I´MINQA

Quality Assurance of the European Universities alliances: state of play and future perspectives

April 2025

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Introduction

This report is prepared as part of the three-year *Implementation and Innovation in quality assurance through peer learning* (IMINQA) project. It has been supporting the work of the Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance (TPG C) under the umbrella of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) during the period 2021-2024.[1] The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme to support the implementation of Bologna Process reforms and commitments related to quality assurance (QA).

One strand of the IMINQA project activities focused on the QA of European Universities Alliances. Specifically, the work explored the need for and potential approaches to Alliance-level internal and external QA. When developing the IMINQA project, five EHEA countries planned to explore the practical use of the *European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities,*[2] developed under the EUniQ project[3] (2019-2021), through feasibility studies and the creation of roadmaps. However, as the project progressed, it became clear that Alliances are at diverse stages of developing their Alliance-level internal QA systems, with no external QA evaluations of these systems conducted to date (excluding the evaluations of individual joint programmes).

As a result, the approach was adjusted: instead of conducting feasibility studies and establishing roadmaps in the five countries, the project organised focus groups to explore perspectives from relevant stakeholders and produced this report. This report draws upon discussions within the project working group, a desk research analysis, focus groups, and a survey conducted with focus group participants. The focus groups were held on 8 November 2024, bringing together representatives from 17 Alliances, 12 QA agencies, and six ministries responsible for higher education across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) (see Annex 2). While the sample is not fully representative, the findings provide valuable insights into current perceptions and practices in both internal and external QA, as well as perspectives on possible future scenarios. These insights provide a strong foundation for further reflection and discussion, which is essential for future steps in this area.

The focus groups aimed to assess the current state and practices in internal and external QA of Alliances. In addition to exploring key issues through facilitated discussions, participants also reflected on potential future scenarios for internal and external QA (see Annex 1) and discussed the most preferable and feasible options from their perspectives. Initially, participants discussed these issues in separate stakeholder groups before coming together for cross-stakeholder discussions.

The project consortium would like to thank all members of the working group for their contribution to the discussions, the focus group participants for their valuable input, and ENQA for writing this report.

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[1] The IMINQA project will be finalised in April 2025, meaning that the TPG C meeting in Constanța (Romania, June 2024) was the last meeting of the period 2021-2024. The meeting in Ghent (Belgium, November 2024) was also supported by IMINQA, although it was part of TPG C on QA 2024-2027.

[2] See European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities for the full text.

[3] More information on the EUniQ project can be found here: EUniQ Project | NVAO

Context

The European Universities alliances[4] are a European Union flagship initiative, launched in 2019 under the Erasmus+ programme. The initiative emerged as part of the European strategy for universities,[5] a comprehensive initiative aimed at strengthening the role of universities across Europe as key drivers of knowledge, innovation, and societal development.

The European Universities Initiative aims to strengthen strategic partnerships between higher education institutions (HEIs) across Europe, fostering deeper cooperation and integration in education, research, and innovation. By creating transnational Alliances, the initiative seeks to develop a new model for European cooperation in higher education that enhances competitiveness, quality and inclusiveness. The main objectives of the initiative are to establish inter-university campuses that enable students, staff, and researchers to move freely across borders, to encourage innovative approaches in education and research, to address global challenges, to improve higher education access and opportunities for diverse groups of learners across Europe, and to strengthen a sense of shared European values and culture through education.

As of June 2024, there are 65 European Universities Alliances.[6] They encompass over 570 higher education institutions across 35 European countries, including all 27 EU member states and several countries associated to the Erasmus+ programme.

The European Approach and cross-border QA

QA of Alliances has been a subject of discussion since the early stages of the initiative. Initially, the discussions revolved around ongoing barriers to the external QA of joint programmes,[7] a key activity for some Alliances. Later, the focus of the discussion expanded to the European Commission's proposal for a Council recommendation to member states regarding the establishment of Alliance-level internal quality systems which would, in turn, be subject to external evaluation.

The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (European Approach)[8] seeks to facilitate the external QA of joint programmes and avoid duplication of procedures across countries where programme level external QA is required. However, this approach has not been widely used in all EHEA countries, primarily due to lack of enabling frameworks at national and regional levels. Similarly, many countries have not been open to accepting the outcomes of cross-border QA (CBQA), despite this being an agreed commitment of the Bologna Process, set out in the London Ministerial Communiqué (2007).[9] The national/regional openness to using CBQA would ensure that EQAR-registered quality assurance agencies and their external quality assurance activities are recognised and acknowledged across the entire EHEA. This would allow HEIs the freedom to choose any suitable EQAR-registered agency and aims to enhance the recognition of degrees and qualifications, while also helping to avoid duplication, especially in the external QA of joint degree programmes.

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[4] More information on the European Universities Initiative can be consulted here:
https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative

[5] See https://European strategy for universities for the full text.

[6] The 65 European Universities Alliances can be discovered here: https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/map

[7] https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/definitions/

[8] See https://www.eqar.eu/assets/uploads/2018/04/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf for the full text.

[9] London Communique (2007)
https://ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/2007_London_Communique_English_588697.pdf

According to the EQAR knowledge base[10], in 2024, the European Approach was available to HEIs in 21 EHEA systems. In six of these systems the European Approach is accessible because external QA is only required at institutional level therefore the use of the European Approach is voluntary. In 14 EHEA systems, the European Approach is available only to some HEIs or subject to specific conditions. However, in 16 EHEA systems, HEIs are still unable to use the European Approach as of 2024. It should be noted that permission to use the European Approach is not directly indicative of how joint programmes are accredited. If all degree-awarding partners in the programme consortium are in countries that use an institutional level approach to external QA, then an individual accreditation for a joint programme is not necessary.

Regarding CBQA, based on the EQAR knowledge base[11] only 34 EHEA higher education systems have established legislative provisions allowing their HEIs to be accredited, evaluated, or audited by an EQAR-registered agency from abroad.

Recent European policy developments

In recent years, the European Commission has developed a number of initiatives related to QA in higher education, including QA of Alliances, namely the Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education[12] and the Blueprint for a European degree.[13] Both initiatives aim to facilitate international collaboration in higher education by simplifying the QA procedures and addressing the aforementioned issues. These proposals will be subject for further discussions and developments through the European Commissions' European Degree Policy Lab and the European Degree Forum.

The Recommendation builds on five topics:

- Improving all QA systems,
- Developing a cross-institutional QA approach for Alliances of HEIs,
- Making programme or combined approaches to external QA more agile, including facilitating transnational cooperation and the agility of higher education systems and allowing and encouraging the use of the European Approach,
- Building the foundations towards a European degree,
- Implementing automatic recognition of qualifications.

Particularly relevant for the QA of Alliances is the proposed development of an external QA process that evaluates the joint Alliance-level internal QA arrangements. It is envisioned that this process would be based on the EUniQ project *European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities*.

The project aimed to develop and pilot an approach for supporting the internal QA of Alliances and minimising the burden of multiple QA processes (for Alliances) while respecting national/regional responsibilities and QA standards, through a single external QA procedure for the Alliances. The work of the EUniQ project (implemented in 2019-2021) provided a preliminary proof-of-concept for an Alliance-level evaluation. The Alliances participating in the EUniQ project were evaluated based only

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[10] https://www.eqar.eu/about/annual-reports/2024-2/contributing-to-the-development-of-the-ehea/#use-of-the-european-approach-for-quality-assurance-of-joint-programmes
[11] https://www.eqar.eu/about/annual-reports/2024-2/contributing-to-the-development-of-the-ehea/#openness-to-cross-border-external-qa-with-an-eqar-registered-agency
[12] The proposal can be found here: Proposal for a Council Recommendation on a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education.pdf
[13] The Blueprint for a European Degree can be consulted here: https://op.europa.eu/en/publication-detail/-/publication/4559af49-43e2-11ef-865a-01aa75ed71a1

on early strategies and plans, rather than implemented activities, since the project ran at the very early stages of the European Universities Initiative. More recently, the EUniQ framework has also been noted as a potential tool for facilitating the verification of Alliances' eligibility to award the European Degree (label).

Universities Alliances and their quality assurance

The next sections of this report summarise the main findings from the focus groups complemented by data from a survey sent to participants in advance,[14] firstly on internal QA of Alliances, and secondly on external QA of Alliances.

Internal quality assurance

Alliance representatives reported offering a range of activities, including joint programmes (94%), summer schools or similar initiatives (76%), micro-credentials (65%), traineeships (24%), and other short joint courses. It would normally be expected that these activities are subject to internal QA within the Alliance either jointly or led by the individual institutions involved. However, the development of a comprehensive internal QA system within the Alliance beyond the monitoring and evaluation of project-specific deliverables remains limited. Most Alliances reported that their internal QA systems were either in progress (53%) or in the early stages of development (18%), with only 6% describing them as advanced.

Interestingly, 18% of participants indicated they had no plans to develop an Alliance-level internal QA system, citing confidence in the existing processes within individual member HEIs, all of which had been subject to external QA according to the respective national (or regional)-level requirements. This demonstrates trust in the soundness of the QA systems across Alliance members and a belief that additional internal QA frameworks at the Alliance level may not be necessary. Furthermore, some participants expressed concerns about the challenges of aligning diverse internal QA approaches across multiple institutions.

The discussion also reflected some uncertainty regarding the sustainability of the Alliances if the EU funding should be ended or reduced. Half of the representatives of Alliances indicated that their Alliance would continue without EU funding, either in full (31%) or with a smaller consortium (19%). However, 44% were unsure, and 6% reported no plan to continue their Alliances without external funding. Developing an internal QA system was acknowledged as a resource-intensive endeavour, often undertaken with long-term sustainability in mind. Since there is uncertainty related to the continuation of the Alliances, setting up an internal QA system is not seen as a priority in most cases.

According to focus group participants representing Alliances, currently internal QA systems within Alliances commonly involve structures such as boards or task forces comprising administrative staff, academics, and students. These groups are responsible for designing and overseeing QA procedures. At present, these systems mainly focus on joint educational provision, with other areas such as research activities, Alliance management, and support services being handled by individual member institutions. Alliances also have common QA tools for their Alliance funded activities, including feedback collection from students.

A key distinction was drawn between QA related to project management, which provides accountability for the EU funding received, and an internal QA system at Alliance level, which is the basis for monitoring, evaluation and strategic development of the Alliances and their joint educational

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[14] The survey was answered by representatives from 16 Alliances, 12 QA agencies, and 5 ministries responsible for higher education across the EHEA.

provision and activities. Beyond the issue of sustainability, the main challenges in developing the internal QA systems reported by focus group participants lie in reconciling the needs of the Alliance with the specific obligations of each partner institution with their respective national or regional legislative frameworks, and the resources this requires.

Scenarios for the future

With regard to the outlook for how internal QA within Alliances might develop, the focus group participants discussed three potential scenarios and expressed views on their preferred scenario (in an ideal situation) and the most feasible scenario (in terms of being realistic to implement). Each participant had two votes for internal QA scenarios and two for external QA scenarios.

- The most preferable scenario was a joint internal QA system, covering all aspects of the Alliance's activities: joint education provision, the learning environment, research activities, support services, and management.

- The most feasible scenario, however, was a flexible system guided by the needs of specific activities. In this model, sub-consortia (composed of different Alliance partners depending on the activity) would be responsible for QA related to their respective joint education provision, learning environments, research activities, support services, and management.

- Notably, a third scenario came a close second in terms of feasibility, indicating its potential relevance. In this scenario, the internal QA system of each HEI within the Alliance separately covers its own education provision, research activities, support services, management, and the learning environment that it offers as part of the Alliance.

These results highlight a significant gap between what participants considered ideal (a joint system) and what they believed was feasible/practical (a fragmented system). This disparity can be attributed to the resource demands of implementing a joint system, particularly at a time when Alliances are still in their early stages of development and their long-term futures remain uncertain. Participants also noted that the cooperation model and volume and types of activities offered would have a significant impact on the added value of a joint system in practical terms. Thus, dividing QA responsibilities currently appears to be a more viable approach. However, when considering the vision for the future of the Alliance, developing a sound internal QA system at Alliance level would be desirable.

External quality assurance

As indicated in the introduction, the European Commission proposal for Council Recommendation proposes that member states develop a European framework to enable Alliances engaged in sustainable, long-term cooperation to undergo a joint external evaluation of their joint internal QA arrangements. This would cover all joint activities or at least Alliances' joint educational provision, such as joint programmes or joint micro-credentials.

A survey of Alliance representatives revealed that no Alliance has undergone an Alliance-level external QA,[15] though 56% expressed plans or interest in doing so in the future. Key reasons for the lack of such evaluations include: internal QA systems being in the early stages of development, uncertainty about the benefits and added value of such an external evaluation at this stage, a current focus on internal issues, and existing processes for joint programme accreditation. Given the limited resources available to HEIs and that the external evaluation at Alliance level is voluntary, focus group participants reported that it is simply not currently considered a priority. Looking ahead, Alliance representatives cited

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[15] The pilots of the EUniQ framework were not taken into account here, since this was based on plans and not on actual activities.

several potential motivations for pursuing such an evaluation in the future, including benchmarking and improvement through objective external feedback, reputation-building and increased credibility and visibility, ensuring compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for QA in the EHEA (ESG), and feeding into strategy reviews and tracking progress toward long-term goals.

QA agencies that participated in the focus group confirmed that none of them have conducted external QA evaluations of Alliances, primarily because no such requests have been made. Agencies agreed that the early stage of development of Alliances may be the main reason for this, while other factors may include a lack of resources and that there is currently no requirement for Alliance-level external QA. Participants also reported that their agencies have not yet developed and promoted any specific frameworks for the external QA of Alliances. Several pointed out that there is lack of resources—human, financial, and time—to create a framework for Alliance-level evaluation without a clear demand from Alliances, or a requirement from national or EU level.

The EUniQ framework, as an approach for Alliance-level evaluation, was viewed as having clear potential for further use, however it would require some updates and further development to better address current and emerging Alliance needs. Suggestions included clarifying its purpose, potentially integrating it with European Degree (label) criteria, and ensuring it adds value to existing processes. All participants also noted that the EUniQ framework would be more likely to be used if it were linked to specific incentives (funding covering the costs of the evaluation) and if it could be integrated with other existing external QA requirements.

Representatives of ministries responsible for higher education acknowledged that the internal QA systems of Alliances are still in the early stages of development. While the development of Alliances has sparked initial discussions on QA at the Alliance level, most ministry representatives emphasise that current national QA reforms coincided with, rather than were directly driven by, the development of Alliances. Some countries participating in the focus group have already enacted legislative provisions to enable CBQA and use of the European Approach, while others reported that they are still in the process of adapting their legal frameworks. A key concern among representatives of ministries is the unclear legal status of Alliances and how potential external QA of Alliances will interact with national accreditation systems - an issue that adds complexity to the prospect of this proposal. The prevailing consensus is that the implementation of CBQA and the European Approach should remain the primary focus at this stage. Greater clarity on the long-term role and structure of Alliances is needed before national governments shift their attention toward the development and recognition of an external QA framework at the Alliance level.

Generally, participants raised concerns about the complexity and questioned the need of introducing an additional or alternative layer of external QA at Alliance level. Ministry representatives noted that in some systems conducting and recognising such an evaluation would require legal changes.

Alliance representatives highlighted the need for external QA evaluations to avoid redundancies, align with national requirements, and support strategic development. To achieve this, any external QA of Alliances would need to adapt to diverse national regulations and avoid overlapping with existing frameworks. It would also need to be flexible enough to be applied to the wide range of Alliances, with their variety of cooperation models, depth of integration and breadth of activities. Therefore, defining the 'object' of the evaluation and separating it from structures and processes that are also part of the individual institutions could be very challenging.

The discussions further explored whether institutions within an evaluated Alliance could be exempt from some parts of their national QA requirements. Participants discussed that this might not be

possible because of the specifics of national QA regulations and different evaluation cycles. Participants agreed that Alliance participation usually represents only a small part of institutional activities, and Alliance-level evaluations may differ significantly in aims and scope from national QA requirements. Some participants reflected that in order to have real added value (and keeping in mind the challenge of defining the object of the evaluation, as mentioned above), Alliance-level evaluations would likely focus on strategic matters related to the development of the Alliance. This might be quite different to aspects/topics that national regulations require to be covered. Integrating reflections on Alliance-related activities into the institutional evaluations of individual participating HEIs was proposed by some focus group participants as a solution. However, others suggested it might not be practical as it would be difficult to look at the Alliance as a whole and it would involve additional time and costs for institutional evaluations.

The European Approach for evaluations of joint programmes was widely recognised as fit for purpose and highly beneficial, in circumstances where programme level external QA is required. Some Alliances have already undergone such evaluations, while others plan to do so. The main reasons cited for undergoing such an evaluation were: it supports the improvement of joint programmes through alignment of QA procedures, learning outcomes, and curriculum development; ensures confidence in programme content, governance, and QA processes; enhances the reputation and credibility of joint programmes; boosts the Alliance's image, and increases visibility; builds trust among students, companies, and other stakeholders; facilitates joint programme accreditation, helping meet national requirements and simplifying recognition across countries; reduces the burden of multiple national evaluations, making it easier to develop joint programmes within the Alliance.

However, it was also noted that the higher education and QA community should be mindful of the challenges and lessons learnt from introducing the European Approach. The remaining restrictions on its use in many systems reflect the cautious approach of national authorities towards adopting a tool that operates without additional national regulations or criteria. The same challenge would exist for any Alliance-level external QA tool that aims to result in exceptions for any aspect of the national external QA requirements.

Scenarios for the future
Similar to the voting for the internal QA scenarios the focus group participants discussed three potential scenarios for external QA (annex 1). They expressed views on those which were most preferred and most feasible.

- The most preferable and feasible scenario was scenario one, which envisaged no requirement for external QA at Alliance level. HEIs are evaluated individually according to their national/system requirements and the European Approach is used for QA of joint programmes if necessary. There are no implications for the national/system-level external QA requirements.

- Ten participants (out of 35) voted for scenario three as most preferable. The scenario envisages that Alliances must have external QA at Alliance level, and the European Approach is used for QA of joint programmes if necessary. The external evaluation at Alliance level is ideally conducted by one agency and recognised in all participating countries. However, it could be conducted jointly by two or more agencies if necessary in order to ensure recognition in all participating countries. For national/system-level external QA of individual HEIs there is a discount/lighter touch approach for institutions following a successful evaluation at Alliance level.

- The least voted scenario was scenario two with only three votes as most preferable and five as most feasible. The only difference between this scenario and scenario three is that in this scenario for national/system-level external QA of individual HEIs there is no discount or lighter touch approach for institutions following a successful evaluation at Alliance level.

The results of the scenarios exercise, together with the issues raised in the accompanying discussions revealed a high level of scepticism regarding the need for and feasibility of an Alliance level external QA. While the EUniQ framework was considered as an appropriate starting point for such an evaluation, participants were concerned that not enough national authorities would be willing to formalise its use as part of a national framework, similar to the challenges seen with the implementation of the European Approach. However, more pertinently, there were many doubts raised as to the real need for and the added value of compulsory Alliance-level external QA.

Conclusions and steps forward

Alliances are at different stages in developing their Alliance-level internal QA systems and adopt various approaches based on their specific goals and future plans. However, progress beyond monitoring and evaluating project-specific objectives remains limited. Developing a comprehensive and integrated internal QA system is recognised as a resource-intensive process, typically undertaken with long-term sustainability in mind. Given that Alliances have confidence in the robustness of the existing QA systems within their member institutions, many believe that there is no significant added-value to developing an additional internal QA framework at the Alliance level. In addition, given the uncertainty surrounding the continuation of Alliances, establishing such systems is not seen as an immediate priority. Beyond sustainability concerns, participants identified key challenges in developing internal QA systems, particularly related to the need to align the requirements of the Alliance with the specific obligations of each partner institution under their respective national or regional legislative frameworks. This alignment demands considerable resources and careful coordination.

As Alliances are still in the early stages of developing their internal QA systems, no Alliance-level external evaluations have been conducted to date. Focus group participants agreed that establishing a framework for such evaluations and carrying them out would require significant resources, making it essential to ensure that they provide clear added value.

Implementing Alliance-level external QA presents several challenges, including potential overlaps with national QA procedures, the need for alignment with diverse regulatory frameworks, and a lack of flexibility to accommodate the diverse structures and cooperation models of different Alliances. The EUniQ framework is seen as a useful starting point should an Alliance-level external QA be required. However, it would need updates to better address the evolving needs of Alliances. Suggested improvements include clarifying its purpose, integrating it with the European Degree (label) criteria, and ensuring it complements rather than duplicates existing procedures.

Although several tools and initiatives already aim to reduce the burden of multiple external QA procedures, further progress depends on national authorities removing barriers that prevent QA agencies from fully complying with the ESG and implementing Bologna Process commitments, particularly regarding CBQA and the European Approach.

The focus group discussions highlighted the need for further dialogue on removing national barriers to the full implementation of Bologna Process tools and commitments and continued discussions on the added value of internal and external QA at Alliance-level.

Annex 1 – Future scenarios

Future scenarios for internal QA		
Scenario 1	**Scenario 2**	**Scenario 3**
The Alliance's internal QA system is **a joint system** covering the joint education provision and the learning environment, research activities, support services, management of the Alliance.	The internal QA system of the Alliance **is guided by the needs of each activity,** with each sub-consortium being responsible for their joint education provision and the learning environment, research activities, support services, management that are directly related to it.	The **internal QA system of each HEI within the Alliance** covers its own education provision, research activities, support services, management, and the learning environment that it offers as part of the Alliance.
Future scenarios for external QA		
Scenario 1	**Scenario 2**	**Scenario 3**
There is no requirement for external QA of Alliances at Alliance level. HEIs are evaluated individually according to their national/system requirements and the European Approach is used for QA of joint programmes if necessary. There are no implications for the national/system-level external QA requirements.	Alliances must have external QA at Alliance level, and the European Approach is used for QA of joint programmes if necessary. **Individual HEIs must also undergo external QA at institutional level according to the national/system-level external QA requirements.** The external evaluation at Alliance level is ideally conducted by one agency and recognised in all participating countries. However, it could be conducted jointly by two or more agencies if necessary in order to ensure recognition in all participating countries.	Alliances must have external QA at Alliance level, and the European Approach is used for QA of joint programmes if necessary. For national/system-level external QA of individual HEIs there is **a discount/lighter touch approach for institutions following a successful evaluation at alliance level.** The external evaluation at Alliance level is ideally conducted by one agency and recognised in all participating countries. However, it could be conducted jointly by two or more agencies if necessary in order to ensure recognition in all participating countries.

Annex 2 – Participants in the Focus Groups

Ministries	QA Agencies	Alliances
Croatia - Ministry of Science, Education and Youth	**AEQES** – Agence pour l'Evaluation de la Qualité de l'Enseignment (French Community Belgium)	4EU+
Flemish Government - Ministry of Education and Training	**AZVO** - Agency for Science and Higher Education (Croatia)	**Circle U.**
France - Ministry of Higher Education, Research and Innovation	**ANECA** – National Agency for the Quality Assessment and Accreditation (Spain)	EC2U
Poland - Ministry of Science and Higher Education	**ANQA** – National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance (Armenia)	**ENGAGE.EU**
Slovak Republic - Ministry of Education, Research, Development and Youth	**ANVUR** - National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (Italy)	**EPICUR**
Slovenia - Ministry of Higher Education, Science, Innovation	**AQAS** - Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (Germany)	**EU-CONEXUS**
	MAB – Hungarian Accreditation Committee	**EUGLOH**
	NAKVIS - Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education	**ERUA**
	NVAO - Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders	**EUniWell**
	QQI - Quality and Qualifications Ireland	**EUt+**
	ÜKA - Swedish Higher Education Authority	**IN.TUNE**
		INGENIUM
		Neurotech
		Ulysseus
		UNA Europe
		UNIC
		UNIVERSEH