

ECA Discussion Paper

European universities initiative – considerations regarding quality and quality assurance

INTRODUCTION

The European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education¹ (ECA) is an association of 17 recognized accreditation and quality assurance agencies (QAA) in Europe.

Since 2003, ECA has been part of the construction of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), through its vision to act as an internationally acknowledged driver of innovation in accreditation and quality assurance in higher education.

Facing the evolution of Higher education and Quality assurance (QA) landscapes, ECA believes that quality should play a key role within the European University initiative.

At the 2017 Gothenburg Summit, EU leaders outlined a vision for increasing policy attention in Europe to education and culture. One of the initiatives to take forward was '...strengthening 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 universities²'

Considering the opportunities and challenges that this initiative raises, ECA member agencies have worked within a working group to draft this Paper, that was adopted by the Board (date) and ECA General Assembly (date).

The aim of the paper is to launch a discussion about QA in the framework of the European universities initiative, a topic that certainly deserves attention. The target is both policy and implementation-oriented and practical: raising awareness on the QA dimension among European member states, European institutions and policy makers is crucial. At the same time, institutions have primary responsibility for QA and will have to cope with this new context. ECA Quality assurance agencies are ready to jointly contribute to the discussion on QA of European universities.

European universities as chance and opportunity:

The European Universities initiative is a promising pan-European idea to strengthen the global position of the European Higher Education Area and the European Research Area. Strong political and institutional support for further developing existing strategic partnerships among higher education institutions and fostering development of new ones will allow for setting more ambitious and future-oriented goals.

The European Universities initiative entails great opportunities for developing quality of education. Increased international cooperation between closely-related higher education institutions spread

¹ <http://ecahe.eu/>

² https://ec.europa.eu/education/education-in-the-eu/european-education-area/european-universities-initiative_en

around the European Higher Education Area is a way to enhance international and intercultural competencies of their faculty and staff members. This will subsequently create a unique environment for developing and strengthening those skills and competencies among the students. This would be facilitated by establishing closer and as well as interdisciplinary connections, and synergies between education, research and innovation. Joining their strengths, these universities will also be able to jointly develop their research strategies, be more visible and attractive.

As mentioned in the Council conclusions on moving towards a vision of a European Education Area³ (2018/C 195/04), these bottom-up networks “could play a flagship role”, with “the potential to significantly enhance mobility and foster high quality and excellence in education and research, by strengthening the link between teaching, research and innovation and knowledge transfer, by demonstrating the benefits of multilingual learning, the recognition of qualifications and by developing joint education and research programmes and projects”.

Close and trust-based links among the individual higher education institutions creating a European University will also create new chances for development of more innovative and cutting-edge joint programmes. Moreover, many administrative obstacles, which joint programmes currently face, might be removed by a strong synergy-oriented partnership and the sharing of good practices and experience at the institutional level.

ECA: bridging the challenges of QA

In the last decades, with the creation of the EHEA, institutions and agencies faced several challenges and have always moved forward in finding innovative solutions to them. In fact, ECA was born out of the need experienced by several agencies regarding mutual recognition of accreditation decisions. Already in the past, ECA has contributed to overcoming quality assurance challenges caused by complex educational structures such as Joint Programmes and the need of mutual recognition.

Mutual recognition is a challenge that key players in the field have tried to solve. And it is obvious that challenge of and need for recognition of degrees will increase with the advent of European universities. ECA has always promoted mutual recognition of QA results. In fact, based on previous experiences built on mutual trust and transparency, in 2010 ECA members launched the Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes (MULTRA⁴). The purpose of MULTRA is to simplify the accreditation and recognition of joint programmes and degrees awarded and to provide an efficient way to expand mutual recognition to more European Higher Education Area countries. It enables joint programmes to be assessed by one quality assurance/accreditation agency, whilst meeting all relevant legal outcomes, such as accreditation decisions, in all the relevant higher education systems.

Nevertheless, the issue of recognition at national level is an obstacle that still requires attention and it might be more effective to develop one QA framework that can be used by all agencies facilitating mutual recognition.

With respect to Joint Programmes, the TEAM II project (2008–2010), aimed at developing a common methodology for their quality assurance. Some of the project outcomes have been publications

³ [https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018XG0607\(01\)&from=EN](https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52018XG0607(01)&from=EN)

⁴ <http://ecahe.eu/home/about/eca-documents/mutual-recognition-agreements/>

clarifying basic terms and problems in this area⁵. In TEAM II, ECA developed and tested the initial idea of a single accreditation procedure for Joint Programmes, based on a core common methodology⁶. The JOQAR project (2010 – 2013) explored how to ease the accreditation and recognition of Joint Programmes. With 14 project partners, including four recognition bodies, it led to the refinement of the methodology for single review procedures and the dissemination of good practices for recognizing Joint degrees and created valuable input that fed into the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes.

ECA has also paid attention to procedural and informational challenges by providing operational and tactical support to higher education institutions, agencies, and other relevant stakeholders, for example with the ImpEA project⁷ (“Facilitating Implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes”), but also with the Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation⁸ (CeQuInt project). One of the outputs of the ImpEA project being the (pilot) accreditation procedures based on the European Approach framework and its methodology, which aim at increasing the number of practical examples and good practices. A dedicated webpage on “Joint Programmes” presents this expertise on the ECA website⁹.

With CeQuInt, quality assurance agencies have created their own framework to assess and award the quality of internationalisation at programme- or at institutional level. This has been achieved via international cooperation, experts training and dedicated methodology. These projects have contributed to the experience of ECA in that field.

ECA considerations

The European Universities initiative creates substantial opportunities to increase the quality of education, research and innovation in the context of the European Higher Education Area and European Research Area. Therefore, the European Consortium for Accreditation in Higher Education supports the idea to create European Universities, whilst underlining the need to address inherent challenges early on to remove imminent as well as mid- and long-term obstacles stemming from quality assurance and development.

In the implementation of the European Universities initiative the following issues should be considered:

1. TOOLS & METHODS

When developing quality assurance procedures for European Universities, **existing quality assurance tools, and methods should be explored**. This should include the outcomes of the ECA members’ projects and initiatives like: JOQAR (Joint Programmes: Quality Assurance and Recognition of degrees awarded), CeQuInt (Certificate for Quality in Internationalisation), ImpEA (Facilitating implementation of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes) and MULTRA (Multilateral Agreement on the Mutual Recognition of Accreditation Results regarding Joint Programmes).

⁵ http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Joint_programmes:Too_many_cooks_in_the_kitchen

⁶ [http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/How_to_assess_and_accredit_joint_programmes_in_Europe_\(2010\)](http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/How_to_assess_and_accredit_joint_programmes_in_Europe_(2010))

⁷ <http://ecahe.eu/launching-impea-project/> and also <http://impea.online/>

⁸ <http://ecahe.eu/home/internationalisation-platform/certification/>

⁹ http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Portal:Joint_programmes

2. ACTORS

The expertise, the added value and the professionalism of the QAA already operating in the field, including the knowledge achieved by ECA regarding QA of Joint Programmes¹⁰, should be recognized and serve as a basis to explore new possibilities of cooperation, like the ImpEA project (Facilitating implementation of the European Approach for quality assurance of Joint Programmes¹¹). Furthermore, it should be noted that ECA has already initiated capacity building activities through its trainings regarding the European Approach, Cequint, etc., not only for QAA staff but also for HEIs.

3. PROCEDURE

A new strategy-oriented quality assurance procedure tailored for European Universities should be developed, in order to reflect, assess and support the innovative structure of this initiative. Based on the experience of the European Approach, the new framework should emphasize and focus on the synergies of the assessed consortia, their added value, jointness and innovativeness. This will also require training a new type of quality assurance experts equipped with the knowledge, skills and competencies necessary for the new type of quality assurance procedure.

Based on the successful examples of similar previous initiatives, ECA considers it necessary to tackle, at an early stage, the possible challenges to efficient implementation of the European Universities initiative. The quality assurance for European Universities should be built on the diversity of HE systems in a collaborative approach, taking existing structures and networks into account. The newly created structures of European Universities will continue and further develop existing structures of previous cooperation between HEIs. In the same line, ECA as a backbone of diversity and cooperation in quality assurance, considers contributing to the success of the European Universities initiative as one of its key priorities.

¹⁰ http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/Joint_programmes: Too many cooks in the kitchen and [http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/How_to_assess_and_accredit_joint_programmes_in_Europe_\(2010\)](http://ecahe.eu/w/index.php/How_to_assess_and_accredit_joint_programmes_in_Europe_(2010))

¹¹ <http://ecahe.eu/launching-impea-project/> and also <http://impea.online/>