

RCC – ERI SEE SUPPORT TO QA SYSTEMS IN THE WESTERN BALKANS 6

Ministerial and QA agency representatives' meeting

Brussels, 8-9 March 2023



Starting Points

- RCC – ERI SEE Working Group on Recognition of Academic Qualifications and Quality Assurance
 - Composed of representatives of ministries, ENIC/NARIC offices and QA agencies
- Cross-economy report analysing quality assurance systems in the Western Balkans (implemented by Knowledge Innovation Centre, commissioned by RCC, contributed to by the ERI SEE)
- Signed Regional Agreement on the Recognition of Higher Education Qualifications, under the Berlin Process
 - Emphasizing not only the mutual recognition, but also the relevance of QA systems in the WB6 and alignment with the ESG
 - Signed by the heads of economies of the WB6

Actions taken

- „Mock” evaluation of QA systems in the WB region finished; establishing areas of compliance and non-compliance with the ESG
- National reports with analysis of the current state of art in compliance with ESG delivered to individual economies (ministries and QAA)
- Delivered Regional and national action plans on quality assurance, in support of QAAs in developing concrete actions needed to be taken to meet ESGs
- Regional conference on QA and recognition, in October 2022 in Zagreb (with cooperation from ministries of education and QAA from Croatia and Slovenia), bringing together QA and recognition bodies
- Regional training on data management and establishment of data basis of accredited institutions and study programmes, on-line, in September 2022
- Regional portal on QA processes and institutions (www.wb-qualifications.org)
- Regional register on accredited institutions and study programmes (wb-qualifications.org/quality-assurance-system/qa-register.php)

Further steps

- Planned external support to WB 6 QA agencies
 - Assist in the integration of recommendations from the Action plans
 - Through the provision of external expert and targeted support to QAAs in meeting key ESG priorities (planned by the RCC - pending the approval of the budget, including a second “mock review” in 2025)
- Regional conference in North Macedonia, on Quality in HE
 - Planned for early June
 - Different aspects of ESG, identified by QAA and covered by external experts
 - Bringing together different actors active in the region in the area of QA
- Seminar in Croatia
 - Also, different aspects of ESG, as identified by QAA (needs-oriented)
- Individual support in data management
 - Offered to some QAA
 - To help establish the Register of accredited institutions and study programmes

Thank you for your attention

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Context of the Cross-Economy Report on QA systems in the WB6

- Objective: to conduct a comparative „mock” evaluation of QA systems in the WB6 against the ESG
- Purpose: mapping the status quo and offer recommendations for further steps by external (EU) experts, to assist the QA agencies in their path towards ENQA and EQAR
- Implemented by the Knowledge Innovation Centre
- Limitations: smaller team than the actual EQAR/ENQA team; no triangulation of data sources for checking the accuracy of data; undertaken during the pandemic (video conferences instead of site visits)
- No part of this report/conclusions/recommendations implies an endorsement of these findings by ENQA or EQAR

Findings – ESG Part 2 (Standard and guidelines for external evaluation)

- Focus is placed more on **quantitative standards** and indicators
 - no. of teachers, publications, classroom size etc;
 - Qualitative standards and indicators are less emphasized (e.g. development of quality culture, student-centred learning)
 - This leads to the development of quality culture (accountability and improvement)
- **Findings in reviews compared to the final decision on accreditation**
 - not always easily traced, not clear and objective
- **The external review reports**
 - vary in their quality and consistency of reports
 - the capacities of the review teams differ and need to be balanced and built
- **The role of QA agency staff**
 - is now more administrative,
 - it can be enhanced: to facilitate the review process and guard the quality and consistency of reports

Findings – ESG Part 2 (Standards and guidelines for external evaluation)

- **Lack of follow-up procedures and practices** (between two round of external evaluation)
 - This limits the quality enhancements within the institutions
 - It also limits building of the quality culture.
 - Follow up procedure could include, for e.g., an Action plan of implementing the recommendations from the report, which can then be checked by QA Agencies
- **Lack of appropriate complaints and appeals processes for HEIs**
 - The only option now is to go to the administrative court and appeal against a negative accreditation decision.
 - A complaints procedure should be introduced to allow the HEI to complain about the external evaluation process itself.
 - An internal independent body that decides on complaints should be established within the QA agency
 - This body should work under clear complaints process and procedures (how to track progress, how to analyse the data, how to communicate on the complaints etc.)

Findings – Part 3 (Standards and guidelines for QA agencies)

- **Insufficient internal QA policies and processes within the QA agencies**
- **Lack of Thematic Analysis**
 - No description and analysis of general findings of their external QA activities at systemic level
 - Not used to improve the system
- **Critical number of staff and complicated recruitment**
 - the staff manages only the business of coordinating external reviews
 - lack of staff that would address additional activities:
 - thematic analysis, collecting systematic feedback from stakeholders
 - stronger staff involvement in reviews and guarding consistency of reports...
- **Long recruitment procedure**
 - connected to the status of civil servants and corresponding procedures
 - causing significant delays in filling staff positions and realising staff increases

Findings – Part 3 (Standards and guidelines for QA agencies)

- **Insufficient stakeholder involvement** in governance, decision making and operations of the QA agencies:
 - students' involvement is too low and with a different status;
 - the expertise of employers, civil society representatives and QA experts is disregarded
 - expertise of senior academic staff is over-emphasized
- **Concerns about organisational and operational independence of the QA agencies** and the outcomes of the QA process.
 - An agency must have guarantees that its leadership cannot be influenced by changes in government, written into legislation
 - The Agency must balance between needs and expectations of all stakeholders while at the same time ensure its independence
- **Legislative barriers to improving procedures, standards and criteria for external QA**
 - inflexible legal frameworks and policies
 - hindering the involvement of students;
 - Hindering introduction of the complaints procedure; follow-up procedures; focusing on qualitative standards etc.

Recommendations

- R1: Review and update standards and criteria for external QA and accreditation in conjunction with stakeholders (focus on qualitative and improvement-oriented approach)
- R2: Improve the quality and consistency of external review reports by enhancing the role of agency staff (training of external review panel members; full involvement of all panel members in the process, coordination of writing reports and ensuring its consistency...)
- R3: Make criteria for outcomes of external QA explicit, transparent and verifiable (with clear link between views from expert panels and final decision on accreditation)
- R4: Implement a comprehensive and independent complaints and appeals system

Recommendations

- R5: Ensure the staff resources of WB6 agencies matches the capacity needed for carrying out their work; develop human resources development plan that includes employment, training and development activities
- R6: Increase and improve the direct involvement of stakeholders, including students, in the agency's governance and work
- R7: Ensure the full organisational and operational independence of QA agencies and of the outcomes of QA process
- R8: Implement comprehensive internal quality assurance policies within QA agencies

Recommendations

- R9: Plan and implement a structural undertaking of thematic analyses
- R10: Include follow-up procedures as mandatory element of the review process
- R11: Strengthen and widen regional cooperation between QA agencies
- R12: Carefully plan for future ENQA membership and EQAR registration reviews

Further steps

- Planned external support to WB 6 QA agencies
 - Assist in the development of the Action plan in each economy to integrate recommendations
 - Assist in any other areas identified by the QA agencies
 - Planned by the RCC (pending the approval of the budget)
- Regional conference in North Macedonia, on Quality in HE
 - Planned for early June
 - Different aspects of ESG, identified by QAA and covered by external experts
 - Bringing together different actors active in the region in the area of QA
- Seminar in Croatia
 - Also, different aspects of ESG, as identified by QAA

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