

WORKSHOP REPORT

4th SEQA-ESG peer-learning workshop Stakeholder involvement

Malta, 28 and 29 June 2022

The fourth peer-learning workshop focused on **stakeholder involvement**. It gathered representatives from all the participating project partners and featured renowned experts from ENQA and ESG-compliant quality assurance systems. The programme mainly tackled ESG 2.2 “Design methodologies fit for purpose” and ESG 3.1 “Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance”, since these two standards emphasise the role of stakeholders in the work of EQA

Day I

The workshop started with a **welcome speech** from Douglas Blackstock, ENQA President, who reiterated his vision about ENQA as a more inclusive organisation, comprising agencies from across the EHEA and the importance of a project like SEQA-ESG in helping agencies on their journey towards compliance with the ESG.



Picture of the welcome speech

After a brief explanation of the objectives of the workshop, the first session focused on **the involvement of stakeholders in the governance and work of a QA agency**. Ronny Heintze, Deputy Director at AQAS started by explaining the meaning of standard 3.1 of the ESG, leading to the idea that both institutions and the public should trust agencies in their work, for which constant engagement of stakeholders is vital. Discussions were thus held on the **relevance of stakeholders** where the participants agreed that their involvement is crucial to external QA. Participants jointly defined **types of relevant stakeholders** (apart from HEIs, teaching staff, students, business representatives and ministries of education) that agencies should involve in their work and governance. The additional stakeholders might include professional bodies, regional organisations, alumni, councils of rectors, churches, counterparts, administrative staff of universities, unions, etc. It was concluded that the list of potential stakeholders can be extended depending on the fields covered by the agencies.

Regarding the involvement of stakeholders, participants agreed that this is done to **build trust in the agency's work**, but also to get their views. However, it was concluded that it is not always easy to involve and convince stakeholders to take an active part. This led to the next logical question "How to involve stakeholders in the governance structures and work, and how are they appointed?" After presenting the experience of other agencies, participants learnt that there are **different levels of involvement of stakeholders**, but no matter what that level is, it should create the **possibility for collaboration** and opportunity for consultation and information sharing.

There were also questions about the **influence of stakeholders** on governance and the **avoidance of possible conflicts of interest**. The participants agreed that people should be appointed based on their personal capacity, provided with no voting rights and no participation in discussions when their institution or program is evaluated.

The next session was led by Cristina Ghitulica, Vice-President at ARACIS, Romania, and it focused on the **involvement of stakeholders in the design of methodologies and criteria for external quality assurance**. Participants were reminded that the main objective of such involvement is to improve the activity of the agency. In addition, this involvement should also help stakeholders achieve a common understanding of quality assurance and its scope. Attendees pointed out that different stakeholders can have **different visions of quality assurance** and different expectations. In this regard, agencies should be ready to adjust to their needs, and provide them with an environment of interaction and communication, to make them understand the quality assurance principles and roles. Therefore, **constant cooperation and communication** between the quality assurance agency and their stakeholders is needed. Another raised question was how to evaluate HEIs that have long lasting experience in internal quality assurance and whether this should be done in the same way as with the newly established HEIs. All participants agreed that similar institutions should be treated equally, but EQA activities should also follow the maturity of the system (thus jointly addressing similar parts of the system in an equal manner)

The discussions then moved to the **involvement of students**. Participants were asked about the importance of students in quality assurance. Everybody agreed that their **role is very important**. Students involved in QA tend to be dedicated, and aware of their role when involved in review panels, etc. Nevertheless, participants also flagged that there were still some **challenges related to their involvement**. First, students have to manage their other activities too (courses, exams, etc.) and therefore, might lack the motivation to be involved in QA. In addition, in some systems students are not regarded as members with the same rights. When this is the case, agencies should provide more support to them. Participants also learned about the different options that are in place when it comes to **selecting students** (e.g., through an open call, appointment by student unions, councils of rectors and so on), but the nomination of students by somebody else should not affect the agency's flexibility in choosing experts in its panels.



Pictures of Day 1 sessions

The three hosts of the workshop - Malta (MFHEA), Slovakia (SAAHE) and Moldova (ANACEC) – presented their examples of reaching compliance with ESG 3.1 at the end of the first day of the workshop. The main topics covered by their presentations were:

- **Type of stakeholders** and their level of involvement in agencies' governance and work. This provided an opportunity to share experiences and good examples with other project partners.
- **Challenges** in the effective **involvement of stakeholders** such as maintaining and increasing trust, identification of experts (representatives of teaching staff/students) for higher educational institutions of the specific fields, lack of professional associations, the low interest of businesses in quality assurance in higher education, involvement of international experts etc.
- **Challenges** related to **the involvement of students** such as the management of the pool of local students' peer reviewers, and possible limitations due to a short lifespan of the students' status.



Pictures of the examples of reaching compliance with ESG 3.1

Day 2

The second day of the workshop started with a session focused on **how different activities beyond External Quality assurance can serve the agency's stakeholders**. Participants learned that in some countries quality assurance agencies carry out other activities beyond external quality assurance. This can include recognition, quality assurance of other educational levels (primary, secondary,

vocational), research evaluation, etc. In addition, some agencies might also provide consultancy to higher education institutions, for example, to help them develop their internal quality assurance systems.

One of the points discussed was how to **avoid a possible conflict of interest** in cases where agency provide consultancy services to higher education institutions that might eventually undergo an external review by the same agency. In some countries, this issue might be avoided by preventing the same (national) body to perform both tasks. However, participants pointed out that this might not be feasible in smaller systems. All attendees agreed that there should be a **clear separation** between review and consultancy activities in all cases.

This session was followed by a practical session focused on **designing an ideal external quality assurance system**, with the emphasis on the involvement of stakeholders. Participants were divided into smaller groups and were asked to reflect on the following points:

- Categories of stakeholders.
- Existing relations between different stakeholders.
- Obstacles and opportunities in involving various stakeholders in the work of the QA agency.
- Possible mechanisms to involve stakeholders in the governance and work of the agency. For example, which bodies should be created within the agency and what should be their format, functions and powers?
- Involvement of students in the agency's work (areas of involvement, appointment procedures, tasks, and what is the agency's overall vision in this).

This exercise made the participants reflect once again on the **importance and role of stakeholders** in an external quality assurance system in practice, at different levels of an agency, making their work and involvement effective and meaningful for the overall continuous enhancement and improvement of quality assurance.



Pictures of the practical exercise

The last session of the workshop provided an **overview of how ARACIS addresses the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work** as part of their compliance with ESG 3.1. Participants learned about the level of involvement of different categories of stakeholders (students' federations, employers, national HE authority, students' federations, National Rectors' Conference, teachers' unions, National Authority for Qualifications, National Authority for Recognition and Equivalence of Diploma, etc.) in different bodies and activities of the agency. In addition, there was a

discussion on the **main strengths and challenges related to stakeholder involvement** in the work and governance of ARACIS.

Following all the sessions described above, the objectives as originally set for the workshop were fully met. Partner agencies reported to have received a comprehensive insight into stakeholder involvement in the governance and work in external quality assurance, which is of high relevance for reaching compliance with ESG 3.1. All in all, participants concluded that although there are several challenges related to stakeholder involvement, the way these can and should be addressed will vary from one agency to another, following their national, regional or field-related contexts.



Group picture on Day 2

Authored by: National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research, Moldova; Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education

Annexes

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Annex I: Agenda of the workshop

4th SEQA-ESG peer-learning workshop Stakeholder involvement Malta, 28 and 29 June 2022

Project: Supporting European QA Agencies in meeting the ESG (SEQA-ESG)

Call: EPLUS-2019-09-EHEA - Initiatives to support the implementation of European Higher Education Area (EHEA) reforms

Venue: Grand Hotel Excelsior, Great Siege Road, Floriana, FRN 1810, Malta

Outline of the workshop:

This workshop will address the involvement of stakeholders at all levels, and through a number of the agencies' activities. This includes their involvement in the governance and work of the agency, but also their participation in the design of methodologies and criteria for EQA. In particular, standard 3.1 of the ESG will be discussed and addressed. Experiences from compliant agencies who have recently aligned their criteria to the ESG will also be shared.

Programme:

Day I, 28 June 2022

From 12:30 on Participants arrive at the venue

13:00 – 14:00 **Lunch**

14:00 – 14:05 **Welcome**
Douglas Blackstock, ENQA President

14:05 – 14:15 **Icebreaker**

14:15 – 14:30 **Aims and objectives of the workshop**
Goran Dakovic, ENQA Reviews Manager

14:30 – 15:15 **Involvement of stakeholders in governance and work of a QA agency**
Ronny Heintze, Deputy Director for International Development, AQAS, Germany

This presentation will cover different elements to be considered regarding the involvement of stakeholders in the governance and work of a QA agency. This includes their participation in strategic planning, the provision of input vs. the independence from stakeholders or the need to balance the different points of

view. Participants will be provided with an overview of methods and good practices from other QA agencies.

After the presentation (25 min.), the participants of the workshop will be invited to ask questions and discuss (20 min.)

15:15 – 16:00 Involvement of stakeholders in the design of methodologies and criteria for EQA

Cristina Ghitulica, Vice-President, ARACIS, Romania
Ronny Heintze, Deputy Director for International Development, AQAS, Germany

This presentation will cover different elements related to the involvement of stakeholders in the design of methodologies and criteria for External QA to ensure that the existing procedures are fit for purpose. Participants will be provided with an overview of methods and good practices from other QA agencies.

After the presentation (25 min.), the participants of the workshop will be invited to ask questions and discuss (20 min.)

16:00 – 16:15 Short break

16:15 – 17:00 Involvement of students

Cristina Ghitulica, Vice-President, ARACIS, Romania

This presentation will address the specificities of students as a stakeholder for QA Agencies. Participants will be provided with an overview and good practices from other QA agencies.

After the presentation (25 min.), the participants of the workshop will be invited to ask questions and discuss (20 min.)

17:00 – 17:45 Compliance with ESG 3.1 – examples from the hosts (Malta, Moldova, Slovakia)

Lawrence Azzopardi, Head of Accreditation, Licensing, Validation and Quality Assurance, MFHEA, Malta
Stela Guvir, Head of the Public Relations and International Cooperation Office, ANACEC, Moldova
René Matlovič, Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board, SAAHE, Slovakia

Three participating countries that host the workshop present their examples of reaching compliance with ESG 3.1 in 10 min. (each), followed by a discussion (15 min.)

17:45 – 18:00 **Wrap-up**

18:30 – 20:00 *Walking tour of Valetta*

20:00 *Dinner*

Day 2, 29 June 2022

From 08:45 on Participants arrive at the venue

9:00 – 9:45 **Provision of support to HE Learning & Teaching: External Quality Assurance vs. other fields of work of a QA agency**
Ronny Heintze, Deputy Director for International Development, AQAS, Germany

This session will reflect on how different activities beyond External Quality Assurance can serve the stakeholders of the agency. In addition, it will also address how these activities are covered by ESG-related reviews and the importance of ensuring a clear distinction between the different fields of work.

After the presentation (15 min.), the participants of the workshop will be invited to ask questions and discuss (30 min.)

9:45 – 10:45 **Practical session – Designing an ideal external QA system through the involvement of stakeholders (Part I)**

Participants will engage in a brainstorming session on the key elements and challenges regarding stakeholder involvement.

Before the session, each participant will be requested to make some desk research and reflect on the following elements related to QA stakeholders considering the situation/quality culture of their own country:

- *Vision of stakeholders' involvement*
- *Different categories of stakeholders*
- *Specific activities they are/they should be involved in (including the impact of such involvement)*
- *Main obstacles/barriers to their involvement*
- *Suggestions and motivations for the increased participation of stakeholders*
- *Mechanisms to enhance cooperation that brings added value to all stakeholders*

At the start of this session, the participants will be divided into groups (5 groups approximately). The groups will be requested to discuss their previous reflection and use the findings to design an ideal External Quality Assurance system (30

min), following the group reflection on who (and how) should be included in such an ideal system. Participants will be asked to draw this ideal system. Once the drawing of the QA system has finished, one participant will remain as the “host”. The other participants will then be requested to “visit” other QA systems and discuss them (10 min/group)

At the end of the session, the hosts (with the help of the moderator) should then summarize the ideas received. The rest of the participants will be invited to ask questions and discuss (25 min.)

10:45 – 11:00 *Short break*

11:00 – 11:45 **Practical session – Designing an ideal external QA system through the involvement of stakeholders (Part II)**

(See the previous description of the practical session above)

11:45 – 12:30 **Example of an Agency that is compliant with 3.1**
Cristina Ghitulica, Vice-President, ARACIS, Romania

The presentation will elaborate on how ARACIS addresses the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work as part of their compliance with standard 3.1.

Following the presentation of 30 min., participants of the workshop will be invited to ask questions and discuss the provided example (15 min.)

12:30 – 12:45 **Information on upcoming WPs**
Goran Dakovic, ENQA Reviews Manager

12:45 – 13:00 **Wrap-up of the workshop and closing words**
Douglas Blackstock, ENQA President

13:00 – 14:00 *Lunch*

14:00 *End of the workshop*

Annex 2: List of participants

#	Name and Surname	Position	Organisation
1	Lawrence Azzopardi	Head of Accreditation and Quality Assurance	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA)
2	Xhiliola Bixheku	Acting Director	Albanian Quality Assurance Agency (ASCAL)
3	Douglas Blackstock	President	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
4	Dunja Bulajic	International Relations Officer	Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ACQAHE)
5	Andrei Chiciuc	President	National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC)
6	Rose Anne Cuschieri	CEO	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA)
7	Ersi Dako	Head of Statistics and Analyses Department	Albanian Quality Assurance Agency (ASCAL)
8	Goran Dakovic	Reviews Manager	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
9	Jelena Đukanović	Advisor for Quality Assurance	Agency for Control and Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ACQAHE)
10	Alexis Fábregas Almirall	Project Officer	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
11	Sona Gewisslerová	Legal Department	Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE)
12	Cristina Ghitulica	Expert	Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)
13	Stela Guvir	Head of Public Relations and International Cooperation Office	National Agency for Quality Assurance in Education and Research (ANACEC)
14	Ronny Heintze	Expert	Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (AQAS)

15	Ingrit Jushi	Head of Unit - Higher Education and Scientific Research Policies Directorate	Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth, Albania
16	Tomáš Kůst	Policy Officer	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, Czech Republic
17	Gabriella Mallia	Communications Manager	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA)
18	René Matlovič	Vice-Chairman of the Executive Board	Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE)
19	Fiona McCowan	QA Officer	Malta Further and Higher Education Authority (MFHEA)
20	Neda Ojdanic	Director General for Tertiary Education	Ministry of Education, Science, Culture and Sports, Montenegro
21	Peter Ondreicka	Policy Officer	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak republic
22	Lilia Parhomenco	Main Consultant	Ministry of Education and Research of the Republic of Moldova
23	Jiří Smrčka	Director	National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education (NAB)
24	Martina Vidláková	Head of Quality Assurance and Evaluation	National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education (NAB)
25	Marcel Vysocky	Director of the Higher Education Institutions Department	Ministry of Education, Science, Research and Sport of Slovak republic
26	Erjon Xhako	Program Officer	Albanian Quality Assurance Agency (ASCAL)
27	Andrea Zacharova	Head of Accreditation Department	Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE)

Annex 3: Practical exercise

Higher education and quality assurance system of the country called “Kinnie”

The country of 2 million people has one large, public, comprehensive (all fields) university in the capital that enrolls 50 % of the overall student population (including a large provision of study programmes on social sciences). The rest of the sector consists of three medium size public universities that are field specific (one technical university, one agricultural university and one university on social sciences), enrolling 15 % of the student population, and of 54 (rather small) private HEI providers offering mostly bachelor programmes in social sciences. The four universities are represented by the national rectors’ conference, whereas private HEIs do not have a representative body. Furthermore, the higher education system includes rather an uninterest and scattered employer associations in social sciences, but strong professional bodies in the field of medicine, engineering, and agriculture. Moreover, there is one main national student association with strong views that only publicly funded higher education is a good education. The overall unemployment rate in the country is low, including that of recent graduates.

There is one quality assurance agency operating in the country. It is a long-established agency that performs initial accreditation of HE institutions and accreditation and reaccreditations of study programmes. The largest university has already undergone three rounds of programme accreditations and their first institutional accreditation, whereas the rest of the system has done one round of programme accreditations.

The agency’s vision is: “the agency shall, with its system of quality assurance, contribute to higher education in the country in terms of quality education and employability of graduates, and to overall internationally recognisable, competitive and integrated higher education system in the global higher education area.

The agency’s mission states: “The agency understands itself as an institution supported by higher education institutions and professional associations. The agency is devoted to quality assurance and quality development of teaching in higher education institutions, with its main task being the quality assessment of degree programmes and of academic institutions.”

The freshly appointed Minister of Education recently presented a vision of reforming the higher education sector, to address a high unemployment rate among the country’s recent graduates in social sciences due to the perceived low quality of studies in this field. The topic is high on the agenda as the well-known social media influencer made a post about this. However, overall, there is not much interest in external quality assurance in the country and HEIs and students do not have complaints related to quality in higher education.

Points of reflection:

1. What categories of stakeholders can you identify?
2. What is their interrelation (draw a scheme)

3. Reflect on obstacles and opportunities in involving various stakeholders in the work of the QA agency. What motivational factors can you think of to further involve (specific) stakeholders?
4. Now, reflect on the agency's involvement of stakeholders in 1) GOVERNANCE and 2) WORK. Create bodies and elaborate on their format, functions, and powers. What objectives are stakeholders helping the agency to achieve and how?
5. Elaborate on the stakeholders' involvement in the design and continuous improvement of study programmes on social sciences
6. Finally, reflect on the involvement of students in the agency's work (areas of involvement, appointment procedures, tasks, and what is the agency's overall vision in this)