

**Resonance Group Paper: European Universities, legal frameworks and the ESG. Some recommendations**

For the EUniQ project: Developing a European Approach for Comprehensive QA of (European) University Networks

*Final draft*

## 1. The European Universities Initiative

In December 2017, at the Gothenburg Summit, the European Council called on Member States, the Council and the Commission to “strengthen strategic partnerships across the EU between higher education institutions and encouraging the emergence by 2024 of some twenty 'European Universities', consisting in bottom-up networks of universities across the EU which will enable students to obtain a degree by combining studies in several EU countries and contribute to the international competitiveness of European universities”.

Following this first call for strategic partnerships, the European Universities Initiative was co-created with Member States and stakeholders in 2018. As a result, 41 European Universities were selected through two calls for proposals under the Erasmus+ programme (17 in 2019 and 24 in 2021). European University alliances are transnational alliances of higher education institutions from across the EU that share a long-term strategy for deeper and sustainable cooperation in higher education, research and innovation, while promoting European values and identity, in order to significantly strengthen mobility of students and staff, and foster the quality, inclusiveness and competitiveness of European higher education.

Today, these European University alliances are in place, involving more than 280 higher education institutions of various sizes and types, located all over Europa. They include a broad range of higher education institutions from across the EU, from universities of applied sciences, technical universities and universities of fine arts to comprehensive and research-intensive universities.

## 2. The EUniQ -project and state-of-play

The EUniQ-project, coordinated by the Ministry of Education and Training Belgium/Flemish Community, aims to develop a methodology for comprehensive quality assurance of (European) University Networks.

To do so, the specific objectives of the EUniQ project are:

- to explore various approaches to assess the quality of (European) university networks;
- to demonstrate the feasibility of organising assessments of (European) university networks;
- to develop an assessment methodology that takes into account joint policies and joint strategies adopted by each alliance of European University network;
- to undertake four pilot assessments of (European) university networks, and to, as a result, produce a development roadmap for quality assurance (QA) agencies in assessing the quality of (European) universities' alliances as sustainable networks of higher education institutions.

A comprehensive quality assurance assessment methodology takes into account joint policies of the alliances and will examine the quality of learning and teaching in higher education, including learning environments

and relevant links to research and innovation strategies, as well the service to society. The principles stated by European standards and guidelines (ESG) will be observed.

This project supports QA agencies in addressing evolving methodological challenges, considering the various shapes and levels of integration of transnational alliances called “European Universities” by developing appropriate external QA procedures on the level of the alliance, taking into account the development of cross-border HE, the policy integration of university networks, the expanding offer of joint programmes, and the establishment of European Universities.

In this project, partners both from QA agencies and from ministries cooperate to develop and trial an assessment methodology for (European) university networks resulting in a development roadmap for QA agencies, from a needs analysis to a developed QA methodology.

### 3. Role of the Resonance Group

Within the project there are two groups defined:

- a Roadmap Group, composed of QA agencies and stakeholder organisations
- a Resonance Group, composed of ministries’ representatives

The Resonance Group which meets adjacent to the three Peer Support Events is meant to guide, monitor and evaluate the work of the Roadmap Group.

Furthermore, as EUniQ is set up as a peer learning project, the choice was made to combine different categories of partners: partners from countries with a fully developed QA system that are already using the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes, with partners from countries that are still in the process of rolling out this approach.

The members of the Resonance Group are the six Ministries partnering in the EUniQ-project: Albania, Bulgaria, Belgium (Flemish Community), France, Georgia and Romania. All ministries have one representative (including the HCERES QA agency, which is mandated as such by the French Ministry) in the Resonance Group. The lead partner of the Resonance Group is the Flemish Ministry of Education and Training, who chairs the meetings and writes the minutes of the Resonance Group meetings.

The Resonance Group has a reflective role and provides an analysis from the viewpoint of national authorities, by giving feedback and thinking about ways forward for the assessment methodology as developed by the Roadmap Group.

In an earlier stage of the project, the Resonance Group discusses the pilot framework developed by the Roadmap group<sup>1</sup>, which resulted in a paper ‘Analysis of the proposed methodology’, which was published in February 2021 (ref) and provided the basis for carrying out 4 pilot evaluations of 4 European University alliances projects.

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<https://www.nvao.net/nl/attachments/view/european%20framework%20for%20comprehensive%20qa%20of%20european%20universities-v4>

#### 4. Focus of this paper

With this paper the Resonance Group wants to give an insight in their reflections on the QA of European University alliances, its legal framework and the applicability of the ESG. The Resonance Group is part of the EUniQ project and focusses on the policy makers' view on the QA of European University alliances.

By sharing its reflections and formulating recommendations for further development of the quality assurance of European University alliances, the Resonance Group wants to contribute the ongoing debate on the European University alliances and inspire the European Commission and other Member States in the further development of the European Universities Initiative.

#### 5. Recommendations on the development of a QA (framework) of European Universities

##### 1. Focus on the level of the alliance

All European Higher Education Area countries and higher education institutions have their own policies and legislation on quality assurance in place, more or less aligned with the European Standards and Guidelines (ref). So when discussing QA procedures of European Universities, debates easily strand or focus on the differences between, institutions, agencies and countries.

In order to overcome this, the Resonance group came to the general conclusion that the framework for Quality Assurance for European University alliances needs to focus on the joint provision of the European University alliance, and not on the basic quality of the institutions and programmes.

Following the general rules of subsidiarity, the external quality assurance of the programmes follow the national requirements and procedures for programme accreditation or those for institutional accreditation and are not affected by the framework for Quality Assurance for European University alliances.

In the long run, it could be useful if the framework for QA of European University alliances could be linked to national QA procedures, and lead to joint external quality assurance procedures, thus reducing the administrative burden.

##### 2. Take the complete remit of each European University alliance into account.

From the beginning of the European Universities Initiative, the European Commission emphasized that all European University alliances need a joint long-term strategy for education with, where possible, links to research and innovation to drive systemic, structural and sustainable impact at all levels of their institutions. Beyond their core tasks of teaching, research and innovation, universities are key actors in Europe, able to address big societal challenges, become true engines of development for cities and regions and promote civic engagement.<sup>2</sup>

This requires a much deeper level of cooperation between participating universities, than common in Erasmus Mundus programmes and EU projects, and affects the scope of the QA process to. Where most know national and international standards, procedures and processes focus mainly on the quality of education, this long term and broad vision of the European University alliances require to open up these standards, processes and procedures to include an international multi-campus approach and enhanced

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<sup>2</sup> <https://ec.europa.eu/education/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-universities-initiative-factsheet.pdf>

mobility schedules. Taking into consideration the focus on research within the alliances, the QA framework should give special attention to this dimension.

### 3. Respect and strengthen Bologna key commitments

During the last two decades, a major common ground was developed in the area of external quality assurance of higher education.

In 2005, the ministers for Higher Education of the EHEA adopted the first version of the “Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education” (ESG). 10 years later, in 2015, the ESG were revised in order to take into account recent developments in the higher education sector, like qualification frameworks and student-centred learning.

A key goal of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. They have played and will continue to play an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and cross-border cooperation. Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision. The ESG are used by institutions and quality assurance agencies as a reference document for internal and external quality assurance systems in higher education. Moreover, they are used by the association of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which is responsible for the register of quality assurance agencies, operating in the EHEA and which substantially comply with the ESG.<sup>3</sup>

Ten years later, in 2015, the ministers for Higher Education of the EHEA approved the European Approach for Quality assurance of Joint Programmes.<sup>4</sup> The European Approach has been developed to ease external quality assurance of joint programmes: it defines standards and procedures that are based on the agreed tools of the EHEA, and it should be applicable without adding additional national standards. This facilitates integrated approaches to quality assurance of joint programmes, which genuinely reflect and mirror their joint character.

In reality, not all European countries<sup>5</sup> accept the procedures described in the European Approach as part of their QA processes. This can be explained by various reasons: National legislations don't allow the use of the European Approach.; national accreditation criteria which don't fully match with the criteria used in the European Approach or which are more demanding; lack of trust about foreign QAAs; language issues for QA assessments & reports; or calendar-related issues.<sup>6</sup>

Cross border QA allows higher education institutions to opt to engage a foreign QA agency in the external quality assurance process. Although the European ministers of higher education have committed<sup>7</sup> to allowing their higher education institutions' to choose a suitable (EQAR-registered) quality assurance agency

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<sup>3</sup> Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/national-implementation/>

<sup>6</sup> See also: [Microsoft Word - TPG\\_C\\_QA\\_RO\\_MK\\_PLA\\_Report.docx \(ehea.info\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.ehea.info/page-ministerial-conference-yerevan-2015>

for the external quality assurance process. The cross border approach is a valid procedure in 32 out of 49 countries of the EHEA.

In 2021 the European commission has consulted an ad hoc expert group on the challenges to unlock the full potential of European University alliances. This resulted in two challenges for the Quality Assurance of new joint programmes:

- Difficulties in developing an internal Quality Assurance framework for the European University as a whole that addresses all requirements in the different national systems
- Strong diversity of appropriation of the Bologna Process tools among partners and within Member States (e.g. Unequal or non-application of the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes)

Given the fact that QA standards procedures and processes are already developed and widely accepted in the EHEA countries, the Resonance Group suggest that, rather than doubling the earlier developed (inter)national QA processes and procedures with specific procedures, processes and frameworks for the QA of the European University alliances' programmes, national authorities and QA agencies should consider using the earlier developed tools (standards, procedures and processes), as a promising basis to assess the QA solution for the programmes delivered by the European Universities, as far as education and research is concerned.

Given the fact that most standards, procedures and processes mentioned above were developed to assess the quality of educational programmes or institutions, the Resonance Group suggest to ask the authors to revisit these tools, to consider making them applicable for the alliance level. This doesn't mean that the tools have to be changed. In some cases adding a manual or guide on how to apply the tools on the level of the alliance will be sufficient.

#### **4. Define a clear focus of the quality assurance process.**

During the work of the Resonance group, often the focus of the framework and the focus of the quality assurance process was discussed. Due to the recent start of the alliances of European Universities, it wasn't always clear which aspect we were focussing on: the European project (Erasmus+ funding), the (potential) added value of an alliance or the QA of the alliance itself. This should be clear before agreeing on a framework.

It's the opinion of the Resonance group that, the added value of the alliance should be the focus of the external QA process. Considering the joint programmes' assessments made under the Erasmus+ calls for the pilot phase of European Universities' alliances and the principle of subsidiarity touched upon earlier, it is more feasible to develop a framework for the added value of the alliance, on to and compatible with the national accreditation systems for each HEI.

The added value of the alliance lies in its transnational character, where institutions from across the EU that share a long-term strategy for deeper and sustainable cooperation in higher education, research and innovation, while promoting European values and identity, in order to significantly strengthen mobility of students and staff, and foster the quality, inclusiveness and competitiveness of European higher education.

In addition to defining a clear focus, it is also important to determine the final goal of the QA process. Is the process focusing on accountability, promoting excellence, supporting development or stimulating growth? The chosen purpose of the QA process should influence the choices made in the framework.

#### **5. Facilitate collaborations and support trust among actors**

In order to build a successful QA framework or process, a strong stakeholder dialogue is a necessity. Due to

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the specific characteristics of the European University alliances, increased cooperation between stakeholders, such as agencies, ministries and universities, but also the dialogue with students representatives and representatives of academic staff and employers, both at national and international level, is a must.

For the European University alliances, organising stakeholder dialogue and collaboration is more complex and might need more attention, due to the international context. The organisation of e.g. student participation or representation of the labour market, needs extra attention.

Ministries, agencies, institutions and stakeholders will need to share information and be willing to integrate a common framework within the existing national systems. Current national legislations on QA remain by far the biggest hurdle. The huge differences in legislation across countries make uptake challenging. But also language and cultural differences might also entail obstacles when using a common framework.

A solution might be to encourage joint evaluations by at least 2 QA agencies, mirroring the collaboration spirit that stays at the foundation of European University alliances. Getting together agencies to do joint evaluations has been a positive outcome of the EUniQ project. Joint evaluations might increase trust in the European QA-framework, which will hopefully lead to more uptake by national authorities.

For a successful further development of a common QA framework and methodology for the European University alliances, it's the Resonance groups' opinion, that there needs to be further and continuous investment in peer learning and peer support, for QA agencies, higher education institutions and national authorities.

## 6. Future steps

The EUniQ project created an opportunity to work together and co-create external QA strategies for the European Universities Initiative. The project brought added value to the development of European University alliances. It combines the different missions of the universities, while leaving space for the specificities of different alliances. The fact that the development of a QA process started early in the development of the universities is a big benefit, as it ensures that the process is more closely aligned and develops at the same pace. Simultaneously to the EUniQ project, the alliances had to develop common internal QA strategies, processes and procedures. It has been an interesting experience to see these grow and feed into the EUniQ framework.

Recently the European Commission published Council conclusions on the European Universities Initiative.<sup>8</sup> The council conclusions include a specific call for the continuation of the exchanges between the European Commission, Member States, the 'European Universities' and of the close cooperation with Member States. The Resonance Group fully supports this objective.

Furthermore, the European Commission is working on the further rollout of the European Universities Initiative in the budgetary period 2021-2027, where they remain as ambitious as before. They intend to co-develop the European Universities Initiative in a bottom up manner, as they have done from the start of this initiative. They are consulting at the technical level with representatives of Member States, umbrella stakeholder organisations and the coordinators of European Universities. The outputs of the EUniQ project can be taken on board in this exercise on the future of the European Universities.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-8658-2021-INIT/en/pdf>



To further develop the quality assurance of European Universities, this topic, should be supported by the European Commission and aided through peer learning in the Bologna process, e.g. through the BFUG Peer Support Group on QA. European organisations for QA agencies (ENQA, EQAR), students (ESU), higher education institutions (EUA, EURASHE) and the NARIC Network all have an important role to play in supporting the implementation of the European Framework and increasing the awareness among its stakeholders.