

INNOVATION IN TEACHING AND LEARNING AS PART OF EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE APPROACHES

Report from the ENQA Leadership Development Programme 2018

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ISBN 978-952-5539-91-2 (web publication)
ISSN 1458-1051

The present report can be downloaded from the ENQA website at
<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/publications/papers-reports/occasional-papers>

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2019, Brussels.
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Graphic design by: Eija Vierimaa, Mats Vuorenjuuri

Introduction

Higher education institutions (HEIs) everywhere are looking for new ways to transfer knowledge and skills, other than through 'traditional' classroom education. Such developments are aimed at adapting higher education, making use of present-day opportunities, but also at making higher education more attractive to a more heterogeneous student population and stimulating lifelong learning. Innovation in teaching and learning may have implications for quality assurance (QA) in higher education as different types of innovation could prompt different approaches to supporting, developing, assessing, or reviewing educational quality. Conversely, we recognise that QA practices may directly or indirectly influence the potential for innovation in HEIs, specifically in regards to innovation in teaching and learning. This influence can be two-fold: positive, where QA practices actively enhance/encourage innovative attitudes or, less positive, where QA requirements are seen to impose such restrictions that could even inhibit attempts at innovation. HEIs, may, in turn, have proactive or reactive approaches to such influence.

Representatives of four European quality assurance agencies investigated to what extent the agencies can and do accommodate and support QA (assessment of) innovation in higher education. More specifically: what is the potential of the current external QA standards and procedures to facilitate innovation? And how do the agencies position themselves concerning innovation in teaching and learning? With a view to providing answers to these questions, an analysis was conducted of the current standards and procedures for each respective national agency (i.e. France, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom), so as to outline elements that encourage, allow and inhibit innovation in teaching and learning. For the purposes of this study, innovation was defined as representing any form of change which is implemented for the benefit of (i.e. with positive impact on) students and other stakeholders.

Notably, all four agencies are members or affiliates of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), and their national standards/frameworks are designed to be in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (the ESG) 2015, which explicitly links learning and teaching in higher education with research and innovation (https://enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf).

Findings

France

The High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres) is responsible for, among other things, the evaluation of HEIs and groupings and of programmes and degrees offered by HEIs, or, where applicable, overseeing the quality of evaluations carried out by other bodies. Hcéres has an independent administrative authority status and acts in accordance with the international standards and the ESG. The organisation has two departments at its disposal that deal with innovation in teaching and learning: the department of Programmes Evaluation and the department of Evaluation of Higher Education and Research Institutions. The principles for an effective evaluation process are described in an evaluation charter; evaluation procedures are based on reference documents.

The reference documents contain some items that refer to innovation in teaching and learning, such as training about new IT technologies for students, the use of interactive digital tools and innovative teaching practices. HEIs are required to develop a pedagogical innovation policy, encouraging the development of new learning methods and the production and use of educational resources. Their educational policies should be based on a working environment adapted to the requirements of higher education, particularly in terms of digital dissemination and teaching tools (e.g. educational platforms, MOOCs, SPOCs). Depending on the specific accreditation body, innovative practices may be more stressed in assessment frameworks.

The French Ministry in charge of higher education, also launched initiatives to stimulate innovation in teaching and learning. Students are involved in the evaluation of teaching from the point of view of pedagogical innovation through tools, such as Pericles.

The Netherlands

The Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO) is responsible for the external quality assurance of Dutch and Flemish higher education, comprising universities of applied sciences (levels 5 to 7) and research universities (levels 6 and 7) which can be either state-funded or private institutions. In the Netherlands, NVAO does so by means of institutional audits and programme assessment, which are based on frameworks with open criteria since they need to be applicable to all Dutch HEIs. All assessments are based on peer review and the procedures are in line with Dutch legislation on higher education (Higher Education and Research Act; WHW) as well as the ESG. Combined with programme assessment, institutions may apply for the assessment of one or more distinctive features, which could cover innovative forms of teaching and learning.

NVAO's Strategy 2017-2020 mentions innovation as something to take into account in the assessment of educational quality. An analysis of NVAO's frameworks (2016) for institutional audits and programme assessment shows that the standards and procedures mainly allow innovation in teaching and learning, respecting the autonomy of institutions. Their vision, aims and objectives are the starting point for assessment, but their contents as such are not assessed. The term 'innovation' is employed once: in the institutional audit, panels assess whether an institution's policy encourages all stakeholders to contribute to innovation and quality improvement. The standards for programme assessments refer to the need for a student-centred approach, encouraging students "to play an active role in the design of their own learning process", thus stimulating new ways of designing programmes. In all cases, assessment panels should be equipped to assess innovative teaching and learning where applicable. NVAO does not provide specific training on this matter.

Dutch HEIs shared their views on the matter via their respective associations. State-funded HEIs acknowledge that the current system for accreditation in the Netherlands does provide ample space to design new programmes and redesign existing programmes in order to meet the changing needs of society. This is also

stressed by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science. However, programmes note that they sometimes find it difficult to convince panels of the benefits of innovation. The results of changes made to a programme are not always visible by the time a programme is reaccredited, since it takes a couple of years before the first students graduate in the redesigned format.

HEIs do not see elements in the current system that stimulate educational innovation, but rather limitations that have their origin in the WHW. The law specifies that a programme is a coherent whole of study units, 'aimed at realising well-defined objectives in the area of knowledge, insight and skills that the person who completes the programme must have'. Exams are connected to each study unit as well as to the programme as a whole. According to HEIs, the way the concept of a programme is described in the law complicates the creation of more innovative forms of education, especially programmes that combine elements from different institutions (e.g. online modules), let students design their own programme (whether or not including previously acquired knowledge and skills), or different disciplines (e.g. interdisciplinary programmes or short cycle programmes that cover a broad range of topics). Currently, NVAO does not accredit partial programmes.

NVAO is generally perceived as cooperative and institutions appreciate NVAO's involvement in developments. An example is the Acceleration plan for educational innovation with ICT, an initiative of HEIs and SURF, the collaborative ICT organisation for Dutch education and research. Stakeholders such as NVAO are invited to explore ways in which higher education could benefit from digitalisation, and to talk about consequences for regulations and assessment frameworks. In addition, NVAO aims to connect stakeholders within higher education and to support sharing good practices on specific themes by organising events such as NVAO aQAdemies.

Sweden

Swedish HEIs and the Universitetskanslersämbetet (UKÄ) have a shared responsibility for quality assurance in higher education. HEIs are responsible for developing their operations, which includes responsibility for organising operations and the content of their courses and programmes and conducting these in a way that meets the requirements and goals of higher education, as specified in the Higher Education Act, the Higher Education Ordinance (1993:100) and the ESG. Consequently, most quality assurance efforts are to be conducted by the HEIs. This requires HEIs to have systematic quality assurance processes that UKÄ is responsible for assessing. UKÄ is also responsible for ensuring that all the courses and programmes are encompassed by these processes. This is done partly by UKÄ evaluating a selection of programmes and partly by the HEIs having responsibility for quality assuring their own courses and programmes and that UKÄ monitors that this has been carried out. The QA system consists of four components: programme evaluations, institutional reviews of the HEIs' QA processes, appraisal of application for degree awarding powers, and thematic evaluations.

Within programme evaluations, the peer reviewers play a vital role. UKÄ provides the assessment framework and within the framework the peers conduct the work.

There are standards that the HEIs have to meet, but exactly how they do this is not directly assessed in for instance actual teaching. Nor is there a register nor a collection of good examples on innovative teaching and learning managed by UKÄ. The evaluation of achieved learning outcomes (ALO), such as degree projects, may be seen as an innovative way of conducting the evaluation and making room for different pedagogical approaches. This can be used for all types of programmes, regardless of a specific pedagogical design (e.g. online courses). However, an individual student's progress throughout the programme may be more difficult to follow.

Institutional reviews focus on an HEI's internal QA system and whether it ensures that the quality of courses and programmes is up to standard. All programmes and courses offered by the HEI should be supported by the internal QA system, campus- as well as online-based. This is not done through evaluating the courses or programmes and therefore there is no real focus on teaching and learning within this review. However, the standards do mention the need for shared responsibility and participation among teachers, staff and students, and for a student-centred approach which encourages students to take an active role in their learning process.

So far, UKÄ has conducted one thematic evaluation on sustainability. Since the thematic evaluations are not tied to one type of methodology or topic, this part of the external QA system could be used to investigate innovation in teaching and learning in the future.

United Kingdom

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in the United Kingdom (QAA) is committed through its mission to safeguarding standards and improving the quality of UK higher education wherever it is delivered around the world. (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us>)

As described in the Strategy 2017-2020 (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/about-us/what-we-do/our-work>), innovation is one of QAA's core values. The Agency has an Innovation and Enterprise team, which is part of the Universities, Quality Enhancement and Standards Group, responsible for QAA's engagement with universities and colleges and its services for members, including enhancement.

QAA works as part of a system of co-regulation across the UK, in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, within a higher education system where policy is devolved. The UK HE context has been going through major changes recently, with England taking a stronger regulatory approach that moves from QA review activities incorporating enhancement as a judgement area and highlighting features of good practice (through the *Higher Education Review* method) to a focus on baseline compliance and data/metrics-driven external QA, especially for

newer institutions (see methods *Quality Review Visit* and *Quality and Standards Review*). The current risk-based outcomes-focused approach determines if an HE institution meets the baseline set and does not explicitly seek to identify and highlight practice above the baseline, as such innovation and good practice will only feature implicitly in the assessment, if at all. Scotland, however, continues an approach encouraging enhancement through its external QA method *Enhancement-led Institutional Review*, and Welsh universities currently go through *Quality Enhancement Review*, as a QA method, which identifies commendations. In both Scotland and Wales, external QA methodologies actively promote an enhancement culture be developed within higher education institutions, with innovation as a strong driver supporting quality cultures. (see all methods referred to above at www.qaa.ac.uk, tab Reviewing Higher Education)

The diversity of needs and interests manifested in different parts of the UK higher education system is reflected in the range of different external review methods operated by the QAA. Given the complexity of the UK system, a single ‘one size fits all’ approach to external quality assessment is deemed inappropriate. However, all of QAA’s review methods share a common set of principles, which includes the main reference point as the UK Quality Code for Higher Education (Quality Code) divided into Expectations, Core practices and Common practices. The Expectations and Core practices of the Quality Code are mandatory for higher education providers in all parts of the UK. Common practices are mandatory in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and while providers in England may choose to work towards them, they are not required to do so as these are not regulatory requirements and will not be assessed as part of the regulatory framework. (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/quality-code>)

UK national regulators and QAA are not bound by information in the Advice and Guidance sections of the Quality Code, and do not treat these as containing indicators of compliance. However, it is in these sections, which are deemed to provide illustrative approaches, that we find overt references to innovation in support of teaching and learning. The revised (March 2018) Quality Code specifically refers to innovative practices in the Advice and Guidance corresponding to Course design and development (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/course-design-and-development>) where the core practice on “the provider designs and/or delivers high-quality courses” is supported through an additional guiding principle which prompts “providers [to] use course design and development to facilitate a culture of innovation, creativity and continuous improvement through the creation of unique and market-attractive portfolios. [...] informed by feedback from a range of stakeholders/sources and developments [to] reflect multidisciplinary research, contemporary industry practice, pedagogical and technological advancements, and current affairs.” Specific pedagogies and/or examples of innovation are not explicitly identified or prescribed. It is, however, implicitly expected that, depending on specialisms, providers will strive to use most recent pedagogies and innovative classroom/online practices to ensure that the student experience is infused by modern, technology-supported, industry-simulated HE exposure. As part of external QA procedures, HEIs can choose to demonstrate that they meet (or, indeed, exceed) core practices by any mechanism which is applicable within their own context, and, as such, they may

make use of innovation in these demonstrations, but, for England, this is not compulsory.

One of the Common practices (mandatory for all nations bar England) highlighted in the Quality Code sees HEIs needing to have internal policies and procedures in place to review quality regularly and use the outcomes to drive improvement and enhancement - which could be seen as a direct encouragement for pedagogical innovation, also. The Advice and Guidance on Monitoring and Evaluation (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/monitoring-and-evaluation>) prompts “providers [to] use examples of sound practice and innovation, and relevant guidance from sector bodies, to keep their strategic approach to learning and teaching under review, to modify it as appropriate and to facilitate the continuous improvement of the learning opportunities they offer”. This is reinforced by the Advice and Guidance on External Expertise (<https://www.qaa.ac.uk/en/quality-code/advice-and-guidance/external-expertise>) which also places responsibility on “external experts [who should be] used to contribute to reviews within a provider and to comment on areas of good practice, innovation and enhancement”.

Apart from the Quality Code, QAA supports higher education providers in different ways to improve the quality of the education they provide through the sharing of good practice and ideas. QAA publishes good practice identified in reviews and facilitates the sharing of good practice between providers and other stakeholders more widely through networks, case studies and events. Finally, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (<https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/>), operationalised by the Office for Students in collaboration with QAA, stimulates an engaging and supportive study environment which strives towards demonstrating excellence in HE teaching and learning more broadly.

In summary, the UK experiences different approaches in what regards external QA methods used and the baseline reported against. Methods implemented are multiple and with different purposes, depending on types of HE institutions and location within the UK. The Quality Code serves as one baseline for all UK nations, however it does exhibit elements which are deemed compulsory or voluntary depending on the governmental system HEIs fall under. Innovation, and explicit encouragement for the development of HE innovative practices, features more prominently in methods/nations where there is a strong focus on enhancement and the sharing of good practice.

QAA promotes the collection of good practice case studies and sector-wide analyses of HE good practice, through its external QA methods, as far as possible, but also through other mechanisms of direct engagement with HEIs, e.g. membership activities. Additionally, the UK also has other bodies which primarily support pedagogical developments, e.g. Advance HE (previously HEA Higher Education Academy) or Universities UK. As such, the ‘responsibility’ for providing authoritative leadership on learning and teaching and the encouragement of innovation in HE will be collectively shared amongst multiple stakeholders.

Conclusions and recommendations

Based on the analysis and the examples extracted from the various national external QA standards, we conclude that there are few instances where explicit encouragement for innovation in teaching and learning is given in the four QA contexts under investigation. Such examples are frequently restrictive and may refer directly to teaching methods or teaching modes and the use of technology. Some other examples could be interpreted as including indirect reference to innovation in teaching and learning, but in most instances it is necessary to read between the lines and hope that, at least, innovation is (passively) allowed. Inhibiting factors may be related to aspects in (national) legislation or to governmental priorities. More open, less prescriptive QA frameworks lend themselves to highly interpretative approaches allowing institutions to generate their own specific actions depending on contexts and missions, rather than clearly labelling and specifically directing innovative approaches.

The findings demonstrate that it becomes important for QA agencies to consider if – and if yes: how – innovation in teaching and learning is important in their context (and for their assumed role within the national contexts). In addition, they should consider how they may wish to proactively promote it through all activities they take part in or if they can contribute to relevant partnerships. Making explicit what is otherwise (at best) implicit could go a long way to promoting innovation, including when reviewers or evaluators are trained, to ensure they take the same approach. For example, if agencies were to more proactively, through their external QA standards, promote an explicit senior management or strategic approach to innovation in the HE sector this could avoid innovative practices being inconsistently applied and insufficiently spread across relevant parts of the organisation.

Even though the procedures and standards are demonstrated to not explicitly and consistently encourage innovation, there are other ways in which QA agencies are involved with innovation in teaching and learning. QA agencies employ a wide range of mechanisms to capture innovation and prompt further pioneering thinking which can subsequently and with the support/involvement of the agency be emulated through system-wide initiatives. Agencies often engage in sector debate on recent developments which encompass new forms of education; they are invited by HEIs to witness emerging trends and incorporate these in relevant updates of external QA procedures. Teams of peers engaged in external QA also ensure that innovation is appropriately contextualised and relevantly disseminated as best practices to allow for new, fresh perspectives to be brought into mainstream practices. Training of QA peers becomes instrumental in setting the relevant mindset to encourage the thorough investigation, proper identification and detailed reporting of innovative instances in higher education practice.

Another important aspect, and one that needs appropriate consideration, when designing and interpreting the national frameworks is the political discourse on innovation in teaching and learning. If governments/political leaders decide to prioritise the matter of innovative methods for teaching and learning in regulatory documents this will likely have an effect on the standards and procedures used by QA agencies. One step in this direction is the chapter on innovation in learning and teaching in the Paris Communiqué.

“We will support higher education institutions to develop and enhance their strategies for learning and teaching. [...] Students should encounter research or activities linked to research and innovation at all levels of higher education to develop the critical and creative mind-sets which will enable them to find novel solutions to emerging challenges. In this regard, we commit to improving synergies between education, research and innovation.” (Paris Communiqué, 2018:3-4)

Overall, innovation in teaching and learning becomes an attribute that has the potential to increase the attractiveness of programmes and the level of engagement of students with their learning process, and ultimately can determine better achievement rates for graduates who declare themselves more strongly motivated for professional development. As such, a clear and explicit approach to promoting innovative practices which is generated through internal QA structure and supported through external QA mechanisms will only contribute positively to the implementation of objectives across the European Higher Education Area.

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This report presents innovation in teaching and learning as part of external quality assurance approaches, developed within the ENQA Leadership Development Programme 2018.

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ISBN 978-952-5539-91-2 (web publication)

ISSN 1458-1051



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