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Quality Assurance of European Universities Alliances: Aligning Internal/External QA and Student Involvement

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1. Introduction

In October 2018 the European Commission initiated its first call for proposals to set up alliances of European Universitiesⁱ, following the Sorbonne speech of President Macronⁱⁱ and the Conclusions of the European Councilⁱⁱⁱ in the previous year. In 2018 the Flemish department of NVAO considered that these new European Universities would need a European QA solution and, therefore, prepared the Erasmus+ project proposal “Developing a European Approach for Comprehensive QA of (European) University Networks” (EUniQ)^{iv}. The EUniQ project was selected and coordinated by NVAO on behalf of the Flemish Community. The project ran from 2019 to 2021 and the consortium comprised eight QA agencies, six ministries and the European stakeholders’ organisations ESU, EUA and ENQA.

When the EUniQ project started, the first 17 European Universities were selected by the European Commission. The project partners developed the European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities^v in close cooperation with these alliances. The Framework focuses on the alliance level, is enhancement-oriented and was tested in 4 pilot evaluations of European Universities. The summaries of these pilot evaluations are published^{vi}. A Roadmap for the implementation of the European Framework, outlining the main QA principles and stakeholders to be involved, was developed as well^{vii}. The Framework is now available to be used in evaluations of European Universities.

After several selection rounds the number of European Universities has increased from 17 when the EUniQ project started in 2019 to 50 by the end of 2023^{viii}. The European Commission aims to further expand this number to 60 European Universities comprising more than 500 higher education institutions by mid-2024^{ix}. Closely connected to this goal and timeline are the current pilot projects to work towards a legal statute for the alliances and to test joint European degree labels based on common criteria.

All these European Universities have to make sure that their joint provision is aligned with the ESG Part 1 and with external QA requirements that are applicable nationally to the partner institutions. In addition, the alliances must comply with the monitoring and evaluation requirements set by the European Commission. An important aspect of all QA processes is that students are involved. As the partner institutions each have their own internal QA systems and quality cultures it is clearly a complex task to bring all these different requirements together in a joint quality assurance approach of the alliance.

In this paper we will focus on the approaches that European Universities have chosen to align their internal and external QA requirements. In addition, we will look at how the involvement of students has taken shape within the QA processes in the alliances.

2. Methodology

The European Framework that was developed in the EUniQ project includes in its principles the alignment between internal and external QA and an active involvement of students. Four alliances (EUTOPIA^x, Una Europa^{xi}, UNITE^{xii}, YUFE^{xiii}) participated as pilot projects in EUniQ to test the European QA Framework. The panels that evaluated these alliances included student members and interviewed student representatives. As these pilot evaluations were carried out at the start of the alliances the student involvement in QA was still limited and the internal QA processes were in the early stages. During the evaluation of the pilots several alliances and panel members posited that it would be beneficial to examine the progress made in the QA developments in a few years after the pilots. Consequently, for this paper interviews were conducted with representatives of the four alliances to consider these new developments. Moreover, new insights could be gained by involving two other alliances that were selected through subsequent calls to take into account these experiences and

developments in the European Universities Initiative. Representatives from E³UDRES² (2020)^{xiv} and FILM-EU (2020)^{xv} agreed to be interviewed.

Interviews have been conducted with responsible actors for QA in the six alliances mentioned above to explore the internal QA developments as well as the experiences with external QA^{xvi}. In addition, the alliances' views on the alignment between the internal and external QA, and the involvement of students in the QA processes have been raised.

The following core questions have guided the semi-structured interviews:

- 1) How has the QA system of the alliance developed since the start and which future steps are envisaged?
 - What are the main elements of the quality vision/strategies/policies of the alliance?
 - What are the main QA structures and how are the alliance and university level QA systems connected (central/decentral)?
 - How will the QA system develop in view of the PDCA cycle and quality improvement/culture?
- 2) How are students involved in the QA processes and how are students' views taken into account?
 - How are students represented and elected/chosen in the governance and QA board/structures of the alliance?
 - How to involve the student bodies of the partner institutions?
 - Formal and informal ways to involve students in the QA processes of the alliance?
- 3) What is the vision/strategy for developing and aligning the internal and external QA of the alliance?
 - Which joint provision has been developed or is planned and how will its quality be assured internally and externally?
 - What experiences does the alliance have with the internal and external QA (e.g. national QA or European Approach) for the joint provision?
 - Any suggestions/wishes for the alignment between internal and external QA?

In the following sections the main findings regarding the three core questions will be reported. Some cautiousness will be applied in naming specific alliances in view of the small number of interviewees, the time constraints for the interviews and as many alliances' QA policies and practices are still in development.

3. QA Strategies and Systems within Alliances

A useful distinction in 3 levels of QA is made by Una Europa: QA at the level of the alliance; QA at the level of individual projects; QA of joint courses and programmes. This alliance advocates that the 3 levels require different QA approaches and main actors (e.g. Board of Directors and Office with input from External Advisory Board on alliance level; dedicated work package and coordination with project leads on project level; blueprint for joint QA of joint programmes).

The experiences with QA at the level of the interviewed alliances, which are in existence now for 3 or 4 years, are quite mixed. Half of the alliances have a joint QA system in place whilst this is still in development in others. Alliances report that developing a joint QA system is a challenging task considering the multiple partner institutions, each with their own institutional QA systems and cultures. YUFE and Una Europa seem to have found a similar way in dealing with these challenges. Their approach is one of trust in existing QA processes of the partner institutions as well as ongoing national/regional QA procedures the partners are already subject to. The aim is to avoid duplication of existing processes and to connect and ensure efficient communication between the different systems. QA efforts are only focused on new, joint activities that are not yet subject to existing QA processes and procedures.

A joint QA system may typically include a QA framework or handbook/manual (e.g. including the vision on quality, the realisation of the PDCA cycle and reporting), QA indicators (quantitative or qualitative) and a QA board (sometimes both an internal and external one). The handbook/manual may describe specific processes for e.g. QA in education, research and services. The process often starts with a mapping exercise of the different institutional QA systems. In FILM-EU enhancement has been prioritised over benchmarking and scoring objectives. This is reflected in the handbook, with a spread over 3 levels of implementation at the alliance level: Level 1 are those policies and procedures that are required for each partner and should be addressed in the same way in each institution (same content,

procedures, stakeholders involved); Level 2 is where every partner should provide the documentation, but procedures or levels can differ, depending upon the institutional and/or national context and regulations (e.g. policies on academic integrity and connections to industry); Level 3 consists of the policies and processes that can be added by each partner depending upon the specifics of the partner, policy of their institution and specifics of their quality culture. A central, joint QA office will see to the implementation of the processes.

At the time of the EUniQ pilot projects QA in the alliances was just starting and it was hardly possible to evaluate the improvement policy. In UNITE! the handbook for quality management is in the implementation phase and the reporting system is based on the PDCA cycle for each key activity. As a future step it is intended to also apply this to the strategic level. When in alliances a joint QA system is fully developed and the PDCA cycle is at the basis of its QA activities it is possible to close the loop with quality improvement in place. In the meantime the projects carried out by alliances are often set up as pilots, giving the opportunity for shorter QA cycles and quick improvements where needed. The results of the QA processes in these pilots serve the development of new pilots or of an elaborated (joint) programme in the end.

The development of a joint QA system is not always a straightforward trajectory. In one alliance ambitious plans for a joint QA system met resistance from some partner universities and were stalled. Consequently, the QA arrangements primarily consist of monitoring the progress of the project work and a fallback to the QA systems of the partner universities emerged. There is no joint QA system of the alliance and little interest in developing one. Perhaps this will change with the development of joint degree programmes.

The development of the internal QA system is linked to the governance structure of the alliance. There is a large variety in how this structure is set up. EUTOPIA has 7 bodies in its organisational structure but other alliances have less. Although an elaborate and multi-layered governance structure can involve stakeholders more structurally it also poses challenges for communication and collaboration. Flatter and simpler governance structures, which are more characteristic for some types of HEIs than for others, can also smoothen the discussions on QA. The core governance bodies are typically a strategic board (with the senior leadership of the partners), a management/coordinating/steering board and the secretariat/office of the alliance. In larger alliances the key liaison officers at each university (UNITE!) or the institutional coordinators (YUFE) can have an important local role (in UNITE! as part of the Steering Committee together with the Secretary-General), next to the secretariat/central office.

Most alliances have a Quality Board/Council/Task Force in place or are developing one. Its main function tends to be advisory or reporting to the main decision-makers in the alliance who also have the main responsibility for the development of the QA system. The composition of this quality body usually consists of QA experts of the partner institutions. External QA experts can also be involved, e.g. through a separate external Quality Board. In YUFE there are QA experts of each partner who act as liaison officers to allow for QA-exchange from the alliance to partners and vice versa, thereby relying on the QA results of each of the partners. UNITE! does not have a Quality Board but quality management is a key structural element and there is a small team for quality management which functions as an ad-hoc working group.

Some alliances have faced significant changes in the leadership of partner universities and/or other main actors (e.g. Secretary-General, coordinators etc.). New university leaders can bring in new perspectives but may not have the same commitment to the alliance as their predecessors who co-founded it. All alliances have increased the number of partner institutions since the start, which can bring advantages and new inspirations but also complexities due to increased communication efforts and differences in perspectives (e.g. long-term strategic objectives vs. short-term project goals and reputational gains). Disputes regarding the strategic priorities or governance may emerge. In one case it was reported that the attention became so much focused on the organisational structure that activities were effectively halted for some time. It often takes time to bring new actors in senior positions on the same page and to transmit the existing knowledge and achievements of the alliance to them.

4. Student Involvement and QA Perspectives

In most alliances students are represented through a formal body in the alliance's structure, e.g. a Student Council/Board/Forum. These student bodies tend to have a minimum of 1, 2 or 3 students from partner institutions, organise their work autonomously and choose among themselves specific representatives in the alliance's structures and projects. FILM-EU had already student representation in

their Academic Council and is now setting up a separate Student Council with 3 student representatives from each partner; the Student Council will elect two of its members who will sit, with full voting rights, in the Academic Council. In UNITE! there is the student body SURE! with 3-5 students per partner institution. SURE! sets its own agenda and chooses two spokespersons who can attend the meetings of the Academic Forum and the Steering Committee.

The student representatives are either elected by students in the partner institutions (in Una Europa and E³UDRES²), appointed directly by the partners (in YUFE) or the partners decide on election or appointment based on local regulations and traditions (in EUTOPIA, FILM-EU, UNITE!). If students are appointed by the institutions this may result in students who are very committed to the alliance but are less connected to the student representation in their home institution. On the other hand, UNITE! stated that the student representatives have strong links or are active participants in the local student unions. E³UDRES² reported that they shifted from appointed to elected student representatives to strengthen the student voice, leading to better connections with the student bodies of the partner institutions.

Most alliances take student involvement very seriously, often already from the start of the alliance. The level of involvement in the decision-making structures varies. For example, in E³UDRES² the Chair and Vice-Chair of the Board of Student Representatives regularly participate in the alliance's management meetings to bring in the student perspective, including on QA. In YUFE each decision-making or advisory body has student representatives; also in the highest decision-making body where they have the same voting power as the rectors of each of the partners. Una Europa mentioned that the EUniQ pilot inspired a broader involvement of students at the highest level of decision-making structures. The Student Board was elevated to the same level as the Board of Directors. At the office a senior governance officer and a student intern were hired to ensure a constant liaison with the Student Board to guarantee continuity and coaching. There are also Student Liaison Officers (SLO) in UNITE!; these are (administrative) staff members from partner institutions who connect to students and who can support in organising student activities (in some partner universities the SLO can also be a student).

However, in some cases there is still room for improvement. One interviewee mentioned that the student involvement in the alliance is limited; although there is a student council its members have no say in the alliance's decision-making and are not, with one exception, participating in meetings of the governance bodies. There is also a disconnect between these student representatives and the students in the universities. Students in the universities are not properly informed about the alliance. An exception are students who are active in learning communities and are also part of the evaluation process in these learning communities.

Another consideration is that if the joint QA system is still in development this also applies to the structural involvement of students in the QA system. If, on the other hand, a joint QA system is in place there is no reason why students should not be involved in all QA processes. For example, YUFE ensures that all activities that involve students are evaluated by involving students, either at partner level or at YUFE level depending on the type of activity. In FILM-EU students are invited at round tables during summits and conferences to express their views; this information is fed back to the QA team for analysis. In this alliance, which is focused on Film and Media Arts, this specialisation makes it easier to involve students than in large alliances with many different fields of study.

Several alliances remarked that the communication with, and certainly the engagement of, the whole student body of the partners of the alliance remains a challenge. An alliance has engaged 1000+ students in activities of the alliance but this is only 1% of the total students enrolled in the partner institutions. In view of the ambitious goal of 50% student mobility it is apparent that more students need to be reached and engaged.

A remarkable initiative to put student participation in the alliance in the spotlight is the E³UDRES² Bank of Students which is a database of students who already support the alliance or would like to join future projects and activities. Both the database and the registration form for interested students are published on the E³UDRES² website.

5. Alignment of Internal and External QA

The core activities of the alliance and planned joint provision at the start may determine to some extent the direction the QA system takes. For instance, when an alliance focuses on the development of small learning units this could have less immediate implications for QA than the development of a joint programme which is subject to both internal QA in the partner universities and to external QA. However, the absence of a joint QA system at the alliance level does not have to impede the QA at the project

level; e.g. it was reported that the QA and quality enhancement arrangements for a project on developing learning units within connected learning communities in EUTOPIA work quite well.

Half of the interviewed alliances have experiences with developing joint programmes within the alliance, the other half are planning or considering this. Una Europa developed the Joint Bachelor of Arts in European Studies; due to conflicting national rules only 4 universities could be degree-awarding partners whilst 4 are mobility partners in the programme. Examples of obstacles relate to the possibility to create an interdisciplinary degree; diverging legislation on tuition fees; selection of students; restrictions on the diploma. The joint programme was evaluated by NVAO using the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes. Although this was a positive experience the joint programme had to go through some separate national accreditation procedures as the European Approach has not been implemented everywhere. A blueprint for the internal QA was developed, in accordance with the standard in the European Approach. YUFE also plans to set up a joint programme based on the European Approach. Some other alliances that plan joint programmes are still exploring possible external QA approaches. FILM-EU emphasised that there should be more openness to using the European Approach in different systems and that systems and QA agencies that are more flexible could try to influence more strict systems and agencies through open conversations.

In E³UDRES² a label for the joint provision (smaller learning units and joint degrees) is being discussed but it is important that this label is also recognised outside the alliance. European “accreditation” of the alliance using the EUniQ framework could be promising in this regard. Perhaps this also applies to the meta campus on the UNITE! website which is still a pilot but once developed would be a learning management system increasing the visibility of the educational offerings of the partner universities.

From EUTOPIA it was remarked that the EUniQ framework, if backed up by the European Commission and the umbrella associations, would stimulate the quality enhancement of the alliances and make its QA more transparent.

Una Europa and YUFE emphasised that no additional European procedures are needed that also deal with what is already quality assured at the national level of the alliance partners. Both alliances agree that the focus should be on the added value of the alliance activities and that a system that mirrors the national procedures should be avoided. YUFE advocates for an institutional review on the alliance level, as in EUniQ, where you need to show how your QA system works, how it is aligned to the mission, vision and policy of the alliance and that allows applying its own procedures to guarantee the external QA of the joint provision.

There is some concern about the numerous reporting and monitoring requirements from the European Commission and its agencies. Una Europa believes in the importance of narrative rather than an overreliance on quantitative indicators that do not serve to demonstrate the transformative impact of the European Universities Initiative. This alliance strongly advocates for a system whereby alliances are subject to only one evaluation procedure across all their interconnected missions (on a regular basis) and hence for a more holistic approach as realised in the EUniQ project. EUniQ is perceived as a very positive experience especially in relation to the appreciative approach that focused on the mission and vision of each alliance. The EUniQ evaluations also provided opportunities to exchange experiences and learn from each other. YUFE was more developed at the QA level, on the other hand they benefitted from the experience of Una Europa in setting up joint programmes.

6. Conclusions

The development of a joint QA system for an alliance is a complex task, and not every alliance has yet completed it. One needs to be aware of the level for which QA is developed and the different approaches required. The governance structure can both facilitate and hinder the development. The trajectory may depend on the starting position, the nature of the planned joint provision as well as the dynamics that occur within an alliance during the passing of time. Some common QA elements have been distinguished and it seems that trust in partners' QA systems, avoiding duplication of existing processes and efficient communication are likely success factors.

Although the alliances mostly have formal student representation in place and there are some good practices in student involvement, the participation in the decision-making structures varies across alliances. The connection to the wider student body of the partners can be improved. Participation of students in the QA system is, like the joint QA system on the alliance level, often still in development. As also pointed out by ESU, students are not always fully involved in the alliances with democratically

elected and locally grounded representatives^{xvii}. To improve this situation, ESU has recently set up a 'Conference of the student bodies of the European alliances of higher education institutions' where students' representatives from the alliances are able to share their experiences, struggles and best practices.^{xviii}

The alignment of internal and external QA is still under discussion. When the joint QA system is taking shape and joint programmes are being developed or a label for the joint provision is sought, the issue of alignment between internal and external QA becomes more acute. European approaches for external QA already exist, both for the QA of joint programmes and for the QA of the alliance. These approaches relate to the ESG and internal QA. Roadmaps for the implementation are available as well. The interviews showed support of alliances in considering the EUniQ framework for evaluation of the QA of the alliance. What is needed now are concerted actions of the European Commission, national authorities, QA agencies, and the support of the European stakeholders' associations, to remove the (legal) obstacles and make it work.

References

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