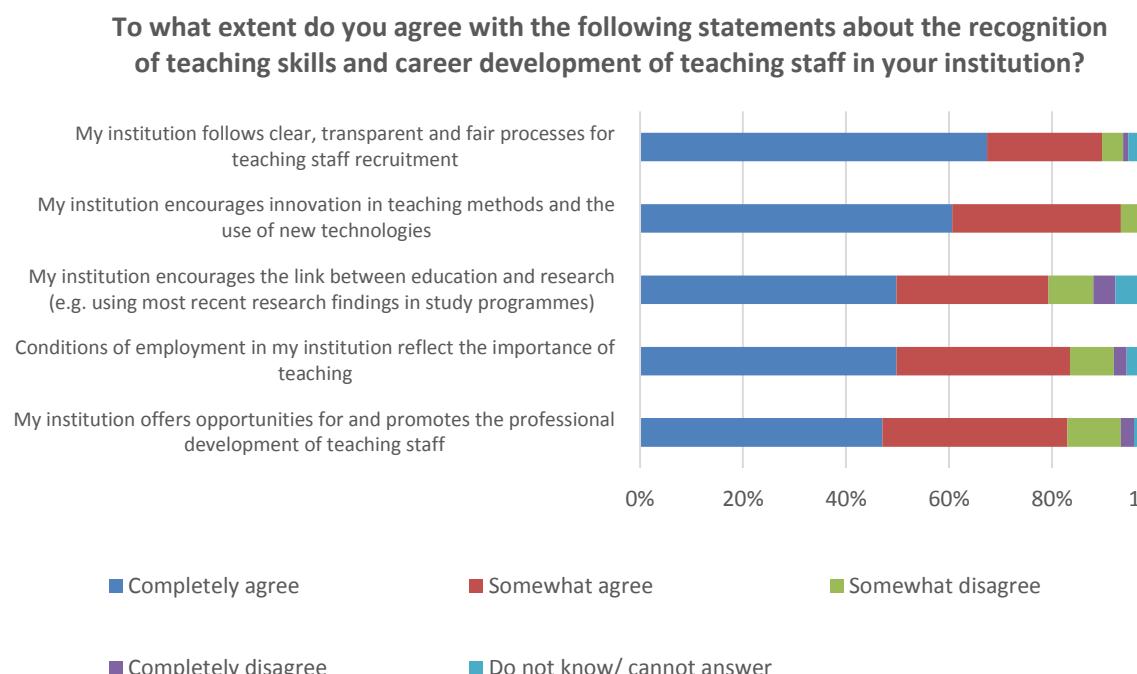
Figure 23. Change in importance of student-centred learning over the last three years by higher education institution size



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

When it comes to precise steps in fostering quality teaching and the professional development of HE teachers, the majority of higher education institutions indicated that they are taking certain measures in that direction. Most commonly, higher education institutions reported using merit-based recruitment of teachers and supporting the use of innovative teaching methods and new technologies, as shown in Figure 24 and Figure 26.

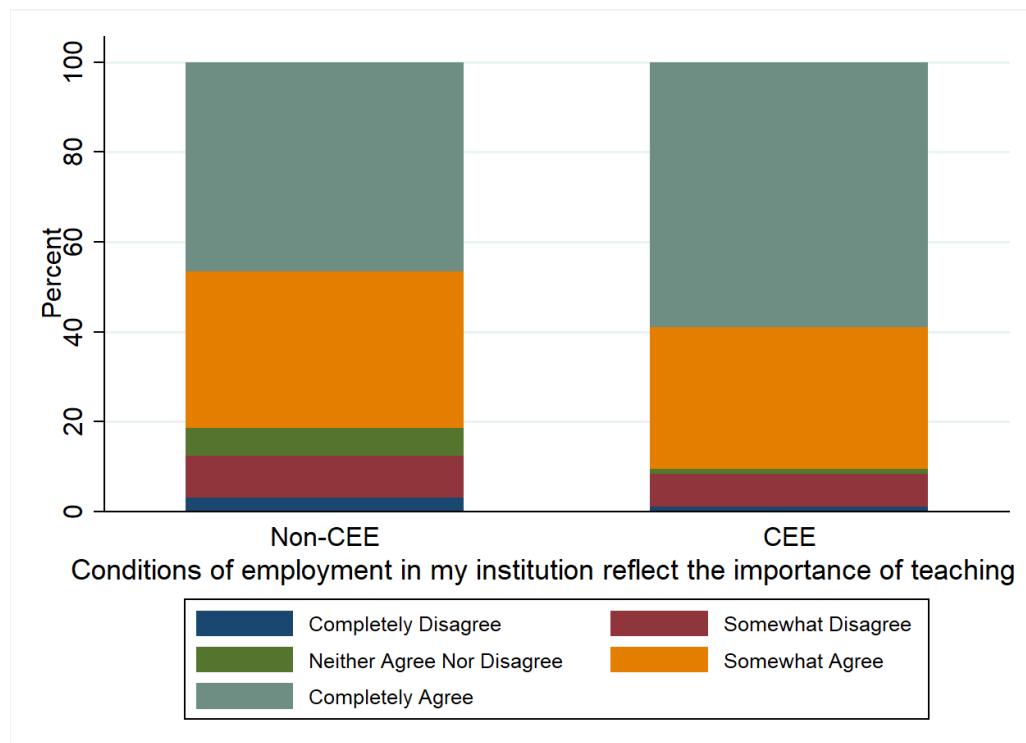
Figure 24. Recognition of teaching skills in higher education institutions



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Survey results also indicate that the higher education institutions in the Central and Eastern Europe are taking more significant steps to ensure that the conditions of employment would reflect the importance of teaching (see Figure 25). This is not surprising, since during the last two decades higher education institutions in this region have invested heavily into modernising their infrastructure and ensuring adequate resources for teaching, learning and research. Furthermore, many states in Central and Eastern Europe have recently undertaken significant reforms in order to improve the overall quality of higher education and conditions in individual higher education institutions.

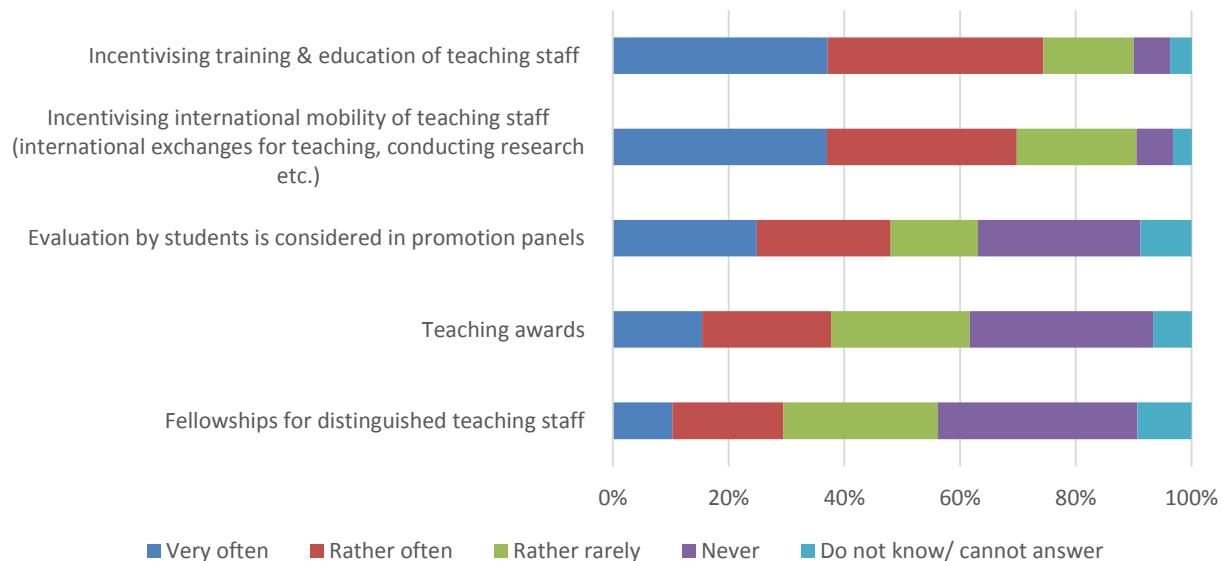
Figure 25. Conditions of employment reflect the importance of teaching: CEE and other EU member states



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Figure 26. Motivational measures to support teaching in higher education institutions

How often are the following motivational measures and practices used in your institution to promote professional development of teaching staff?



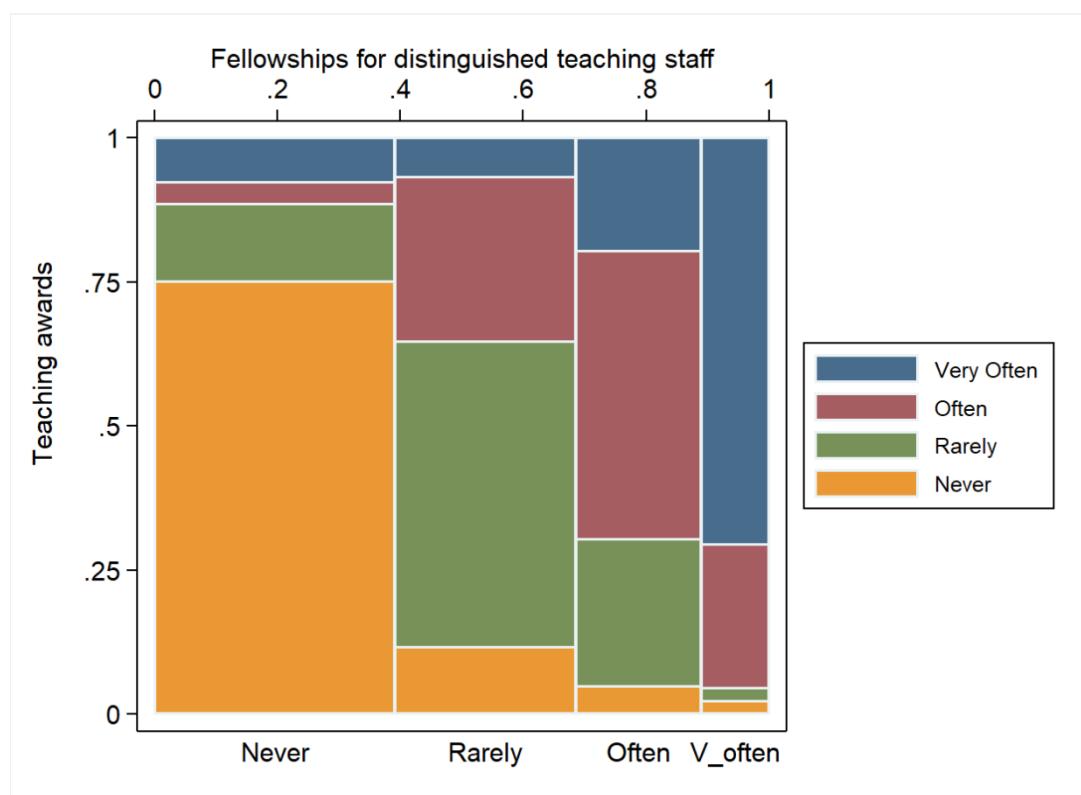
Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Furthermore, higher education institutions have indicated that the most common measures to incentivise staff training and professional development in higher education

institutions were: offering of courses and training opportunities as well as offering international mobility opportunities for professional development. However, measures aimed at raising the status of teaching in HE, like teaching awards and fellowships for distinguished teachers were rather rarely used.

A more in-depth analysis has revealed that, though only a small portion of higher education institutions use the Teaching Awards and Fellowships for distinguished teachers to incentivise quality teaching, the use of these measures is correlated and higher education institutions that use one type of incentive, also are rather likely to use another. Figure 27 shows a cross-tabulation of the use of such incentives. The size of the sections indicates the share of respondents having chosen different answers, the results clearly demonstrate that in those higher education institutions, where Teaching Awards are used, the use of Teaching Fellowships is also high.

Figure 27. Use of teaching awards and fellowships for distinguished teachers



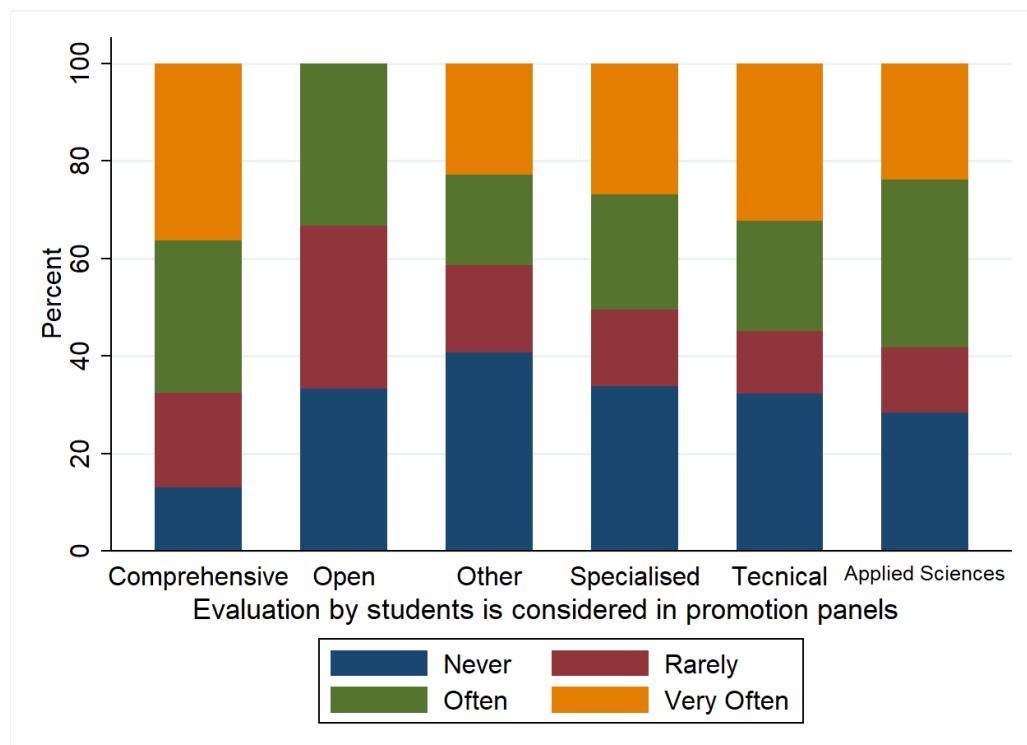
Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

The use of teaching awards and fellowships for teachers might heavily depend on internal management policies of individual higher education institutions and, therefore, lower prevalence of these measures might not constitute a significant problem, as higher education institutions might develop other commemorative measures to support quality teaching. However, the **results of survey of higher education institutions also show a rather negative trend that student perception of the teaching quality is considered as a factor in the promotion panels of less than 50% of European higher education institutions**. This is truly negative sign, given the fact that over the last three years research has demonstrated validity of using the student satisfaction data

by showing that it correlates with the perceived learning and utility of the course rather than actual grade received by the student.⁶⁴

A more in-depth analysis of the survey data reveals that these data are most commonly used in the comprehensive universities and universities of applied sciences, while other types of higher education institutions use it to a smaller degree (see Figure 28). The situation is the most problematic in the open universities, only 30% of which use these data "Often".

Figure 28. Use of student evaluation data in staff promotion panels by type of a higher education institution



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Data from our interview programme and desk-research supports the survey results and reveals a mixed picture. Some higher education institutions have taken significant active steps to promote teaching and adopt student-centred learning provisions, while others have shown significant reluctance to change the established teaching and course delivery modes. Nonetheless, it seems likely, given the influence of the QA agencies and the national authorities, that sustained pressure from them might lead higher education institutions to increasingly adopt student-centred learning provisions.

The desk research and the interview programme have revealed that in some higher education institutions significant steps are being taken to further reward teaching by creating separate career progression paths for teachers and thus allow high-quality teachers to advance their careers in their institutions solely through their pedagogical activities. For example, in Lund University in Sweden or in International School of Management (ISM) in Lithuania these tracks were introduced to help the university staff who focus their activities either exclusively or mostly on teaching, to continue to enhance

⁶⁴ Ana Torres, Filipa David, and Marta Garcia (2017) "Quality assurance of teaching and learning: validity and usefulness of student ratings", paper presented in 12th European Quality Assurance Forum "Responsible QA – committing to impact" in Riga.

the quality of their teaching activities and help them to advance their careers by continuous excellence in teaching.

Following the publication of the Norwegian White Paper on "Quality Culture in Higher Education",⁶⁵ more higher education institutions in Norway are looking into ways to establish such alternative teaching-based career progression paths for their staff. Though this is undoubtedly a positive development, such initiatives are few and far between and, therefore, still constitute an exception rather than a trend.

Meanwhile, the University of Helsinki implemented a different initiative to reward teaching excellence. It started the Teachers' Academy project, which allows teachers from different higher education institutions to apply for a three-year stipend, given to teachers in higher education institutions who want to implement certain pedagogical innovations or experiment with novel teaching methods. The idea behind the stipend is that it provides both individual teachers and their host institutions with additional funding and allows teachers in higher education institutions to focus exclusively on teaching and not to look for new research projects to supplement their income. Additionally, membership of the Teachers' Academy acts as a badge of honour for both the individual lecturer and for the host institution.⁶⁶

Furthermore, University of Helsinki has managed to implement another initiative, which can be considered a good practice in the European context. The "HowULearn" initiative collects data and provides advice for university students on how to improve their learning and deal with the workload and stress.⁶⁷ Additionally, this online tool serves to improve teaching by providing an evidence base to assess which teaching methods and techniques are effective or result in significant stress on the student. More impressively, the University of Helsinki managed to launch this initiative and the above-mentioned Teachers' Academy amidst major budget cuts that reduced its budget by about € 100 million.⁶⁸

Other higher education institutions have made efforts to improve the quality of their teaching, adapt to the student-centred learning requirements as well as to the pressures resulting from increasingly diverse student bodies by establishing centres of excellence for teaching. These centres conduct various experiments with novel teaching methods and small-scale pilot actions where new approaches to teaching and new teaching techniques are tested. Furthermore, these centres of excellence document and analyse their efforts and disseminate the best practices within their institutions and among other higher education institutions. One such initiative is the TRANSArk centre of excellence at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology (NTNU) in Trondheim.⁶⁹ The centre conducts research on new pedagogies and develops pilot initiatives to test them. After a trial period the initiatives are evaluated, and successful best practices are implemented and disseminated among the key stakeholders (see Figure 29). These centres of excellence are significant because they have a major transformative potential. Even a few such centres of excellence in a small number of higher education institutions can develop powerful new tools and techniques, which can benefit a large number of higher education institutions internationally⁷⁰.

⁶⁵ Ministry of Education and Research of Norway: Report to the Storting (white paper): "Quality Culture in Higher Education" Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)

⁶⁶ University of Helsinki: Teachers' Academy <<http://www.helsinki.fi/news/archive/9-2012/3-12-30-42>>

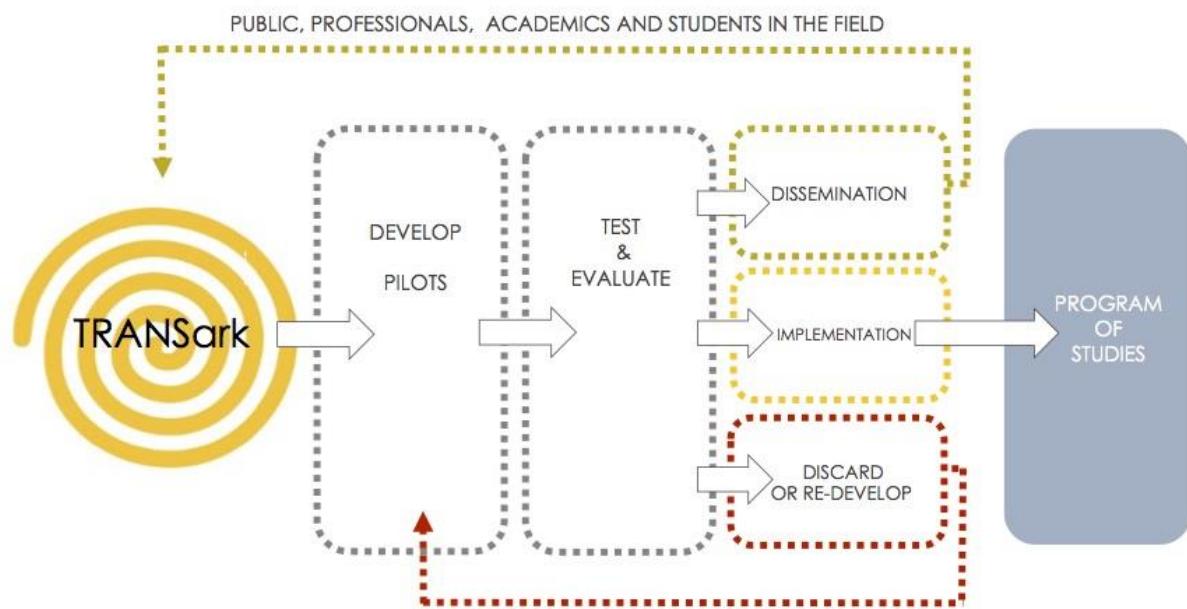
⁶⁷University of Helsinki Blog entry on "HowULearn" <<http://blogs.helsinki.fi/howulearn/en/>>

⁶⁸ ENQA Agency Review: Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC) (2017)

⁶⁹ TRANSArk website <<https://www.ntnu.edu/transark/organisation>>

⁷⁰ Ministry of Education and Research of Norway: Report to the Storting (white paper): "Quality Culture in Higher Education" Meld. St. 16 (2016–2017)

Figure 29. TRANSark centre of excellence activities



Source: TRANSark website.

However, some higher education institutions have reported difficulties in keeping up to existing standards of teaching quality and to raise them further, due to increasing financial pressures and budget cuts. Many higher education institutions in Ireland have reported that stricter budgets require the teaching staff to work longer hours and with larger groups of students. This, consequentially, leaves them with very little time to conduct research and engage in research and professional development activities.

Finally, our research has also revealed that in some HE systems higher education institutions are unwilling to take steps to further promote teaching and especially student-centred learning provisions. This unwillingness occurs due to two sets of reasons: some higher education institutions are unwilling to break with established and traditional ways of teaching and learning; and some higher education institutions struggle to internalise the new norms and provisions.

In countries like France and Italy, which have some of the oldest and most respectable higher education institutions in the continent, commitment to the established traditions, especially those related to how courses are taught as well as perceptions on how students should learn are strong. Against these perceptions, higher education institutions show reluctance to engage with various innovations or do not consider that they can benefit from the progressive teaching and learning practices. Even the very existence of the ESG, not to mention student-centred learning provisions therein, are unknown to many such higher education institutions.⁷¹

Meanwhile, in Slovakia many teaching professionals refuse to engage with student-centred learning and innovations in course delivery practices. While it is difficult to pinpoint the exact reasons for this, the fact that academia is dominated by older professionals (only 25% of the teaching staff are younger than 56) could be regarded as an important factor. While these professionals are undoubtedly highly skilled and knowledgeable, the prevailing attitude in the academia is that professional development,

⁷¹ Marie-Jo Goedert, CTI, France (2017) "Enhancing Quality Culture in Higher Education: government incentives and the role of HEI leadership", presentation in PLA Oslo, 16-17 November.

especially the development of the teaching skills is something only for early career stage staff members while more established academics do not need to engage in these activities.

Overall, our findings show that since 2014 there has been a significant push to place more emphasis on teaching and learning in HE as well as to adopt the student-centred learning provisions. This trend is clearly visible in all levels of analysis: European, national/regional, and institutional. Of course, there are exceptions to this trend and while in European and national levels there seems to be broad support for putting a higher emphasis on teaching, at the institutional level, the situation is more nuanced and some higher education institutions have shown reluctance to engage with these developments.

There are many reasons why this occurs, one of them being the fact that the actual staff members in higher education institutions are attracted to academic work primarily by the freedom and autonomy of research work.⁷² While, it is widely acknowledged that adapting student-centred learning provisions can help the academics to enhance their research activities by engaging their students or involving them in research,⁷³ about a third of academics still perceive any efforts to raise the quality of their teaching and incorporating student-centred learning provisions to be in direct competition for their time with research.⁷⁴ This tension is further compounded by the previously mentioned fact that only a minority of European higher education institutions factor-in the students' perceptions of the quality of teaching into the staff promotion panels.

The existence of these tensions is well known, and European level documents emphasise the necessity to ensure institutional support and adequate resources for teaching and learning activities (e.g. Standard 1.6 in ESG). However, recent budget cuts have made it difficult for many higher education institutions to ensure adequate support in the financial resources for teaching and learning activities. Additionally, the recent budget cuts have resulted in a situation where an increasing share of academic staff (especially junior-level academics) are employed under fixed-term contracts.⁷⁵ Such lack of job-security and unsure career prospects may discourage younger teachers in higher education institutions to invest in their pedagogical skills and rather push them to strengthen their research profile, which is perceived to be more beneficial in the employment market for young academics.

However, as the above example from University of Helsinki suggests, significant steps can be taken by higher education institutions to promote teaching amidst the budget cuts and without contributing sizable amount of resources. Furthermore, the tensions between teaching and research can be, at least partly, reconciled by managing faculty workloads and granting academic staff members more time to perform their teaching and research activities, as well as allowing them to determine the best way the two can be integrated.⁷⁶

⁷² Kwiek, M. (2015). "Academic generations and academic work: patterns of attitudes, behaviors, and research productivity of Polish academics after 1989". *Studies in Higher Education*, 40(8), 1354-1376.

⁷³ ESU & EI (2016) "TIME FOR A NEW PARADIGM IN EDUCATION: STUDENT-CENTRED LEARNING Toolkit"

⁷⁴ Ulrich Teichler (2015) "Teaching and Research in Germany: The Notions of University Professors" in Jung Cheol Shin, Akira Arimoto, William K. Cummings, Ulrich Teichler (eds.) *Teaching and Research in Contemporary Higher Education*, Springer.

⁷⁵ European Commission (2017) "EURYDICE Brief: Modernisation of Higher Education in Europe: Academic Staff 2017"

⁷⁶ M. A. Khan (2017) "Achieving an Appropriate Balance between Teaching and Research in Institutions of Higher Education: An Exploratory Study", *International Journal of Information and Education Technology*, Vol. 7, No. 5.

3.3. Contribution of quality assurance to incorporating learning outcomes into teaching, learning and assessment

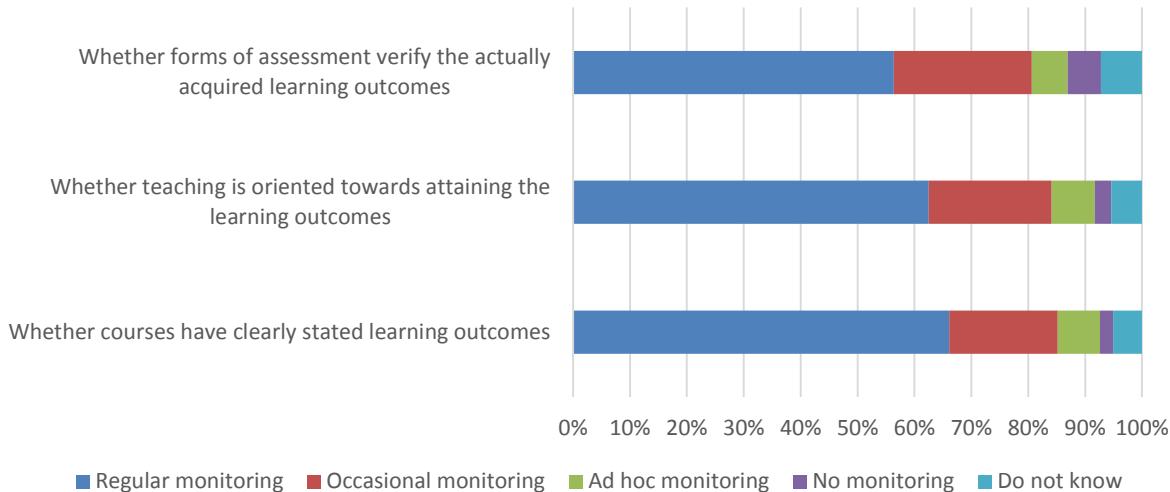
The incorporation of learning outcomes into higher education activities such as teaching, learning and assessment has been mainly driven by national authorities, which incorporated learning outcomes into national laws and regulations. It subsequently became a part of quality assurance systems. The additional emphasis on learning outcomes in the revised ESG was also a positive development. The majority of QA agencies now evaluate whether study programmes integrate learning outcomes. Yet, as seen from discussion below, evaluations need to be more thorough to guarantee that learning outcomes are well-connected with teaching, learning and assessment.

External QA has positively contributed to the incorporation of learning outcomes and this effect was particularly strong in the first few years after the introduction of learning outcomes. Based on the evaluations of QA agencies, many higher education institutions modified their curricula and study programmes. Having said that, many QA agencies evaluate compliance with minimal standards and lack more sophisticated assessment criteria. The Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA) and the Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) are good practice examples: they have some relatively extensive criteria to assess learning outcomes. PKA checks whether learning outcomes are publicly available and consistent with the National Qualification Framework, whether the curriculum enables students to achieve the intended learning outcomes, and whether the conditions and infrastructure necessary to achieve intended learning outcomes are in place. Similarly, NVAO, checks whether learning outcomes align with relevant qualification frameworks and international requirements, whether teaching and learning, including curriculum, staff services and facilities, ensure that students are able to achieve these learning outcomes, and whether study programmes have adequate student assessment, which demonstrates that learning outcomes have been achieved.

There was a consensus among the interviewees from QA agencies that the design of study programmes usually includes learning outcomes, however, their systematic incorporation into teaching, learning and assessment is still a challenge in many countries even though a comprehensive use of learning outcomes can help enhance the transparency and credibility of study programmes. The survey of higher education institutions also showed (see Figure 30) that a substantial number of higher education institutions do not regularly monitor the issues related to learning outcomes in their internal quality assurance systems, especially, when it comes to assessment.

Figure 30: Monitoring of learning outcomes in internal quality assurance

To what extent are the following issues related to learning outcomes monitored through internal quality assurance in your institution?



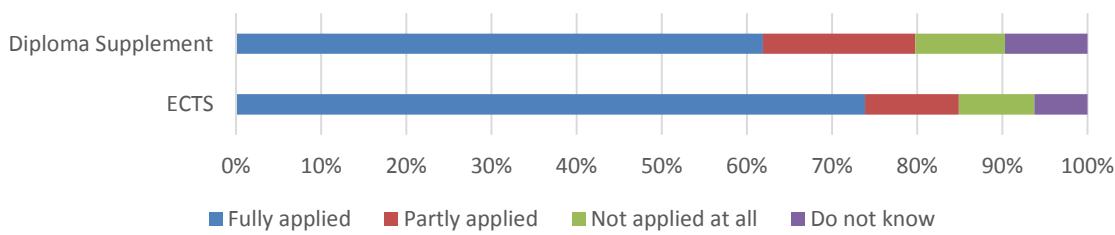
Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

The main challenge related to learning outcomes is that they are not well communicated and understood among the student population, and in some cases teaching staff. This tendency was found to be more common in countries that introduced learning outcomes in recent years. Training possibilities for staff can be a helpful tool in these countries. Poland, for example, has organised training programmes for staff on an individual and national level.

Overall, most respondents of the interview programme confirmed that implementation of learning outcomes go hand in hand with the implementation of other tools such as ECTS, Qualification Frameworks, and the Diploma Supplement. Most European higher education institutions fully or partly apply European tools based on learning outcomes approach, as indicated in the Figure 31.

Figure 31: Application of European tools

To what extent has your institution integrated and applies the following European tools based on learning outcomes approach?



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

In addition to the efforts of internal and external quality assurance systems of the EU Member States, there is a European tool – CALOHEE project – that offers a new approach for assessing and diagnosing the outcomes of higher education from a learning

outcomes-based perspective.⁷⁷ It looks at what graduates should know and be able to do in order to be successful in their careers. It is expected to offer understanding of strengths and weakness of study programmes and show how they compare to each other. It may be used to inform and complement existing quality assurance procedures for the evaluation of study programmes. CALOHEE's strength is that it encompasses knowledge, skills and wider competences, including civic, social and cultural engagement, which have not been mapped previously. The project currently covers only five subject areas: Civil Engineering, Nursing, Education, History and Physics. At the same time, the developed methodology is expected to be applicable to other fields of study and subject areas.

3.4. Contribution of quality assurance to meeting labour market needs

Interviews with representatives from national authorities and quality assurance agencies revealed that employability was seen as one of the most important indicators of higher education quality. Employers expect graduates to have skills that correspond to labour market needs and the fulfilment of these expectations is impossible without greater cooperation between higher education institutions and employers in order to increase the relevance of curricula and create more opportunities for students to access work-based learning.

In addition to providing relevant curricula, higher education institutions have to ensure that they equip students with transferable skills. The possession of these skills is expected to allow graduates to adapt more easily to the needs of a constantly changing labour market. Economic structures and the nature of many occupations are continuously evolving, and graduates are expected to be adaptable and mobile. In their careers, graduates might be required to undertake new tasks or even shift sectors to be employable.

Measurements of employability are gaining a momentum in quality assurance systems across European Higher Education Area. It is high on the agenda of national authorities, quality assurance agencies and individual higher education institutions.

Employers are generally involved in quality assurance systems across Europe. While the degree to which they are involved varies across countries, in most cases they are part of both internal and external QA systems. When asked whether they have to address the involvement of employers in the design, evaluation and curriculum development processes of study programmes, 65% of QA agencies indicate that they are required to evaluate this, while a further 28% do it without any formal requirements in place.

The interview programme revealed that higher education institutions could assume more responsibility for cooperation with employers and make them an integral part of internal QA in order to move towards quality enhancement. To make the involvement of employers more comprehensive, higher education institutions need to develop strategies and identify the best ways to engage with employers. Some examples of engagement include their involvement in the design, review and monitoring of study programmes, placements and internships, career advice and guidance, strategic partnerships in research, consultancy and enterprise activities, membership of the governance and decision-making structures of higher education institutions and quality assurance units. Higher education institutions in different countries or even within a country might have different strategic goals for their cooperation with employers. Yet, the production of a strategic document is not alone going to improve the existing situation. Higher education

⁷⁷ CALOHEE Policy Note: <https://www.calohhee.eu/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CALOHEE-Policy-Note.pdf>.

institutions have to commit to the regular monitoring and evaluation of their progress in achieving their strategic goals. QA agencies can also have a positive impact by providing advice and guidance to higher education institutions that are lacking effective tools in this area or create a common model that all higher education institutions are able to use. A good example of this practice is Quality and Qualifications Ireland, which issued guidelines on how employers can be involved in internal quality assurance systems.

The most common and widespread way to engage employers in external quality assurance is through their membership of different panels in the QA agencies. During the interview programme, a large share of respondents indicated that employers are required to be members of evaluation panels. It was also reported that employers are sometimes members of the review teams and are occasionally involved in policy-making bodies/processes. Quality assurance agencies often require higher education institutions to demonstrate how their study programmes correspond to the labour market needs while others can be required to demonstrate how their graduate tracking systems are used to improve study programmes or simply show that graduate tracking systems are operational.

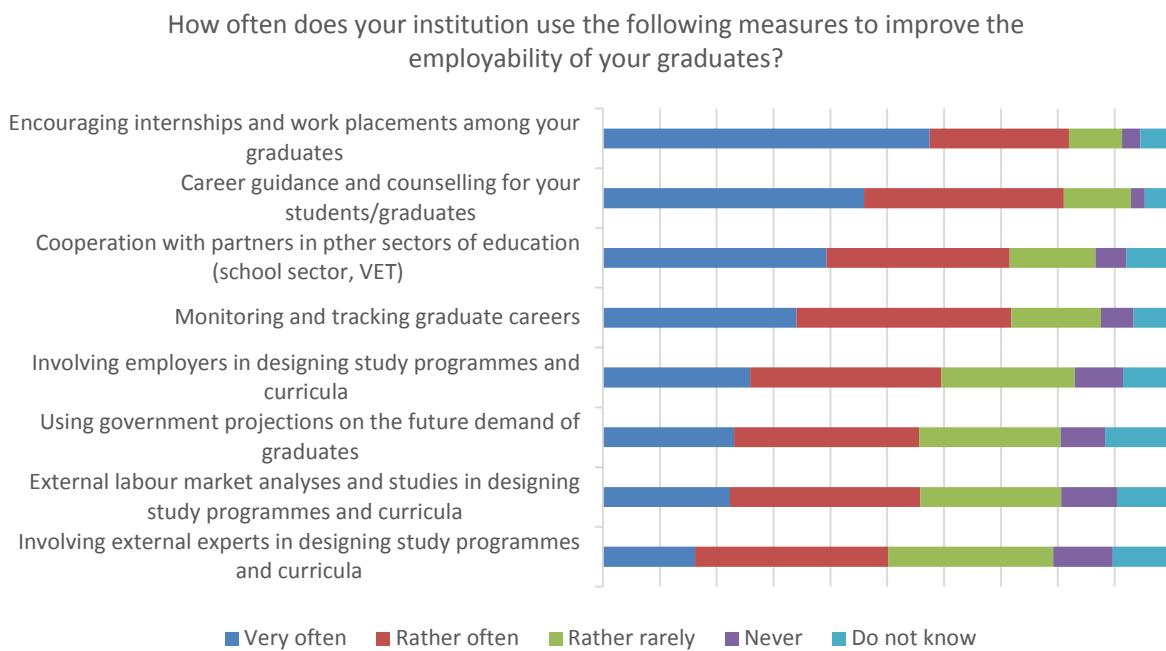
Employer surveys is a useful tool to help ascertain the views of employers regarding the expected outcome of higher education. Irish and Bulgarian interviewees indicated that they organise such surveys on a regular basis. These surveys allow national authorities, QA agencies and higher education institutions identify the existing gaps in higher education and look for ways to close them and concentrate their quality enhancement efforts on areas of concern. The topics for discussion can vary and depend on the condition of a specific higher education system but understanding employer satisfaction with the skills of higher education graduates can be particularly useful in trying to better correspond to labour market needs.

The survey of higher education institutions showed that the most common ways to improve employability of graduates are:

- Encouraging work placements and internships;
- Career guidance and counselling;
- Cooperation with partners in other sectors of education (e.g. school sector and VET);
- Monitoring and tracking careers of their graduates.

Less common ways include labour market analyses and studies, involvement of external experts and employers in the design of their study programmes and curricula as shown in Figure 32.

Figure 32: Measures to improve employability of graduates



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions.

The promotion of internships and work placements can also facilitate stronger cooperation opportunities between higher education institutions and employers. When such activities are part of study programmes, it is important that they guarantee the allocation of credits and are well linked with the content of study programmes and learning outcomes. One of the best examples in this area is in Lithuania, where students are often allowed to earn credits through internships in private and public sector. Another example of good practice is in Denmark where a large number of students in professionally-oriented programmes have to prepare a final year project in cooperation with an employer. A topic or a problem is identified in that particular company and a student is expected to analyse it and provide possible solutions/ideas. A representative of Danish trade union cooperation said that it is quite common for employers to take these projects seriously and provide employment to students who showed excellence.

The study also found that there are different approaches to graduate tracking across European Higher Education Area countries. Depending on the country, it can be done on institutional or national level or both, on a regular or ad hoc basis. It can also be part of national or institutional agenda and in some cases is well integrated into quality assurance systems. During the interview programme, respondents from Finland, France, Lithuania, Romania and Poland identified graduate tracking as a tool that they use to assess employability. It can be done through surveys or more sophisticated systems that use social insurance or labour market data. Surveys were often mentioned by interview respondents as main means for graduate tracking; they provide an opportunity to better understand opinions and experiences of graduates on a wide range of important topics. They can include, but are not limited to, graduate satisfaction with study programmes and careers, and usefulness of their study programmes, and the knowledge and skills that they gained during their studies. However, this method can be negatively affected by a low response rate and distorted memory. Advantages of graduate tracking based on administrative data include wide-reach, low-cost and effectiveness.

An advanced system based on administrative data operates in Poland, which allows for monitoring of graduates' outcomes on the labour market by the type of studies and higher education institution. It gives an opportunity for prospective students to examine courses and higher education institutions that offer the best employment prospects while looking at the salary potential and the duration of unemployment after the graduation. It also allows higher education institutions to identify weakness in their overall education quality or the shortcomings of specific programmes. These advantages of graduate tracking were also identified in the New Skills Agenda for Europe.⁷⁸ Yet, as the Council Recommendation on tracking graduates highlight, there is still a lack of well-developed systems for collecting, analysing and using data on graduates of tertiary education.⁷⁹ Thus, the Recommendation intends to support Member States in improving the quality and availability of information on what graduates go on to do after leaving tertiary education. The Recommendation calls on Member States to develop national graduate tracking systems, using graduate surveys and administrative data, and to cooperate to make data from different EU countries easier to compare. In order to improve the availability of comparable data at EU level and allow EU-comparative analyses of graduate outcomes, the Recommendation also called on the Commission to develop a pilot phase of a European graduate survey, which was launched in January 2018 with a lifespan of two years and will capture Bachelor, Master and tertiary short cycle graduates one and five years after graduation assessing their labour market integration, their perceived skills, careers paths and working conditions and how other contextual factors, primarily socio-demographic and economic, affect them.

3.5. Broadening the scope of quality assurance in terms of issues covered, learning pathways and delivery modes

Broadening the scope of quality assurance to include more issues is still a challenge across the European Higher Education Area. Although there is an increasing awareness of the need for QA to take into account newly emerging issues (e.g. ICT-based learning tools), in many countries this process is still in its early stage.

Issues such as widening participation, reducing dropout rates, internationalisation, innovation, and employability are increasingly seen as issues that should be covered by external and internal QA. However, until recently, in many countries these issues were considered only at a political level without being fully ingrained in the actual practices of national QA systems.

Desk research and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders shows that QA agencies can contribute to broadening the scope of quality assurance by employing a greater variety of QA tools than the usual accreditations/evaluations. They can steer the national QA process through drafting guidelines, undertaking research, publishing good practices, providing consultative activities to higher education institutions, and reporting on the general state of quality in higher education. When it comes to consultative activities, it is important to ensure that conflict of interest is avoided and there is a clear distinction between activities that fall within and outside the scope of the ESG. This approach allows QA agencies to cover a broader variety of issues without making them formal criteria for external QA. Such an approach serves as a way to move from simple compliance to quality enhancement and the development of quality culture in higher education. It also transfers more responsibility to higher education institutions and their internal QA systems. This approach is common in countries that have well developed internal QA systems such as Ireland, the UK or Finland. In this way, QA agencies become

⁷⁸ COM/2016/0381 final <<http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52016DC0381>>

⁷⁹ Council Recommendation on tracking graduates <<http://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-14208-2017-INIT/en/pdf>>

a catalyst for change and guide higher education institutions in the development and enhancement of their internal QA processes.

Another way to broaden the scope of quality assurance is by introducing a thematic element to it. It means that specific issues are introduced into quality assurance when they become relevant or problematic. It allows QA systems to concentrate on the most pressing topics when there is some concern at the national level, or within QA agencies and higher education institutions, for example, internationalisation, employability, dropout rates, student support services, and new delivery modes among others.

Another tool that can be used by higher education institutions in order to broaden the scope of their internal QA systems is internal surveys. Interview respondents from several higher education institutions identified that student and staff surveys are used as means to identify shortcomings in the quality of their provision. They became an integral part of their internal QA systems and more issues are increasingly being introduced into these surveys. Interview respondents explained that many questions are designed with the intention to better understand priority issues and the expectations of staff and students in regard to them. However, the fact that new topics are being regularly added and the volume of surveys is increasing can result into the low response rate. Nevertheless, some good practices were identified by interview respondents. Some higher education institutions established bodies that overlook the use of surveys so that topics do not overlap, several surveys do not run at the same time, and they are more dispersed and targeted. It is also important that responsible actors (e.g. quality assurance units, the management of a higher education institution, teachers) take the results into account and make improvements. A survey for prospective students was mentioned in one of the interviews, which can be used to inform responsible bodies on issues such as widening participation and internationalisation.

Widening participation

We found that the responsibility to widen participation in HE usually lies with the national authorities responsible for the implementation of higher education. This issue is ingrained in the national legislation of many countries. Various tools are used in order to promote inclusive higher education and facilitate access to higher education for different social groups. These social groups include people from low-income families, people with disabilities, adult learners, and non-native speakers.

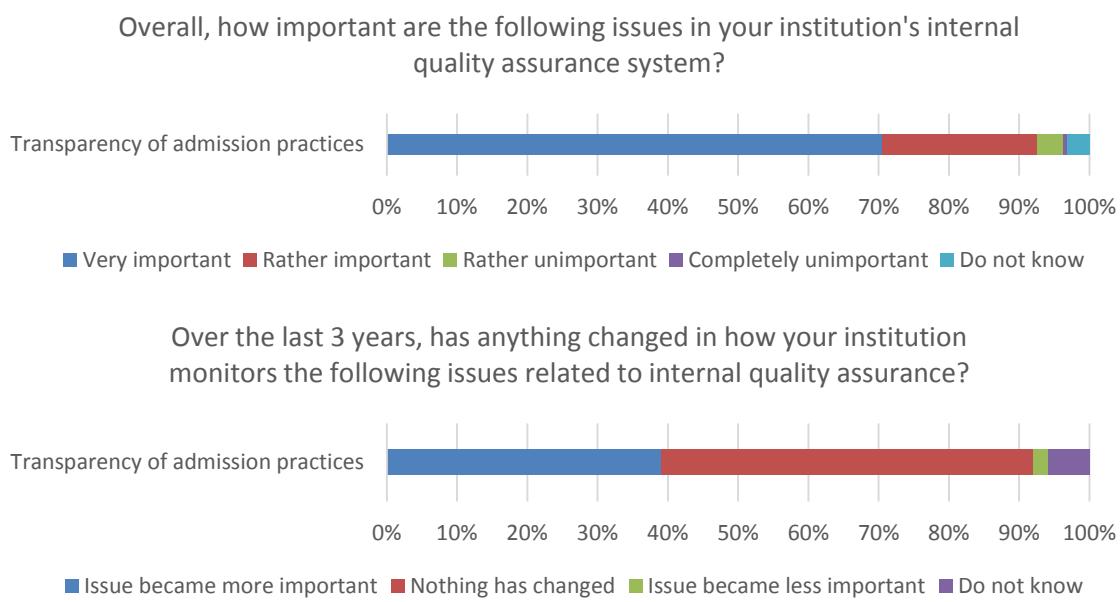
Some countries have national and institution-level targets for widening participation. They are usually decided on the national level as part of a national strategy concerning higher education. For example, this approach is applied in Ireland, where the targets are established with the Higher Education Authority, which is responsible for the effective governance and regulation of the HE system.

When it comes to QA, the issue of widening participation is in most cases covered by both internal QA and external QA. Around 59% of higher education institutions that participated in the survey, reported that they regularly monitor widening access to their study programmes as part of their internal quality assurance. Around 40% of quality assurance agencies answered that they are required to evaluate this issue and an additional 44% of QA agencies answered that they usually evaluate this issue without it being a formal requirement.

In some countries, QA agencies indirectly address this issue by evaluating the recognition of prior learning and the transparency of admission practices. A more widespread recognition of prior learning and flexible study options such as part-time studies or online learning make higher education more accessible to adult learners and learners with

disabilities, and students from low income families can often combine studies with work. In this regard, QA agencies can also evaluate the transparency of procedures that higher education institutions use to manage and monitor their admission policies. Quality and Qualifications Ireland, for example, implemented an analysis of the recognition of prior learning, and the management and monitoring of admission policies to cover widening participation in their external quality assurance processes. Figure 33 shows that transparency of admission practices is also high on the agenda of European higher education institutions. Yet, there were no changes in the last three years in how the majority of higher education institutions monitor transparency of their admission practices.

Figure 33: Transparency of admission practices



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Reducing dropout rates

The issue of dropout rates is considered in the majority of QA systems across the European Higher Education Area. However, different countries often measure different indicators when evaluating study success. In addition to dropout rates, retention and time to complete a degree are measured. Admission systems can also affect dropout rates but the rules and regulations for access to higher education differ markedly among European countries and higher education institutions. We found that there is a lack of common approach across European Higher Education Area countries, which makes it more difficult to have a full picture on reducing dropout rates.

Around 65% of European higher education institutions that participated in the survey, reported that they regularly monitor dropout rates as part of their internal quality assurance process. Some higher education institutions indicated that in order to develop efficient monitoring mechanisms they needed additional resources that are not always available. Others explained that the main challenge is related to the analysis of data and the use of this data to make informed decisions. There were also higher education institutions that see a lot of potential in this area due to the introduction of new digital tools, which made data collection and analysis easier.

Interviews with relevant stakeholders revealed that student support services are an important tool used to reduce dropout rates and increase student engagement and satisfaction with their studies. Internal and external quality assurance can assess student support services and look at indicators such as students' attendance, tutoring and peer-mentoring programmes, counselling and other advisory services among others. The existence of these services, however, does not necessarily guarantee their quality and effectiveness; therefore, assessment of student support services is an integral part of the ESG.

Internationalisation

Internationalisation as a QA topic is gaining momentum across the European Higher Education Area. It is growing in importance in some countries due to the changing demographic trends. Interestingly, this applies to countries that have both an increase and decrease in their student population. Internationalisation is often evaluated by both internal and external quality assurance systems.

Teichler⁸⁰ suggests three main areas related international student mobility: inwards mobility, balance and reciprocity of student flows, and international experience. All these areas are used by higher education institutions and QA agencies to evaluate internationalisation of higher education.

The number of incoming international students is considered in internal and external QA in a number of countries. QA is often concerned with how many international students a particular higher education institution has managed to attract, the capability of a particular higher education institution to receive international students and the ability of a particular higher education institution to maintain the satisfaction levels of international students. Interview respondents from Lithuania and Finland indicated that internationalisation is often discussed in the strategic documents of higher education institutions. The UK, for example, also has a guiding document for higher education institutions on managing the international student experience. The main goal of this document is to establish a set of principles for developing an inclusive environment for the growing international student body. Quality and Qualifications Ireland has taken a different approach and awards an International Education Mark to higher education institutions that demonstrate their fitness to enrol international students. While the Dutch higher education institutions signed the Code of Conduct, which guarantees the quality standards of higher education provided to international students. For example, it includes provisions on the quality of study programmes and requirements for admission of international students among others.

Erasmus+ was mentioned by many respondents as the main contributor to increasing the number of international students. It is expected that it will continue to serve as a driving force for the internationalisation of higher education, which in turn positively affects the quality of education and research, enhances skills and competences of students and staff, and increases employability of graduates. Furthermore, it promotes a common European identity.⁸¹

Increasing the number of outgoing students is high on European agenda and is an important strategic target of the Bologna Process. However, we found that little attention

⁸⁰ Teichler, V. (2017) Internationalisation Trends in Higher Education and the Changing Role of International Student Mobility. *Journal of International Mobility*, 1(5), 177-216: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-journal-of-international-mobility-2017-1-page-177.html>.

⁸¹ European Commission (2014) "The Erasmus Impact Study: Effect of mobility in the skills and employability of students and the internationalisation of higher education institutions": http://ec.europa.eu/dgs/education_culture/repository/education/library/study/2014/erasmus-impact_en.pdf

was paid to the outgoing student body by QA agencies in most countries and it was rarely mentioned by respondents when talking about the internationalisation of higher education. Even countries that receive the most international students have relatively low numbers of outgoing students. Norway is one of these countries. Yet, it has a very ambitious goal of ensuring that 20% of their student population has a study exchange period abroad in 2020 and in the long term, the proportion of students that study abroad is expected to extend to half of its student population. NOKUT – the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education, under the Ministry of Education, proposed that each study programme works out agreements for study abroad periods.

Learning pathways and delivery modes

There was a consensus among the interviewees that QA does not yet pay sufficient attention to new delivery modes and learning pathways. The lack of widespread adoption of quality and evaluation/accreditation standards for new delivery modes is a pressing issue that was noted in the Digital Education Manifesto of the Malta EU Presidency.⁸² The main reason for this is that the use of new learning pathways and delivery modes is occasional rather than regular. In some cases, massive open online courses (MOOCs) are excluded from quality assurance systems because they often only offer non-credit awarding certificates.

Only 41% of QA agencies participating in our survey responded that they were required to assess the use of unconventional learning pathways or delivery modes. This can be corroborated by the data collected through interviews where respondents from QA agencies and national authorities indicated that formal criteria for the assessment of MOOCs and blended learning are still lacking and therefore not yet widely used. However, an additional 49% of surveyed QA agencies answered that they usually evaluate this issue without it being a formal requirement. Some interviewees mentioned that in cases where these delivery modes were used, they were evaluated on the same criteria as traditional delivery modes.

Some progress regarding this issue was achieved when the revised ESG recognised the importance of flexible learning pathways, digital learning and new forms of delivery.⁸³ The introductory part of the document provides a good reference point for higher education institutions and QA agencies.

⁸² Malta EU Presidency (2017) "Digital Education Manifesto":
<https://education.gov.mt/en/digitaleducation/Documents/Malta%20EU%20Presidency%20Digital%20Education%20Manifesto.pdf>

⁸³ E4 Group (2015) "Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area"

3.6. The extent to which the ESG 2015 met expectations

One of the most important events that took place after the publication of the previous study in 2014, was the revision of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for QA in HE in 2015. The revision of the ESG was prompted by three main reasons: 1. Stakeholders expressed the view that some of the standards or guidelines were vague; 2. The distinction between standards and guidelines was not always clear⁸⁴; 3. There was a need to update existing standards and approaches to match the changing QA and HE landscape in Europe. The mandate to commence with the revision of the ESG was given in the Ministerial Conference in Bucharest in 2012. The MAP-ESG project carried out by the E4 Group, which facilitated stakeholder consultations and help to formulate the revisions to the ESG that were needed.⁸⁵

Further expectations to the new ESG were, among others:

- Raising quality by more precise standards;
- Widening the scope of QA to include issues as reducing the student drop-out rates and broadening the access to HE;
- Enhancing Quality Culture;
- Opening the QA up for cooperation with other sectors.⁸⁶

The revisions of the ESG affected all three parts of the document, but the most significant changes were made to Part 1: Internal Quality Assurance. The changes in this section included:

- Greater emphasis on the learning outcomes approach (five out of ten standards);
- The introduction of a standard on student-centred learning (see a section on teaching above)
- More emphasis placed on teaching as the core mission of higher education institutions (see section on teaching above);
- More emphasis placed on collecting, analysing and using data for management and decision making.

The biggest changes for the QA agencies in the ESG Part 2 and Part 3 included:

- Stricter requirement to have own QA policy;
- Requirement to create a complaints and appeals process within the agency;
- Strengthening the student involvement in the external QA procedures with the explicit requirement to include student representatives into review panels.
- Requirement to periodically publish all reports and analyses (changed from “*from time to time*”);
- Requirement to periodically undergo external review (changed from guideline to standard).

Other sections of the report present the analysis how these changes in the ESG have contributed to meeting the broader expectations of the QA community. Our research shows that the stakeholders consider that some progress was made towards raising the quality standards, widening the scope of QA and enhancing the quality culture. There is a broad agreement that these processes are on the way and changes in the desired direction are happening at an incremental pace. As the subsequent section indicates, the perception towards the last expectation – cooperation with other education sectors is more mixed and not all stakeholders consider this to be desirable. In order to make

⁸⁴ Fernando M Galán Palomares (2016) “New Tools for New Realities: Intro to the revised European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) for Quality Assurance”, presentation at EQUIP Workshop Amsterdam, 14 March.

⁸⁵ EURASHE (2012) “EURASHE REPORT ON THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EUROPEAN STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS”.

⁸⁶ COM(2014) 29 final “Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education”

further progress on this issue, a broad consultation with the stakeholders is needed to take existing concerns into account and forge a consensus between the different stakeholder groups.

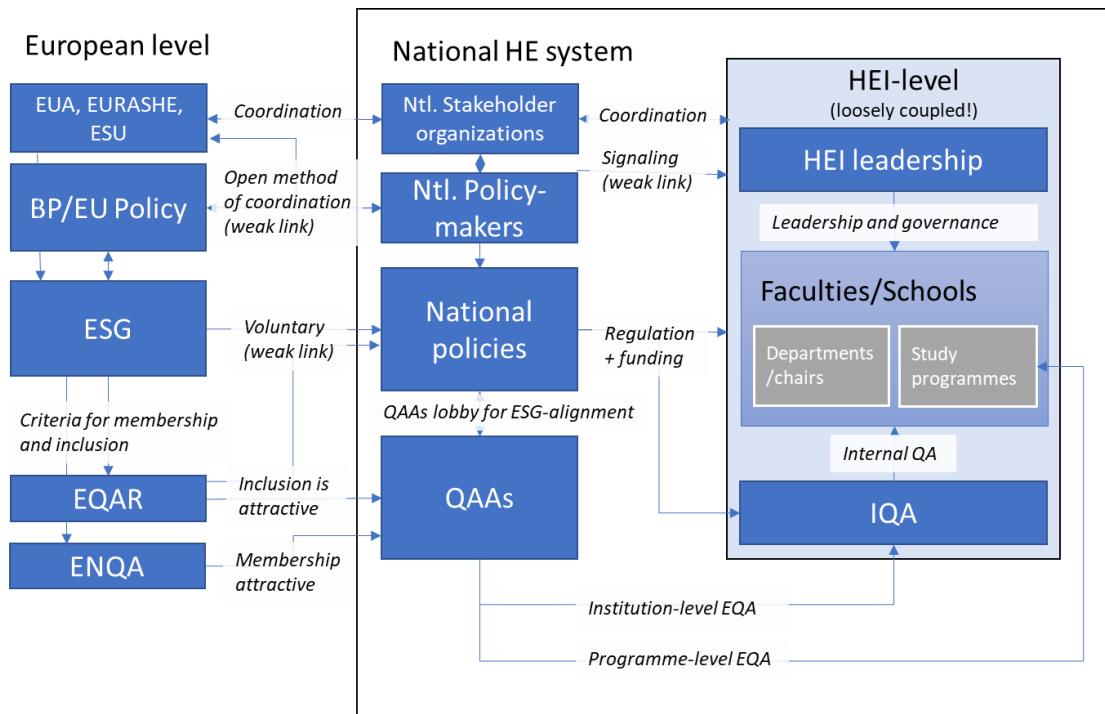
A key question meanwhile, is how well the ESG 2015 has met the narrower expectations set for the document itself. One of the aims of ESG 2015, like that of its predecessor ESG 2005, was to systematise the ongoing discussions in the European QA community and to set clear universally shared standards which would be known to all stakeholders and actors in the field of QA. In this regard, the ESG 2015 has been almost universally successful. During the interview programme we gathered the opinions and perceptions from the QA agencies and national authorities and there was a near uniform consensus that the ESG 2015 very well serves the function of communicating standards for carrying out QA. There was some resistance to the ESG from some of the oldest HE systems in EU (see section 3.2). However, this resistance came mostly from the general reluctance in these HE systems to engage with the new trends in HE and adopt the good practices from abroad rather than being caused by any flaws in the document itself. It also must be noted that the ESG 2015 has fared better than its predecessor ESG 2005, since the higher education institutions in some of the HE systems where the ESG 2005 were virtually unknown (e.g. Germany) have adopted the new revised version of 2015.

In part, the successful dissemination of the new ESG 2015 could be attributed to the EQUIP project, co-funded by the Erasmus+ programme.⁸⁷ Under the project, a guide outlining the changes between the two versions of the ESG was prepared and disseminated and multiple activities were organised to inform the stakeholders about the new ESG and the changes to internal and external QA processes resulting from it.

We believe that in order to effectively support the implementation of the ESG even further, the Commission, the Member States and other relevant stakeholders may benefit from a more shared understanding of the ESG delivery model (the EQUIP project has already made substantial progress in this area). This would allow to better understand "who should do what, when and how" in order to make sure that the ESG are mainstreamed from the European level, through the national level to the actual practices of higher education institutions. In order to be effective, the delivery model should be discussed with the key players in the field of QA, both EU and national. The key to policy success is alignment of perceptions and actions of the different actors. The Commission, E4 and EQAR could organise a stakeholder consultation mechanism to situate different supporting activities within the ESG delivery model, and a separate guiding document could be published as a result of this process. Figure 34 shows the preliminary ESG delivery model and demonstrates the links and connections between the key players involved in the process.

⁸⁷ EQUIP Project website < <http://www.equip-project.eu/about/> >

Figure 34. ESG delivery model



Source: developed by the study team.

Furthermore, it must be emphasised that although the degree of adoption of the ESG differs among the Member States, the general validity and usefulness of the document is not questioned (except for cases mentioned above). For instance, though some countries – as Latvia or Slovakia – do not yet have a QA agency compliant with the ESG, the representatives of both the QA agencies and the national authorities consider adopting the ESG as one of the key goals for the future. Similarly, though in some countries certain higher education institutions struggle to engage with some of the finer nuances of the ESG, such as student-centred learning or the development of the quality culture, they nonetheless consider greater adoption of the ESG as the best pathway to raise the quality standards in their institutions.

The role of the ESG 2015 is perceived differently across the Member States, yet there is a near universal agreement that the ESG 2015 provides a list of good standards and guidelines. In some countries, the standards of the ESG 2015 are followed to the letter while in some other countries the necessity for higher education institutions and QA agencies to adhere to the ESG is written into the national legislation, explicitly mentioning the ESG. Meanwhile, in other countries like Estonia, Croatia and Finland, ESG 2015 is understood more as a collection of general principles and guidelines, which allow for some flexibility when implemented in a specific national context. Officials interviewed in these countries emphasised that they require both QA agencies and higher education institutions in their HE systems to adhere to the core concepts or the spirit of the ESG, yet they also allow room for adaptation in the practical implementation of the ESG if it serves to further enhance the QA procedures.

Perhaps, the best indication that the ESG 2015 have met the expectations of the stakeholders is the fact that the ESG 2015 and the discussions leading up to it served as the guiding principles for higher education reforms in some countries. For instance, in 2012 Austria adopted the "Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education" as a part of a broader "Quality Assurance Framework Act" covering all education sectors. As the

discussions on the revision of the ESG were already under way, they served as the guiding principles and justification in preparing the new legislation. Similarly, in Finland the ESG 2015 served as the guiding principles for revising the external QA procedures of the Finnish QA agency, FINEEC.

Based on the evidence above, we can conclude that so far, the key stakeholders have not identified any major shortcomings or issues related to the ESG 2015. During the interview programme we detected no examples of stakeholders raising the same issues with the new ESG 2015 as they did with its predecessor (vagueness, confusion between standards and guidelines). Furthermore, the new ESG 2015 communicates more clearly about the shared standards and views on QA to stakeholders than its predecessor. The overall awareness of the ESG have increased following the publication of the revised version in 2015. Finally, there is a near-universal agreement in the QA community that the ESG are valid and fit for purpose in providing principles and guidelines how the QA processes should be carried out.

3.7. Is there a case for harmonisation of quality assurance principles across education sectors?

One of the recommendations made in the previous study in 2014 was to enhance cross-sector dialogue with other education sectors, especially VET on the theme of QA.⁸⁸ Building on this recommendation, we surveyed the opinions of the national authorities and QA agencies on whether such line of action would be feasible and beneficial.

Furthermore, since the publication of the previous study, the new European Qualification Framework containing an annex dedicated to QA for all education levels referenced in the new European Qualification Framework was published (2016).⁸⁹ We also collected perceptions of the national authorities and the QA agencies on the role this EQF annex has played.

Our research shows a mixed picture. On one hand, there is a broad understanding among the stakeholders that a number of QA principles are overlapping and can be applied throughout the different education sectors. However, some stakeholders are hesitant about pursuing a harmonised approach towards QA in different education sectors, due to certain unique features endemic in each sector. Therefore, though a case could be made for harmonisation of QA principles across education sectors, it has to follow a broad consultation with the stakeholders. Furthermore, even if such harmonisation takes place, the harmonised principles would have to be supplemented by sector-specific guidelines which would address the unique features of each education sector.

During the interview programme, a large number of QA agencies indicated overlaps in QA principles between different education sectors. Many QA agency representatives indicated that the following QA principles can be unequivocally applied throughout different education sectors:

- Clarity and transparency of institutional policies;
- Clear processes for the design and approval of the study programmes;
- Existence of clearly established links between study programmes and qualifications gained;

⁸⁸ COM (2014) 29 final "Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education"

⁸⁹ COM(2016) 383 final "ANNEXES to the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning and repealing the Recommendation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 23 April 2008 on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning"

- Orientation to quality and quality culture;
- Involvement of the key stakeholders in the decision making;
- Ensuring adequate resources for teaching and learning;
- Ongoing periodic review of the study programmes.

In some EU countries the substantial overlap between different educational sectors in terms of QA is well understood and exploited in practice, as the same QA agency is responsible for the external quality assurance in different sectors. Examples of such practice include:

- Estonia: the national QA agency, EKKA, is responsible for EQA in HE and VET sectors;
- Finland: the national QA agency, FINEEC, is responsible for QA in all education sectors;
- Ireland: the national QA agency, QQI is responsible for EQA in all tertiary (further) education sectors;
- Malta: the national QA agency, NCFHE, is responsible for EQA in all tertiary education sectors.

Such approach, to bring units responsible for QA in different education sectors under the same institution, has many advantages. It allows QA practitioners from different sectors to share their expertise, exchange best practices and share their knowledge of QA across different education sectors.

However, even in such institutions there exists a clear division between units responsible for different education sectors. This points to the issue that, even with the existence of significant overlaps in QA between different education sectors, each sector is unique and QA processes in these sectors have certain distinct features. For instance, as an interviewee pointed out: while it is important for higher education institutions to have good links to social partners and labour market stakeholders, in the VET sector the importance of this dimension is often far greater.

The difference between sectors becomes even more apparent moving from the level of abstract principles to more concrete guidelines or examples how these could be implemented. QA documents and guidelines for different education sectors use their own terminology and language. They address slightly different issues and provide guidelines to cope with certain sector specific challenges. A representative of Finnish QA agency has pointed out that although QA documents and guidelines for different education sectors largely deal with the same issues, they require different wording (e.g. documents for HE address the needs of *students*, while those for primary or secondary education deal with the needs of *pupils*). Furthermore, while it is important for QA purposes that all education institutions involve the key stakeholders into the decision making, HE and VET institutions have to forge working relationships with the employers, while in primary and secondary education, these key stakeholders are families and parents. Overall, the need to address these aspects makes drafting documents applicable for all education sectors very difficult and not very useful.

While QA agencies in general welcomed the idea of the harmonisation of QA approaches across different sectors, the national authorities have expressed a more mixed sentiment on the matter. In some cases, e.g. Estonia, representatives of the Ministry of Education and Science have expressed their support for the idea as such, but simultaneously indicated that not all QA principles for HE can be applied to other education sectors. Similar sentiments were expressed by the representatives of ministries in other countries (such as Lithuania or Finland) as well.

Nonetheless, despite these reservations, our research has revealed a large number of instances, when cooperation on QA has occurred between different education sectors since 2014. For instance, in Sweden institutional bodies responsible for QA in HE and VET sectors are separated by law, but they often cooperate and network informally. Additionally, there is a practice to invite the Swedish higher education QA agency representatives to the working groups of the QA authority for vocational education and training in order to foster good-practice exchange and expertise transfer.

Similarly, in France QA agencies from different educational sectors (agencies: HCERES, CTI, VTE QA agency and QA agency for management programmes) gathered to exchange good practices. This meeting resulted in a declaration aimed at creating a platform to facilitate the cooperation between the QA agencies. The platform is planned to include not only the representatives from the different QA agencies, but also external stakeholders: students and employers.

Furthermore, in Estonia and France, there are institutions which offer both HE and VET degrees and when these institutions are evaluated sometimes QA agencies from HE and VET sectors cooperate and provide joint-evaluations. In Estonia, the Estonian Academy of Security Sciences offers a wide range of study programmes from VET programmes for rescue workers to various HE degrees (MA in Internal Security or BA in Customs and Taxation). When the Academy was evaluated, two sub-units of Estonian QA agency, EKKA, formed a joint-panel which carried out the evaluation. Similarly, a French QA agency, CTI, is performing cross-sectoral QA of those institutions which offer both VET and HE degrees in the field of engineering.

Perhaps the most interesting example how the cooperation between different education sectors in the area of QA can take place is Ireland. In 2012, four agencies responsible for QA in different education sectors were combined to form a new agency, "Quality and Qualifications Ireland". This merger was prompted by the need to foster the integrity of the upper half of the NQF (corresponding to EQF levels 5-8) and in this manner to increase the access to further education for people throughout their lives. The EQA system in Ireland functions by granting education institutions power to award degrees corresponding to certain levels of the NQF. The degree awarding powers are granted to an institution based on a set of core principles that are valid across different education sectors and are supplemented by sector and topic specific guidelines. Generic standards⁹⁰ contain the specifications of the knowledge, skills and competences that are linked to different degrees and diplomas, while specific standards⁹¹ supplement the generic standards with the sector specific requirements in different subject areas. In pursuing such an approach, the Irish QA system has identified and exploited the common principles valid across different education sectors, while simultaneously allowing for flexibility to address certain sector and topic specific features. However, it must be noted that these standards in Ireland mostly address the learning outcomes of students/pupils, which are in turn linked to the NQF. Other areas related to course delivery or the management of the education institutions covered by the ESG are not included in these standards.

Arguably, the annex of the new EQF on "QA principles for qualifications referenced to the European Qualifications Framework" is one of the first attempts to move in this direction. It outlined the common QA principles for HE and VET sectors, in line with the existing sector-specific documents (ESG and EQAVET). However, surveyed stakeholders did not

⁹⁰ QQI Awards Standards: Generic Higher Education and Training <<http://www.qqi.ie/Publications/Publications/Generic%20Major%20Awards%20-20QQI%20Awards%20Standards.pdf>>

⁹¹ QQI Awards Standards: Topic specific standards <<http://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/Active-NFQ-Standards-for-HE.aspx>>

indicate that this document serves as a good platform for cross-sectoral cooperation on QA. Many of the surveyed stakeholders did not recall the contents of the document at all.

Overall, it could be argued that, in general, stakeholders see the value and potential for harmonisation of QA principles across education sectors, as evidenced by the general support for the idea among the stakeholders and many initiatives where cross-sector cooperation on QA was pursued in different Member States since the publication of the previous study in 2014. However, some stakeholders, especially national authorities, have some reservations how this harmonisation could be implemented or how the end result would look like.

The idea of harmonising QA principles could be pursued further, but broad consultations with various stakeholders in the field of QA are needed in order to ensure the success of such approach. If the harmonisation of QA principles across the different education sectors was to be pursued further, it nonetheless should be limited to set of core principles which are agreed to be valid across education sectors. These core principles then would have to be supplemented by sector-specific principles and guidelines to better adhere to unique issues and challenges in each education sector.

The QA-related annexes to the EQF (Annex III in the 2008 version and Annex IV of the 2017 version of the EQF) could be considered a good step forward in this direction. However, more consultations, involving the key stakeholders, are needed in order to determine if this is the best approach and to fine-tune it to the diverse needs of the key stakeholders. Currently, the discussions are still ongoing in the ET2020 Working Groups on QA principles for general education. Further work on the issue of cross-sectoral QA principles could be based on these.

3.8. Contribution of Erasmus+ to supporting quality assurance community and processes in 2014-2017

The previous report from the European Commission on Progress on QA in HE pointed out that one of the avenues to support QA community and processes in the EU is the Erasmus+ programme.⁹² More specifically, the report identified the following areas, where Erasmus+ could contribute to QA:

Support cross-border cooperation on QA:

- Networking among higher education institutions;
- Fostering the dialogue between higher education institutions and QA agencies on the recent developments in QA;
- Encouraging dialogue with other education sectors (VET);
- Facilitating the development of international joint-programmes.

Support the education reform and support the Bologna process:

- Promote the orientation towards a quality culture;
- Support the capacity for QA;
- Support the implementation of the Bologna process.

Erasmus+ programme support QA in HE through two main mechanisms: Key Action 3: Support to the implementation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms, and Key Action 3: Forward looking cooperation projects and strategic partnerships.

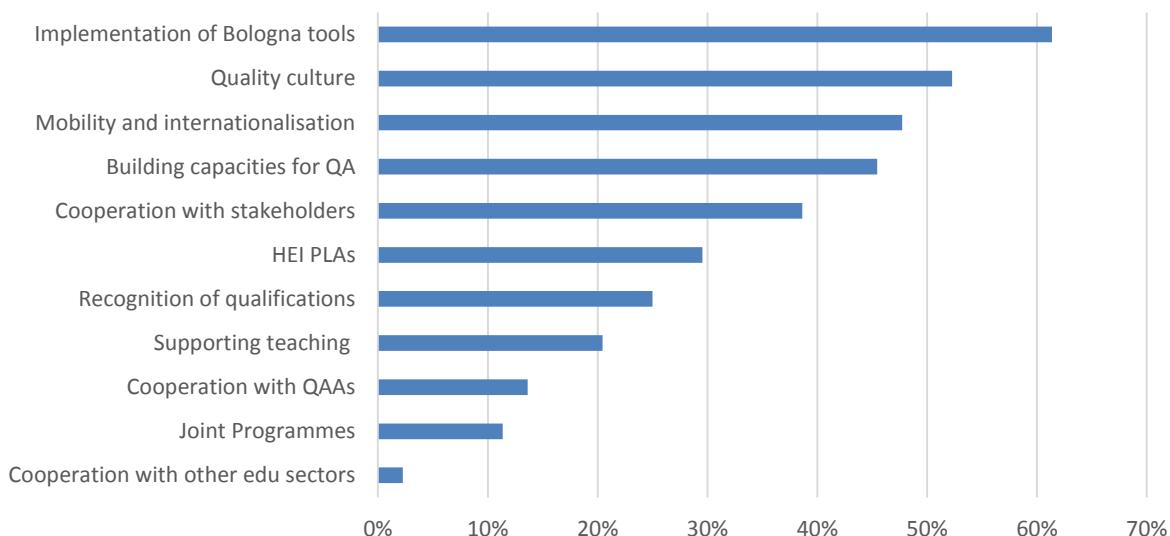
Since the publication of the report, there have been two calls for Erasmus+ projects to support the implementation of European Higher Education Area reforms, covering two

⁹² COM (2014) 29 final "Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education"

periods 2014-2016 and 2016-2018. Overall, 44 different projects were selected and funded under these calls. The total EU contribution to the QA through Erasmus+ amounted to around 4.7 million euros. We analysed the data from the two project compendiums⁹³ on the projects financed under the two calls, in order to determine which themes were addressed by these projects.

Our analysis demonstrates that there was a large degree of correspondence between these areas identified in the report and the actual activities financed by the Erasmus+ projects. However, not all themes were covered evenly: the absolute majority of the projects touched the theme of the implementation of the Bologna Process tools (ECTS, EQF, diploma supplement, etc), while only one project addressed the theme of cooperating with other education sectors (e.g. VET) (see Figure 35).

Figure 35. Themes of Erasmus+ projects



Source: PPMI calculations based on the Erasmus+ project compendium provided by the European Commission.

In addition to the implementation of the Bologna tools, the second most prominent theme covered by the projects was the development of the Quality Culture. This is not surprising, as the theme of Quality Culture is still new to some higher education institutions and to some education systems of the Member States. What is more, though this theme is mentioned and emphasised in European-level documents, like the ESG, these documents do not often contain detailed explanations of what exactly this concept entails. Therefore, national authorities applied for European funding for dedicated events to communicate the contents of the Quality culture concept to the individual higher education institutions.

The third most frequently occurring theme of the Erasmus+ project addressed aspects related to the mobility and internationalisation of the student body and staff. This is not surprising either, as the topics of the implementation of Bologna tools and mobility are intertwined: adoption and implementation of ECTS helps higher education institutions to increase transparency and to promote student mobility for short-term exchanges, while the adoption of the Diploma Supplement helps to promote degree mobility. Only in some

⁹³ European Commission (2015) "Erasmus+ Support to the implementation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms (KA3)"; European Commission (2017) "Erasmus+ KA3 Support to the implementation of European Higher Education Area reforms (2016-2018)"

cases did the Erasmus+ projects include the theme of mobility in isolation (e.g. the project implemented by the national authorities in Iceland). In other cases, the theme of mobility was included together with the adoption and implementation of the Bologna tools.

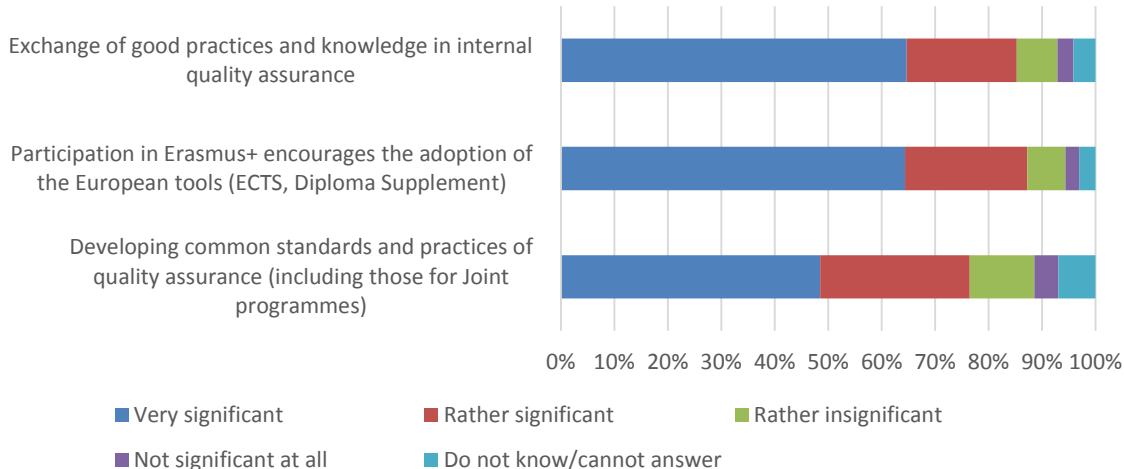
The theme of promoting teaching was included in about 20% of all projects. However, this theme only appeared in the projects financed under the second call, after the publication of the new ESG, when there was a huge uptake of the projects dedicated to enhancing teaching, often in the broader context of the student-centred learning. In the second call, this theme was included in 9 out of 24 projects (38%). It shows that following the revision of the ESG, there was a lot of interest among the stakeholders, primarily national authorities, to communicate clearly to higher education institutions what the new ESG provisions are and what they mean for higher education institutions.

The two areas which received the least attention in the projects, were international joint-programmes and cooperation with other education sectors on QA. Relatively small attention was paid to the joint-programmes. This could be explained by the fact that the national authorities are the main coordinators of projects under this funding category as well as the main authors of project applications. Therefore, naturally, they first and foremost prepare projects which touch upon themes which fall under their remit (e.g. Bologna Process implementation), while the themes which are primarily responsibility of the individual higher education institutions, such as international joint-programmes, receive less attention.

These findings were very closely echoed by the results of survey of higher education institutions. When asked how does the participation in the Erasmus+ programme contribute to their internal QA activities, higher education institutions mostly emphasised the possibility to network with other higher education institutions in order to exchange good practices and the adoption of European tools (ECTS, diploma supplement), as indicated in Figure 36. Meanwhile, a slightly smaller share of higher education institutions indicated that Erasmus+ helps to develop common QA standards and capacities, including those for joint programmes.

Figure 36. Perceptions of Erasmus+ among higher education institutions

Indicate which aspects of internal quality assurance does the participation in Erasmus+ affect most significantly:



Source: PPMI survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Finally, Erasmus+ has contributed to the QA in HE by co-financing projects under the KA3: Forward looking partnerships instrument. Two of these projects contributed to the improvement of QA in HE processes in the EU member states and projects aimed at fostering quality and transparency of the study programmes.

One of the projects was EQUIP,⁹⁴ a project organised by EURASHE, ENQA, EUA, ESU, EI, EQAR, University of Oslo, and the Portuguese Polytechnics Coordinating Council (CCISP). The project aimed to disseminate the information on the new ESG 2015 among the stakeholders in the QA community by:

- Producing a comparative analysis of how ESG 2015 has changed from the previous version;
- Publishing and disseminating the new ESG among the actors in the HE community;
- Organising multi-level peer-learning events, which granted the participants an opportunity to see how various ESG provisions have been implemented in practice in various higher education institutions or HE systems in general.

The project resulted in a study highlighting the changes to be made in various levels of QA as well as an overview of challenges and possible solutions will be published. The project provides a set of policy recommendations on how QA in HE could be enhanced in the European Higher Education Area.

Another project co-funded by Erasmus+ which aims to significantly contribute to QA in HE was CALOHEE,⁹⁵ organised by the Tuning Academy and the University of Groningen. The project aims to improve the way the learning outcomes are implemented in various HE programmes. The project started from the observation that the current way of formulating the learning outcomes of programmes lacks clarity and leaves significant room for interpretation. The project aims to establish a better, more nuanced way of formulating the learning outcomes in order to increase the comparability of the learning outcomes between different programmes and institutions.

Overall, during our interview programme we encountered a large number of instances when the representatives of both national authorities and QA agencies have struggled to identify any cases when they have used services co-financed by Erasmus+, though later research revealed that they have participated in events organised with the help of Erasmus+ funding (e.g. seminars on the implementation of Bologna tools). This leads to a conclusion that though a very large number of stakeholders in the QA community and QA practitioners benefit from the projects co-financed under Erasmus+, many are unaware of the fact that these benefits result from the Erasmus+ programme.

3.9. Use of quality assurance data in improving higher education quality

Our analysis showed that a good use of monitoring data also contributes significantly to developing the “quality culture” in higher education institutions through collecting and disseminating high quality evidence about the impact of QA procedures. This ensures that the quality assurance and enhancement process is transparent and relevant to the staff and inspires them to be part of quality improvements.

However, the key issue for the QA monitoring systems is that the impact of QA procedures is very difficult to capture unambiguously. This was indicated by many of the

⁹⁴ EQUIP project website <<http://www.equip-project.eu/about/>>

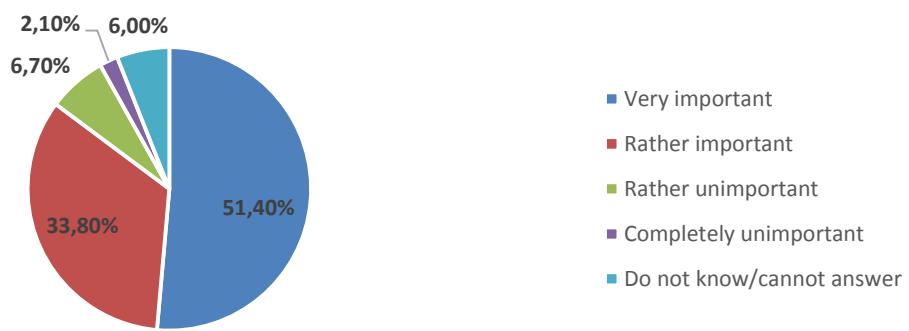
⁹⁵ CALOHEE project website <<https://www.calohée.eu/why-calohée-2/>>

interviewees (especially from QA agencies and higher education institutions) and was one of the main topics for discussion in the European Quality Assurance Forum 2017 in Riga.⁹⁶

Evidence provided by our survey of European higher education institutions revealed that the collection, analysis and use of data on the quality of study programmes was seen as an important aspect of the quality assurance systems by the majority of responding institutions (630 overall). As many as 85% of respondents thought that this issue is very or rather important (see Figure 37). Only another 15% of respondents said that the issue is rather unimportant, completely unimportant or that they do not know about the importance of the issue; the data collection/ use aspect was not exceptional from other internal QA aspects in this regard.

Figure 37. Overall, how important is the following issue in your institutions internal quality assurance system?

Collection, analysis and use of data on the quality of your programmes

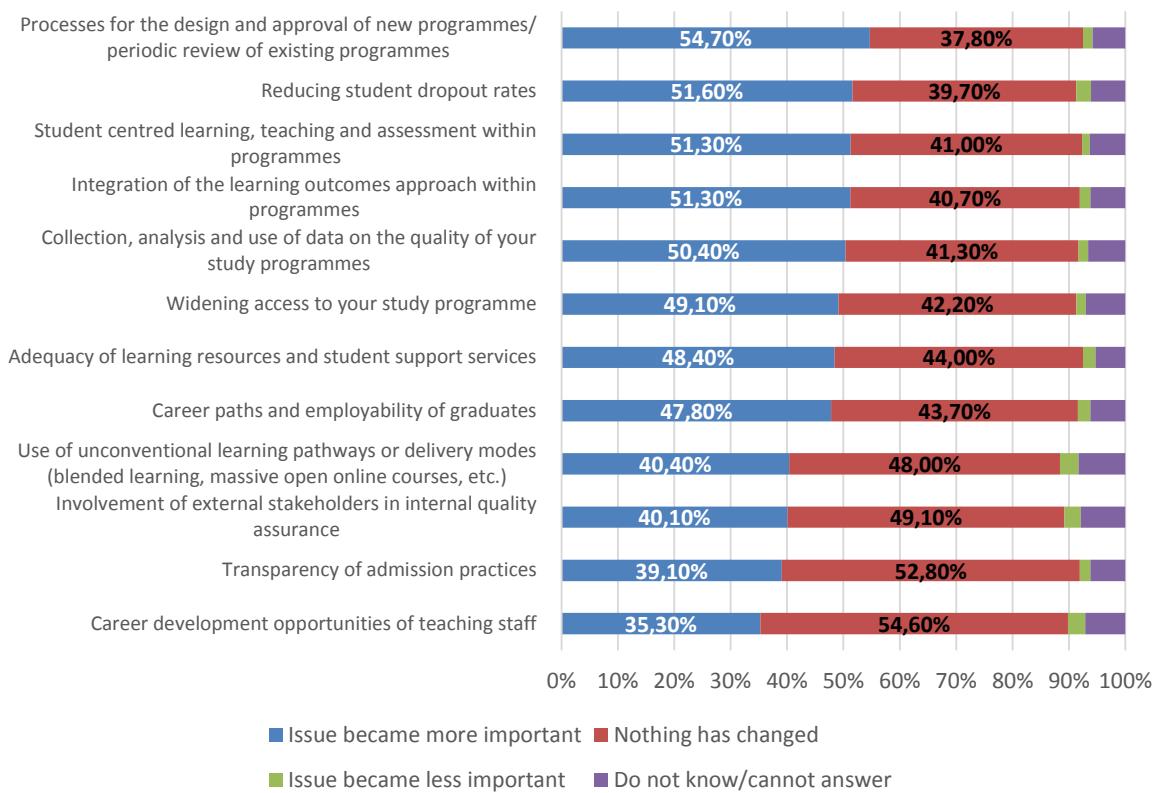


Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Furthermore, as demonstrated by Figure 38, the collection, analysis and use of data on the quality of study programmes was among the issues that saw the most significant increase in importance over the last three years. As many as 50% of respondents in the survey of higher education institutions were of this opinion.

⁹⁶ For example, see the presentation by David O'Sullivan on "Managing the Impact of internal Quality Review in Irish Universities": http://www.eua.be/Libraries/EQAF-2017/p15_osullivan.pdf?sfvrsn=0

Figure 38. Over the last 3 years, has anything changed in how your institution monitors the following issues related to internal quality assurance?

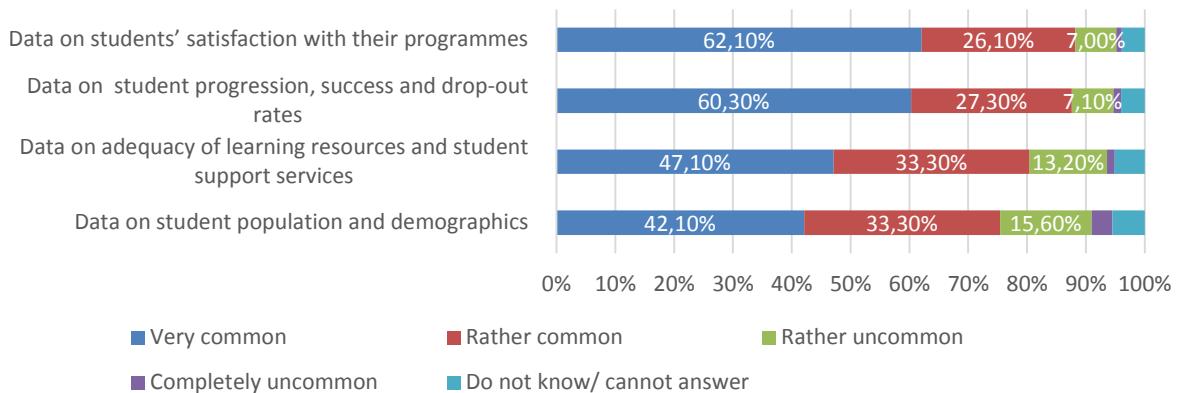


Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Our survey of higher education institutions aimed to provide a more in-depth picture of the regularity of data collection and use related to student-centred learning. As Figure 39 demonstrates, it is most common for higher education institutions to collect data on the student satisfaction and student progression, success and drop-out rates. It is slightly less common to collect and use the data on the adequacy of learning resources and student support services, and on demographic characteristics.

Feedback received during the interviews with higher education institutions and QA agencies, and during the stakeholder events, revealed the stakeholders' opinion that currently there is too much focus on students' satisfaction rate as an indicator of student-centred learning. Considering the emerging consensus that student-centred learning means "rendering a student a self-sufficient learner" rather than "making students happy", better indicators than students' satisfaction rates should be devised to capture the quality of learning by students. Analysis of the interview data and consultations with stakeholders during events also revealed that much of student satisfaction data is not analysed after being collected.

Figure 39. Please indicate how common it is for your institution to collect, analyse and use the following types of data to improve its quality assurance processes:



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Interviews with quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions revealed that not all quality indicators carry the same value. While the majority of indicators are useful for accountability purposes (which is also very important, as one of the key objectives in using good data is to build transparency about the process), only some of them can lead to management action (i.e. changing practice based on evidence) or learning. There are diverging opinions among the stakeholders about the value of different indicators and this study did not have an objective to thoroughly analyse each and every indicator applied by higher education institutions to assess quality of higher education. However, feedback received during the interview programme pointed to the following indicators as being the most frequently used with the assumption that they have high potential to lead to real action:

- Student-staff ratio. It shows the amount of teachers' attention that the individual student receives and is a promising indicator to facilitate student-centred learning. It is also relatively straightforward to act on this indicator. Of course, the value of this indicator cannot be considered the same in the situation of e-learning, where the number of students 'attending' the class can be significantly higher.
- Graduate-tracking indicators. There can be a number of indicators tracking graduates, for example: first destination analysis, salary tracking, and tracking of the job sector, among many others. Such indicators, whether done through surveys or analysis of administrative data, are among the most promising ones to demonstrate whether graduates of a certain programme can lead fulfilling professional and personal lives after graduation. It should be noted that the pilot European graduate survey process was launched in January 2018 with focus on assessing not only the labour market outcomes but also the social integration of graduates in eight European countries.⁹⁷
- Internationalisation indicators, such as the average amount of time that students enrolled in a higher education institution spend abroad, the share of students from abroad in the total population. The same type of internationalisation indicators can be used to analyse the extent of internationalisation among the teaching staff.
- Retention/progression/drop-out rates. It must be noted that the value of these indicators cannot be considered the same in the situation of e-learning, where the number of students 'attending' the class and their turnover can be significantly higher.
- Equal access indicators, such as the share of socio-economically disadvantaged students and gender equality indicators.

⁹⁷ For more information, see: http://www.eurograduate.eu/index_html

Of course, these indicators and their immediate relevance depends on and should be calibrated against national and regional priorities as well as the institution's own agenda. Our interview programme also showed that there is a clear need expressed by the stakeholders to further discuss and study this issue at the European level.

4. European cooperation on quality assurance

This section focuses on recent trends and examples in European cooperation on QA in higher education. First, we analyse whether individual higher education institutions responded to cross-border QA opportunities (i.e. quality assurance by foreign QA agencies) in countries where this is permitted. We will aim to capture both positive and negative experiences of the latter process. Second, a great deal of work under this section concentrated on assessing the application of the new European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. Third, this section discusses the extent to which QA agencies regularly cooperate/ learn from each other and whether this contributes to disseminating good practices and better QA procedures in every part of Europe. This section will end with analysis of the activities and impact of EQAR and E4 organisations in 2014-2017.

4.1. The extent to which higher education institutions were assessed by foreign quality assurance agencies, considering benefits and challenges to overcome

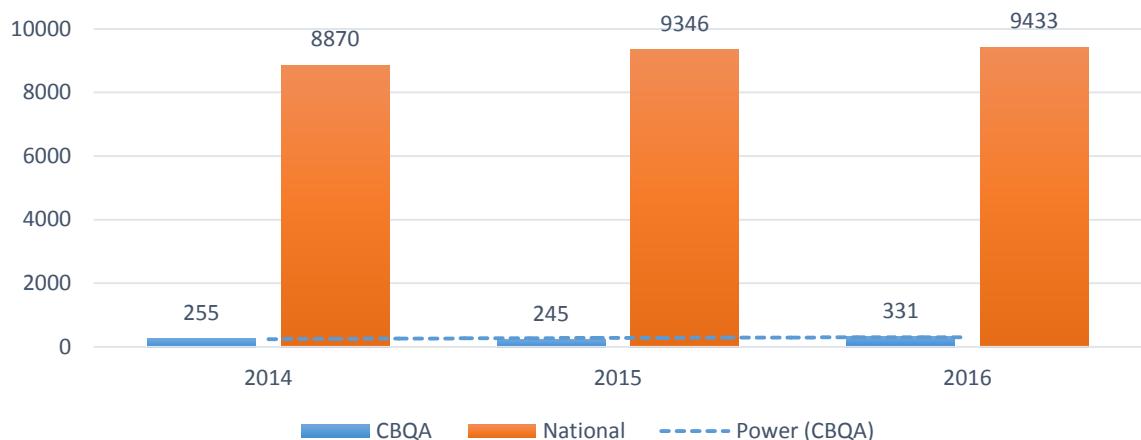
The study evidence shows that overall assessments by foreign quality assurance agencies is not often used by the higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area: only a minority of higher education institutions surveyed during the study confirmed they were externally evaluated by a foreign QA agency. At the same time, when institutions use foreign agencies, the evaluation by a foreign QA agency usually leads to formal consequences (i.e. accreditation). In terms of the legal regulations, analysis showed that in a large part of European Higher Education Area countries higher education institutions cannot be evaluated by QA agencies from outside the country to fulfil their obligations: according to the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2018, in 2016/17 in 14 higher education systems – out of 50 – institutions and programmes could not be evaluated by QA agencies from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external QA, and no plans were being discussed.⁹⁸ Moreover, even in those cases when evaluation by a foreign agency does lead to a formal decision, its results usually must be approved by the national QA agency authorities and/or the foreign QA agency itself must follow the national regulations and standards of evaluation. The key motive of higher education institutions to choose a foreign external evaluator was the prestige and credibility carried by the use of foreign QA agencies, whereas the key barriers to using foreign QA agencies include unfavourable legal regulations set at national level, higher financial costs incurred to institutions, distrust with foreign QA agencies/fear of “agency shopping”, differing national higher education contexts and regulations, as well as the language differences between countries.

The analysis of the administrative and statistical data shows that, although gradually becoming more popular, using services of foreign QA agencies is a relatively rare practice in the European Higher Education Area. According to the EQAR Annual Report, 2016 witnessed a steady increase of cross-border quality assurance activities among the EQAR-registered agencies: an increase of 29% in the total number compared to 2014 and a 35% increase compared to 2015. Similarly, looking at the EU countries only, the same trend of increasing cross-border QA activities is visible. According to the EQAR data, in 2016 the number of cross-border quality assurance activities in the EU countries increased by 61% compared to 2015 and (or by 23% compared to 2014).

⁹⁸ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

However, overall cross-border activities occupied only a small share of all the agency activities during this period: in 2014 this share totalled for 2.8%, in 2015 – 2.6%, whereas in 2016 – 3.4% of all the activities conducted by EQAR-registered agencies.

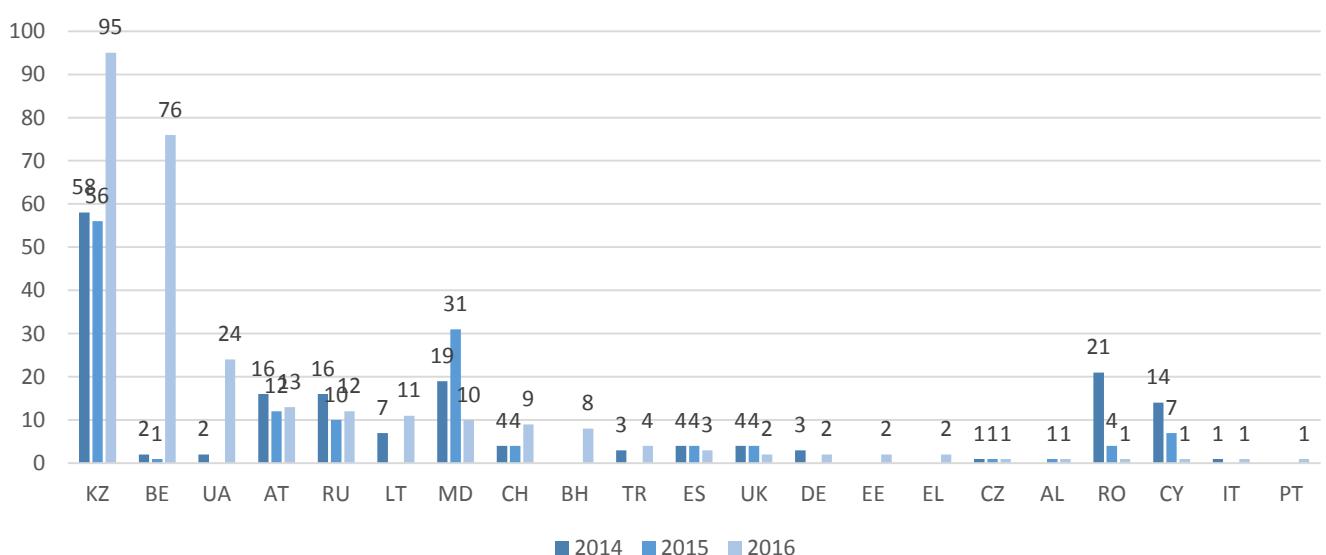
Figure 40: Cross-border and national quality assurance activities among EQAR-registered agencies in 2014, 2015 and 2016



Source: EQAR Annual Report 2016.

The occurrence of using foreign QA agencies varied significantly by country. According to EQAR data, between 2014 and 2016 Kazakhstan was the leader among the countries with the highest absolute numbers of cross-border quality assurance activities carried out in the country by EQAR registered agencies, followed by Belgium and Ukraine (see Figure 41). It must be noted, however, that Belgium has two higher education systems (higher education system in the Walloon and Flemish communities), which, if counted separately, would reduce the number of cross-border quality assurance activities for each respective higher education system.

Figure 41: Cross-border quality assurance activities by EQAR registered agencies across differed European Higher Education Area countries.

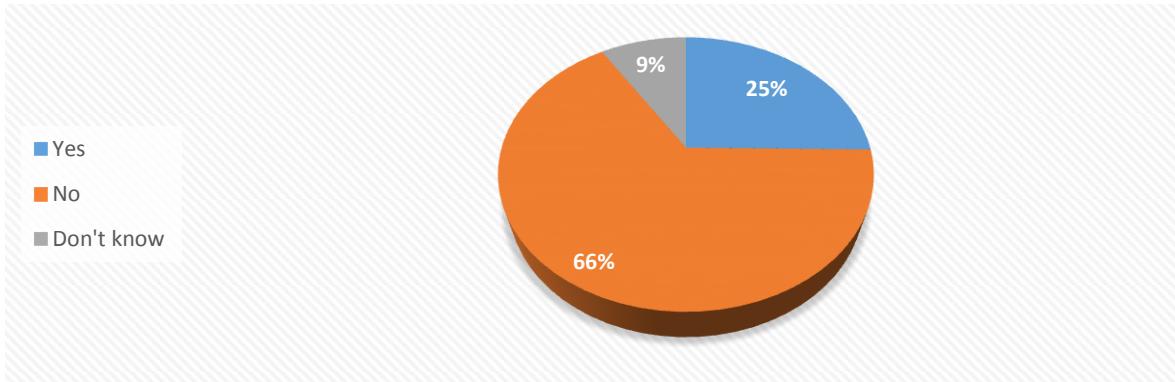


Source: EQAR Annual Report 2016.

Our survey results are very similar, indicating that only a minority of higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area countries actually use foreign quality assurance agencies for the purpose of their external quality assurance. According to the survey of higher education institutions, only 25% of institutions (n=325 on this question) indicated that they or their study programmes were evaluated by a foreign quality assurance agency at least once (Figure 37). Among the higher education institutions with the highest incidence of assessments by foreign QA agencies were comprehensive universities (34% - 28 institutions out of 83) reported being externally evaluated by a foreign QA agency at least once and specialised universities (31%- 21 institutions out of 68), whereas the type of higher education institutions least likely to use foreign QA agencies were technical universities (18% - 3 institutions out of 17) and other type of HE providers (13% - 10 institutions out of 79). It should be noted, however, that the survey question asked the institutions to indicate if they or one of their study programmes was externally evaluated by a foreign agency *at least once in the past*. The figure of 25% might also have been inflated by specific (e.g. joint) programmes that formally require foreign evaluation/accreditation. Thus, the real number of institutions in the European Higher Education Area that regularly undergo external review by foreign QA agencies and/or apply it across wide spectrum of study programmes is probably much lower.

According to the same survey results, an overwhelming majority of higher education institutions (66% of the 325 institutions that answered this question) indicated they never used a foreign quality assurance agency for external QA (Figure 42).

Figure 42: Has your organisation/study programme been ever evaluated by foreign quality assurance agency?

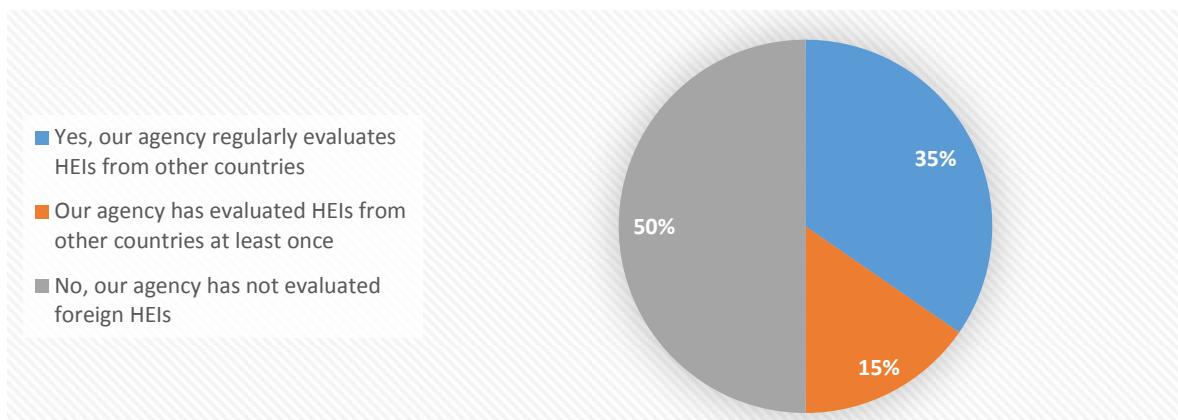


Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

A number of interviews with relevant stakeholders confirmed that the use of foreign agencies for external QA is a rare practice among the European higher education institutions. For example, although higher education institutions in France have been able to apply to be externally evaluated by a foreign EQAR-registered agency upon the validation by the national QA agency (HCERES) since 2014, no university has used this opportunity to change its external evaluator (although this might have been also partly caused by strict requirements imposed on foreign agency operations before and after evaluating higher education institutions in France).

The conclusion that the use of foreign quality assurance agencies for external quality assurance is not a common practice among higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area was also confirmed by the evidence provided by the survey of quality assurance agencies. According to these results, half the agencies had never evaluated foreign higher education institutions in their practice, whereas only slightly more than one third (35%) of the surveyed agencies regularly evaluates institutions based in other countries (see Figure 43).

Figure 43: Has your agency ever implemented external evaluation of foreign universities?



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies in European Higher Education Area.

Desk research and in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders confirmed that the established legislation in a large proportion of European Higher Education Area countries still does not favour use of foreign agencies. According to the Bologna Implementation Report 2018, as of 2016/17 in 12 European Higher Education Area countries (of which 5 EU countries) all institutions and programmes could choose to be evaluated by a suitable QA agency from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external QA, while complying with national requirements (where EQAR registration always serves as a criterion for agencies to be allowed to carry out cross-border evaluation/accreditation/audit). In addition, in another 12 European Higher Education Area countries (of which 10 EU countries) the institutions and programmes could be evaluated by a foreign QA agency but, in contrast to the first group of countries, EQAR registration did not always serve as a criterion for agencies to be allowed to carry out cross-border evaluation/accreditation/audit. On the other hand, in 14 European Higher Education Area countries (of which 6 EU countries) institutions and programmes could not be evaluated by QA agencies from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external QA, and no plans were being discussed.⁹⁹

In-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders carried out during the study showed that there is wide spectrum of legal regulations focusing on the use of foreign QA agencies, ranging from a complete absence of registered foreign QA agencies in the country to the almost "automatic" recognition of the external QA activities carried out by foreign agencies, leading to formal decisions (i.e. accreditation of an institution/study programme). Based on the collected evidence, European Higher Education Area countries could be broken-down into several categories, according to the established legislative regulations and practices in this area:

- The first category includes the countries where evaluations by foreign QA agencies are not recognised for mandatory external quality assurance and no foreign QA agency is officially registered as operating in the country. For instance, according to the official EQAR data for 2018, in Malta, Slovakia, Belarus, Holy See and Andorra there are no officially registered foreign QA agencies operating in the country.
- In a number of cases, although there are registered foreign QA agencies that have carried out external quality assurance in the country, the evaluations carried out by foreign agencies are not recognised as fulfilling the formal external

⁹⁹ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

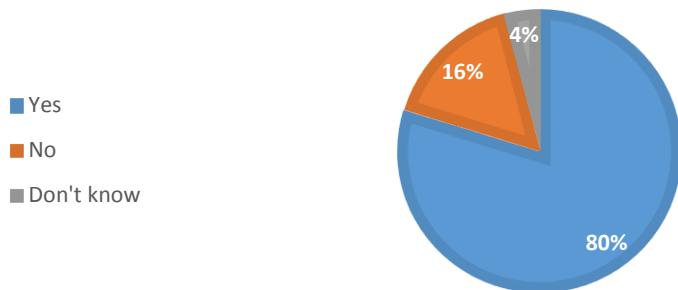
QA obligations. They have purely consultative status and higher education institutions still need to pass full external evaluation procedures by national QA agencies to meet their formal obligations. For instance, British higher education institutions cannot choose an EQAR-registered agency for their mandatory external quality assurance (except for Wales, which, starting with 2017, allows its institutions choose an EQAR-registered agency). Higher education institutions that receive public funding in the UK or with the UK degree awarding powers must be reviewed by the national agency (QAA). Similarly, even if a Swedish university goes through the evaluation by a foreign agency, it still has to go through the full evaluation by UKA, in order to be accredited.

- Another group of countries includes the cases when the audit/evaluation by a foreign QA agency does not automatically lead to a formal decision/accreditation but has to be considered and approved by the national agency or authority. For instance, in Estonia higher education institutions seeking to be evaluated by a foreign QA agency have to justify this in a request to EKKA and the final decision regarding the accreditation of study programme groups/higher education institutions is made by the national agency (EKKA). However, the report prepared by the expert group serves as a basis for the decision, regardless of whether it is made by EKKA or by a foreign QA agency. France, Netherlands, Portugal also belong to this group;
- Still another category of countries includes the cases when higher education institutions can be evaluated by a foreign QA agency, however, for this evaluation to have formal consequences (i.e. accreditation) the foreign agency and its procedures must meet certain requirements and criteria set by a national agency or authorities. For instance, according to the Austrian legislation, results of audits performed by external QA agencies shall have the same effects as an audit performed by the national agency. However, the external QA agencies, selected by universities, must submit an expression of interest to the Federal Ministry of Science, Research and Economy to be included in the list of authorised and reliable QA agencies. Similarly, in Luxembourg, foreign universities must be evaluated by a foreign QA agency, but this agency must follow the standards and regulations set by the Ministry of Higher Education and Research. Lithuania also belongs to this group of countries;
- Finally, in a small group of European Higher Education Area countries higher education institutions/study programmes can be evaluated by foreign QA agencies and this evaluation officially or *de facto* directly carries formal consequences i.e. accreditation. For example, in Germany, under the new system, any EQAR-registered QA agency can apply for authority to conduct accreditations. If the national Accreditation Council has no major doubts about the foreign agency's compliance with ESG 2015, the agency's accreditation decision will be accepted directly without an additional verification. Similarly, in Romania higher education institutions can be evaluated and accredited by foreign QA agencies even when prior to that the national QA agency did not grant accreditation. Similarly, in Bulgaria, foreign QA agencies can *de facto* grant accreditation to higher education institutions even though officially a formal decision can only be taken by NEAA, the Bulgarian national agency: in a well-known case the court allowed a foreign agency to accredit a Bulgarian institution even after the national agency refused to recognise that accreditation.

At the same time, the evidence collected during the study also shows that in the majority of the cases when a higher education institution is evaluated by a foreign QA agency, this evaluation usually leads to a formal decision (i.e. accreditation of an institution or a study programme). According to the results of higher education institutions' survey, 59 institutions (around 80% of those that used the services of foreign quality assurance agency for their or their study programmes' external evaluation and answered the survey

question) confirmed that this evaluation led to a formal decision. At the same time, only 12 institutions (around 16% of the same group) indicated that their evaluation by a foreign quality assurance did not lead to a formal decision (see Figure 44).

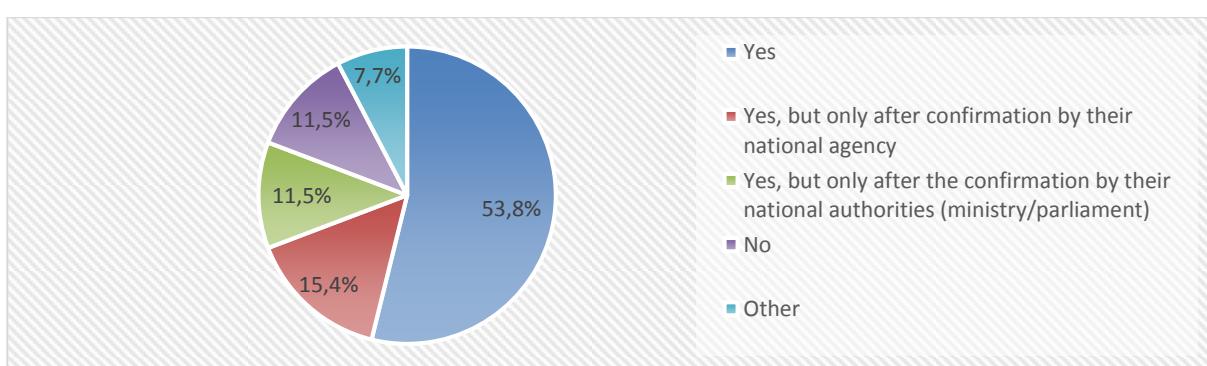
Figure 44: Has an evaluation by a foreign quality assurance agency led to a formal decision (e.g. accreditation)?



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area. N= 74 institutions that answered the survey question.

Analysis of the answers from surveyed quality assurance agencies confirmed the above conclusions and provided more in-depth information on the consequences of external evaluation by foreign quality assurance agencies. Overall, according to survey results, 14 agencies (around 54% of those that carried out external evaluations of foreign higher education institutions), confirmed that this evaluation also led to a formal decision. In addition, 4 agencies (15% of the same group) indicated this evaluation led to a formal decision only after a confirmation by a national agency, with another 3 (11.5%) indicating it led to a formal decision after a confirmation by a national authority (e.g. a Ministry of Education). At the same time, only 3 agencies (11.5%) indicated their evaluation of a foreign higher education institutions did not lead to a formal decision (accreditation) (see Figure 45).

Figure 45: Did your evaluation of the foreign higher education institution lead to a formal decision (accreditation)?

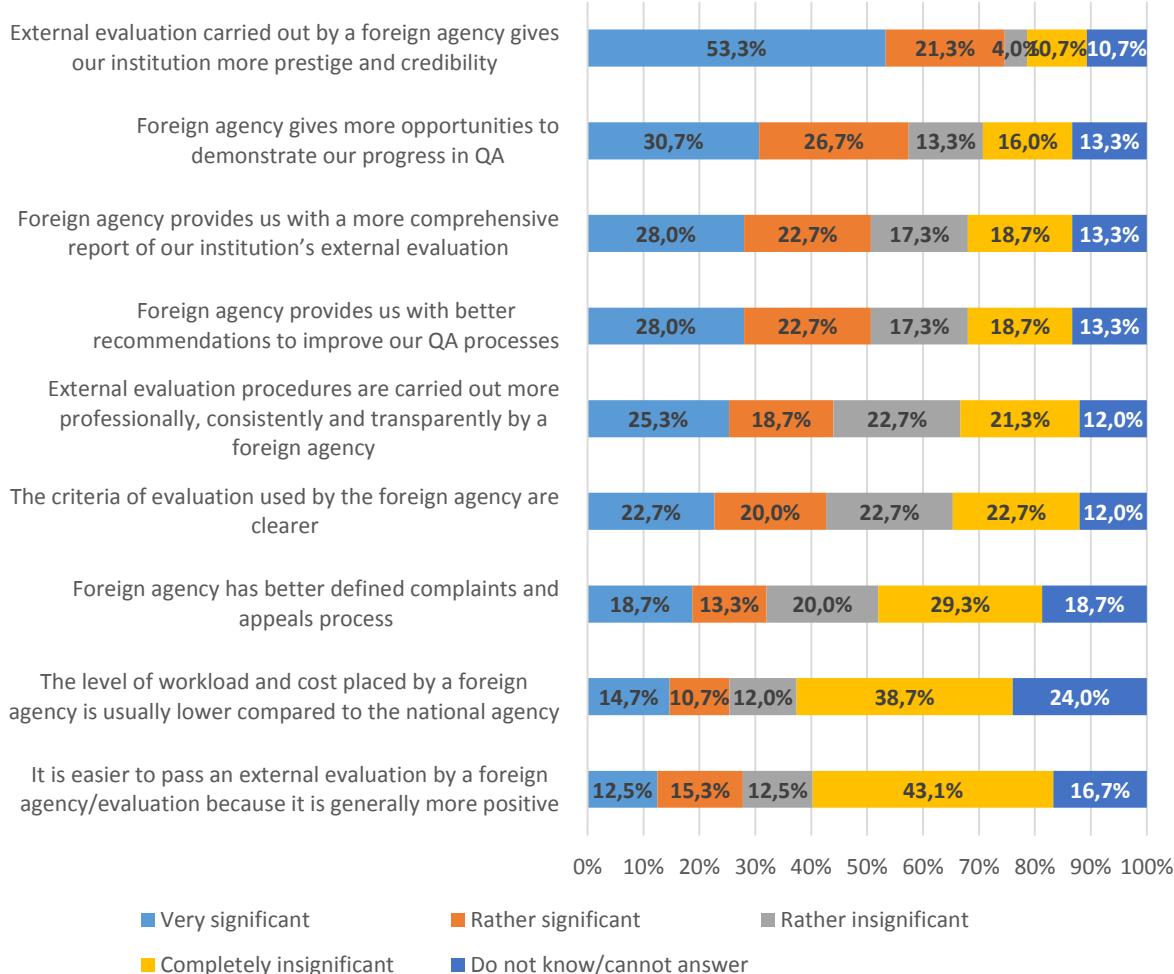


Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies; N=26 agencies that answered the question.

The available evidence showed that the primary motive of higher education institutions to choose a foreign external evaluator over a domestic one was not directly related to the expectation of higher quality services provided by foreign agencies. Both the surveys of higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies indicate that the most important reason to choose a foreign quality assurance agency is the perception that such an evaluation provides more prestige and credibility to the institution. According to the survey results (Figure 46), more than half (53%) of institutions that were evaluated by a foreign quality assurance agency indicated "more prestige and credibility" as a very

significant reason to choose a foreign agency over a national, with another 21% indicating it as a rather significant reason. Another somewhat less important reason to choose a foreign agency over a domestic one was: "foreign agency gives more opportunities to demonstrate progress in QA" (more than 57% indicating it as a very or rather significant reason). Others related to the feedback they received from the evaluation; "foreign agency provides us with a more comprehensive report of institution's external evaluation" (around 51% indicating it as a very or rather significant reason); and "foreign agency provides with better recommendations to improve QA processes" (around 51% indicating it as a very or rather significant reason). Around 28% of the higher education institutions that had been evaluated by foreign quality assurance agencies indicated that a very or rather significant reason for this choice was that "It is easier to pass an external evaluation by a foreign agency/because it is generally more positive". This result suggests that further consideration and possibly action is necessary to prevent "agency shopping" (see section on barriers for the use of foreign QA agencies below).

Figure 46: What reasons led your institution to choose a foreign quality assurance agency instead of a national one? Please indicate the reasons in terms of their significance.

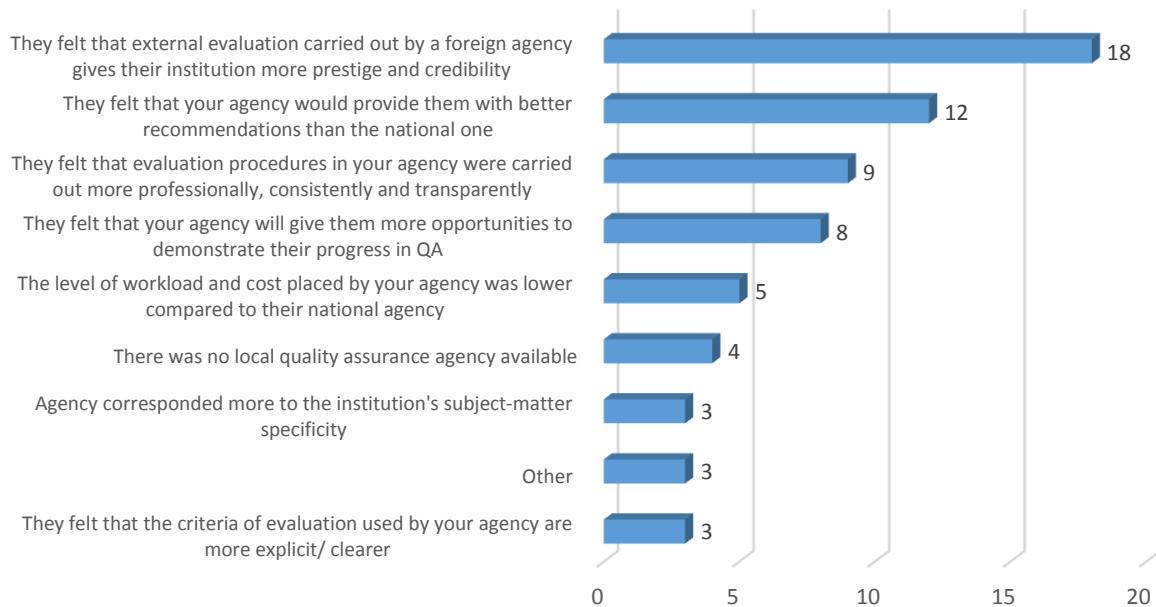


Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Results from the quality assurance agency survey roughly confirmed the above evidence. When asked which reasons led the higher education institutions that they evaluated choose a foreign quality assurance agency instead of the national one, the overwhelming

majority of agencies (18 or 72% of those that answered the question) indicated that higher education institutions "felt that external evaluation carried out by a foreign agency gives their institution more prestige and credibility". Overall, the survey showed that getting better quality services was among the key reason for higher education institutions to choose foreign QA agencies instead of domestic: 12 agencies (or 48% of those that answered the question) indicated that higher education institutions "felt that their agency would provide them with better recommendations than the national one", 9 agencies (36%) indicated higher education institutions "felt that evaluation procedures in their agency were carried out more professionally, consistently and transparently", while 8 agencies (32%) indicated that higher education institutions "felt that their agency will give them more opportunities to demonstrate their progress in QA". In addition, in some specific cases, institutions chose to be evaluated by a foreign agency simply because there was no local quality assurance agency available (3 agencies indicated this reason) or because the agency corresponded more to the institution's subject-matter specificity (3 agencies) (see Figure 47 below).

Figure 47: To the best of your knowledge, which reasons led the higher education institutions that you have evaluated choose a foreign quality assurance agency instead of the national one? Check three most significant.



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

In-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders indicate a very similar list of the key motives of higher education institutions to choose external evaluation by a foreign QA agency. According to a number of stakeholders, external QA by a foreign agency often carries the prestige and credibility trademark, which helps institutions in terms of marketing and competition with other institutions. In addition, a number of stakeholders also emphasised that higher education institutions choose foreign external QA agency because the QA procedures used by foreign QA agencies are often better adapted and better suit the institution's profile, especially in the case of specialised higher education institutions (e.g. art or music schools) where high quality external review requires sector specific knowledge within QA agency, which in its turn can only be offered outside the country. Finally, some of stakeholders indicated that higher education institutions sometimes seek external evaluations by foreign agency because it can provide valuable

feedback from outside the national HE system, which provides a “fresh-look” and therefore can lead to the improvement of educational offer within institution.

Finally, desk research, interviews with relevant stakeholders and analysis of answers to open-ended survey questions provided evidence on the most common barriers for using foreign QA agencies:

- The absence of necessary legal framework enabling the higher education institutions to use foreign QA agencies to fulfil their formal external QA obligations. As already mentioned, according to the existing legislation in many of European Higher Education Area countries, external reviews by foreign QA agencies cannot be a substitute for external evaluation by national QA agencies. As of 2016/17, in 6 EU countries institutions and programmes could not be evaluated by QA agencies from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external QA, and no plans were being discussed. In another 4 EU countries discussions were still on-going or plans have been made to establish a legal framework allowing EQAR-registered agencies to operate in the country.¹⁰⁰ This situation discourages higher education institutions from using foreign QA agencies since in many cases even after an extensive external review by a foreign agency an institution would still have to undergo a full evaluation procedure by the national agency. The results of higher education institutions’ survey confirmed that for the clear majority, around 80%, (see Figure 44) of the cases when higher education institutions had chosen to be evaluated by a foreign QA agency, this resulted in a formal decision (i.e. accreditation), thus showing the importance of the ability to get accreditation after the external evaluation by a foreign agency. According to the qualitative data collected during the study, the lack of openness towards foreign QA agencies is often a conscious political choice made by national policy makers: national authorities/agencies want to maintain the control over higher education QA in their country, especially when it comes to accreditation of institutions/study programmes. One of the main reasons for this view is that higher education in Europe is still largely funded from national budgets and as a consequence, QA should be exercised at national level as well. Changing this situation, according to the stakeholders, would require a wide cross-national political agreement at a very high (ministerial) level;
- Higher financial costs related to the use of foreign QA agencies: in many cases external evaluation by a domestic QA agency is free of charge/has reduced cost rates, whereas the cost of external evaluation by a foreign QA agency has to be fully covered by a higher education institution itself. This situation indirectly encourages institutions to choose domestic QA agencies over foreign ones. For example, in Lithuania external evaluation by a national QA agency, SKVC, is completely free of charge, however this is not the case if the higher education institution chooses a foreign QA agency;
- Distrust of foreign QA agencies and fear of “agency shopping”. Although this is not the majority of views and most of the interviewed stakeholders expressed trust in foreign EQAR-registered QA agencies, a few national QA agencies and national authority representatives had doubts regarding the quality of QA services provided by foreign agencies. According to them, some of the foreign QA agencies have lower standards than the national ones. Most importantly, this distrust was strengthened by few cases when higher education institutions that were not accredited by national QA agencies received their accreditation from foreign agencies. For example, a private higher education institution in Romania chose to be evaluated by a foreign EQAR-registered QA agency and received the accreditation even after the denial of accreditation by the national agency

¹⁰⁰ European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018. The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

(ARACIS) on the grounds that the quality standards had not been met. Similarly, a court decision in Bulgaria recently ruled to recognise the accreditation granted by a foreign EQAR-registered agency for a poorly performing institution even after the accreditation was refused by the national agency. These cases should be brought to the attention of EQAR by the use of the Complaints Policy, which allows individuals or organisations that have substantiated concerns about a registered agency's compliance with the ESG (or the external review process) to report it to EQAR. Although there have been only few similar cases that do not reflect the overall picture in Europe, it is important to constantly monitor the situation in this area. If there is an increase of the above doubtful practices, the European quality assurance community should have a wider discussion on what changes should be made to prevent them;

- Difference of national higher education contexts and regulations. According to some of the stakeholders, QA is often related to extensive knowledge of the national context and existing national-level regulations: this is especially relevant for the high-risk, highly regulated areas, such as medicine or engineering. It is very difficult for foreign QA agencies to understand all the details related to this national context and, consequently, QA in these subject-fields is left for domestic QA agencies;
- Finally, a number of stakeholders indicated language as one of the barriers to using foreign QA agencies. In many cases, the internal documents of higher education institutions are only available in national language and therefore extensive external review by a foreign QA agency would require a translation of all these documents into English or other relevant language. This would incur a significant administrative burden and financial costs for a higher education institution. As a consequence, institutions often chose domestic QA agencies. This barrier could be overcome by providing additional support for higher education institutions to cover the costs of document translation and other language support, when it is related to and indispensable for institution's assessment by a foreign agency.

4.2. The impact of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes

The key aim of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, adopted by European Higher Education Area ministers in May 2015, is to enable all joint programmes in the European Higher Education Area to be subject to a single quality assurance procedure based solely on the ESG and "without applying additional national criteria". In the view of the European Higher Education Area ministers, the European Approach should facilitate "integrated approaches to QA of joint programmes" that would "genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character."¹⁰¹ The European Approach should work in two main ways:

- If some of the cooperating institutions require external QA at programme level, they should be able to carry out a single QA procedure by an EQAR-registered agency, which should be accepted in all countries where the programme is offered;
- If all cooperating institutions are subject to external QA at institutional level and therefore have "self-accrediting" status for study programmes, they can use the European Approach in setting up joint QA procedures (internal approval and monitoring processes).

¹⁰¹ European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes:
https://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/bologna/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf

The key finding of our analysis, which is presented in detail below, is that the European Approach for Joint Programmes was not significantly applied in 2015-2017. This was also underlined in the recent Bologna Process Implementation Report 2018.¹⁰² While our interview and survey programmes showed that many higher education institutions and national QA agencies applied some “bits and pieces” of the European Approach, we could find only a few joint programmes where the Approach was fully applied as originally intended by the European Higher Education Area ministers.

Our research revealed the following examples where the European Approach was applied or where there was a clear intention to apply it (fully or partially):

- The joint bachelor programme International Teacher Education for Primary Schools (ITEPS)¹⁰³ is offered by Stenden University of Applied Sciences (The Netherlands), University College South-East Norway (Norway) and associate partner University College Zealand (Denmark). Although the Zealand University withdrew as a full consortium partner due to objections from the Danish government, otherwise the European Approach was fully applied by this consortium of self-accrediting organisations. ITEPS experience is described in detail as a good practice in Annex 1.
- As part of the Erasmus+ funded project EuroPS (“Curriculum Development Joint European Political Science MA”), ten partner universities (University of Salzburg – lead partner, University of Ljubljana, University of Pavia, Ss. Cyril and Methodius University in Skopje, European University of Tirana, University of Tirana, Fama College in Kosovo, University of Business and Technology in Kosovo, University of Sarajevo and Sarajevo School of Science and Technology) have set up a Joint MA in Political Science. The partners established a single QA and monitoring framework and a common methodology of teaching and learning, as well as common administrative procedures.¹⁰⁴ The consortium opted to use the European Approach, however, the resulting accreditation was not automatically recognised in all countries due to differences in national regulations and procedures applied by national QA agencies.¹⁰⁵
- Since 2015, Frontex, the European border and coast guard agency, together with partners from Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, the Netherlands and Spain offers a Joint Master’s Degree in Strategic Border Management¹⁰⁶. This programme participated in a pilot using the ECA-developed JOQAR framework, a forerunner of the European Approach, using a single accreditation procedure with similar standards and the principle of acceptance of the results of the single procedure. However, single accreditation was accepted in all countries, but not formally recognised, so they also had to go through national accreditation procedures.

It is necessary to point out that the European Approach was also not applied by any of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Degrees, where the Commission might potentially have some leverage to influence the supported institutions. Many interviewees suggested that encouraging the use of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes among the projects supported by Erasmus+ should be considered. We also think that the European Approach may be more frequently considered after the Commission’s new initiative to build European Universities gains momentum. Having such a close

¹⁰² Bologna Process Implementation report 2018, p. 141-142: http://www.erasmusplus.it/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/bologna_internet_reduced.pdf

¹⁰³ ITEPS website: <http://www.iteps.eu/>

¹⁰⁴ Final report on external quality assurance of EuroPS, EURODEMPA Research and Consultancy, October 2017: <http://euro-ps.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/Final-Report-WP11-EURODEMPA-1.pdf>

¹⁰⁵ For more information, see: Outcomes of Peer Learning Activity on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (5-6 October 2017, the Hague), Report, 31 October 2017.

¹⁰⁶ See: <http://frontex.europa.eu/news/frontex-launches-new-master-s-programme-vqtoEN> and [http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/European_Joint_Master%27s_in_Strategic_Border_Management_\(EJMSBM\)](http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/European_Joint_Master%27s_in_Strategic_Border_Management_(EJMSBM))

cooperation, even integration between institutions, will require more flexible approaches, like the European Approach.

Interviews with national authorities and QA agencies showed that the main obstacle for the full application of the European Approach was different national legal frameworks and regulations. As vividly put by one of the respondents in the QA agencies' survey "the European Approach is impossible to implement. Each time we have tried to use it, it was not possible due to differences in practices and methodologies of other partners involved and complete differences of national laws, rules and regulations that stopped definitively all our efforts. Therefore, the European Approach, without harmonisation of national laws and rules, is not useful and totally unrealistic."

A Peer Learning Activity on the European Approach, which took place on 5-6 October 2017 in The Hague, indicated a number of examples of the "national legislative hindrances"¹⁰⁷:

- Separate national programme accreditations are required, with different national criteria, rules, accreditation timelines and re-accreditation deadlines;
- National legislation requiring that recognition of an accreditation decision by a foreign quality assurance agency needs to be approved by the national quality assurance agency;
- The assessment report must be written in the national language;
- National quality assurance agencies are not allowed to coordinate an international procedure or undertake a site visit abroad;
- National criteria contradict each other;
- Very detailed national staff requirements.

However, a deeper analysis of the issue and consultation with the national authorities through the interview programme revealed that higher education reforms (including those related to QA) were usually driven by the priorities of top national politicians and political parties, which stemmed from national political discussions and perceived national problems. For example, a complex new QA system in Sweden was an outcome of the coalition government, where some parties wanted to focus more on institutions, while others on programmes. The outcome was a complex consensus system focusing on both programmes and institutions. Interviews also clearly showed that peer pressure from the European partners was a secondary influence for the national ministers compared to the importance of national problems. This points to the inherent difficulty in attempting to harmonise national laws and regulations related to QA of joint programmes (and QA in general). Interviewees also stated that some of the national ministers do not see QA as a priority, while in other countries education ministers are not powerful enough to bring about changes.

Another key finding of our analysis in this area is that the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is not sufficiently clear for higher education institutions. Interviews showed that there are many cases, in which higher education institutions thought that it was enough to comply with the ESG in order to apply the European Approach, while this is not the case.

To shed more light on the issue, in our survey of higher education institutions we aimed to identify the institutions that are providing joint study programmes leading to double, multiple degrees or a joint degree, and then to analyse their perceptions about the European Approach. Around 38% of responding organisations (195 higher education institutions) said that they provide joint programmes (see Figure 48). Of these 195 higher education institutions, 42% (83 institutions) said that they have used the

¹⁰⁷ Ibid, 5.

European Approach to implement QA of joint programmes. However, this probably points to a misunderstanding or a lack of knowledge about what the European Approach entails (single accreditation/ evaluation procedures) or simply confusion of the European Approach with the ESG. We draw this conclusion based on the fact that our desk research and interview programme revealed that the European Approach was not applied as intended and there were only few attempts to use it.

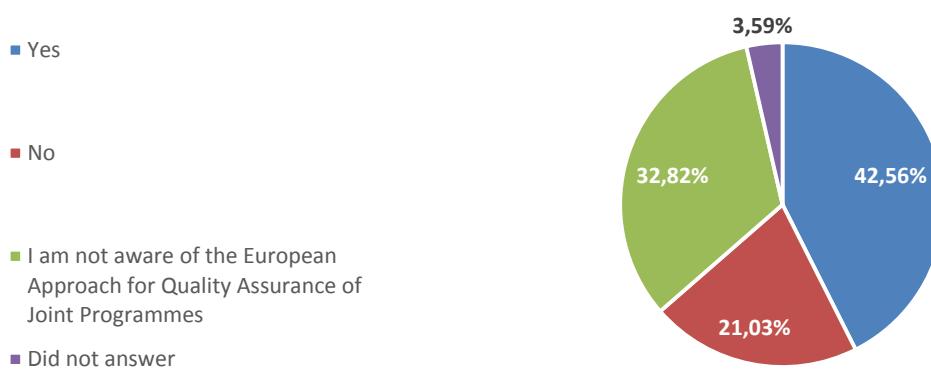
Figure 48. Does your institution offer joint study programmes leading to double/multiple degrees or a joint degree?



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Figure 49 below also points to another finding showing the lack of knowledge among higher education institutions about the European Approach. Around a third of respondents said that they are not aware of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes. Therefore, to improve the application of the European Approach, the Commission (and other relevant stakeholders) could consider more targeted communication to higher education institutions as to what the European Approach entails and what its benefits are for higher education institutions.

Figure 49. Does your institution use the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes in the evaluation of your joint study programme(s)?



Source: PPMI Survey of higher education institutions in European Higher Education Area.

Despite all the problems, interviews with national authorities and QA agencies revealed a positive future outlook: a clear majority of interviewees agreed that the implementation of the European Approach should move on and that all involved stakeholders should do what is in their power in order to remove the remaining national obstacles. Our findings

were well in line with the outcomes from the recent Peer Learning Activity on Joint Programmes¹⁰⁸, which suggested for:

- Ministries of education:
 - To act on the Yerevan agreement: integrate the European Approach in national legislation and make sure that the results are accepted by national quality assurance organisations;
 - To raise awareness of the European Approach, highlighting its benefits to higher education institutions, and establish a joint promotion centre;
 - To include the European Approach in national strategies to internationalise higher education;
 - To compile data and statistics, and monitor developments on joint programmes and joint programme accreditation following the European Approach;
- QA agencies:
 - To accept the results of the European Approach carried out by EQAR-listed agencies and facilitate the recognition of national decisions on the European Approach;
 - To create internal capacity building / training on the European Approach to strengthen its implementation;
 - To coordinate implementation strategies, building on experiences and sharing good practices. To this end, organise international meetings and networking between QA agencies, creating concrete results and placing the European Approach and the role of quality assurance agencies on the agenda at the highest levels;
 - To promote the European Approach towards ministries of education and higher education institutions, and create a handbook with step-by-step guidelines for higher education institutions;
- European Commission and EACEA:
 - Keep the European Approach on the policy agenda;
 - Carry out further awareness raising of the European Approach, together with the E4 organisations and EQAR;
 - Consider the European Approach as a possible priority of the Bologna reform implementation projects;
 - Suggest a target for Bologna ministers for the minimum number of joint programmes using the European Approach;
- EQAR:
 - Promote the European Approach, e.g. through the website, a brochure highlighting the benefits of the European Approach, and a European database of joint programmes;
- Higher education institutions:
 - Ensure support from institutional leadership in adopting the European Approach;
 - Offer appropriate incentives to implement the European Approach;
 - Organise central support for joint programmes and the European Approach.

4.3. Cooperation between quality assurance agencies

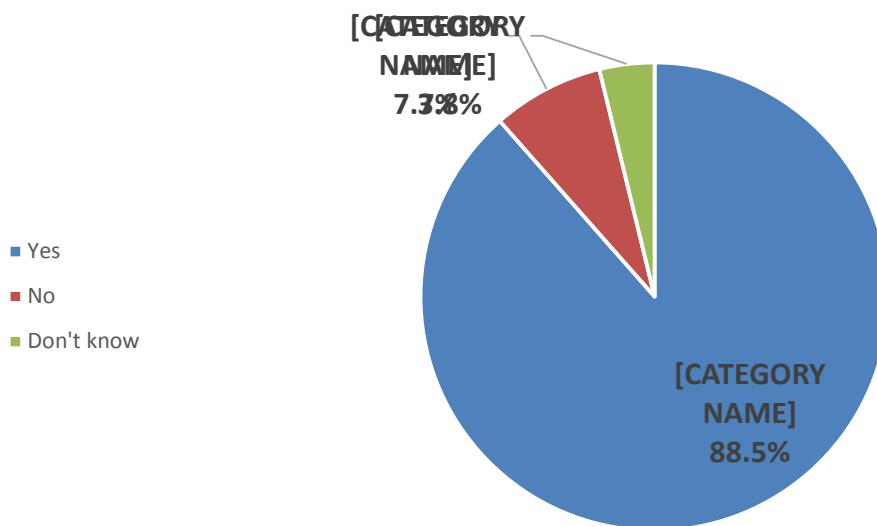
Study evidence shows that the overwhelming majority (around 89%) of QA agencies in European Higher Education Area cooperate with each other and with agencies based in the third-countries. According to the results of our social network analysis (SNA), this international cooperation created an integrated community of quality assurance agencies

¹⁰⁸ Outcomes of Peer Learning Activity on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (5-6 October 2017, The Hague), Report, 31 October 2017, 5-7.

in European Higher Education Area and beyond, interconnected through cooperation ties. A single network of interconnected organisations, as opposed to multiple groups of isolated sub-networks, facilitates the knowledge flow, cooperation and good practice exchange in higher education quality assurance in Europe and beyond. Almost all of the most key central actors in this integrated network are members of ENQA and EQAR-registered agencies. The key motive of QA agencies to engage in international cooperation was mutual learning and exchange of good practices, providing transparent information on quality, as well as mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions, whereas the key barrier for international cooperation between QA agencies was the lack of financial, human and time resources. Strong evidence on the benefits of international cooperation between QA agencies confirms that the current European and international networks of agencies should be maintained and the ties between the agencies should be further strengthened in the future.

The preliminary quantitative evidence gathered from the survey of national quality assurance agencies (QA agencies) shows that QA agencies in the European Higher Education Area actively cooperate both with each other and to some extent with agencies from third countries. According to the survey results, the overwhelming majority of agencies (46 or around 89% of agencies that answered the question) indicated that they do cooperate with QA agencies from other countries, compared to only 4 (around 8%) indicated that they did not (see Figure 50). This evidence was strongly supported by the results of in-depth interviews and desk research, which showed that almost all of the QA agencies in European Higher Education Area (exception those recently established) cooperate with each other and third-country partners in one way or another.

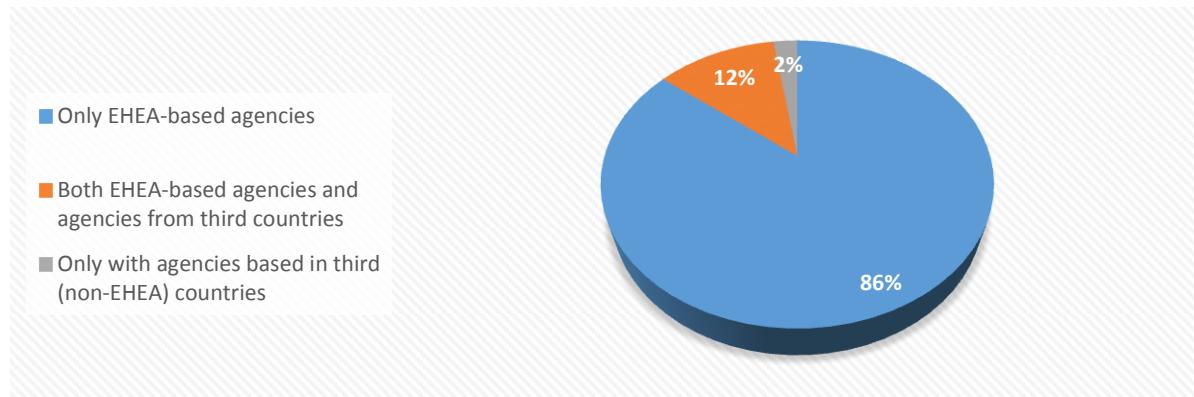
Figure 50: Does your agency cooperate with quality assurance agencies from other countries? (n=52)



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

The analysis showed that on average a QA agency in the European Higher Education Area has 3 partner agencies from other countries. The same evidence also indicates that the overwhelming majority of the European Higher Education Area QA agencies cooperate only with other European Higher Education Area-based quality assurance agencies (36 or 86% of the agencies that answered the question), whereas only 6 agencies (14% of the same group) indicated that they cooperate with one or more third country, non-European Higher Education Area based quality assurance agencies (see Figure 51).

Figure 51: Country origin of the partner agencies based on the quality assurance agency survey data



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

Our survey-based social network analysis (SNA) provided more in-depth evidence on the patterns of international cooperation between European quality assurance agencies. The surveyed QA agencies were asked to provide the name of at least one partner QA agency from another country, as well as to assess the strength of the cooperation ties with this partner agency on the scale from very strong to very weak. This survey data was transferred to a SNA software tool to generate a network that shows the overall structure and patterns of cooperation among European Higher Education Area-based quality assurance agencies.

In order to assess the overall integration and interconnectedness of European QA agencies, the study team assessed a number of key Social Network Analysis structural indicators that describe the overall network structure. One of the key indicators showing close interconnectedness and efficient flow of information within a network is the presence of "giant component"¹⁰⁹. In the case of the surveyed network of quality assurance agencies, the giant component interconnected 94% of the network actors (agencies). At the same, there were only two pairs of subject-specific QA agencies that cooperated with each other but were disconnected from the larger network of agencies (see network components 1, 2 and 3 in the Figure 52 below). The evidence on the presence of the giant component shows that there is an integrated community of quality assurance agencies in European Higher Education Area and beyond, interconnected through mutual cooperation ties. A single network of interconnected organisations, as opposed to multiple groups of isolated sub-networks, facilitates the knowledge flow, cooperation and good practice exchange in higher education quality assurance in Europe and beyond.

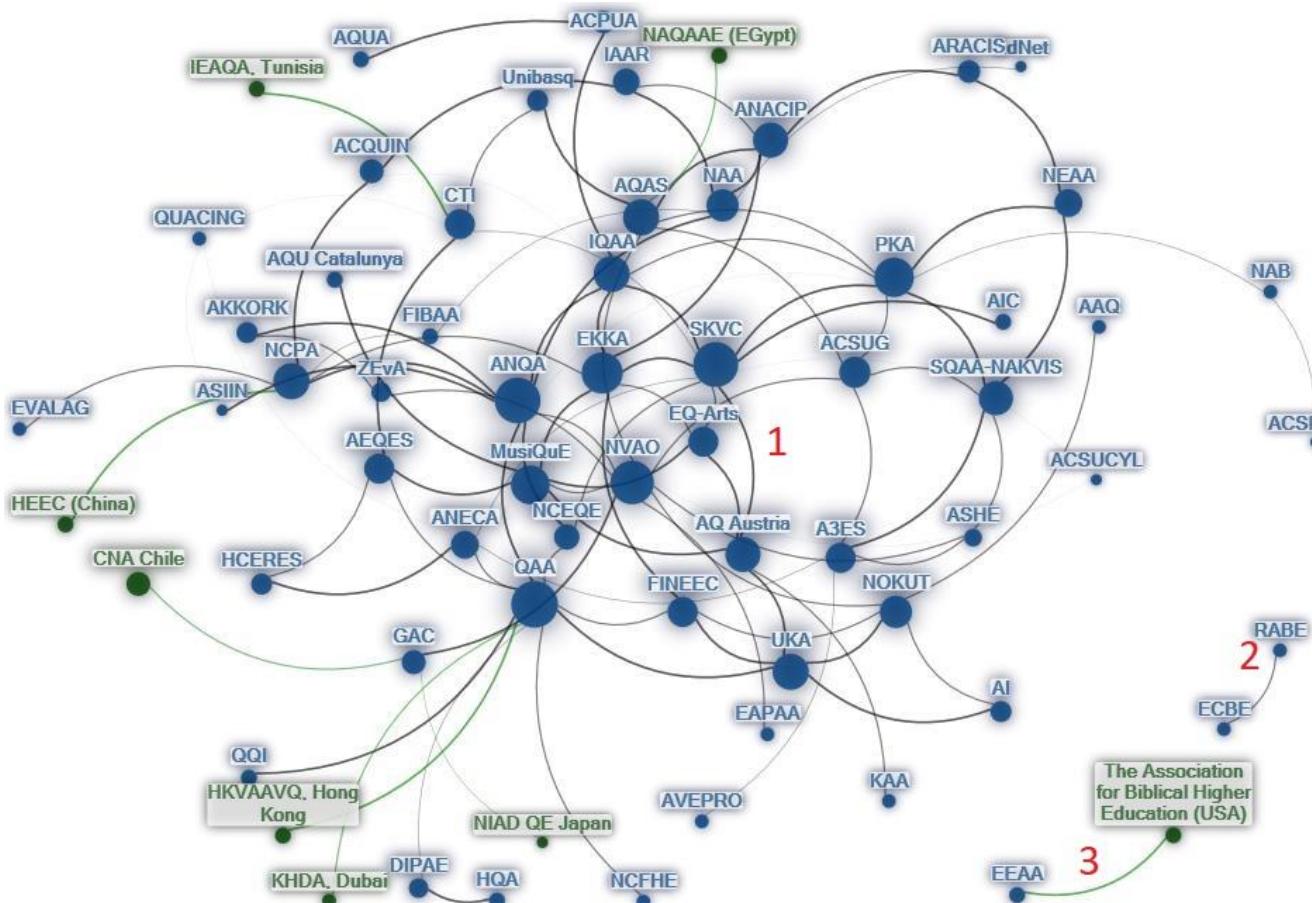
Further analysis showed that the network of surveyed QA agencies demonstrated the so called "small-world"¹¹⁰ characteristics showing that its network structure facilitated diffusion and exchange of knowledge between network actors. Analysis of two key indicators of "small-worldliness" (short average path length and high clustering coefficient compared to the random network of the same size) confirmed that the network of QA agencies fits well the criteria of a small-world network. Close

¹⁰⁹ In SNA theory, network components are understood as sub-networks of network actors that are (directly or indirectly) interconnected with each other, but have no ties with other sub-networks.

¹¹⁰ A small-world network is a type of network in which most actors are not neighbours of one another, but most actors can be reached from every other by a small number of steps. In other words, "small-worldliness" of a network defines the probability that two directly unconnected actors (organisations) are interconnected indirectly through a mutual acquaintance.

interconnectedness and efficient flow of information within the network was also confirmed by the analysis of the network fragmentation structural indicator that shows the proportion of pairs of network actors unreachable from each other. In the present network this proportion was less than 12%, meaning that the absolute majority of the pairs of agencies had either direct cooperation ties or could reach each other through a mutual acquaintance(s).

Figure 52: Network of quality assurance agencies with network components 1, 2 and 3 indicated in red. Note: The size of the discs indicate the aggregate sum of the number and strength of cooperation developed by a quality assurance agency (i.e. degree centrality); the width of lines connecting agencies indicate the strength of cooperation as indicated in the survey; blue disks indicate European Higher Education Area-based agencies, whereas green disks indicate agencies based in third-countries.



Source: PPMI Social network analysis based on the Survey of QA agencies.

Further analysis assessed the most central quality assurance agencies in terms of their importance and network-embeddedness. For this purpose, a degree centrality measure, which ranks the network actors according to the number and strength of their direct cooperation ties to other network actors, was calculated. This analysis revealed that almost all of the top-central agencies that developed the highest number and the strongest cooperation ties with foreign partners were members of ENQA and listed on EQAR, although less than half of them were members of ECA (although this could be attributed to the fact that ECA is a sub-category of accreditation agencies and cannot cover all the QA agencies in Europe). This evidence shows that participation in European-wide quality assurance networks, such as ENQA, significantly increases the opportunities for QA agencies to develop mutual cooperation ties with partners from other countries.

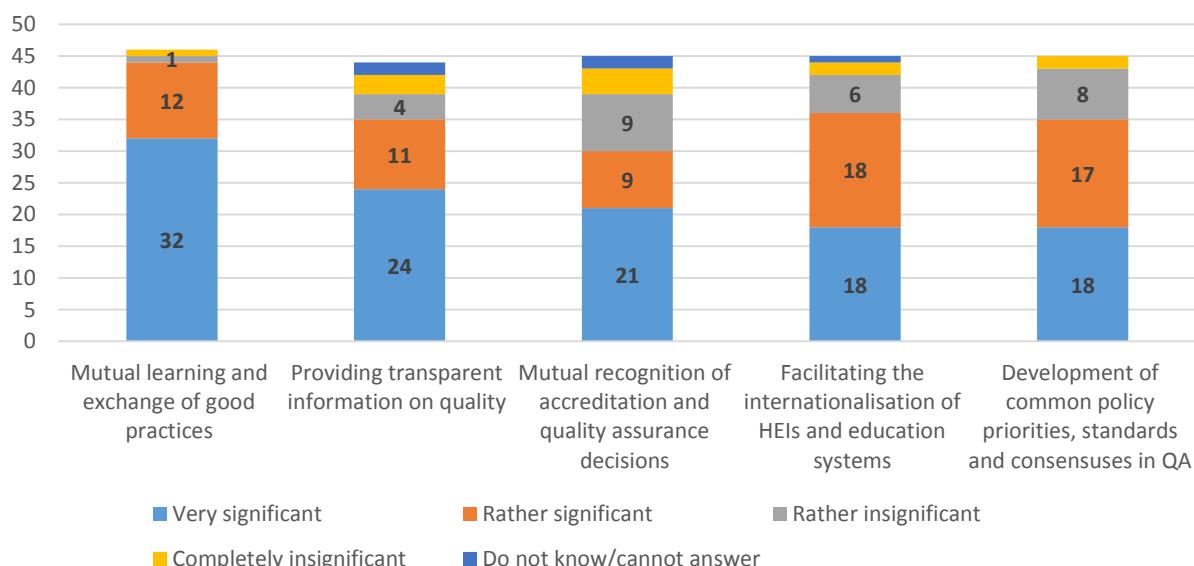
Table 4: Top-10 most central quality assurance agencies by degree centrality measure

Agency name (Country)	Network degree centrality	Listed on EQAR	Member of ENQA	Member of ECA
1. QAA (United Kingdom)	36	Yes	Yes	No
2. ANQA (Armenia)	32	Yes	Yes	No
3. SKVC (Lithuania)	31	Yes	Yes	No
4. NVAO (the Netherlands-Flanders)	29	Yes	Yes	Yes
5. EKKA (Estonia)	26	Yes	Yes	No
6. PKA (Poland)	24	Yes	Yes	Yes
7. MusiQuE (Europe)	23	Yes	Affiliate	No
8. AQAS (Germany)	20	Yes	Yes	Yes
9. IQAA (Kazakhstan)	20	Yes	Yes	No
10. NCPA (Russia)	20	Yes	Yes	No
10. UKÄ (Sweden)	20	No	Affiliate	Yes

Source: Social Network analysis based on the Survey of Quality Assurance Agencies.

According to the survey results, by far the most significant area in which cross-border cooperation between national QA agencies takes place is "Mutual learning and exchange of good practices" (around 70% of respondents - 45 QA agencies – indicating it as a "very significant" area of cooperation). To a somewhat smaller extent, the QA agencies also emphasised other areas of cooperation: "Providing transparent information on quality" (55% of respondents indicating it as a "very significant" area of cooperation); Mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions (47% of respondents); "Facilitating the internationalisation of higher education institutions and education systems" and "Development of common policy priorities, standards and consensuses in QA" (around 40% of respondents indicating each of them as "very significant" areas of cooperation) (see Figure 53 below).

Figure 53: Please indicate in which areas this cooperation is the most significant (the numbers in the figure refer to the agencies that answered the question).



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

In addition, in the open-question responses some individual agencies indicated other areas of cross-border cooperation with partner agencies, including: providing help for partner agencies in external evaluation/accreditation of study programmes (2 agencies),

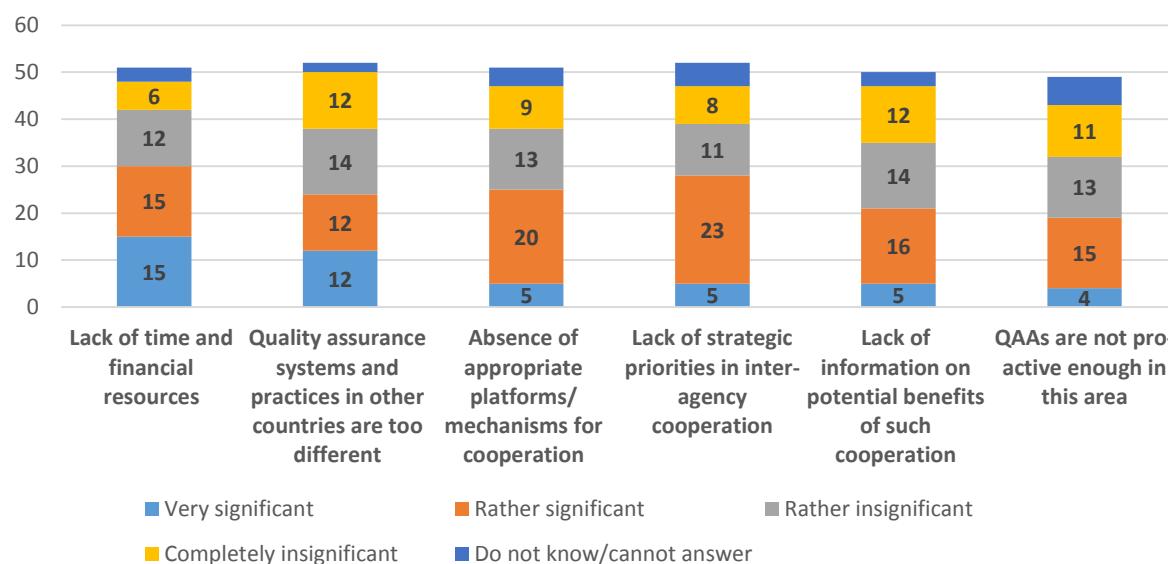
avoiding duplication of external quality assurance procedures, collaboration in common projects (e.g. Erasmus+), exchange of experts of review teams and following up on the international developments in quality assurance and higher education (1 agency for each answer respectively).

The evidence provided by in-depth interviews with the representatives of QA agencies strongly confirmed the above survey results. Most of the stakeholders indicated the exchange of good practice, mutual learning and capacity building as the key motives of international cooperation with foreign partners, followed by mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions (including joint programmes), as well as exchange of QA experts with foreign agencies. A number of agencies also indicated that they cooperate with international partners to train experts, to conduct international research projects on QA, to help foreign agencies with external evaluation/accreditation programmes and simply to become acquainted with recent developments in other countries. In some of the cases, QA agencies indicated they helped to establish new local QA agencies (usually, in non-EU countries).

The survey results also revealed the key barriers for cross-border cooperation between national quality assurance agencies. The most significant among them included: the "lack of time and financial resources" (59% - 30 QA agencies - indicating it as a "very significant" or "rather significant" barrier), "lack of strategic priorities in inter-agency cooperation" (54% indicating it as a "very significant" or "rather significant" barrier), "absence of appropriate platforms/mechanisms for cooperation" (49% of respondents) and differences between quality assurance systems and practices in other countries (46% of respondents indicating it as a significant barrier). To a somewhat smaller extent, other barriers also included "lack of information on potential benefits of such cooperation" (42% of respondents indicating it as a significant barrier) and the lack of pro-activeness in this area among QA agencies (39% of respondents) (see Figure 54 below).

Answers to the open-ended questions revealed some further barriers for cross-border cooperation between quality assurance agencies, including the lack of information on the general structure of HE systems in other countries, language barriers and the agency being in too early a stage of development. Interviews with the representatives of QA agencies confirmed the above survey results: the most common barrier to international cooperation identified by stakeholders was the lack of time, human and financial resources/small size of the agency.

Figure 54: In your opinion, what are the most significant barriers for cooperation with QA agencies from other countries? (the numbers in the figure refer to the agencies that answered the question).



Source: PPMI Survey of QA agencies.

4.4. The role and impact of E4 and EQAR on progress in quality assurance in 2014-2017

The E4, EQAR and the European Commission share a common goal, which is to make European cooperation in higher education succeed. There is a clear spirit of cooperation in the area of QA between these organisations which expresses itself in many joint projects. The E4 and EQAR have been important drivers for the development of quality assurance in higher education in 2014-2018. Through the links to their respective stakeholder organisations and their engagement in various activities, they have acted as facilitators of dialogue and mutual learning on quality assurance, as well as a transmission vector of European policy in quality assurance into national practice, not least through the development of the ESG, the E4 forming the executive board of EQAR, and the annual European Quality Assurance Forum.

4.4.1. The new Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

There can be no doubt that in terms of its impact, **the most significant work of the E4 (with considerable involvement of other stakeholders) has been the development of the revised ESG 2015.**

When the original ESG 2005 were drafted, they were intended to identify commonly accepted good practice in QA in Europe. This in itself was rather revolutionary for some countries and institutions, while for others (more advanced higher education systems) it did not represent a major innovation. Without doubt, for many QA agencies, meeting these standards has been a challenge. At the time of their writing, there was no document of the same international recognition as the ESG on which ENQA could base its evaluations. EQAR was founded as the official register of QA agencies that substantially comply with the ESG. In the ten years following their publication, the role and status of the ESG had grown considerably. At the moment they represent the common basis for implementing quality assurance in Europe.

The new ESG 2015 are designed to promote the importance of teaching & learning. At the core of the revised ESG part 1 is student-centred learning. While as a criterion (1.3) it may seem inconspicuous, almost half the criteria formulated in ESG part 1 cannot be meaningfully met without implementing student-centred learning¹¹¹. A key lesson from the EQUIP project¹¹² (2015-2017) was that student-centred learning has immensely gained in prominence all over Europe. Largely due to the ESG 2015, in many more higher education systems and QA agencies than previously, there is now a debate about student-centred learning and pedagogies that was not taking place before. However, student-centred learning is rather new for most QA agencies and many still do not know how to address it in their evaluation criteria or how to measure it appropriately.

The ESG 2015 are stressing the link between internal and external QA. During the last six years, the link between internal and external QA has moved from rhetoric to practice (as demonstrated in the first section of this study). Another aspect of this link is quality culture, which has gained in prominence in the ESG. Quality culture needs to develop within institutions, but it is clearly a topic that QA agencies and external QA increasingly reflect on and address.

The new ESG represent a major step forward towards the European Higher Education Area where quality is perceived as a major objective. At the same time, due to the loosely-coupled nature of higher education systems, their implementation is far from guaranteed. The European Commission may consider encouraging the E4 to promote further understanding and use of the ESG. Jointly with the E4 and national authorities, the Commission could develop high-impact interventions to support their implementation within higher education institutions (possibly, via Erasmus+).

4.4.2. Supporting mutual learning and sharing expertise

The E4 regularly organises the annual European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF), which has become clearly the most important conference on quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Continuously high application and participation numbers show the strong interest of the QA professional community, policy-makers and academics in exchanging perspectives on quality assurance practices and learning from the experiences of other countries.

The E4 and EQAR developed a hands-on guide with key considerations for cross border quality assurance¹¹³, partly in response to questions from higher education institutions, on whether the ESG would include a section on cross-border QA. The document is a summary of key questions that higher education institutions (and QA agencies) interested in cross-border QA should ask themselves. It received very positive feedback from those higher education institutions.

A shift is discernible in the activities of EUA, EURASHE, – and, to a degree ESU - towards supporting implementation rather than just developing and lobbying on policy. In QA, they are shifting their focus to learning & teaching rather than procedures of internal and

¹¹¹ Neither ESG 1.2 „Design and approval of programmes“ nor ESG 1.4 „Student admission, progression, recognition and certification“ can be implemented without formulating learning outcomes. ESG 1.5 „Teaching staff“ and ESG 1.6 „Learning resources and student support“ refer to student-centred learning directly.

¹¹² The EQUIP project is a collaborative project by the E4 and EI, which has promoted the ESG 2015 in the higher education community through multi-level peer-learning groups and training events. The project has provided opportunities to understand what the ESG are and what the background of each standard is. Many HEI staff have first learnt about the ESG within this project. Link: <http://www.equip-project.eu/>

¹¹³ E4. (2017). Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. Retrieved from E4 website: <https://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/e4/key-considerations-for-cross-border-quality-assurance-in-the-ehea.pdf>

external QA. This is visible in the number of capacity-building projects (e.g. the joint EQUIP project; EUA's EUREQA¹¹⁴, the EUA's learning and teaching initiative and the European Learning & Teaching Forum (EFFECT)¹¹⁵; EURASHE's QA community of practitioner experts from within higher education institutions; the Peer Assessment of Student-Centred Learning project (PAstudent-centred learning)¹¹⁶ by ESU as well as various TEMPUS/Erasmus+ projects on enhancing students' participation in Quality Assurance, e.g. in Armenia¹¹⁷ and Moldova¹¹⁸. ENQA is highly active in developing and sharing examples of good practice in QA in a large number of projects, providing guidelines on Quality Assurance Professional Competencies¹¹⁹, Internal Quality Management in Competence-Based Higher Education¹²⁰, Quality Assurance of Cross-Border Higher Education, or Competence-based Higher Education¹²¹.

Publications like the EURASHE's Manual for internal quality assurance systems¹²², EUA's Reports, Studies and Occasional Papers¹²³, ENQA's "occasional papers" series, or ESU's publications on student-centred learning are in high demand. Some have been translated into other languages and are being used by various other stakeholders in Europe.

All the E4 are also active globally via contributions to policy dialogues and cooperation activities with African or ASEAN countries.

EUA continues to contribute to capacity-building for strategic management through the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP)¹²⁴ which is being used by many individual higher education institutions as well as in system-wide institutional reviews, e.g. in Romania, the former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia, or Montenegro where all of the countries' higher education institutions were evaluated and the main problems of the higher education system as a whole were identified – covering broader issues than only quality assurance, such as funding model or governance. Regarding capacity-building EUA also coordinates the SPHERE¹²⁵ study visits, seminars, and technical assistance missions.

ESU's student expert pool¹²⁶ is a valuable tool to build expertise in QA and promote students as agents of change. Over the past years, the pool has received a continuously growing number of requests for student experts for international reviews and has become a role model for the national students' pools, e.g. recently in Armenia. A notable proportion of former ESU pool members have gone on to work in higher education policy, quality assurance or higher education management.

¹¹⁴ <http://www.eua.be/activities-services/projects/past-projects/quality-assurance-and-transparency/EUREQA.aspx>; <http://www.eureqa-tempus.eu/>

¹¹⁵ <http://www.eua.be/policy-representation/higher-education-policies/eua-learning-teaching-initiative>

¹¹⁶ <http://pascl.eu/> (not accessible at the time of writing)

¹¹⁷ <http://espaq.eu/en/>

¹¹⁸ <http://gesi.sozphil.uni-leipzig.de/quaem/welcome/>

¹¹⁹ <http://www.enqa.eu/indirme/papers-and-reports/occasional-papers/ENQA%20Competencies%20Framework.pdf>

¹²⁰ <https://iqmhe.files.wordpress.com/2016/11/iqm-he-handbook.pdf>

¹²¹ <https://iqmhe.wordpress.com/>

¹²² Bollaert, L. (2014). A Manual for Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education: With a Special Focus on Professional Higher Education.

¹²³ <http://www.eua.be/activities-services/publications/eua-reports-studies-and-occasional-papers.aspx>

¹²⁴ For the timeframe between 2014 and 2017, IEP lists evaluation reports of 66 individual higher education institutions.

¹²⁵ The SPHERE Consortium (*Support and Promotion for Higher Education Reform Experts*) is an initiative steered by the European Commission and implemented by its Executive Agency for Education, Audiovisual and Culture. SPHERE will provide training and networking for Higher Education Reform Experts (HEREs) and National Erasmus Plus Offices (NEOs) in countries neighbouring the EU (former Tempus partner countries) between January 2015–December 2020. URL: <http://supporthere.org/page/sphere-consortium>

¹²⁶ <http://www.quest.esu-online.org/QA+Student+Experts+Pool>

4.4.3. The triple role of ENQA: members' representation, link between EU and national level, promotion of European higher education QA principles at the international level

ENQA, through its QA agency reviews against the ESG, plays an integral part in the quality assurance architecture and the "delivery chain" of European policy to the national level. As a membership organisation, ENQA sees its main purpose in representing its member QA agencies. For ENQA, ESG compliance is primarily an intrinsic motive, in order to have a criterion to admit QA agencies to membership¹²⁷. In contrast to EQAR, ENQA is not a formal instrument of the Bologna Process. On the other hand, ENQA does act as an instrument of policy transfer and implementation through the ESG and its agency reviews, and by working on areas of interest at the European level, in the interest of its member QA agencies. ENQA sees itself as a facilitator in both directions: to promote a European-level understanding of QA among its members, and to provide feedback from its members to the EU level.

At the same time, ENQA is instrumental in the implementation of the ESG through its agency reviews; it conducts around 12-17 reviews of QA agencies every year. Aside from certifying compliance with the ESG, these reviews support agencies in their development. The number of ESG-compliant QA agencies in ENQA membership has continued to increase. At the close of 2013, ENQA had 38 members (including 2 under review) in 23 countries and another 48 affiliates in 14 additional countries. At the close of 2016, ENQA had 49 members (including 3 under review) in 27 countries and 50 affiliates in 12 additional countries. Through its reviews for membership, ENQA is an important factor in the adoption of the ESG by QA agencies within Member States and wider European Higher Education Area.

Lastly, ENQA also plays an important role in promoting European higher education and the ESG worldwide, through its collaborations with the QA networks in other parts of the world (AFRIQAN¹²⁸, APQN¹²⁹, AQAN¹³⁰, ANQAHE¹³¹). The different activities beyond the European Higher Education Area have led to a better understanding of similarities and difference in QA systems. This makes the work of European QA agencies easier when they go outside of Europe because the ESG and EQAR are already known.

In summary, ENQA in addition to its crucial function in assessing QA agencies' compliance with the ESG, acts as an important multiplier and point of dissemination of information to QA agencies. QA agencies, in turn, act as filter and transmission vector of policy (such as the ESG) to the national systems.

4.4.4. The role of EQAR

In contrast to ENQA, which is an interest-organisation of QA agencies and not a formal instrument of the Bologna Process, EQAR was created because there was a need to have a European tool for the implementation of policy in the area of QA. EQAR is the official register of agencies that have demonstrated their substantial compliance with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe, the ESG. EQAR's mission is to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education. Through this function, EQAR serves as a European tool for the implementation

¹²⁷ Interview with ENQA.

¹²⁸ <https://afriqan.aau.org/>

¹²⁹ www.apqn.org/

¹³⁰ <http://www.aqan.org/>

¹³¹ <http://www.anqahe.org/>

of policy in the area of QA in higher education. While EQAR-registration is an “official stamp of approval” for a QA agency, it does not confer agencies any rights to participate in EQAR’s governance. The structure of EQAR is designed in such a way as to ensure that the body taking decisions regarding agency’s compliance with the ESG (Register Committee) can act fully independently. Its members, nominated by stakeholder organisations,¹³² participate in their personal capacity.

For the period 2014-2017, the most significant activity for EQAR was its contribution to the development of and transition to the ESG 2015. EQAR’s input concerned particularly the norms regarding professional conduct and the introduction of complaints and appeals procedures for agencies. EQAR has also contributed to clarifying the standards regarding student involvement¹³³. Most importantly, EQAR has stressed the importance of QA agencies systematically assessing the ESG part 1 as required by ESG part 2.1 (results of internal QA).

The transition to ESG 2015 was proactively planned and implemented by EQAR. Before publishing the ESG 2015, EQAR began preparing and coordinating the transition with ENQA, which conducts the reviews of QA agencies. From the moment that the ESG 2015 were adopted, EQAR no longer accepted evaluations based on the ESG 2005. Those QA agencies due to be reviewed for re-registration during the transition received an extension of their registration so that they too could be reviewed against the new ESG. The Register Committee of EQAR also received an extension of their mandate for the period of transition¹³⁴. This gave the QA agencies up for review enough time to align their procedures with the ESG 2015. This approach of EQAR and ENQA has significantly contributed to a swift implementation of the new ESG.

It is evident, that there is an increasing (normative) pressure by the national authorities on their QA agencies to apply for inclusion in EQAR. Some countries (e.g. Moldova) have even included the goal for their agencies to be listed in EQAR in the relevant laws.

With financial support from the Erasmus+ programme, EQAR is currently working on establishing a database of external QA results (DEQAR). This database will include a list of higher education institutions and study programmes that have been externally reviewed by an EQAR-registered QA agency. EQAR has conducted a feasibility study for such a database, which concluded that it would be both feasible as well as useful, especially for recognition offices. Having a common European database of quality assured study programmes and higher education institutions represents a significant step towards closing the existing information gaps in the European Higher Education Area.

¹³² Members of EQAR’s governing structure are the four founders (ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE). 38 European governments that have decided to support the operation of EQAR and get involved in its governance, as well as the social partner organisations represented in the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG).

¹³³ Interview with EQAR.

¹³⁴ https://eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/eqar/official/RC_11_1_ESG_TransitionalArrangements_v2_0.pdf

5. Conclusions of the study

Adoption of the ESG 2015 – a major achievement, but there remain significant differences among countries in terms of compliance

There exists a consensus in the quality assurance community that the adoption of the ESG 2015 was a major development that defined the period of 2014-2017. Most significant changes were introduced in its part 1 related to internal QA. These changes included:

- Introduction of the student-centred learning provision;
- Stronger emphasis on the learning outcomes approach;
- Stronger emphasis on teaching as the core mission of higher education institutions;
- Stronger emphasis on the need to collect, analyse and use QA data for management and decision-making.

The study found that these topics have clearly influenced the recent developments in QA and were indeed the key issues discussed and implemented by the QA community in 2014-2017, both nationally and at the European level. The E4 organisations (ENQA, EUA, ESU, EURASHE) and EQAR have been important drivers for the development and application of the ESG 2015. They acted as

- *links* between the European policy developments and their member organisations;
- *facilitators* of European dialogue and mutual learning on QA (including through the European Quality Assurance Forum and joint projects);
- *transmission vectors* of European QA policy into national policy and practice;
- increasingly: *centres of competence* and respected consultants on QA.

The ESG have a well-established status in the European QA community: they serve as membership criteria for ENQA, inclusion criteria for EQAR, and the basis for the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes. Because ENQA membership and registration on EQAR are both attractive, QA agencies have become the vector of change on national policies pushing for alignment of the national policies with the ESG. The ESG 2015 has achieved success in setting clear and universal standards and inspiring discussions and actions on newly-introduced or better-emphasised issues (student-centred learning, teaching as the core mission of higher education, learning outcomes, the use of QA data). However, our study has also revealed that it is not always clear for stakeholders how exactly ESG should be translated into the actual practices of higher education institutions and who should drive this process at its different stages.

While most of QA agencies are convinced of their sufficient compliance with the ESG provisions (according to our survey of QA agencies), we observed differences in compliance with the ESG among national QA systems based on their maturity. Representatives of advanced QA systems reported that compliance with the ESG required minimal additional effort. In these systems, focus lied on further development of specific aspects of quality culture and enhancement. For QA systems with a shorter history, compliance with the ESG 2015 posed a significant challenge.

Key developments in internal quality assurance in 2014-2017

The study found that in all EU Member States higher education laws and specific QA laws or directives specify the framework and role of internal QA in general and in relation to external QA. QA in general and internal QA has become an important part of recent university reforms. In almost all EU countries legislation determines that institutions should develop and publish their internal QA policy or strategy.

The government usually defines the duties and framework of internal and external QA and the quality assurance agencies are responsible for setting up specific procedures and guidelines, provide support to higher education institutions, and conduct the evaluations and/or accreditation. However, it is clearly understood as the responsibility of higher education institutions to set up their own internal QA procedures, based on broader legal frameworks. University autonomy is the key enabling condition to have an effective internal QA system. There is some possible conflict and trade-off between keeping university autonomy on the one hand and defining and prescribing specific rules and procedures on the other hand.

In accordance with the above-mentioned frameworks and duties, the increasing number of higher education institutions establish institutional strategies for quality improvement which, in most EU countries, is required explicitly by laws. Although interview data clearly showed that institutional policies are not just driven by external pressure or laws and that there is a clear involvement and commitment of the higher education institutions themselves, a number of country representatives reported that in some higher education institutions these strategies are quite formal, and they are not necessarily followed by staff in their everyday work.

Key developments in external quality assurance in 2014-2017

The period since 2014 brought several large legislative changes to external quality assurance and the creation of independent QA agencies, for example, in Cyprus, Latvia and Czech Republic. Revisions to the law governing quality assurance were passed in Austria, Croatia, Czech Republic, Hungary and Slovenia. With the establishment of the Cypriot, Latvian and Czech QA agencies, every EU country has adopted a system where responsibility for QA has been delegated to one or multiple independent agencies except for Slovakia, where a national committee is entrusted with the quality assurance, and Luxembourg, where the University of Luxembourg is periodically accredited by an EQAR-registered foreign QA agency.

QA has become an important part of national higher education reforms in many countries, but this has led to an increase in financial and human resources required by higher education institutions to deal with more advanced QA processes

The study has revealed that QA in general and internal QA in particular have become important parts of recent university reforms in the Member States. Interview data showed that institutional policies were not just driven by external pressure or laws and that there was a clear involvement and commitment of the higher education institutions themselves. It was clearly understood as the responsibility of higher education institutions to set up their own internal QA procedures, based on broader legal frameworks. University autonomy was found to be the key enabling condition to have an effective internal QA system. We also found some possible conflict and trade-off between respecting university autonomy, on the one hand, and defining and prescribing specific rules and procedures on the other hand.

As any important change in policy and practice, this was related to an increase in financial and human resources needed by higher education institutions to deal with more advanced QA processes. Introduction of more advanced internal QA systems, and introduction of both programme and institutional external evaluations in some countries, have led to a significant growth of higher education institutions' staff working exclusively on QA. This was generally a positive trend – permanent staff took care of assuring compliance with the formal criteria, which freed-up time and capacity of academics within reviews, QA committees or boards to reflect upon content aspects. However, the full

integration of QA in the daily work within higher education institutions is still a big challenge.

Some EU countries have also sped-up the external QA activities considerably since 2014, which resulted in some discomforts in higher education institutions due to burden and efforts necessary. As many as 45% of respondents in the survey of higher education institutions thought that there are not enough resources (not only financial, but also human) in their institution to meet all QA requirements. This was seen by higher education institutions as the main problematic issue precluding the development of internal quality culture.

Using a mix of institutional and programme evaluations was found to be more effective than selecting any single type of evaluation

Our research produced various insights on the pros and cons of institutional and programme-level evaluations. Interview programme revealed a consensus among the stakeholders that institutional evaluations provide more autonomy to individual higher education institutions to devise their internal QA processes based on their own specific needs. This is believed to contribute to building a quality culture in higher education institutions that are subject to an institutional evaluation. This line of thinking led to a growing popularity of institutional evaluations, and the number of countries applying this type of QA seems to be growing. However, our survey of QA agencies showed that the majority of agencies (52%), who are rightly regarded as experts in the field, believe that using a mix of institutional and programme evaluations is more effective than selecting any single type of evaluation. Only 22% of the responding QA agencies said that institutional evaluations bring better results, while 24% were of the opinion that programme evaluations are more effective.

A discouraging number: 71% of respondents from higher education institutions believed that quality assurance in their institutions is mostly about complying with external regulations and laws

The majority of interviewees consulted during the study agreed that the Commission and the main EU-level and national stakeholders should continue their efforts in making sure that quality assurance processes are not merely formalities but rather part of quality culture(s) in individual higher education institutions. However, our survey of higher education institutions showed that substantial efforts will still be needed – 71% of respondents believed quality assurance in their institutions to be mostly about complying with external regulations and laws.

Contribution of QA to supporting teaching – still a challenge

Since the publication of the previous Commission's progress report on QA in 2014, teaching in higher education has received significantly more attention across European Higher Education Area and all levels of QA community. The surveyed higher education institutions indicated that the most common measures to foster professional development of teachers were training opportunities and international mobility. However, measures aimed at raising the status of teaching in higher education, like teaching awards and fellowships for distinguished teachers, were rarely used. The EU-wide survey of higher education institutions revealed a disappointing picture: career development opportunities for teaching staff were rarely addressed by internal and external QA, and this has not changed in the recent three years. The survey results also pointed towards another concerning issue: student perception of the teaching quality is considered as a factor in the promotion panels of less than 50% of European higher education institutions.

Most of QA agencies analyse whether learning outcomes are clearly stated in the study programmes; however, learning outcomes are not yet a living practice in daily lives of students and teachers

The incorporation of learning outcomes into higher education activities such as teaching, learning and assessment was mainly driven by national authorities, who incorporated learning outcomes into national laws and regulations. They subsequently became a part of quality assurance systems. Most of QA agencies now evaluate whether study programmes clearly state learning outcomes. There was a consensus among the interviewees that the design of study programmes usually includes learning outcomes, however, their systematic incorporation into teaching, learning and assessment is still a challenge in many countries. The main challenge related to learning outcomes is that they are not well communicated and understood among the student population, and in some cases teaching staff. Learning outcomes are not yet a living practice in higher education processes in Europe.

Performance (quality) agreements were found to be an effective way for the national policy-makers to provide incentives to higher education institutions to enhance quality of their study programmes

Our study revealed the promising effects of performance (or quality) agreements – contracts or compacts between governments and *individual* higher education institutions, which set out specific quantitative or qualitative goals that institutions should seek to achieve in a given time and which are usually (but not necessarily) *linked to institutional funding*. For example, since 2012, 7% of higher education institutions' funding in the Netherlands have been based on such performance agreements. Analysis of the Dutch case (analysed in more detail in one of the good practice fiches that you can find in Annex 1) revealed that performance agreements:

- allowed to consider the context and mission of individual higher education institutions, rather than fitting all higher education institutions into one standard system. Therefore, performance agreements exhibited higher flexibility than uniform, formula/ indicator-based systems;
- may strengthen strategic planning and focus on medium term results, while public policy can increase transparency and alignment of institutional and national goals;
- allow to consider qualitative and quantitative goals. Being set at an institutional level, they can also be used within institutions, in order to steer the development of faculties and departments.

Developments in ICT were seen as the most important factor that has influenced developments in internal QA in 2014-2017 and is likely to have a high impact in the future; however, ICT-based learning modes have not yet received sufficient attention in QA

In our survey of higher education institutions, developments in ICT was mentioned as the most important factor that has influenced developments in internal QA in 2014-2017 (72% of respondents thought that it had a strong influence). This led to proliferation of the use of new and innovative learning modes, such as MOOCs and blended learning. However, only 41% of QA agencies participating in our survey responded that they were required to assess the use of these new delivery modes. This can be corroborated with the data collected through interviews where respondents from QA agencies and national authorities indicated that formal criteria for the assessment of MOOCs and blended learning are still lacking mainly because they are not yet widely used.

Effective use of monitoring data – very important for developing quality culture in higher education institutions

Our analysis showed that a good use of monitoring data contributed significantly to developing the quality culture in higher education institutions through collecting and disseminating high quality evidence about the impact of QA procedures and supporting the development of the institution's "narrative" about quality in their institution. This ensured that the QA process was seen as transparent and relevant by the staff and inspired them to be part of quality improvements. However, our analysis has also indicated that a lot of data, which is collected, is not shared among all interested stakeholders or analysed to provide valuable insights.

Interviews with the quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions have also revealed that not all quality indicators bring the same value. While most indicators are useful for accountability purposes, only some of them can lead to management action (i.e. changing practice based on evidence) or learning. Feedback received during the interview programme pointed to the following indicators as being among the most effective measures that can lead to real action: student-staff ratio, graduate tracking, internationalisation (both incoming and outgoing students), retention/ progression/ drop-out rates, equal access indicators.

The peer learning activity on quality culture in Oslo has also revealed that collection of quality indicators always produces quite significant administrative burden for higher education institutions. Therefore, it must be ensured that administrative burden related to data collection is proportionate to the usefulness of the data in question. A useful tip for the QA agencies and national authorities, deciding about the usefulness of indicators, was provided during the discussions at the meeting of Directors General for Higher Education in Sofia: national authorities and QA agencies should ask higher education institutions whether certain indicators are useful for higher education institutions themselves – only such indicators should be used for monitoring of higher education quality.

Leadership of higher education institutions – the key driver of quality culture

Our study found that the institutional leadership and management of the university was the key driver of quality culture in higher education. More than 65% of respondents were of the opinion that leadership had a very strong or rather strong influence on the internal quality assurance of an institution. Strong leadership and effective management in higher education institutions could address some of the obstacles to further developing quality assurance processes by mobilising human and financial resources (as noted above, as many as 45% of respondents agreed that there are not enough resources), generating motivation and commitment among academic staff and other higher education stakeholders, as well as overcoming possible resistance to change and innovation in higher education.

Involvement of all stakeholders in development of QA tools and policies is of key importance in making sure that these tools will be endorsed and applied by all main players in the QA community

We have collected strong evidence that involvement of all stakeholders in development of QA tools and policies is a key in making sure that these tools will be endorsed and applied by all main players in the QA community. Even policy tools without any attached financial or legal consequences can be very effective if there is a strong agreement and commitment among the main stakeholders, as the discussions on the Norwegian white

paper on quality culture revealed. On the other hand, even smartest policies can fail if they are not endorsed by all key players.

Cross-border quality assurance – still rarely used by higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area

Survey of higher education institutions showed that cross-border quality assurance was very rarely used by higher education institutions in the European Higher Education Area. Considering legal regulations, analysis showed that in most of the European Higher Education Area countries higher education institutions cannot be evaluated by QA agencies from outside the country to fulfil their obligations for external QA. Moreover, even in those cases when evaluation by a foreign agency does lead to a formal decision, its results usually must be approved by the national QA agency and/ or the foreign QA agency itself must follow the national regulations and standards of evaluation.

The key motive of higher education institutions to choose a foreign external evaluator was the prestige and credibility carried by cross-border quality assurance. The key barriers for cross-border quality assurance included unfavourable legal regulations set at national level, higher financial costs of cross-border quality assurance, distrust of foreign QA agencies, fear of 'agency shopping' (a very rare phenomenon, which, however, has a very high negative impact), differing national higher education contexts and regulations, as well as language differences between countries.

Being included in the EQAR register is generally considered as the indicator of the agency's substantial compliance with the ESG 2015. However, in a few cases national QA agencies and national authority representatives expressed their distrust of the quality of services provided by foreign agencies, even if these agencies were EQAR-registered. This distrust was strengthened by few cases where higher education institutions that previously were refused accreditation by national QA agencies were nevertheless positively evaluated and received their accreditation from foreign EQAR registered agencies.

Social network analysis revealed a single, well integrated network of European QA agencies

We found that an overwhelming majority of QA agencies in European Higher Education Area (around 89% of surveyed agencies) cooperate with QA agencies from other countries, mostly other European Higher Education Area-based agencies. According to the results of social network analysis (SNA), this international cooperation resulted in a single, well integrated network of European QA agencies interconnected through cooperation ties.

A closely integrated network of European QA agencies facilitates the knowledge flow, cooperation and good practice exchange in higher education quality assurance in Europe and beyond. Both interviews and survey results showed that the main motive of QA agencies to engage in international cooperation was mutual learning and exchange of good practices, providing transparent information on quality, as well as mutual recognition of accreditation and quality assurance decisions; the key barrier for such cooperation was the lack of financial, human and time resources within QA agencies.

European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes is hindered by national legislations and lack of awareness by higher education institutions on what the Approach entails

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes has been applied only a few times since its adoption in 2015. However, even in these cases higher education

institutions rather applied some “bits and pieces” of the Approach, and we could find only one joint programme (ITEPS), where the Approach has been fully applied as originally intended by European Higher Education Area ministers. Interviews with national authorities and QA agencies showed that the main obstacle for the full application of the European Approach was different national legal frameworks and regulations. The following are examples of the ‘national legislative hindrances’:

- Separate national programme accreditations were required, with different national criteria, rules, accreditation timelines and re-accreditation deadlines;
- National legislations requiring that recognition of an accreditation decision by a foreign quality assurance agency needs to be approved by the national quality assurance agency;
- The assessment report must be written in the national language;
- National quality assurance agencies are not allowed to coordinate an international procedure or undertake a site visit abroad;
- National criteria contradict each other;
- Very detailed national staff requirements.

Despite all hindrances mentioned above, interviews with national authorities and QA agencies revealed a positive outlook: a clear majority of interviewees agreed that the implementation of the European Approach should move on and that all involved stakeholders should do what is in their power to remove the remaining national obstacles.

Another key finding of our analysis in this area was that the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (“the European Approach”) was not sufficiently clear for higher education institutions. Interviews showed that there were many cases, in which higher education institutions perceived that they are applying it, while an objective analysis clearly showed that they were not. Around a third of survey respondents also said that they were not aware of it. Therefore, to improve the application of the European Approach, the Commission (and other relevant stakeholders) could consider more targeted communication to higher education institutions as to what the “European Approach” entails and what are its benefits.

6. Recommendations

Based on the study conclusions discussed above, this final section of the study provides recommendations for various key players of the European QA community, including the European Commission, the Member States, the European higher education institutions, national quality assurance agencies, the EU-level stakeholders (EQAR, ENQA, EURASHE, ESU, EUA), and others. Where possible, we tried to indicate, who should take the lead in implementing each of the proposed recommendations. We provide three large sets of recommendations, under which more operational sub-recommendations are suggested:

- The first set of recommendations proposes ways to work towards realisation of the European Education Area and creation of truly European universities, including through better use of Bologna Process tools, cross-border quality assurance and the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes.
- The second set of recommendations proposes operational steps in order to build quality culture(s) in European higher education institutions.
- The final third set of recommendations is related to the implementation of the ESG. We underline certain standards and guidelines of the ESG, which should be given more attention in the future.

Recommendation 1: The EU institutions, the Member States and the European higher education institutions should work together on the realisation of the European Education Area, where quality assurance aspects play a prominent role. Well-functioning quality assurance systems are key for the recognition of diplomas and creating truly European universities. The current European quality assurance tools enhancing cross-border quality assurance, such as ESG, EQAR and the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, should be applied more effectively to reach the EU policy objectives.

The European Council of 14 December 2017 called on Member States, the Council and the Commission to take work forward with a view to realising the key components of the European Education Area. A few important elements of this policy agenda include strengthening strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encouraging the emergence of some twenty 'European Universities', as well as promoting the cooperation of Member States on mutual recognition of higher education. Quality assurance (including the current European QA tools – ESG, EQAR, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes) should play an important role in ensuring smooth recognition of diplomas and creating truly European universities. Five sub-recommendations below propose more detailed actions that the European Commission, the Member States and the European higher education institutions should take in order to contribute to realising the European Education Area and building truly European universities.

Recommendation 1.1: Ensure that national authorities fulfil their commitments towards the Bologna process.

The European Commission should work together with the national authorities to ensure that they fulfil their commitments towards the Bologna process, including:

- Ensuring the independence of QA agencies in external QA;
- Encouraging more QA agencies to apply for EQAR registration and to allow any EQAR-registered agency to operate in their country in order to:
 - Facilitate automatic recognition of qualifications and capitalise on the Database of European QA Results (DEQAR) for easier recognition;

- Apply the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes;
- Evaluate higher education institutions for their regular external quality assurance.

The European Commission should support the Member States (including through related funding schemes), as far as their mandate allows, in fulfilling their Bologna commitments.

Recommendation 1.2: Funding schemes for QA should ensure that higher education institutions can freely choose any EQAR-registered agency for their external evaluation. Funding should not be used as a barrier to limit the freedom of higher education institutions to choose the most suitable QA agency, either national or from another country.

To provide more opportunities for higher education institutions to use the cross-border quality assurance in Europe, it is recommended for those Member States that cover the costs of external review by domestic QA agency, also to provide the financial support for their higher education institutions by covering part or full costs of external evaluations conducted by foreign EQAR registered QA agencies (in case a higher education institution chooses a foreign QA agency instead of the domestic one).

Alternatively, it is recommended to establish a special EU-level fund (or provide funding from Erasmus+) that could support the higher education institutions by covering part or full costs of external evaluations conducted by foreign QA agencies. Additional support could be provided to higher education institutions to cover the costs of document translation and other language support, when it is related to and indispensable for cross-border QA activities. In order to maintain fair competition between agencies, this support, however, should be provided only for higher education institutions based in the countries where government covers the costs of external evaluation by domestic QA agencies. This requirement would prevent the discrimination against the national QA agencies based in the countries where higher education institutions have to self-fund the external evaluation by both domestic and foreign agencies. Support for cross-border quality assurance in the countries where the costs of external reviews by domestic QA agencies are also financed by the government would make the competition between European QA agencies fairer by creating equal opportunities for higher education institutions to choose either domestic or foreign evaluator without additional financial incentives or costs.

Recommendation 1.3. Strengthen mutual trust among the European QA agencies by raising their awareness of the 'Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' and the mechanisms mentioned therein.

To strengthen the mutual trust among the European QA agencies and foster cross-border quality assurance activities, it is recommended to raise the awareness of the QA agencies and ensure their support to the 'Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area'¹³⁵ (2017). Following these considerations, before carrying out cross-border QA activities, agencies should make special preparations that include the agency contacting the local QA agency, and informing itself of previous external QA reports and decisions concerning the institution in question. The agencies conducting external evaluations of higher education institutions abroad should be encouraged to take into consideration the outcomes of the previous evaluations, with specific precautions to be taken when an institution previously received a negative

¹³⁵ https://www.esu-online.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Key-Considerations-CBQA-EHEA_Feb2017.pdf

evaluation/was denied accreditation. In addition, EQAR could compare the principles defined in the "Key considerations" and actual practice of QA agencies when conducting evaluations abroad. ENQA could discuss with its members at a regular basis how they implement the "Key considerations", without making it part of its review criteria.

Recommendation 1.4: Remove national and transnational hindrances stalling the implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

Our study team fully endorses the recommendations proposed by the peer learning activity on the European Approach, which took place in The Hague on 5-6 October 2017, as they are clearly in line with our own findings. A shortened version of the recommendations from the PLA is provided below.

National authorities should:

- act on the Yerevan Communiqué, as also confirmed in the Paris Communiqué, to integrate the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes ("European Approach") in national legislation and make sure that the results are accepted by national quality assurance agencies;
- raise awareness of the "European Approach", highlighting its benefits to higher education institutions, and establish a joint promotion centre;
- include the "European Approach" in national strategies to internationalise higher education;
- compile data and statistics and monitor developments on joint programmes and joint programme accreditation following the "European Approach".

Quality assurance agencies should:

- promote the "European Approach" towards ministries of education and higher education institutions and create a handbook with step-by-step guidelines for higher education institutions;
- accept the results of the "European Approach" carried out by EQAR-listed agencies and facilitate the recognition of national decisions on the "European Approach";
- create internal capacity building / training on the "European Approach" to strengthen its implementation;
- coordinate implementation strategies, building on experiences and sharing good practices. To this end, organise international meetings and networking between QA agencies, creating concrete results and placing the "European Approach" and the role of quality assurance agencies on the agenda at the highest levels.

The European Commission should:

- Promote the "European Approach" via the Erasmus+ Programme, notably via the new initiative on "European universities" and the Erasmus Mundus Joint Masters programmes. For the latter, require where possible the use of the "European Approach" instead of national accreditations for the national components of joint programmes.

The Commission, the Member States and the relevant stakeholders should also provide more targeted communication to make sure that the "European Approach" is understood by higher education institutions. Such 'targeted communication' could involve good practice and mutual learning activities, short and clear brochures for dissemination, a dedicated page on the European Commission's, ENQA's and EQAR's websites, input of the Member States' representatives in communicating about the "European Approach" to their national higher education institutions.

Recommendation 1.5. Use the “European Approach” as a step towards the European universities. Provide joint programmes with a ‘European status’.

The Commission and other stakeholders may use the “European Approach” as a step towards the “European universities” by providing joint programmes with a ‘European status’. While developing proposals for the implementation of these initiatives, the Commission should consider applying the “European Approach” to the preparation and delivery of joint European degrees in networks of universities that will combine studies in several EU member states.

Also, this approach could be systematically applied during the delivery of the Erasmus Mundus Joint Master’s Degrees. This could create a new momentum in the implementation of the “European Approach” (based a single quality assurance procedure following the ESG) whose use was found to be very limited during the period 2015-2017 according to the results of our study.

In more general terms, the transnational joint programmes as a phenomenon could be given a kind of a ‘European status’. While transnational joint programmes are, of course, also part of national higher education systems, in many cases they are transnational by nature and a number of operational specificities stem from this nature. Countries should allow for the specific treatment of the transnational joint programmes (nuanced according to their specific transnational nature) and might consider shifting the responsibility for QA of such programmes to transnational bodies.

Recommendation 2: The European Commission, the Member States, the European higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders should put further efforts into developing and enhancing quality culture(s) in higher education institutions.

Quality culture is a broader concept than quality assurance. EUA¹³⁶ defines it as an organisational culture that ‘intends to enhance quality permanently’ and is characterised by shared values, expectations and leadership commitment towards quality, as well as the management processes and structures that enhance quality and coordinate individual efforts. Below we provide five operational sub-recommendations on specific actions to be taken to develop and enhance quality culture(s) in higher education. These operational sub-recommendations are related to: (1) development of leadership skills among the key officials of higher education institutions; (2) better use of data for improving higher education quality; (3) tying at least some funding for higher education institutions to quality indicators; (4) supporting higher education institutions in developing their human resource policies to deal with increasing QA requirements; and (5) supporting further research to find out more about impacts of different types of QA procedures.

Recommendation 2.1: Further recognise the importance of leadership for creating quality culture in higher education institutions and support the development of leadership skills.

EU institutions and national authorities should adequately recognise the importance of leadership to the development of quality culture in higher education in various policy documents or reports. The Commission’s upcoming report on quality assurance systems in the area of higher education in the Member States should reflect this in particular. Also, it is important to integrate leadership development and training in the activities implemented in the framework of policy cooperation in higher education (under the

¹³⁶ EUA (2006): Quality Culture in European Universities: A Bottom-Up Approach.

Education and Training 2020 framework and its successor) or within the partnerships and projects supported under the Erasmus+ programme. Higher education institutions should consider using funds available under Erasmus+ to support development of leadership skills of their staff, especially among the top officials (rectors, vice-rectors, deans) of the European higher education institutions.

Recommendation 2.2: The Commission, the Member States, higher education institutions and other stakeholders should work together to improve the use of data and indicators to capture improvements in higher education quality. They should also look for further ways to increase the transparency of data on higher education processes both at the national and at the EU levels.

Well-designed QA measures and indicators are key enabling factors for higher education reforms, along with funding and governance. Indicators such as completion, retention, student satisfaction, employability, contact hours and various alumni-related measurements are most commonly used to capture improvements in quality of higher education. Indicators on adequacy of learning resources and student support services or demographics are less common. We recommend that the European Commission, the Member States, higher education institutions and other stakeholders work together to improve the use of data and indicators to capture improvements in quality.

We also recommend the European Commission, the Member States and the key stakeholders to look for further ways to increase the transparency of data on HE processes both at the national (in particular) and at the EU levels. Availability of good data and evidence is key for carrying out effective quality assurance. Further technological and policy-related solutions should be sought in order to ensure that data are available to everyone who needs them and is authorised to use them. Less sensitive data could be available in open source databases, while more sensitive data should be stored in encrypted databases accessible only for those authorised to use them. New technologies such as blockchain/ distributed ledger technology could be used to ensure the validity of data. Personal data protection must be ensured in every case. There are already many initiatives at the national and EU level that could be taken as examples: indicator portal in Norway, the Commission's initiatives such as U-Multirank and ETER. We find the upcoming Commission's graduate tracking initiative as a very timely and positive undertaking.

The Commission and the relevant stakeholders may consider discussing, which indicators could be the most useful to increase higher education quality and potentially draw up a list of these. Indicators could be classified according to their primary purpose: (1) accountability, (2) learning and (2) management of higher education processes. This list could also indicate, which indicators would provide the highest value if used in performance (quality) agreements. These indicators could be disseminated through mutual learning activities and sharing of good practices at the EU level.

The EU and national policymakers should also have in mind that administrative overload and data collection burdens often arise from the increasing expectations from a variety of interested parties, each with their own accountability requirements. Therefore, policymakers should avoid creating unnecessary data collection burden for higher education institutions and requirements for any new data should be well-justified.

Recommendation 2.3: Encourage more Member States to tie at least some funding for higher education institutions to quality indicators through individualised performance agreements.

Member States could introduce financial incentives for higher education institutions to improve the quality of their study programmes. This could be done, among other ways,

through excellence initiatives or individualised performance agreements. Solid evidence from Norway and the Netherlands revealed that even small changes in funding work as a strong incentive for higher education institutions to improve quality of their study programmes. Nevertheless, several important practical issues must be considered by the governments willing to tie funding to the achievement of quality indicators. First, only a relatively small share of funding should be tied to quality indicators (around 5%, but no more than 10%) in order not to produce unwanted financial shocks for the higher education sector. Second, a small number of selected key quality indicators (quantitative and qualitative) should be used in order not to confuse higher education institutions and to make sure that they are focused on the key quality dimensions. This would also ensure a balanced administrative burden in collecting the data on quality.

Recommendation 2.4: Support higher education institutions in developing efficient human resource policies to deal with growing internal quality assurance requirements.

With the increased importance and resource-intensiveness of internal quality assurance, higher education institutions are obliged to adjust their human resources policy to cater for the requirements and to ensure that QA functions effectively. This is especially valid in systems where external quality assurance is based on institutional evaluations rather than programme evaluations. The right mix between administrative staff and academics working in QA should be ensured. While it is very effective for higher education institutions to have separate QA departments with administrative staff guiding the process, academics should not be left out in order to ensure the relevance of QA for the content of specific study disciplines and programmes. Higher education institutions should be assisted in adjusting their management and human resource policies to cater for internal QA requirements in the most suitable way. Exchange of good practice and financial incentives could support them in this undertaking.

Recommendation 2.5: Support further research to find out more about impacts of different types of QA procedures on higher education institutions and the quality of study programmes that they provide.

The Commission and the Member States should do further comparative research targeted specifically at providing better understanding of the impacts of different levels of QA evaluation processes: programme-level evaluation vs. institutional-level evaluation vs. mix of institutional and programme-level evaluations. A project funded by Erasmus+ could be considered in this area.

Recommendation 3: The European Commission, the Member States and other relevant stakeholders should work together to ensure that the ESG are well known, understood and implemented by the quality assurance agencies and the European higher education institutions.

Our study conclusions revealed substantial progress with implementation of the ESG by the Member States. However, the level of implementation is uneven in different countries. Therefore, both EU and national policy-makers and other relevant stakeholders should work further to accomplish better compliance with the ESG, in particular with some of the more recent provisions of the ESG 2015: for example, emphasising teaching as the core mission of higher education and making learning outcomes a living practice in higher education.

Recommendation 3.1: Provide substantially more attention to promoting the status of teaching as the core mission of higher education institutions.

QA agencies, higher education institutions and other relevant stakeholders should work together to find ways how QA could better contribute to promoting the status of teaching as the core mission of higher education institutions. We propose at least the following measures: (1) the same importance in career development at higher education institutions should be attached to teaching excellence as to research excellence; (2) there should be a better connection between research and teaching/ students should be involved in research projects and professors should ground at least some of their lectures on the most recent research results; (3) more higher education institutions should establish teaching excellence awards and fellowships for excellent teaching; (4) QA agencies and national authorities should consider establishing “teaching excellence labels” for higher education institutions acknowledged for quality teaching; (5) student satisfaction with teachers should be duly considered in promotion panels; (6) more funding programmes at the national level should be established to improve quality of teaching conditions (for example, such as Quality Pact for Teaching in Germany); (7) more Member States should establish centres of excellence for teaching, which would carry out research and promote good practices in this area; (8) more training opportunities and international mobility opportunities should be provided to teaching staff; (9) higher education institutions should improve the use of funding for staff training available under Erasmus+.

Recommendation 3.2: Make sure that learning outcomes are truly mainstreamed throughout the teaching, learning and assessment process.

The European Commission should invite the Member States, the QA agencies and individual higher education institutions to take further steps in ensuring that learning outcomes are truly mainstreamed throughout the teaching, learning and assessment process. The recent Commission’s Proposal for the Council Recommendation on automatic mutual recognition emphasises the use of the European transparency tools, which are based on the learning outcomes approach.

EU-level analyses and initiatives could also be further supported in this area. A notable good practice is also the CALOHEE study¹³⁷ funded by Erasmus+, which is aiming to understand how learning outcomes could be most effectively measured in several selected disciplines.

Further awareness-raising about the learning outcomes approach should also take place. Even though learning outcomes are embedded in legislation in most European countries as the basis of a number of tools and instruments, their use is still diverse at the level of higher education institutions. Teaching and other relevant staff of higher education institutions should be adequately trained in the formulation of learning outcomes. Higher education institutions should also make sure that the expected learning outcomes are communicated to the students and that in the beginning of their studies they are aware of what they should know by the end of their studies. QA agencies should analyse whether higher education institutions apply learning outcomes approach throughout their study processes (and whether they do it in the correct way) and should advise higher education institutions on how this process could be further improved.

Recommendation 3.3: Promote the development of quality assurance criteria for innovative ICT-supported types of teaching & learning, such as massive open online courses (MOOCs) and blended learning.

Given the increasing importance of ICT and internationalisation in higher education, it is necessary to monitor and assess the impact of these trends on learning and teaching in higher education institutions, as well as to continuously adapt external and internal

¹³⁷ See: <https://www.calohée.eu/>

quality assistance systems and their instruments. For instance, although there has been an emergence of online learning and new forms of delivery in higher education institutions, our study revealed that criteria and guidelines for the assessment of MOOCs and blended learning are still underdeveloped. The Commission could promote the development of such criteria. The White Paper containing guidelines for blended learning, which has been recently published by the Quality and Qualifications in Ireland, is a good example of how quality assurance agencies can respond to new developments in higher education. Guidelines and information provided to higher education institutions can contribute to ensuring the quality of flexible learning experiences while exploiting innovation in education technology. The Commission could also do more on exploring the potential of new technologies (such as blockchain) for QA and recognition of diplomas and qualifications.

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