Quality Assurance in European Higher Education:

Using Polarities to Compare Sound Practices in External Quality Assurance in Select Systems

WORLD BANK GROUP
Education

Table of Contents

Tables

Figures

Abbreviations and Acronyms

ANOSR	National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania
AQ Austria	Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria
AQU	Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency
ARACIS/RAQAHE	Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
ASIIN	Accreditation Agency for Study Programs of Engineering, Information Science, Natural Sciences and Mathematics
BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
EC	European Commission
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQA	External Quality Assurance
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQF	European Qualifications Framework
ESU	European Students' Union
EU	European Union
EUA	European University Association
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
EVALAG	Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg
FCC	Federal Constitutional Court
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
GAC	German Accreditation Council
HEI(s)	Higher Education Institution(s)
HETAC	Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IQA	Internal Quality Assurance
IUQB	Irish Universities Quality Board
MoNE	Ministry of National Education
NFQ/NQF	National Framework of Qualifications | National Qualifications Framework
NIS	National Institute of Statistics
NOKUT	Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education
NVAO	Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders
QA	Quality Assurance
QMS	Quality Management System
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
UAS	Universities of Applied Sciences
UKA	Swedish Higher Education Authority
VET	Vocational Education and Training
WB	World Bank

Executive Summary

This study, "Quality Assurance in European Higher Education: Using Polarities to Compare Sound Practices in External Quality Assurance in Select Systems" was prepared by a World Bank team for the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS/RAQAHE).

Globally, there is remarkable diversity among students, institutions, and programs offered; however, HEIs tend to be grouped, compared, and ranked in many countries even though they share few traits to allow for accurate comparisons. The diversity in higher education systems "has implications for how […] we think about related policy issues."[1]

Quality assurance (QA) is a key area of higher education. It remains a relevant policy issue facing governments and stakeholders, particularly as higher education systems grow (rapidly) and evolve to respond to demands from employers, students, and graduates. While QA includes approaches, mechanisms, and reporting guidelines to evaluate higher education systems, each institution—whether public or private—is likely to have its own goals and strategic plans which may or may not align with a national vision (provided one exists).

The growth of higher education enrollment has contributed to adverse trends in higher education. The growth of higher education enrollment has incentivized fraudulent behavior around the world, including academic fraud and the rise of diploma mills. In some instances, students have paid fees believing that they would be enrolled in legitimate courses, and receive accredited degrees. Instead, in countries with weak QA systems, students may either gain no skills or fail to receive a diploma, despite having paid fees. In some cases, students received fake diplomas or face the risk of their institution closing. There are certainly other cases where students were complicit in fraud, knowingly paying fees to obtain fraudulent degrees.

The growth of student populations has also contributed to an increase in the number of HEIs providing a low quality of education. There is significant information asymmetry, not only regarding the quality of institutions and study programs offered, but also regarding the labor market outcomes of graduates. QA plays a role in supporting relevant study programs to make higher education more attuned to the demands of the labor market.

In 2015, quality assurance was identified as the "most important change driver" in European higher education in the preceding 15 years.[2] Although the changes which resulted were attributed mainly to "system level changes and the introduction of external QA, the past decade has seen a gradual shift toward internal QA."[3]

Methodology of the study: The authors conducted a literature review and a review of institutional practices based on publicly available documents for QA agencies in selected European countries, the

[1] Smith, J. (2008). "Heterogeneity and Higher Education." Succeeding in College: What it Means and How to Make It Happen. New York: College Board, pp. 131-144.
[2] Sursock, A. (2015). "Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities," Brussels, Belgium: European University Association.
[3] Gover, A., and Loukkola, T. (2015). "Eureqa Moments!: Top Tips for Internal Quality Assurance," Brussels, Belgium: European University Association.

United States, Canada, and Australia. In addition to these reviews, independent QA experts from across the European Union and other comparative contexts were interviewed. The reviews and expert interviews helped to establish the foundations for defining reasonable criteria and to apply a framework for comparing the QA systems requested by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). Subsequently, the authors interviewed representatives of QA agencies from the selected countries, as well as representatives of European QA agencies. Representatives of two key student organizations—the National Alliance of Student Organizations in Romania (ANOSR) and the European Students' Union (ESU)—were also consulted.

Based on the research conducted, as well as the legislative and policy frameworks which guide QA in European countries, the team explored various frameworks to structure the criteria used for comparing the practices and systems in the study. The resulting framework is an approach known as Polarity Management. Polarity Management is a model and set of principles used to address ongoing, chronic issues which are unavoidable and unsolvable.[4] There is a significant competitive advantage for leaders, teams, and organizations able to distinguish between a problem to solve and a polarity to manage (and are effective at performing both).[5]

Polarities in Quality Assurance in Higher Education: There are several layers and components of QA which share equal importance, almost in a dual existence. For example, there is internal quality assurance and external quality assurance; study programs and institutions; as well as standards to achieve minimum goals and standards to strive for excellence or enhancement among HEIs. There is also the QA agency (or several QA agencies, such as the cases of Germany and Spain based on their respective legislative and policy frameworks) which is often independent; however, the agencies rely on financial endowments from their respective governments or Ministries. Given these elements, an approach known as Polarity Management was used to anchor the discussion and comparisons of the QA systems. Polarity pairs are used as criteria to compare how countries with sound practices in quality assurance manage key areas of QA.

Practices in Quality Assurance in European Higher Education: This section compares sound practices in quality assurance in selected European higher education systems, with an underlying focus on external QA practices which ARACIS should explore. ARACIS and independent QA experts selected the systems compared in this study. The comparisons are presented within the framework of identifying practices which emerged from the QA agencies' management of polarities in their respective country contexts. The polarities included in this section are internal QA and external QA; program assurance and institutional assurance; as well as standards and enhancement. The systems and QA agencies included in this study were of interest to ARACIS, which led to their selection for informative and comparative purposes. Throughout the study, the  icon will indicate good practices in polarity management in European QA systems.

Legislative and Policy Frameworks: The QA systems included in this study developed into the strong systems they are because of key legislative and policy frameworks. These frameworks introduced a combination of reforms which addressed the higher education sector, HEIs, and/or quality assurance. In some of the systems, HEIs merged, QA agencies merged, or assurance procedures were restructured.

[4] Johnson, B. (1998). "Polarity Management: A Summary Introduction," Polarity Management Associates.
[5] *Id.*

Many of the legislative frameworks were adopted or amended in recent years to align more closely with the standards and expectations of the European community. In addition to the legislative frameworks, there are several policy frameworks to guide the direction of the higher education sector and quality assurance in the medium- and long-term. Presently, additional frameworks are being discussed in the countries included in this study, which may either nullify or supplement existing frameworks (if the former become effective). It is worth reiterating that good practices cited in the systems included in this study may also be affected by the implementation of new legislative and policy frameworks. As such, the practices included in this study are likely to evolve if legislative frameworks are passed, amended, or repealed.

Introduction

Quality, in almost any context, provides a sense of relief. Consumers and users of a product or service, having determined that its quality meets their implied standards and provides value, tend to be satisfied. Similarly, producers and sellers feel relieved that the quality of their offerings satisfy their users. In higher education, particularly in a rapidly changing and knowledge-driven world, quality is necessary for institutions to continue functioning in countries where market forces play a strong role.

Quality is not a static requirement, however. Quality is aspirational. Once quality is achieved, it must be actively sustained *and* improved. Decision-makers use systems and various instruments at their disposal to safeguard quality in various fields. In higher education, this ongoing process to ensure safeguards is referred to as *quality assurance* (QA).

In 2015, quality assurance was identified as the "most important change driver" in European higher education in the preceding 15 years.[6] Although the changes which resulted were attributed mainly to "system level changes and the introduction of external QA, the past decade has seen a gradual shift toward internal QA."[7] QA helps to insulate HEIs from being subject to debate in adverse fiscal environments linked to national budgets, which threatens the availability of resources needed to achieve their respective missions. QA helps to establish a clear understanding that HEIs are achieving their objectives. QA can also be a driver for HEIs to achieve excellence in higher education.[8] An institution's pursuit of excellence relates to external and international demands of the institution. QA is sometimes perceived as a punitive system for the imperfections in a country's higher education system.

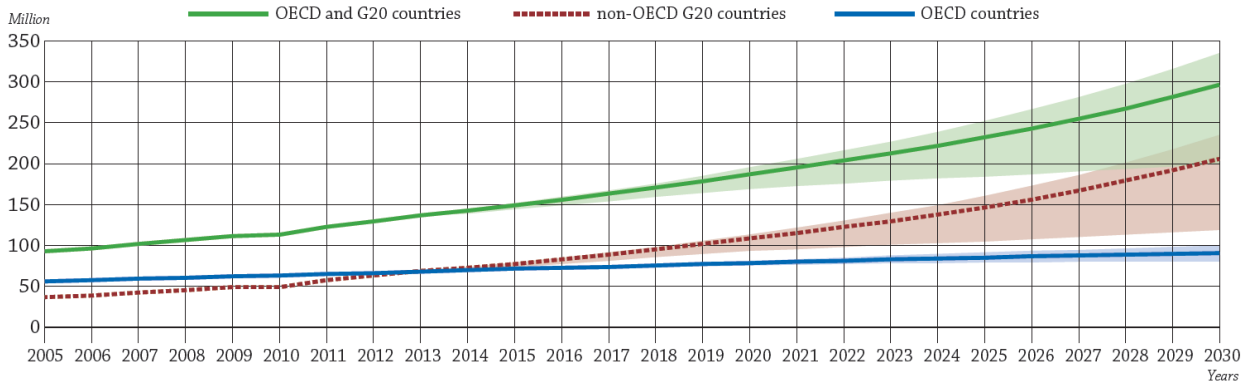
Higher education institutions (HEIs)–whether public or private–are central to the quality assurance process. HEIs have existed for centuries. In recent decades, however, the role of HEIs has arguably evolved more rapidly than in the preceding generations. The evolving role of HEIs is evident in the rapid expansion of enrolment rates over the past 50 years.

Higher education—acquired from either public or private HEIs—has become one pathway for individuals who seek to earn higher wages through diplomas. These diplomas tend to signal to employers the readiness of a prospective hire. Higher education also provides training throughout a course of study which previously was provided to individuals on the job.[9] The fall of communism, which removed constraints on institutional autonomy across many Eastern European countries, also accounts for the rapid increase in enrolment. Institutions offering higher education programs increased enrolments and expanded program offerings to keep pace with the demand for higher education. One previous estimate suggested that the projected global demand for higher education could reach 263 million students by

[6] Sursock, A. (2015). "Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities," Brussels, Belgium: European University Association.
[7] Gover, A., and Loukkola, T. (2015). "Eureqa Moments!: Top Tips for Internal Quality Assurance," Brussels, Belgium: European University Association.
[8] Ryan, P. (2015). "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: A Review of Literature." Higher Learning Research Communications, Vol. 5, No. 4.
[9] Hallak, J. and Poisson, M. (2007). "Academic fraud, accreditation and quality assurance: learning from the past and challenges for the future." Report: Higher Education in the World 2007: Accreditation for Quality Assurance: What is at Stake?"

2025[10]–an increase of 163 percent since 2000; a 25-year period. Among OECD and G20 countries, estimates suggest that the number of individuals holding a tertiary education qualification among 25-34 year olds is expected to rise to 300 million people by 2030, compared to 137 million in 2013. (Figure 1). At the policy level, quality assurance helps to manage the (ongoing) expansion of higher education globally by ensuring that students are accessing recognized programs when they enroll at HEIs; however, employers have been shifting their hiring strategies, transitioning from recruiting graduates based on degrees to recruitment based on skills, potential, and talent.[11] This transition may prompt changes in the quality assurance frameworks in various countries.

Figure 1. Projections of the number of 25-34 year-olds with tertiary education, 2005-2030



Source: OECD (2015). "Education Indicators in Focus;" OECD, UNESCO, and National Statistics websites for Argentina, China, India, Indonesia, Saudi Arabia and South Africa.
Note: Figures are estimates based on available data. Population estimates are based on OECD's annual population projections. ARACIS, *Methodology for External Evaluation,* http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Proceduri/Methodology_for_External_Evaluation.pdf (last visited December 18, 2017).

Methodology

This section outlines the methodology used to prepare the study. To prepare this study, the authors used a multipronged approach. The authors conducted a literature review and a review of institutional practices based on publicly available documents for QA agencies around the world. In addition to these reviews, independent QA experts from across the European Union and other comparative contexts were interviewed. The reviews and expert interviews helped to establish the foundations for defining reasonable criteria and to apply a framework for comparing the QA systems requested by the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). Subsequently, the authors interviewed representatives of QA agencies from the selected countries, as well as representatives of European QA agencies. A list of the agency teams interviewed—both national and regional—as well as the interview guide are included as Annexes.

[10] Karaim, R. (2011). "Expanding Higher Education." CQ Global Researcher, 5(22), 525–572.
[11] European Commission, European Political Strategy Centre, *10 Trends Transforming Education As We Know It,* https://ec.europa.eu/epsc/sites/epsc/files/epsc_-_10_trends_transforming_education_as_we_know_it.pdf (last visited December 19, 2017).

Rationale and objective

The objective of this study is to support ARACIS' efforts to enhance quality assurance in the higher education system in Romania. The National Strategy for Tertiary Education in Romania 2015-2020 was developed in collaboration with the World Bank through advisory services. The Strategy includes a number of activities for promoting the establishment of high quality, adaptive academic programs to implement a more transparent assessment and quality assurance system. This study was undertaken to contribute toward ARACIS' efforts to implement a more transparent QA system based on policies and lessons from European peers.

Given the reforms being implemented in European countries in the context of QA in higher education, this study explores practices which ARACIS can emulate to improve Romania's QA system. It compares existing QA models in higher education, focused mainly on select European systems.

Literature Review

Quality, and the derivative term, quality assurance, "[…] in higher education is a term that is highly contested, considerably vague and highly contextual."[12] It is quite a challenge—evident in the existing literature—to define *quality assurance* without reusing the word *quality* in the definition. Perhaps, that challenge summarizes the ongoing struggle facing some higher education systems which attempt to implement QA mechanisms. While university students and their families may not be deeply familiar with the nuances of QA in their specific countries, there is an implied understanding of the concept when referring to an institution as a "good university," or a department's offerings as a "good program."

QA is not an objective or static measure. For example, in some countries, it is perceived—incorrectly—as a measurement approach, which requires such calculations as the number square meters per student or the number of books in the library to provide responses periodically for a list of indicators. It is important that countries seeking to establish stronger QA systems, design systems that can adapt to the different (and evolving) purposes of quality assurance. Given the stakeholders involved in higher education, the range of programs offered, and other factors, it is unlikely that the identified purpose remains the same in perpetuity for any QA agency nor the HEIs.

Several studies and publications emerging from Europe's regional QA bodies, reiterate the broad purposes of quality assurance consistently, despite disagreement on the number of these purposes. Unfortunately, the same literature fails to ensure consistency in the terminology of quality assurance. Specifically, QA literature often excludes fundamental definitions for internal and external QA, as well as definitions for procedures such as assessment, review, audit, evaluation, and accreditation. While such an approach to define concepts in each study is repetitive, it is unclear why QA experts continue to list the broad purposes of QA, yet fail to define relevant concepts in their publications.

Key features emerged from comparing structures of QA systems in European countries. The systems compared in this study were identified by ARACIS as particularly relevant for the Romanian sector and have characteristics recognized by practitioners and experts in higher education as being hallmarks of

[12] Lim, F. C. B. (2009). "Education Hub at a Crossroads: The Development of Quality Assurance as a Competitive Tool for Singapore's private tertiary education", Quality Assurance in Education, Vol. 17 Issue: 1, pp.79-9.

strong QA systems. In most of the countries included in this study, there is a single, autonomous agency tasked with implementing QA procedures. In two of the systems—Germany and Spain—there are several QA agencies operating. Features of these systems are also cited in the literature as being good practices in QA.

Applied Methodologies

The overarching research question for the study focused on the following question: How do QA agencies in Europe manage their external QA system in the context of their legislative frameworks? Several questions emerged throughout the process based on guidance from independent (international) QA experts prior to the interviews conducted with representatives of the QA agencies included in the study, and in parallel with research of the respective systems. Research of the QA systems explored several resources.

First, the WB team researched the country context for each system's higher education sector included in the study. This research focused on documents prepared by the national and/or regional QA agency/agencies such as analytical works, annual reports and self-assessment reports. The latter reports were often prepared as part of a review conducted by ENQA. In terms of the sector-specific research, the WB team reviewed documents prepared for quality procedures conducted by the QA agency. These documents include institutional reviews of universities and HEIs. Research into the country context included a review of the legislative frameworks.

Next, independent (international) QA experts were interviewed. The experts interviewed were Rick Hopper (USA), María-José Lemaitre (Chile), and Ellen Hazelkorn (Ireland). These interviews helped to shape the guides prepared for interviews with representatives of the QA agencies selected for the study. Annex 1 includes the full list of QA agency representatives interviewed for this study. On-site interviews were conducted with representatives from the following quality assurance agencies:

- **AQ Austria:** The Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria based in Vienna, Austria;
- **AQU:** The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency based in Barcelona, Spain;
- **NOKUT:** The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education based in Oslo, Norway;
- **NVAO:** The Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders based in the Hague, the Netherlands;
- **QQI:** Quality and Qualifications Ireland based in Dublin, Ireland;
- **UKA:** The Swedish Higher Education Authority based in Stockholm, Sweden;

Virtual interviews were conducted with representatives from the following agencies:

- **ASIIN:** The Accreditation Agency for Study Programs of Engineering, Information Science, Natural Sciences and Mathematics based in Düsseldorf, Germany;
- **EVALAG:** Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg based in Mannheim, Germany;

Finally, the WB team researched frameworks and structures to compare the QA systems. There are several aspects of QA which share equal importance, almost in a dual existence. For example, there is internal quality assurance and external quality assurance; programs and institutions; as well as standards to achieve minimum goals and standards to strive for excellence or enhancement among HEIs. Given these elements, the team used an approach known as Polarity Management to anchor the discussion and comparisons of the QA systems. The Polarity Management approach is discussed throughout the study.

Limitations of the study

This study focused on selected QA systems in Europe. The terms of reference for the World Bank's advisory services with ARACIS cites a study on best practices. However, at the request of ARACIS, specific systems were included. As a result, the study focuses on good practices in these selected QA systems in Europe.

As noted in the *Terminology* section which follows, there are fundamental differences across systems in terms of the definitions used by agencies tasked with conducting QA procedures. The World Bank team identified specific definitions in each country context and system to allow for reasonable comparisons to be made.

Finally, since the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), there have been several reforms in European higher education systems in the context of QA. There have also been legislative reforms to consolidate QA agencies and their functions. While there have been several analyses regarding the impact of QA systems globally (and in Europe), few attempts have been made to analyze revamped European QA systems. As a result, although the impact of quality assurance is not a new research area, in the context of QA reforms in Europe, there is a shortage of research which explores the impact of QA in the post-reform period.

Terminology

Comparing practices across selected QA systems and agencies in Europe requires an understanding of quality assurance procedures performed by each agency. There are several procedures which are standard across systems; however, there is nuance in the frequency of QA procedures performed, the level at which a procedure is performed i.e. program level and/or institutional level, and the definition of the procedure, among other aspects. Table 1 below serves as a reference to the QA procedures performed by the QA agencies included in this study.

Table 1. Quality assurance procedures in selected European countries

Country	Quality Assurance Procedure	Definition
Austria	Accreditation	*Private universities and Universities of Applied Sciences require both institutional accreditation and program accreditation as a prerequisite for state recognition; Accreditation is not required for public universities*
	Audit	*Certifies that an HEI's internal quality management system (QMS) is effective and properly organized and supports continued improvement of that QMS*
Germany	Accreditation	***At program level**, accreditation confirms that the program meets certain requirements – the quality criteria that apply to a certain seal* ***At system or institution level**, accreditation offers a quality seal for an education institution or its quality management system*

Country	Quality Assurance Procedure	Definition
Germany (continued)	Audit	*Quality management audit of HEIs aim to obtain an unbiased assessment of the current state of their QA and quality management*
	Evaluation	*Relates to systematic assessment of teaching, research, services or entire organizational units of HEIs, as well as of other academic establishments*
	Certification	***At program level**, certification validates and confirms that the intended qualification goals and the desired competence profile can be achieved, and determines the competences level according to the German Qualifications Framework* ***At institution level**, certification validates and confirms that the institution has established effective processes and instruments for the QA of their offers*
Ireland	Review	*Ensures that the QA procedures of HEIs are effective; this involves establishing and promoting frameworks for the enhancement of QA*
	Validation	*Regulatory process that determines whether a QQI (Quality and Qualifications Ireland) award can be offered in respect of a provider's program of education and training*
	Initial validation	*Independent HEIs who wish to access QQI awards for the first time must undergo a single procedure, with two stages, to ensure a program is recognized by QQI and leads to an award of QQI; this also involves approval of QA capacity and procedures and validation of its first program*
	Revalidation	*Process of validating a program that has emerged or evolved from a program that had been previously validated (typically five years); provides an opportunity to substantially update and modify the original program*
	Programmatic review	*Revalidation of programs is normally based on an independent evaluation report arranged by the provider in accordance with its approved QA procedures and with **terms of reference** agreed in advance with QQI for those programs*
The Netherlands	Initial accreditation	*Assessment of new programs (initial accreditation) involves an ex-ante assessment, focused on plans, pre-conditions, and, wherever applicable, achieved quality*
	Accreditation	*The assessment of existing programs focuses on the quality achieved; the program must demonstrate that its educational practice meets the standards*
	Audit	*Periodic, external, and independent assessment of the QA in place at an institution; internal QA comprises both the quality culture and the internal QA system of an institution*
Norway	Self-accreditation	*Universities are authorized to accredit new study programs at all levels of higher education (bachelor, master, and PhD). Specialized university institutions and accredited university colleges may also accredit study programs at the bachelor's degree level, in addition to all levels in subjects in which they have been granted the right to award doctoral degrees*

Country	Quality Assurance Procedure	Definition
Norway (continued)	Accreditation	*Ensures that all new study programs meet national quality requirements; NOKUT (Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education) grants accreditation to study programs and institutions*
	Supervision	*Covers study programs, institutions' QA practices and institutional accreditation*
	Accreditation revision	*A supervisory process that may result in revocation of accreditation*
	Periodic review	*Mandatory review taking place every eight years*
Romania	External evaluation for provisional authorization/ accreditation	*Aims to certify compliance of a study program or HEI with pre-determined minimum performance indicators*
	Periodic external evaluation (periodic review)	*Accredited study programs and HEIs are subject to periodic external evaluation of institutional QA mechanisms and compliance with the ESG every five years*
Spain	Program review	*Study programs in Catalonia must follow the procedures of validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring, modification, and accreditation, with the purpose of ensuring QA and continuous enhancement of study programs*
	Ex-ante accreditation (validation)	*Any new study program must undergo ex-ante accreditation (validation) prior to introduction*
	Monitoring	*Registered study programs are monitored using available public information until they are reviewed for accreditation (renewal); monitoring is performed at least every two years for BA and MA degrees, and every three years for PhD degrees*
	Modification	*Minor changes can be made to improve study programs as a result of the monitoring process; substantial modifications that alter the structure, nature, or objectives of a study program require approval*
	Accreditation	*Establishes that the study program is delivered according to the validation process (ex-ante accreditation); recognized study programs must undergo accreditation every six years in the case of BA and PhD degrees, and every four years in the case of MA degrees*
Sweden	Institutional review	*Aims to confirm that the QA processes ensure high quality courses and programs and helps to enhance the quality of HEIs*
	Program evaluation	*Aims to monitor the programs' outcomes and to contribute to HEI's quality improvements for the reviewed programs*
	Appraisal of applications for degree-awarding powers	*Examines whether HEIs meet the necessary prerequisites for students to be able to achieve the qualitative targets of a degree program*
	Thematic evaluation	*Aims to provide a better understanding and national comparisons of how various HEIs work and of achieved results in the examined theme*

Source: World Bank authors based on the websites of the QA agencies and respective Ministries.

In subsequent sections, the phrases “program assurance” and “institutional assurance” are used to reference quality assurance procedures to maintain consistency across systems and allow for comparisons. The specific procedure will be included in parentheses along with the phrases “program assurance” and/or “institutional assurance” where applicable. For example, if the QA procedure is an audit, the phrases “program (audit) assurance” and “institutional (audit) assurance” are used.

Quality Assurance in Romanian Higher Education

The Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS)

ARACIS was established in 2005, based on the Government Emergency Ordinance no. 75/2005 on Quality Assurance in Education, and the subsequent law (Law no. 87/2006). The agency assumed the responsibilities of the National Council for Academic Evaluation and Assessment (CNEEA, 1993-2005) and shifted its focus to accreditation activity. The law provides the framework of quality assurance in Romanian higher education, in accordance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The provisions of this guidance also helped to strengthen the independence of the agency.

ARACIS aims to ensure quality standards for study programs and higher education qualifications, and to support continuous improvement of the HEIs quality management. ARACIS provides external quality evaluation of Romanian HEIs, which includes 48 public HEIs, 7 military institutions, 37 private accredited HEIs, and 10 private HEIs with temporary authorization. The total enrolment in Romanian HEIS in 2017 amounted to approximately 532,000 students.[13] Public HEIs accounted for roughly 86 percent of this enrolment.

Since 2009, ARACIS has been a full member of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). An external evaluation of ARACIS is conducted every five years. Currently, ARACIS is applying to renew its membership (for the second time).

ARACIS is a member of several other international QA associations: the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (CEENQA), the European Network for Accreditation of Engineering Education (ENAEE), the European Quality Assurance Network for Informatics Education (EQANIE), and the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE). ARACIS has also been registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) since 2009. In 2012, ARACIS received authorization to award the EUR-ACE certification to engineering study programs.

ARACIS has developed an Internal Quality Assurance Manual of Procedures to explain its internal QA system and the administrative aspects of activities. Internal feedback is also very important, and there are periodical meetings with staff and stakeholders. The agency has established clear mechanisms to avoid conflict of interest situations. The Code of Ethics has been also revised to include a new “independence” clause for evaluators.

[13] National Institute of Statistics (2017).

Quality Assurance Activities of ARACIS

ARACIS has three main areas of focus in the context of external QA activities. ARACIS conducts external evaluations to accredit study programs and HEIs. ARACIS also conducts periodic external evaluations (periodic reviews) of accredited study programs and HEIs. According to the Law of National Education no. 1/2011, these evaluations may be performed by any agency registered in EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register in Higher Education). According to Romania's laws, if ARACIS is removed from EQAR, it shall legally cease activity. This constraint, imposed in national regulation, is specific only to Romania and reflects a low level of trust and confidence in a key national agency in the context of higher education. ARACIS' other QA activities include overall higher education system evaluations, external evaluations of teaching staff training departments, and external evaluations of distance learning and part-time programs.

Higher education system evaluations: ARACIS is monitoring quality in higher education, prepares and publishes reports and studies, for example the Quality Barometer.

External evaluation of teaching staff training departments: ensures the quality of initial teacher training by evaluating the teaching staff training departments. The specific guide provides indicators and practices for quality assurance and evaluation at the level of teaching staff training departments.

External evaluation of distance learning and part-time programs: consists of a self-evaluation report prepared by the HEI, an external evaluation carried out by ARACIS, and implementation of the recommendations resulting from these evaluations. HEIs can apply for authorization or accreditation of distance learning and part-time programs only for the specializations that have been authorized or accredited for regular programs.

ARACIS' external evaluation procedures, criteria, standards, and performance indicators are defined in a methodology and accompanying guides.[14] The guides provide relevant information on quality evaluation procedures, as well as evaluations of learning outcomes. The evaluation process includes four components:

(i) A *self-evaluation report*: The self-evaluation report comprises an analytical component which identifies the strengths and weaknesses, successes, threats, uncertainties of quality assurance, and future improvement measures. The report also includes supporting documents and data to provide evidence for the report's assertions. According to the law, the quality dimensions to be taken into account are institutional capacity, educational effectiveness, and quality management;

(ii) An *external evaluation:* the evaluation is conducted by a panel of independent experts selected from ARACIS' register of external evaluators. Site-visits are mandatory, and help evaluators to verify compliance with the criteria and quality standards. An external evaluation report is prepared by the evaluators.

[14] ARACIS, *Methodology for External Evaluation,* http://www.aracis.ro/fileadmin/ARACIS/Proceduri/Methodology_for_External_Evaluation.pdf (last visited December 18, 2017); ARACIS, *Quality Evaluation Activities Guide For University Study Programs and for Higher Education Institutions: Part I, Part II, Part III, and Part IV* (last visited December 18, 2017);

(iii) *Preparation and publication of the report, including follow-up procedure*. The report includes decisions, conclusions, and recommendations. For example, in the case of temporary authorization and accreditation, the main decision is whether to grant the status. If the recommendations advise for a supplemental implementation period, an implementation plan should be prepared, which should include specific provisions and deadlines. In evaluations where the highest degree of confidence is awarded to a study program or HEI, the follow-up procedure requires a short site-visit after three years.

(iv) *Appeal procedure*. After the publication of the evaluation report, HEIs have the right to submit a written appeal within two weeks. In this case, ARACIS' Executive Board reviews the report and invites university representatives to a clarification discussion.

According to Romanian Law no. 87/2006, accreditation is a legal procedure which includes two key steps: provisional authorization and accreditation. If an education provider intends to establish a new HEI or study program, corresponding to a specific qualification, the education provider needs to undertake a process of external evaluation. This process allows for provisional authorization, and then for accreditation, after successfully operating the study program for a number of years. For example, for accreditation of study programs at the bachelor degree level, the interval between the graduation of the first cohort of students and the application for accreditation of the study program should not exceed two years; while accreditation of HEIs can be undertaken after the accreditation of three study programs.

External evaluation for accreditation of study programs: Program accreditation aims to certify compliance of a study program with pre-determined minimum performance indicators. The evaluation is based on the HEI's self-evaluation report and site-visit results. The experts panel presents the site-visit results to the permanent specialty commission[15] for the respective study domain. The role of the commission is particularly important in ensuring compliance with the regulations and consistency of decisions. The report is submitted to the Accreditation Department for validation of procedures, and then to the ARACIS Council. The Council verifies the report and procedures and takes the final decision on accreditation of study program. The final decision is a "yes/no" type, either granting or not granting the right to function of a study program. The final decision is sent to the Ministry of National Education (MoNE) to prepare the Government Decision on accreditation of study program.

External evaluation for accreditation of HEIs (as an institution): Institutional accreditation aims to certify compliance of an HEI with pre-determined minimum performance indicators. The evaluation is based on the HEI's self-evaluation report and site-visit results. Additional experts might be consulted for specific study programs or fields. An HEI is informed by a comprehensive letter about the main conclusions and recommendations, and is given the possibility to react. The report is drafted by the expert panel's director, and the HEI's approval is published on ARACIS website. The review's conclusion is either "accreditation proposal" or "non-accreditation proposal", referring to an HEI's credibility to assure quality of study

[15] There are 15 permanent specialty commissions for the following domains: exact and natural sciences; humanities and theology; law; social, political and communication sciences; administrative, education and psychology sciences; economic sciences (two commissions); arts, architecture, urban planning and sports; agriculture, forestry and veterinary medicine; engineering sciences (two commissions); medical sciences; distance learning and part-time programs; institutional evaluation for management and financial activities; and the employers registry.

programs and management activities. The HEI has the possibility to appeal ARACIS' decision. The final decision is shared with the MoNE.

Periodic external evaluations (periodic reviews) of accredited study programs and HEIs: Both accredited study programs and HEIs are subject to periodic external evaluation of institutional quality assurance mechanisms and compliance with the ESG every five years.

External evaluation of accredited study programs: applies to bachelor and master levels of education. The evaluation is based on the HEI's self-evaluation report and site-visit results. The panel of experts presents the site-visit results to the permanent specialty commission for the respective study domain. The report is submitted to the Accreditation Department for validation of procedures, and then to the ARACIS Council. The Council verifies the report and procedures and takes the final decision. The final decision is sent to the MoNE.

There is an appeal procedure in place, which HEIs may use if their representatives are dissatisfied with the procedures or the decision. A new expert panel may be appointed to examine the appeal letter and perform additional evaluation, if needed. The final decision is validated by the ARACIS Council.

The result of the study program evaluations refers to the following three levels of confidence:

(1) confidence;
(2) limited confidence; and
(3) no confidence;

External evaluation of accredited HEIs: the experts panel consists of institutional evaluators, including a student representative and an international expert, as well as study program evaluators for at least 20% of HEI's accredited study programs. HEI is informed by a comprehensive letter about the findings and preliminary conclusions, and is given the possibility to react. The report is sent to the Department of external quality assurance evaluation for validation of procedures and drafting its own report. All the reports are presented to the ARACIS Council for their final decision. The final report, the decision, and the follow-up procedures are published on the ARACIS website. The decision is shared with the HEI and the MoNE.

The result of the HEI evaluations refers to the following four levels of confidence:

(1) high degree of confidence,
(2) confidence,
(3) limited degree of confidence, and
(4) lack of confidence.

ARACIS is currently developing a methodology for the accreditation and periodic evaluation of doctoral schools. In early 2018, the methodology will undergo stakeholder consultations and will also be piloted. At the completion of the consultations and the pilot phase, the methodology will be implemented.

Quality Assurance Reporting and Outcomes

ARACIS publishes the evaluation reports endorsed by the Council. It also publishes working documents, methodologies and guides, as well as brochures relevant to stakeholders. ARACIS also publishes annual

reports on its activity, including a self-assessment report, and conducts an analysis every three years on the quality of Romania's higher education system.

The appeal procedure is also published on ARACIS website: after the publication of the *Institutional evaluation report*, HEIs have the right to submit a written appeal against the agency within two weeks. In this case, the ARACIS Council's Executive Board reviews the report and invites university representatives to a clarification discussion.

Agency Independence

ARACIS is an autonomous public institution of national interest with legal status and financial autonomy. It is funded by evaluation fees paid by HEIs, and projects (both European and Romanian projects financed by European funds). Its independence is statutory. Its operational independence from HEIs and the Romanian government is guaranteed by official documents.

The Government, particularly the MoNE, has no direct institutional influence on decisions made by ARACIS regarding its approach, the external evaluation of study programs, institutional quality assurance, or the development of methodologies. The MoNE decides on accreditation only with advice provided by ARACIS. However, the MoNE is not allowed to modify any proposed methodology unilaterally.

ARACIS is led by a Council of 21 members—17 higher education professors, two student representatives, one employer representative, and one person who represents the unions in higher education. Individuals who hold official positions within the Presidency, the Government, Parliament, or a Rector position at an HEI, cannot serve as members of the ARACIS Council while employed in any of the aforementioned roles. This restriction aims to ensure the independence and transparency of the agency. According to the most recent ENQA report, the Council has achieved an improved representation of various subject domains and gender balance among the members.

Five members of the ARACIS Council form its Executive Board, which is responsible for daily management activities of the Agency. Two of the five members of the Executive Board, the President and Vice-president of the Council, are elected by their peers via a confidential/secret voting procedure. The other three members of the Executive Board are appointed by the President: two Department Directors, for Accreditation and External Quality Evaluation Departments, and a Secretary General. The technical and administrative staff comprise 46 individuals who are selected through a competitive process.

Applying a Framework for External Quality Assurance Systems: Polarity Management

Countries which have introduced effective quality assurance mechanisms in higher education continue to face challenges in the sector. The complexities of QA mean that ongoing efforts to improve QA systems are not without the need to balance multiple objectives and concerns from several stakeholder groups. As a result, it is not surprising that QA includes adversarial and complementary concepts. For example,

there is internal and external QA; there is program assurance and institutional assurance processes;[16] and there are minimum standards as well as standards focused on enhancement or improvement, to name a few key concepts.

An important primary concern in QA is the relationship between the quality assurance agency and higher education institutions. In many European countries, there is one agency responsible for quality assurance in higher education, and in others there are several agencies tasked with quality assurance in specific fields of study. Globally, many higher education sectors feature large institutions, specifically universities and colleges, which account for a disproportionate share of student enrolment as well as resources, and budget allocations (in the case of public institutions). These large institutions, with their leadership teams acting in concert, tend to exert significant influence on higher education policies and reforms in their respective countries. Smaller institutions in these sectors—determined by student enrollment and the share of public funding received—are often less influential in shaping higher education policies and reforms.

Box 1. Quality Assurance for which institutions?

Some countries have established QA systems to evaluate their private HEIs only. Students are less likely to be harmed in systems where QA mechanisms include private HEIs. In these systems, policymakers—through QA mechanisms—seek to reduce the risk borne by students.

It is important to note that countries which focus on private HEIs—to protect student consumers—in the QA process tend to ignore the performance of publicly-funded HEIs. There is a widely-held belief in many countries that the public HEIs are beyond scrutiny since students at these institutions do not pay for their education (other than ancillary out-of-pocket expenses). If the QA system is effective in protecting consumers sustainably—being fit for the intended purpose—then the QA system needs to adapt to address other challenges.

The relationship between any QA agency and its related HEIs is fraught with challenges centered on forced collaboration. Both sets of actors—the QA agency and the HEIs—are compelled to collaborate due to legislative or other policy guidelines. In many of the systems compared in this study, the QA agency is conferred with "veto power:" as a result of a QA procedure, the QA agency can recommend common remedial actions for an HEI which may include the need for the HEI to improve in certain areas and undergo additional QA procedures. In less common scenarios, programs offered by an HEI may be closed if the agency deems the results emerging from the HEI's efforts to improve are insufficient. In extreme cases, the agency's recommendations may lead to an HEI ceasing operations or merging with peer HEIs.

The systems compared in this study have considered the purpose of the QA agency and the HEIs in managing the polarities which are relevant to both sets of actors. As such, the framework which follows focuses on the dynamic between the QA agency and the HEIs: both actors rely on each other in the QA process.

[16] *Assurance* in this context includes *ex ante* and *ex post* accreditation for programs and institutions, as well as periodic audits and reviews.

Polarity Management in Quality Assurance

Each pair of concepts may be viewed as *polarities*. These areas of QA, in the context of polarity pairs, require reframing the discussion, transitioning from "either-or" thinking *at one point in time* to "both-and" thinking *over time*. This study frames the discussion of QA using the "Polarity Management" model.[17] Polarities are two ostensibly opposing ideas which can complement each other when applied in a balanced way. Polarity pairs will be used as criteria to compare how countries with sound practices in quality assurance manage key areas of QA.

Polarities are interdependent pairs of concepts which reciprocally support each other and need to be managed over time. Polarities are present in individuals, teams, organizations, and systems. They are unavoidable. Yet, in various settings, polarities are misdiagnosed, and addressed, as problems. It is important to note that polarities are different from problems. The former is a dynamic approach for recognizing and managing conflict i.e. an ongoing dilemma which may contain seemingly contrasting ideas. Problems, however, are often solvable i.e. a solution exists. When a polarity is identified incorrectly as a problem, a solution is often elusive since the stakeholder is searching for an answer to an unclear or misdiagnosed problem. As such, polarities can never be solved.

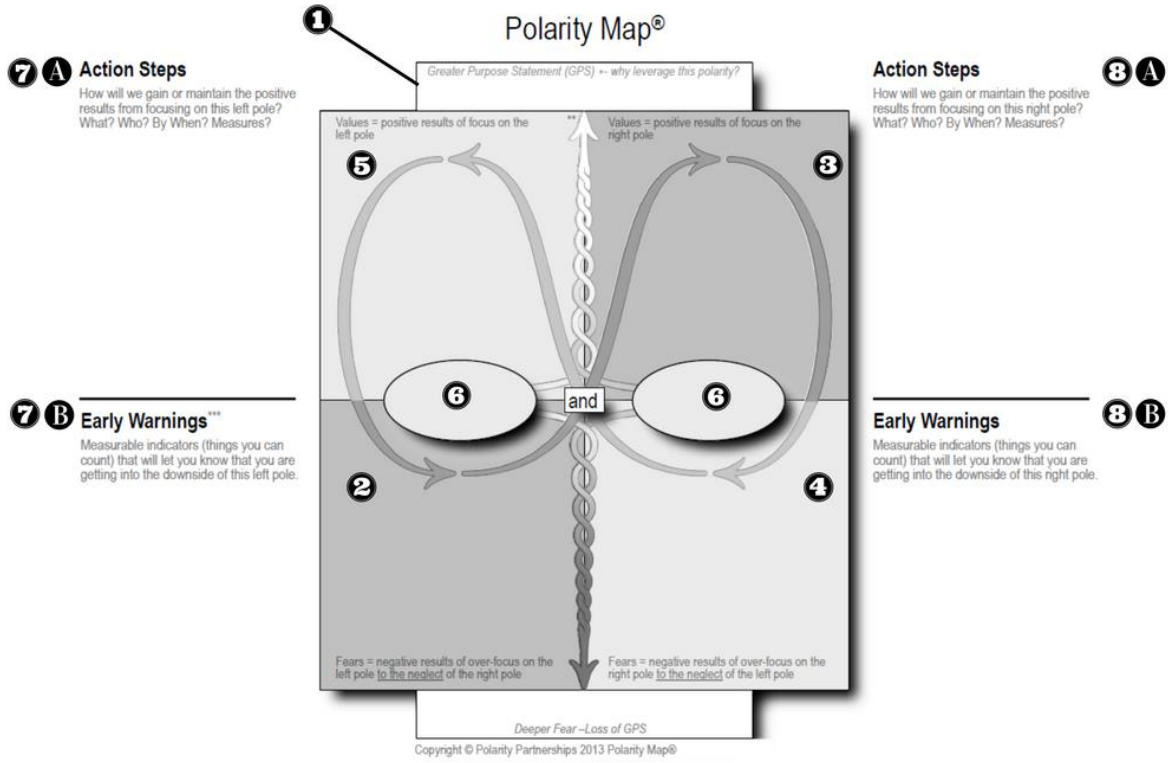
A Polarity Map helps to visualize the concept of polarities and "both-and" thinking. A Polarity Map contains the following elements which are numbered in Figure 2:

- (1) A greater purpose statement (GPS),
- (2)(3)(4)(5) Four quadrants: A Polarity Map has upper quadrants and lower quadrants, or an upside and a downside. The two upper quadrants, above the oval shapes, focus on positive outcomes when organizations focus on each pole in the polarity pair.[18] The two lower quadrants, below the oval shapes, focus on negative outcomes when organizations overemphasize one pole, and neglect the other pole.
- (6) and (6) Polarities (or poles). In each polarity pair, there are two poles: a left pole and a right pole. In practice, organizations that are able to manage polarities successfully, focus on sustaining positive outcomes of both poles *simultaneously* while minimizing the resources used to address the negative outcomes of the two poles.
- (7)(A) and (7)(B) Action Steps and Early Warnings for the left pole; and
- (8)(A) and (8)(B) Action Steps and Early Warnings for the right pole;

[17] The Polarity Management model was created by Barry Johnson. He is the creator of "The Polarity Map," and author of *Polarity Management: Identifying and Managing Unsolvable Problems.* See Johnson, B. (1998). "Polarity Management, A Summary Introduction," Polarity Management Associates; Polarity Thinking, Polarity Map, Polarity Management, and PACT (Polarity Approach to Continuity and Transformation) are registered trademarks of Polarity Partnerships, LLC.

[18] Individuals, stakeholders, teams, organizations, and communities can apply PACT in their respective settings. In this study, the focus is quality assurance agencies. Where applicable, the QA agency is referenced.

Figure 2. Polarity Map visualizing "Both-And" Thinking



Source: Polarity Partnerships, The Polarity Assessment™

In practice, a common example cited in primers on Polarity Management is the breathing cycle. Both inhaling and exhaling are needed. Inhaling brings oxygen. Exhaling releases carbon dioxide. Inhaling for too long creates a problem, however; so too does exhaling for too long. Inhaling and exhaling are polarities. There are negative or adverse effects from overemphasizing one aspect of the polarity pair. There are positive effects from focusing (without overemphasizing) each aspect of the polarity pair.

Summary of Selected Polarity Realities

Polarities are interdependent pairs for which "both-and" thinking is required. They show up in literature as polarities, dilemmas, paradoxes, or tensions.

"Both-and" thinking is an essential addition to "either-or" thinking. These two types of thinking are themselves an interdependent pair, a polarity.

Each pole has an upside and a downside. When we acknowledge the downside of our own pole, we are acknowledging the legitimate fears of the other side, thus opening dialogue about the portion of truth each side holds.

Polarities are unsolvable. The downside of one pole is often seen as a "problem" with the upside of the other pole as a "solution."

Seeing one upside as a solution leads to it being called a mistake later on. There are natural self-corrections in the ongoing oscillation between the two poles, but both are needed over time.

Source: Copyright Polarity Partnerships, LLC

There are lessons for Romania in the context of how countries with sound QA practices manage polarities in QA. Although the countries referenced in this study are widely recognized as having sound QA practices *today*, it is important to note that current strengths are not indicators of either future or past strengths. Various pressures on budgets, legislative frameworks, and community commitments—such as the ESG—are examples of factors which may affect QA practices in a country's higher education sector. Countries which have historically been cited for their strong QA systems in higher

education have been more adept at managing polarities.

The following section outlines three broad polarity pairs which are being managed successfully in several European countries. It is not an exhaustive list of polarities; however, these are the main polarities that exist in many of the mature QA systems found in Europe and from which several good practices emerge in how the QA agencies manage these polarities.

Polarities for Quality Assurance—Internal QA and External QA

In 2005, European Ministers—tasked with higher education in their respective countries—adopted the ESG, which guide quality assurance in higher education across Europe. Since then, the ESG have been revised "to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope."[19] The ESG were updated with this purpose in 2012, and adopted in 2015 "to provide a common framework for quality assurance in Europe."[20] The ESG include standards and guidelines for three key aspects of QA: internal quality assurance (Part 1 of the ESG); external quality assurance (Part 2); and quality assurance agencies (Part 3).

Polarities focused on quality assurance exist in the ESG. These polarities are internal QA and external QA. While this study has been prepared for ARACIS to focus on external QA practices, it is worth noting that a discussion of external QA also requires a focus on internal QA. Focusing on one aspect of QA, either internal QA or external QA, at the expense of the other often results in imbalances in the system.

The two aspects—internal and external QA—are interdependent, and both need to be managed in strong QA systems. Part 2 of the ESG confirms this interdependence in which Standard 2.1 states that "External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in part 1 of the ESG."[21] Internal and external QA polarities are included as criteria in comparing QA systems in this study.

In recent years, the focus of QA in Romanian higher education has centered on external QA procedures, and less on internal QA. Among Romanian HEIs with strong internal QA, the external QA process became redundant and repetitive; however, among Romanian HEIs with weak internal QA procedures, ARACIS provides an assessment function, rather than functions focused on control and audit. According to the ESG, the primary responsibility for QA rests with HEIs. As a result, there is a need to strengthen and balance both internal QA and external QA processes.

Polarities for External Quality Assurance—Program Assurance and Institutional Assurance

Accreditation procedures in the systems analyzed in this study are guided by the maturity of the respective higher education sectors as well as the prevailing legislative frameworks. In the various systems, accreditation is provided through ex ante program accreditation, institutional accreditation, or a combination of both approaches.

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[19] Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). (2015). Brussels, Belgium.
[20] EQUIP Project (2016), "Comparative Analysis of the ESG 2015 and ESG 2005," Brussels, Belgium.
[21] *Id.* at 18.

In mature systems, institutional accreditation is a main feature of the higher education sector. In some of these systems, the QA agency accredits the HEIs, which are mainly publicly-funded. In turn, the institutions are bestowed with self-accreditation authority for programs.

In other systems, program accreditation is conducted by the QA agency for programs at either public HEIs only; private HEIs only (while the public HEIs are allowed to self-accredit programs); or at both public and private HEIs. While program accreditation is generally not discussed in the context of external QA, it is worth acknowledging the interdependence of program accreditation and institutional accreditation in well-functioning higher education systems.

In many systems, the QA agency conducts periodic audits which inform the accreditation processes—both program accreditation and institutional accreditation. It is a rare occurrence for an audit to lead directly to the revocation or loss of institutional accreditation. However, in the context of program accreditation, the failure of an institution to provide evidence of steps taken to improve shortcomings noted during an audit, program accreditation may be revoked.

In summary, several approaches exist for program accreditation and institutional accreditation in higher education sectors included in this study since accreditation applies to both public and private HEIs.

In Romania, ARACIS provides a combined approach of program and institutional accreditation for both public and private HEIs. There is a need to strengthen these accreditation processes. Strong institutional accreditation would allow for self-accreditation powers at the level of the HEI. Based on a higher degree of confidence in the QA system in Romania, accreditation in higher education can transition from program and institutional accreditation to institutional accreditation only. HEIs can accredit their own programs and ARACIS—independently—would be able to assess HEIs regularly, through a diversified panel of evaluators to include employers, alumni, and international experts.

Polarities for Standards—Minimum Standards and Enhancement

The final pair of polarities—explored in the context of good QA practices in European systems—revolves around standards. In establishing a strong external QA system, it is important for stakeholders to agree on minimum standards for the organizational health of HEIs to deliver on their promised purpose(s). This agreement is predicated on institutional stakeholders, particularly the QA agency and the HEIs in a country, being attuned to the *purpose* of their respective organizations on an ongoing basis. "Fit for purpose" has been identified as a key approach used to identify *quality* in higher education.[22] As a result, it follows that in quality *assurance*—as a process—"fit for purpose" is a priority and guides the QA agency and HEIs. In the "fit for purpose" approach, a broad interpretation of *purpose* includes mission, goals objectives, and specifications, among others. "Fit for purpose" means that "an organization has procedures in place that are appropriate for the specified purposes, and that there is evidence to show that these procedures are in fact achieving the specified purposes."[23] As such, when the purpose of the

[22] Harvey, L., and Green, D. (1993). "Defining Quality," Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education, Vol. 18 Issue: 1, pp.9-34.

[23] Utuka, G. (2013). "Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Comparative Analysis of Provisions and Practices in Ghana and New Zealand," Wellington, New Zealand: Lambert Academic Publishing.

HEI is determined, then it is critical to establish standards to gauge whether the HEI is achieving its promised purpose.

Research suggests, however, that there are multiple approaches of QA globally.[24] In some countries, despite several approaches for shaping the QA system, there is a convergence toward a singular *purpose* of QA. This convergence is common in countries with weak QA mechanisms. This purpose has been identified as treating quality assurance similar to an inspection process, compelling HEIs to adhere to standards which focus on measuring and counting physical spaces as "quality" inputs. Examples of this approach include measuring the area per student in square meters, or the number of laboratory spaces. Table 2 shows common features of QA systems, focused on systems often cited as being examples of "strong" and "weak" QA systems. In countries that seek to strengthen their external QA systems, it is important for QA to be subjective, nuanced, contextual, and evolving. The latter is particularly important given the debate surrounding what colleges and universities would look like in the future.[25]

Table 2. Characteristics of QA systems

	WEAK QA SYSTEMS		STRONG QA SYSTEMS
QUALITY ASSURANCE	Single purpose	→	Fit for purpose
PURPOSE OF HEIs	Not considered	→	Used for differentiating HEIs
CULTURE OF QA AGENCY	Inspectorate	→	Collegial Review
INDICATORS	Objective	→	Subjective
STANDARDS	Determined by QA Agency	→	Developed with input from HEIs
QA AGENCY ACTIVITIES	Government provides input	→	Agency is independent

Source: WB authors

If a country's QA system is deemed effective by stakeholders, the purpose of the QA system, and possibly the purpose of the QA agency as well as HEIs, must then change—and continue to change—provided that mechanisms are established to safeguard and sustain quality.[26] It follows, therefore, that if the purpose of an institution evolves, then the standards should also evolve.

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[24] Kis, V. (2005) "Quality Assurance in Tertiary Education: Current Practices in OECD Countries and a Literature Review on Potential Effects," Paper prepared for the OECD Thematic Review of Tertiary Education. Paris, France: OECD; Harvey, L., and Green, D. (1993), *supra* note 22.

[25] Contributors. "Future Perfect: What Will Universities Look Like in 2030?" *Times Higher Education,* https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/what-will-universities-look-like-in-2030-future-perfect. Accessed September 24, 2017.

[26] Girdwood, A., and Bramley, A. (1997). "Quality Assurance in Higher Education," Paper presented at the British Council Seminar on Quality Assurance, U.K.

Polarities which focus on standards are highly relevant in countries and economies which experienced rapid increases in the number of HEIs and higher education programs. In these countries, QA helps to ensure that no institution or program falls below minimum standards. In other countries, HEIs exceed the minimum standards regularly. Mature QA systems have established a culture of focusing on the improvement of HEIs (to achieve excellence gradually). In the self-evaluations conducted by HEIs, there have been attempts by HEIs to deceive review teams rather than admit to shortcomings, and also provide a strategy to address challenges. These attempts to mislead review teams emerges from a culture of fear in higher education and cognitive bias in expectations from HEIs.

Given the interdependence of minimum standards—emerging from purpose—and standards intended to enhance QA agencies and HEIs, these two aspects form the emerging polarities focused on standards.

Throughout this study, the  icon will indicate good practices in polarity management in European QA systems.

Comparing External Quality Assurance Practices in European Countries Using Polarities

This section compares sound practices in quality assurance in selected European higher education systems, with an underlying focus on external QA practices which ARACIS should explore. The comparisons are presented within the framework of identifying practices which emerged from the QA agencies' management of polarities in their respective country contexts. The polarities included in this section are internal QA and external QA; program assurance and institutional assurance; as well as standards and enhancement. The systems and QA agencies included in this study were of interest to ARACIS, which led to their selection for informative and comparative purposes. In addition to research conducted by reviewing self-evaluations of the QA agencies as well as reports of external reviews which were coordinated by ENQA, interviews were conducted with representatives and staff of the QA agencies included in this study. On-site interviews were conducted with representatives from the following quality assurance agencies (as shown in Figure 3):

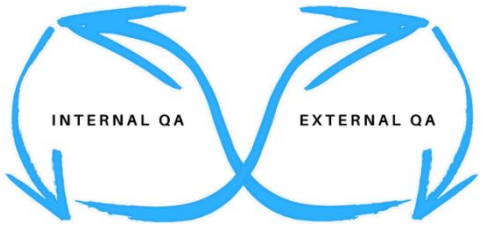
- **AQ Austria:** The Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria based in Vienna, Austria;
- **AQU:** The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency based in Barcelona, Spain;
- **NOKUT:** The Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education based in Oslo, Norway;
- **NVAO:** The Accreditation Organization of the Netherlands and Flanders based in the Hague, the Netherlands;
- **QQI:** Quality and Qualifications Ireland based in Dublin, Ireland;
- **UKA:** The Swedish Higher Education Authority based in Stockholm, Sweden;

Virtual interviews were conducted with representatives from the following agencies:

- **ASIIN:** The Accreditation Agency for Study Programs of Engineering, Information Science, Natural Sciences and Mathematics based in Düsseldorf, Germany;
- **EVALAG:** Evaluation Agency Baden-Württemberg based in Mannheim, Germany;

Figure 3. Quality Assurance Agencies analyzed and compared in this study

Practices in Managing Polarities



In several of the systems included in this study, key practices emerged which focus on the dynamics between internal QA and external QA.

In many European countries, HEIs have established procedures to assess their activities. These procedures are collectively referred to as internal QA. For various reasons, QA agencies should also establish procedures for the internal QA of their activities. An important reason for internal QA of the respective quality assurance agencies relates to the concept of who will "audit the auditor," analogous to the "train the trainer" model in corporate settings.

As part of ENQA's external review of QA agencies in Europe, agencies prepare a self-assessment report: a key component of the QA agency's internal QA process. With the exception of Sweden's lone QA agency in higher education—UKA—all other QA agencies included in this study have participated in an ENQA review recently, or are participating currently. Presently, UKA is an affiliate member of ENQA.

Section Summary

- Beyond the formal processes for internal QA and external QA, there is a key factor identified in the extensive literature on quality assurance that allows mature quality assurance systems to operate reliably: Trust.
- While trust is needed between the agency and HEIs, there are contexts where a lack of trust threatens the external QA process.
- In some countries, HEIs are allowed to opt for external QA processes administered by a foreign QA agency, effectively bypassing the domestic QA agency.

In terms of external reviews, AQU is the first QA agency in Europe to undergo three reviews by ENQA, with its membership being (re-)confirmed on each occasion. The ENQA-coordinated review is a fairly standard process for QA agencies which are ENQA members. NOKUT and NVAO are two agencies with procedures in place for the internal QA of the agency beyond the ENQA-coordinated review. Both agencies incorporate stakeholder consultations in their internal QA processes.

'Trust' in External Quality Assurance

Beyond the formal processes for internal QA and external QA, there is a key factor identified in the extensive literature on quality assurance that allows mature quality assurance systems to operate reliably: Trust. In most contexts, when the outcomes of a process are mutually beneficial to stakeholders, trust is a prerequisite for ensuring that actions taken to determine the outcomes were performed fairly. In contexts where it is clear that the outcomes are not guaranteed to be mutually beneficial, trust is likewise necessary, both as a prerequisite for the process, and after the outcomes are known to all stakeholders.

Norway

In the context of external QA and the need for trust when it remains unclear that outcomes will be mutually beneficial to stakeholders, ongoing structural reforms in Norway's higher education sector are particularly noteworthy. These reforms are not clearly related to the results of external QA processes, and are driven by the geographic spread of Norway's HEIs, particularly those HEIs in rural areas; yet, there are significant implications for the quality of higher education resulting from these reforms. The reforms focus on mergers among Norwegian HEIs, specifically focused on mergers between universities and university-colleges. The former's status allows for full self-accreditation authority at all levels, including doctoral programs. The latter's status allows

NOKUT

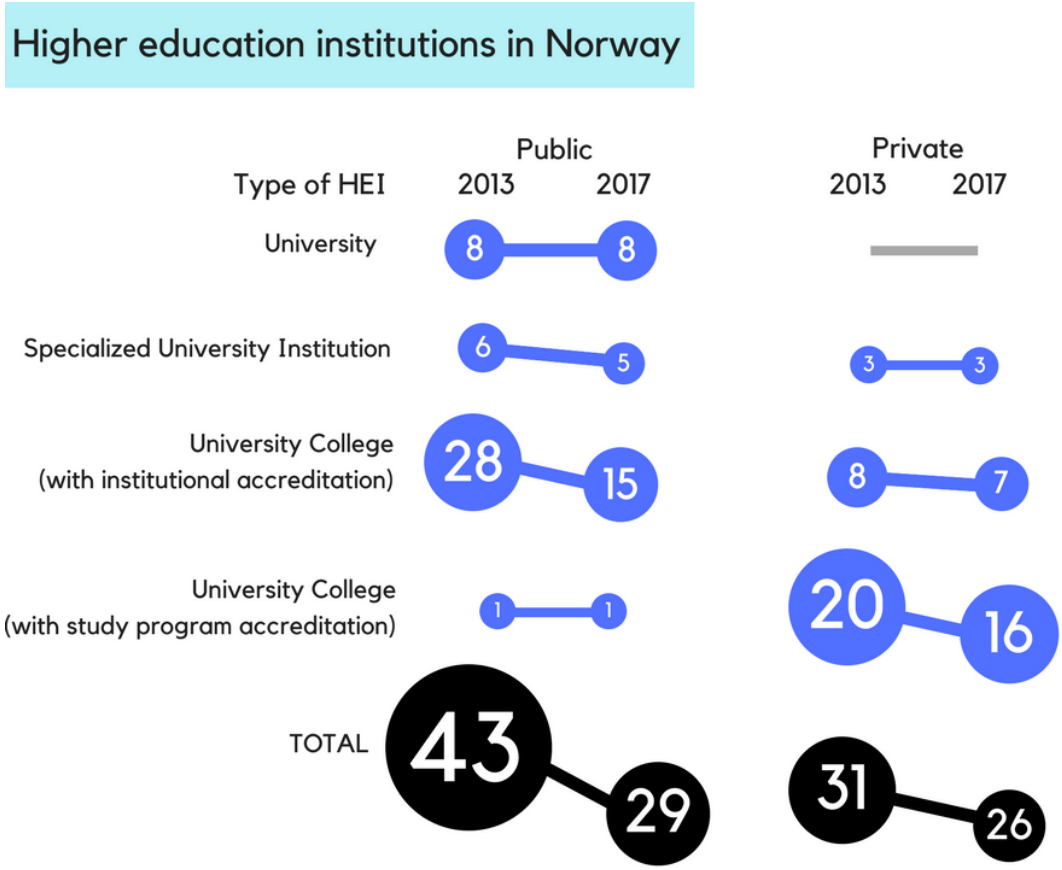
The Universities and University Colleges Act established the Norwegian Agency for Quality Assurance in Education (NOKUT) in 2002. NOKUT, becoming operative on January 1, 2003. NOKUT is not a part of the government structure and acts independently inside a given framework of law and Ministerial Regulations.

Source: NOKUT (2017). "ENQA Review of NOKUT, Self-assessment Report," November 2017. Oslo, Norway.

for full self-accreditation authority only at the bachelor degree level.[27] Accreditation is discussed in the subsequent section in the context of polarities emerging from program assurance and institutional assurance.

In 2013, the Norwegian government implemented structural reforms which led to a series of mergers and takeovers in the higher education sector.[28] At the end of 2012, NOKUT reported the existence of 79 HEIs (Table 3). In 2017, this number declined to 55 HEIs. A further decline in the number of HEIs is expected in coming years, with the continued objective of concentrating resources among fewer, but stronger, HEIs. Mergers of HEIs in Norway is not a new development, however. Norway's higher education sector experienced a more intense wave of mergers in the early 1990s. During this time, 98 colleges were consolidated into 26 state university-colleges.[29]

Table 3. Higher Education Institutions in Norway



Source: NOKUT (2017), ENQA Review of NOKUT, Self-assessment Report

In any country context, this consolidation process is challenging. Aware of the wider implications emerging from reviews and assessments of self-evaluations conducted as part of their internal QA processes, HEIs

[27] University colleges which offer doctoral programs which have been accredited by NOKUT can also accredit master programs *within* their doctoral fields.
[28] NOKUT (2017). "ENQA Review of NOKUT, Self-assessment Report," November 2017. Oslo, Norway.
[29] Kyvik, S. and B. Stensaker (2013). "Factors Affecting the Decision to Merge: The Case of Strategic Mergers in Norwegian Higher Education," Tertiary Education and Management, Vol. 19, No. 4, p.323-337.

are incentivized globally to deceive review teams rather than admit to shortcomings in the context of possible structural reforms in higher education. This deception is one of many costs of survival from the perspective of the HEI. These attempts to mislead review teams emerges from a culture of fear in higher education and cognitive bias in expectations from HEIs. In many countries, QA punishes flaws exposed during external QA processes, rather than rewarding and encouraging HEIs to improve.

It is worth noting that, despite the implications for quality stemming from Norway's structural reforms in higher education, cross-sectoral mergers—i.e. between universities and university-colleges—are exempt from NOKUT's external QA processes. Cross-sectoral mergers remain prohibited in several European countries, including the Netherlands and Germany. One reason that is often cited for this ban on cross-sectoral mergers is the perception that mergers and takeovers are a "short-cut" to quality in higher education.[30]

In Norway, mergers and takeovers are not quality approaches to external QA, particularly for university-colleges to achieve the status of university by proxy. However, there is a performance-based approach which allows university-colleges to become universities. Norway's higher education system allows HEIs to seek institutional accreditation—to become either a university or a specialized university institution—by applying to NOKUT for accreditation. This practice will be discussed in detail in the section on polarities emerging from program assurance and institutional assurance.

In Romania, university mergers are rare. The only example is the North University of Baia Mare, which merged with the Technical University of Cluj-Napoca in 2012-2013. The main reason for the merger was the financial insecurity of the smaller HEI—the North University of Baia Mare. High-profile university mergers would consolidate the higher education system, however. These types of mergers would reduce the duplication of study programs, create synergies, and address demographic decline. In addition, this type of merger in Romania could reap financial benefits for institutions through a per-capita funding approach which favors larger HEIs based on student enrollment, and potentially improve the quality of HEIs.

Bypassing a National Quality Assurance Agency's Procedures

While trust is needed between the agency and HEIs, there are contexts where a lack of trust threatens the external QA process. There are options available to the QA agency and the HEIs to take action which, in some instances, protects their respective institutions and the higher education sector(s).

AQ Austria

AQ Austria is a quality assurance agency operating in Austria and other countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It is committed to serving the common good and is based on the values of the EHEA, in particular the autonomy and diversity of higher education institutions (HEIs) and independent quality assurance. It regards itself as a competence centre for matters regarding quality assurance and improvement and as a driving force for the advancement of quality assurance.

Source: AQ Austria, About Us

In addition to a lack of trust between the agency and HEIs, an HEI may opt for external QA processes administered by a foreign QA agency for a variety of reasons when allowed by the legislative

[30] Skodvin, O. (2014) "Merger as an Instrument to Achieve Quality in Higher Education – Rhetoric or Reality?" Paper Presented in Track 1 at the EAIR 36th Annual Forum in Essen, Germany.

framework. For instance, the legislative frameworks of Austria, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, and Romania allow certain HEIs to bypass the national agency for external QA activities. There are differences in the legislative text regarding this possibility, but a common guideline in higher education sectors which include this option is the allowance for external QA procedures to be performed by any QA agency registered in EQAR (with no limits on the number of times the national agency may be bypassed), or with an agency that is recognized internationally. Austria's Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education includes both provisions, stating that institutional (audit) assurance of HEIs may be performed by "[…] a quality assurance agency registered with […] (EQAR) or by another internationally recognized and independent quality assurance agency."[31] In this context, Austria's quality assurance law inhibits the ability of AQ Austria to manage internal and external QA polarities due to the ability of other agencies to conduct QA procedures for Austria's HEIs.

In contexts where the legislative framework allows an HEI to bypass a national agency for external QA procedures and opt for a foreign agency, even when a strong national quality assurance system exists, HEIs in some European countries may prefer the "international" brand of certain QA agencies. QA agencies which are more recognized due to marketing or the language used in evaluation i.e. English, among other reasons, may be contracted by HEIs in countries which allow for the national QA agency to be bypassed in favor of a foreign agency.

In addition to a lack of trust and the preference for an international QA agency (brand), another common reason for an HEI bypassing a national QA agency centers on an HEI's QA practices effectively being deemed as noncompliant with national guidelines. If the leadership of an HEI suspects that the institution's QA practices do not fulfill statutory requirements or European guidelines, then it is possible that the HEI bypasses the national QA agency for a foreign agency to conduct the external QA procedure. The HEI could opt instead for a QA procedure from an agency with a history of conducting external reviews with outcomes which favor HEIs undeservingly. Bypassing a national QA agency in this context leads to negative results due to the HEI's failure to focus adequately on one pole—internal QA—which adversely affects the HEI's to manage polarities in QA.

There are clear situations, however, where the national QA agency should be bypassed to ensure the integrity of the external QA procedure as a good practice. One such situation emerges when the national QA agency contributed to the design of an HEI's internal quality assurance system. Austria's quality assurance legislation includes a provision that addresses this conflict—a provision which should be emulated in countries undergoing legislative reforms pertaining to quality assurance in higher education.

Trust considerations also emerge in higher education sectors as it relates to the influence of HEIs. In most countries, there is often one HEI (or several HEIs) wielding significant influence owing to various factors: its position in international rankings, the size of the student enrollment, perceived legacy, and "prestige," among other factors. As a result, smaller or less prestigious HEIs may be placed at a disadvantage in higher education sectors where larger institutions have significant influence. Implementation of proven good practices in external QA mitigate the influence of larger institutions by ensuring that all HEIs are critiqued

[31] Federal Ministry of Science, Research, and Economy (2014). "Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG)," Vienna, Austria.

fairly by peer review experts. There is a standard in the ESG which calls for publishing reports prepared by experts, including any formal decision taken by the agency based on the reports.

The legislative framework of Romania allows HEIs to bypass the external QA procedures of ARACIS. The Law of National Education no. 1/2011 includes provisions stating that external QA activities may be performed by ARACIS or by other national and international QA agency registered with EQAR. There are few examples of Romanian HEIs that have bypassed the national QA agency's procedures, however.

Ireland

The publication of reports is a good practice, and presents an opportunity for various HEIs to critique whether their peer HEIs are being held to similar standards (provided institutions are sufficiently comparable/differentiated by their purpose in the country's higher education sector). The impact of publishing experts' reports is limited by the extent to which peer reviewers critique large and small HEIs similarly. For example, Trinity College is Ireland's oldest university and ranks among the top research universities globally. In the review report prepared in June 2012, as part of Ireland's external QA process, the QA agency asserted that Trinity's "research fields and/or centers of excellence were 'self-proclaimed' or their categorization was based on 'general conviction.'"[32] This comment represents a strong condemnation of an HEI which accounted for roughly 25 percent of Ireland's graduates from doctoral programs.

In the context of using QA mechanisms to drive enhancement at Trinity College, the review team stated further that if Trinity College is to maintain its standing in research and teaching:

> "[…] it needs to adopt a more proactive and outward-looking approach. It needs to learn from good practice adopted by its peer institutions nationally and internationally and also from a range of external stakeholders. If it is to remain competitive with those *which it regards as its peers* [emphasis added], it needs to reflect on and modernize its structures for governance and management."[33]

HEIs of all sizes—and influence—should be assured that irrespective of the QA agency conducting a quality assurance procedure, particularly where the option to bypass a national agency exists, the standards and frameworks used in the procedure are applied consistently across institutions.

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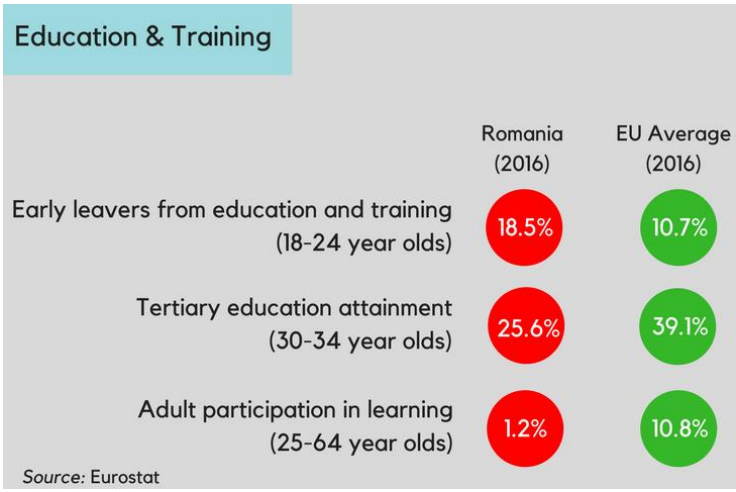
[32] IUQB (2012). "IRIU Report, Institutional Review of Trinity College Dublin," Institutional Review of Irish Universities. Dublin, Ireland: Irish Universities Quality Board, pp.16; QQI was established in November 2012, replacing/integrating FETAC (Further Education and Training Awards Council), HETAC (Higher Education and Training Awards Council), and the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland. QQI also incorporated the functions of the IUQB (Irish Universities Quality Board).

[33] *Id.* at 35.

Creating an Integrated Approach to External Quality Assurance



In the European region, there are several bodies and commitments across sectors which often create an administrative burden in monitoring and evaluation. In the education context alone, there are the education and training goals for EU 2020 which are focused on reducing the share of early school-leavers, as well as increasing the share of 30-34 year olds attaining tertiary education and the share of adults participating in lifelong learning. There is also the European Qualifications Framework (EQF). In most European countries, several agencies are responsible for each set of commitments, particularly in the context of reporting on progress toward aligning national and European frameworks.

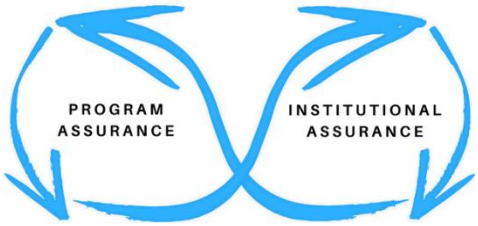
Ireland's QA structure provides a good practice on leveraging an opportunity for system-wide education reforms to centralize the monitoring and evaluation of key QA aspects. During institutional reviews of Irish HEIs, the agency reported on each institution's awareness and approach to using the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) as an external reference for program standards. Although institutional reforms have occurred among Ireland's quality assurance agencies since this reference to the NFQ began, this practice has continued. The reforms undertaken in Ireland's higher education sector in 2012 were prompted by the need to integrate functions across several QA agencies. More specifically, there was a desire to have both the qualifications framework and the QA agency housed within a single agency.

QQI

QQI, the quality assurance agency of Ireland, replaced the activities of four previous agencies:

FETAC: Further Education and Training Awards Council
HETAC: Higher Education and Training Awards Council
IUQB: Irish Universities Quality Board
NQAI: National Qualifications Authority of Ireland

In the context of internal and external QA polarities being well-managed in Ireland since QQI was established, there are also well-managed polarities of the qualifications framework and quality assurance. The push for an integrated approach in Ireland's higher education sector has contributed to a similarly successful push for an integrated approach across post-secondary education and training, including vocational education and training (VET). QQI is focused on refining its approach to ensure that the integrated approach remains fit for purpose in higher education (and post-secondary education by extension), and also for each HEI.



In transitioning to the types of QA approaches used in the systems and agencies included in this study, this section will focus on polarities emerging in quality assurance—i.e. program assurance and institutional assurance. The word *assurance* in this context includes the three main approaches recognized in QA: accreditation, assessments, and audits.[34] *Evaluation,* another term used to describe certain QA processes, is understood to include assessments and audits. Accreditation and assessment focus on monitoring the quality of teaching and learning. Audit refers to an HEI's procedures and activities undertaken to fulfill its purpose.

Section Summary

- The size of a country's higher education sector is a key factor which determines whether program assurance, institutional assurance, or a combination of both approaches are used.
- In countries, which feature strong quality assurance systems, there is a widespread notion in the higher education sector that HEIs are responsible for the quality of their program offerings.
- In Ireland and Norway, there are tight controls on key terms used in higher education, limiting the ability of an institution to operate without undergoing a QA procedure
- Some QA agencies are endowed with the ability to issue authorization for an HEI to operate, *and* revoke the authorization.
- Strong QA systems evolve over time, guided by the needs and demands of the higher education sector, HEIs, and other stakeholders.

This study does not identify any specific good practice active in all examined systems, regarding whether program assurance, institutional assurance, or a combination of both aspects is a more appropriate approach. Rather, the profile of each country or system and the applicable legislative framework contribute to determine which approach(es) can serve as a guide on managing polarities in program assurance and institutional assurance for ARACIS.

The size of a country's higher education sector—including, but not limited to the number of students enrolled, the number of study programs, and the number of HEIs—is a key factor which determines whether program assurance, institutional assurance, or a combination of both approaches are used. The ability of a QA agency to conduct assurance procedures emerges from the legislative framework guiding higher education and/or quality assurance activities. In this context, size may refer to the number of HEIs, and the number of programs being assured—either for the first time or as part of an assurance procedure conducted periodically.

Program Assurance and Institutional Assurance: Accreditation, Audit, and Assessment

In countries, which feature strong quality assurance systems, there is a widespread notion in the higher education sector that HEIs are responsible for the quality of their program offerings. In these contexts, the QA agency conducts institutional assurance activities. These activities include *ex ante* accreditation—effectively the inception of an HEI, which allows it to offer study programs—or *ex post* accreditation—effectively the renewal of an HEI's license (also recognized as *reaccreditation*) to continue offering study programs. Institutional accreditation of an HEI allows the institution to leverage the approval from the QA agency to self-accredit its programs, highlighting the polarities between program assurance and institutional assurance in the accreditation context.

[34] Kis, V., *supra* note 24.

It is not likely that *ex ante* institutional (accreditation) assurance occurs frequently in established QA systems since this approach would mean that the HEI is being established for the first time, expanding the higher education sector in the process. However, *ex ante* program (accreditation) assurance occurs frequently in many higher education systems if the legislative framework requires that the QA agency is responsible for program accreditation. If the QA agency is not responsible for program accreditation based on the legislative norms in the country, it means that the HEI self-accredits its programs, and the agency provides program (evaluation) assurance. As stated previously, evaluations may include both audits and assessments.

The existence of another dimension—the type of HEI—is an important element in the discussion of program assurance and institutional assurance. In some of the countries included in this study, whether the QA agency conducts program assurance or institutional assurance depends on the type of HEI. In some contexts, the QA agency conducts program assurance activities for private HEIs only, while conducting institutional activities for public HEIs. Relatedly, the possible types of HEIs are limited to public and private institutions in some contexts. In some systems, there are several types of HEIs including universities, university colleges, and HEIs with "other" statuses.

The ability of QA agencies to perform assurance activities is a practical concern. The number of study programs and the number of HEIs in the higher education sector are two key factors which determine a QA agency's ability to conduct effective assurance activities. In systems characterized by a relatively small number of HEIs, it is possible for QA agencies to conduct both program assurance *and* institutional assurance activities. In systems characterized by a relatively large number of HEIs, it becomes challenging for the QA agency to conduct assurance activities of consistently high quality, given the demands on the agencies' staffing. In this regard, Ireland and Norway offer a similar good practice which helps their respective QA agencies to manage the demands for assurance activities. Both countries share the practice of imposing restrictions on the use of key terms in higher education.

In Ireland, there is the existing practice of placing tight restrictions on the use of the term *university.* There are seven universities in Ireland, and although other HEIs exist in the sector, their names exclude the term *university.* These other institutions include (13) Institutes of Technology, as well as private-sector colleges. QQI—the QA agency—performs both program assurance and institutional assurance. The assurance activities include accreditation and evaluation. It is worth noting, however, whether QQI performs a program evaluation or institutional evaluation depends on the status of the institution. QQI evaluates/accredits programs offered by private institutions. Public institutions in Ireland—both universities and institutes—have their own program accreditation process. Both categories of HEIs have self-awarding abilities granted to them by the law. The self-awarding abilities of institutes are limited compared to those of universities, however. In addition, QQI conducts program accreditation within the vocational education system.

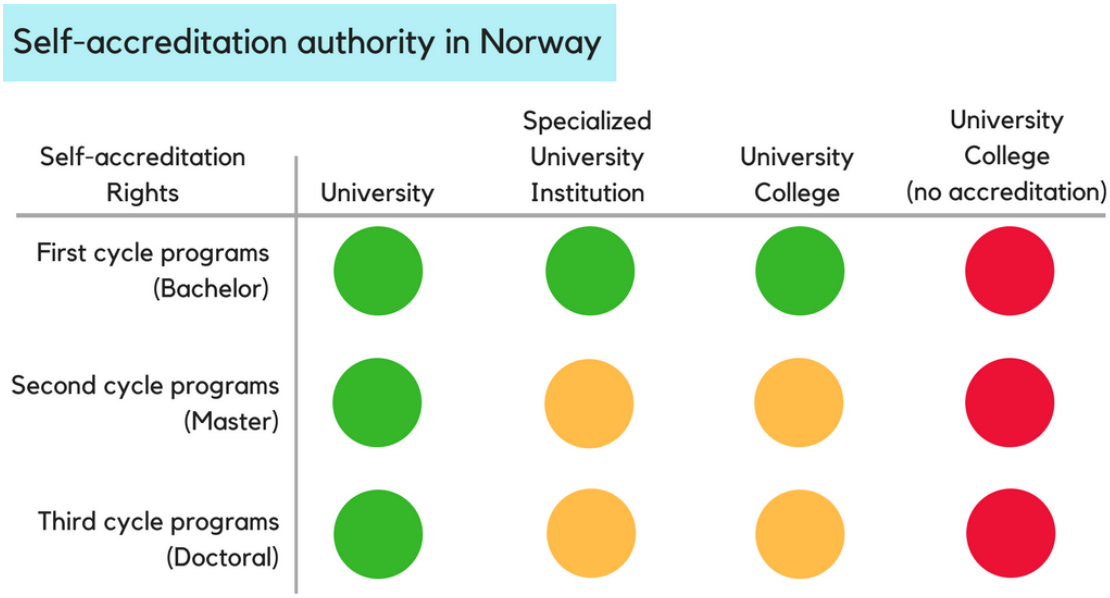
Among Ireland's private-sector colleges, these institutions are not obligated to seek program (accreditation) assurance or institutional (accreditation) assurance from QQI or any other QA body. In Ireland, an institution can begin operating and offering courses, as long as the institution does not use the *University* designation. For private-sector colleges in Ireland, accreditation focuses on whether a study program meets predetermined standards.

In Norway, there is the existing practice in which the term *higher education* is protected by law. As a result, non-accredited education providers cannot claim to be an HEI without obtaining accreditation from NOKUT to launch study programs. HEIs in Norway without institutional accreditation can apply for their study programs to be recognized by NOKUT. These programs must lead to a student obtaining at least a bachelor degree. Norway's higher education sector includes levels (or degrees) of accreditation linked to the HEI's status or category. There are four categories of HEIs in Norway[35]:

- University: authorized to self-accredit *at all levels* (including doctoral programs;
- Specialized University Institution: authorized to self-accredit at all levels *within their doctoral fields;*
- University College: authorized to self-accredit at the bachelor degree level. If a UC has doctoral programs which have been accredited by NOKUT, then the UC can also accredit master programs *within* their doctoral fields; and
- University Colleges (without institutional accreditation): NOKUT must accredit all education provisions

As such, it follows that HEIs which are not allowed to self-accredit programs must seek accreditation for these programs from NOKUT. Figure 4 helps to clarify Norway's accreditation context.

Figure 4. Accreditation authority of HEIs in Norway's higher education sector



Source: NOKUT (2017). "NOKUT (2017). "ENQA Review of NOKUT, Self-Assessment Report," Oslo, Norway.
Note: Green indicates full self-accreditation authority; orange indicates full self-accreditation authority in doctoral fields; and red indicates no self-accreditation authority.

In the context of program and institutional assurance, there is a good practice related to the accreditation abilities of HEIs in Ireland and Norway which allow the QA agencies to manage polarities. This practice centers on the standing of QQI and NOKUT. These agencies use institutional (audit) assurance procedures,

[35] NOKUT (2017), *supra* note 28.

irrespective of the HEI's accreditation status i.e. whether the institution is a university in both country contexts, or a non-university which enjoys only partial self-accreditation authority. In other words, QA agencies in Ireland and Norway can audit institutions irrespective of the institution's status/category. Institutional (audit) assurance is conducted in seven year cycles. The current review period is 2017-2023. In Norway, this assurance is not time limited, allowing NOKUT to undertake institutional (audit) assurance randomly.

In the Netherlands, NVAO provides an interesting contrast in practices regarding polarities of program assurance and institutional assurance. NVAO considers various options to reduce the administrative burden of assurance activities. As a result, one option being considered applies to HEIs which successfully pass two rounds of institutional (audit) assurance: NVAO will explore options to reduce its role in handling applications for program (accreditation) assurance for HEIs which pass two rounds of institutional (audit) assurance procedures.[36] If this approach is adopted, NVAO would continue to perform quality checks of the HEI's reports and documents. However, if NVAO notes that there are no infractions, it would endorse a simplified procedure for the HEI on an ongoing basis.[37]

In Ireland, it is worth noting that although Irish universities have self-awarding abilities granted to them by the law, QQI has standing to review these abilities in the context of QA. For example, in the past, one recommendation emerged which proposed that the Memorandum of Understanding governing the relationship between a university and a (linked) college should be reviewed as a matter of urgency. It was also suggested that the entities involved in the MoU consider renegotiating and revising the terms to reflect relevant changes in Ireland's higher education sector since 2007. QQI performed a review of the QA processes and governance arrangements between the university and the linked college. Universities in Ireland can undertake a review of its relationship with a partner college, or can request that QQI perform the review. During periodic reviews of universities, QQI examines how universities manage their QA processes with partner colleges. As such, timing is a driving factor which guides *when* QQI examines universities' QA processes or whether a university examines its relationship with a partner college.

In Norway, NOKUT is authorized to use an institutional (audit) assurance process for **all** HEIs, including those accredited as an institution (full self-accreditation) or those which only provide accredited study programs (partial self-accreditation).[38] If an institutional (audit) assurance process reveals shortcomings in the HEI's provision of a study program, NOKUT reserves the right to supervise the program or the HEI based on the criteria relevant to the accreditation.[39] An HEI with (full) self-accreditation authority which fails to conduct internal QA activities loses its ability to self-accredit new study programs until the HEI passes an audit. Similarly, an HEI with partial self-accreditation abilities also loses its ability to apply for *new* program (accreditation) assurance until the HEI passes an audit. As such, NOKUT's institutional (audit) assurance procedure, which applies to all HEIs, has adverse consequences for their ability to self-accredit or apply for accreditation from NOKUT for new study programs.

[36] NVAO (2016). "ENQA Review 2017, Self-Assessment Report," the Hague, Netherlands.
[37] *Id.*
[38] NOKUT (2017), *supra* note 28.
[39] *Id.*

A related good practice emerges from Ireland and Norway's institutional (audit) assurance procedures and centers on the ability of each country's QA agency to revoke accreditation. In Ireland, QQI can recommend steps to improve a University's processes in the context of quality assurance. QQI can also recommend the closure of programs in *private* HEIs (which mainly carry the designation of a *college*). Further, QQI can withdraw the authority of an institution (both public and private) to issue degrees, and insist that the institution seeks QQI's approval for program accreditation. In one case, QQI deemed that an Institute of Technology was mismanaging its research degrees. As a result, QQI withdrew the Institute's capacity to recruit students for research degrees. QQI can exert more forceful measures with Institutes of Technology than for Universities. It is possible, however, for QQI to revoke a University's institutional accreditation—i.e. ability to award degrees—and compel the university to seek reaccreditation from QQI on a program basis. This action is the most powerful safeguard that QQI could recommend for a university in the context of program accreditation. This action would have far-reaching consequences for Ireland's higher education sector, given the status of its universities, both nationally and internationally.

In Norway, the institutional (audit) assurance, while it is conducted randomly (and remains periodic), cannot lead to the loss of institutional accreditation or program accreditation without having exhausted options to allow an HEI to make efforts to improve. Similarly, if supervision by NOKUT results from an HEI failing the institutional (audit) assurance process, supervision also cannot lead to accreditation being revoked. It is important to note that the term *revision of accreditation* is used by NOKUT to define the process which can lead to accreditation being revoked.[40] The institutional (audit) assurance activity and supervision could lead to revision of accreditation. Revision is a comprehensive procedure which may result in accreditation—either program or institutional—being revoked. NOKUT may revise self-accredited study programs and programs accredited by NOKUT (for institutions with partial self-accreditation abilities). NOKUT cites its revision tool as a strong counterpart to Norway's trust-based society which extends to HEIs with full or partial self-accreditation abilities.[41]

Creating an Open Link Between Program Assurance and Institutional Assurance

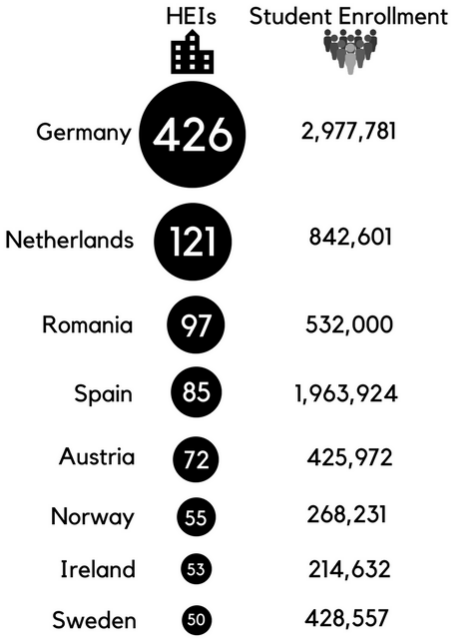
Legislative frameworks outline the roles of QA agencies in terms of providing program assurance, institutional assurance, or a combination of both types. It is worth noting, however, that strong QA systems evolve over time, guided by the needs and demands of the higher education sector, HEIs, and other stakeholders. As the higher education sector evolves, grows, or matures, the QA system should be able to do the same. This ability requires a flexible/versatile system of QA.

The flexibility of Ireland's higher education sector to evolve—at the system level, the sectoral level, and the institutional level—should be noted as a good practice. Whether a sector prioritizes program accreditation or institutional accreditation in QA is less important in the Irish higher education system than ensuring that mechanisms exist within the system to respond to external factors which may prompt a shift from one type of assurance approach to another i.e. program and institutional, confirming Ireland's approach to managing polarities in assurance activities. In other words, it will not

[40] *Id.*
[41] *Id.*

always be the case that program assurance or institutional assurance will be needed if the growth of the higher education sector is not managed strategically. This growth is often due to an increase in the number of HEIs, study programs, and student enrollment, are examples of external factors which impact the need for program and/or institutional assurance procedures. In this regard, it is important to reiterate that the size of the higher education sector matters in the context of a QA agency conducting assurance activities.

HEIs and Student Enrollment



Source: Eurostat; ENQA Self-Assessment Reports; QA Agency websites
Note: Student enrollment data is for 2015 or most recent year.

The higher education sector in Ireland, in terms of the number of HEIs and student enrollment, is much smaller than the same sector in Germany and Romania. A good practice for creating an open link between program and institutional assurance in response to external factors, is the use of structures which convene representatives of HEIs in various European countries. In the Romanian context, this structure is the National Council of Rectors. It is important to caution that these structures comprise competing interests among members who represent their various HEIs.

ASIIN

ASIIN specializes in providing QA for STEM programs. The agency conducts both program and institutional assurance activities. ASIIN is different from peer agencies in terms of its program accreditation process which centers on learning outcomes and competence profiles in the 13 disciplines which the agency represents. ASIIN also conducts institutional accreditation at the national level.

1 of 9 National Quality Assurance Agencies in Germany

ASIIN, one of Germany's QA agencies, provides a good practice regarding structures which convene representatives of HEIs. ASIIN's membership is not comprised of individual institutions. Instead, ASIIN's membership is based on groups of institutions or universities. As a result, there are coordination groups which operate as ASIIN's members. For example, the coordination group of the University of Applied Sciences (UAS) represents roughly 120 faculties from UAS as one membership group; not individual members. ASIIN asserts that this group membership approach helps to provide checks and balances which prevent one large university/institution from exerting influence over smaller peer institutions. This approach also provides a forum to help manage the interactions between HEIs and ASIIN.

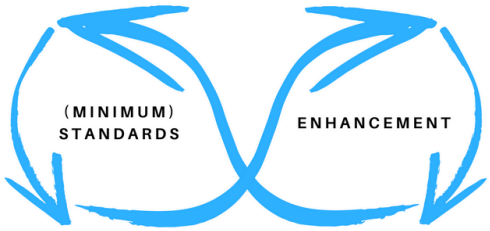
Good practices also emerge (from Germany) in the context of polarities in program and institutional assurance, specifically in documenting accreditation decisions.

In Germany, there is a legal requirement for HEIs to obtain accreditation from relevant QA agencies. Among the systems in this study, Germany's higher education sector and legislative framework allow for more QA agencies than other countries. There are nine national QA agencies in Germany's higher

education sector tasked with quality assurance activities for more than 400 HEIs which includes public and private institutions. These HEIs face a choice between pursuing program (accreditation) assurance and institutional (accreditation) assurance.

Regarding private institutions in Germany, the Science Council is tasked with providing institutional (accreditation) assurance to these institutions that seek a license to operate. There are ministries in Germany's individual states, however, which request that agencies perform *ex ante* accreditation of institutions as opposed to *ex post* accreditation. This approach is similar to an initial or probationary accreditation for new programs. This approach helps ministries to determine whether a new study program has sufficient demand to be deemed sustainable. However, it interferes with the ability of German QA agencies to be fully independent in their operations. The independence of QA agencies will be discussed later in this study. It is worth noting that the emergence of new higher education institutions in Germany—whether public or private—is a rare occurrence.

ASIIN also provides a good practice worth noting in the context of program and institutional assurance polarities. As part of ASIIN's management of program and institutional polarities, the agency created a database which contains the results of more than 4,000 accreditation processes conducted. The database, which is populated by ASIIN, serves as a "living memory" for decisions emerging from peer reviews and allows for adopting a comparable approach for accreditation processes. Peer review experts, members of various technical committees within ASIIN, and each of the accreditation commissions–one each for program and institutional accreditation–are ASIIN's key decision-making bodies which have access to the database. The results of ASIIN's accreditation processes are collated in the database and published on its website.



A final pair of polarities to consider in QA revolves around standards. This pair of polarities includes minimum standards and standards focused on enhancement. Standards are contentious in quality assurance for various reasons. However, standards are a critical component in QA. While the name of the ESG—European Standards and Guidelines—suggests that "standards" and "guidelines" exist for QA in European higher education, the ESG have been cited by stakeholders as "generic principles" that do "not prescribe how quality assurance processes should be implemented."[42] Representatives of one QA agency included in this study, cited their agency's objective regarding the ESG as "not to fail." As a result, it is the responsibility of higher education stakeholders in a country—i.e. QA agencies and HEIs—to establish their own standards for QA. In Romania, both program and institutional accreditation aims to certify compliance with predetermined minimum performance indicators. However, ARACIS aims to ensure quality standards for study programs and higher education qualifications, and also to support the continuous improvement of quality management within Romanian HEIs. ARACIS is promoting the adoption (by HEIs) of an enhancement-focused approach to QA in higher education to focus on better outcomes and escape from the existing compliance-based approach.

[42] EQUIP Project, *supra* note 20, at 2.

A critical step in formulating standards in QA is determining the purpose of each HEI. In some countries this is a process of classifying or categorizing HEIs. Determining the purpose of HEIs is a process that is overlooked often or conducted poorly, which leads to disparate institutions being compared to achieve a predetermined objective. It is worth noting that, as institutions grow and evolve, the purpose of an HEI may change gradually. NVAO asserts that HEIs self-sort and group themselves into categories which align with their purpose. In Norway, HEI categories are linked to their ability to self-accredit. QQI notes that there are too few universities in Ireland to conduct a classification exercise involving those institutions.

Once HEIs are differentiated by purpose, the QA agency can assess the quality of institutions using standards. This approach should focus on developing standards by which HEIs are assessed *in consultation with the HEIs*. Attainment of these standards, however, should be an activity devoid of comparisons with other HEIs. This activity does not measure whether an institution improved. The indicator measures whether HEIs meet the existing standards when being assessed by the QA agency.

Periodically, this activity would lead to assessing improvement of an HEI's performance. Opportunities to assess improvement of an HEI often emerge when the status of the HEI is deemed probationary. This status arises after an institution fails to attain standards for the sector during its evaluation. In the probationary status, subsequent evaluations require comparing whether the HEI improved relative to the previous evaluation. When an HEI is being evaluated and its status is not probationary, during the QA review process, the institution's performance should not be compared with past performance. In other words, the review process would focus on attaining the standards rather than improvement.

Enhancement—moving toward excellence, whether national or regional—as a standard in QA is more directly linked to the audit process. During this process, an evaluation is conducted which focuses on the HEI and whether it is achieving its purpose, meeting agreed standards, and/or taking necessary steps to improve.

In terms of good practices regarding standards and enhancement of HEIs, QQI notes that there is openness and transparency in the process of establishing guidelines and review methods in Ireland's higher education sector. The process is "owned" by the community of stakeholders and the higher education sector. QQI maintains that QA in Ireland is the responsibility of the HEIs, and the contribution of the agency is only as effective as the work led by the HEIs to establish guidelines and review methods.

In the context of standards, QQI is also exploring how HEIs can incorporate the use of data in QA processes without shifting the process to a metric-driven approach. QQI asserts that outcomes which result from processes that are not data-driven remain valuable, particularly in the context of peer review processes. However, more data and better tools for interpreting data prompt the need for including data in the QA process. In addition, QQI hopes that departments and programs at Ireland's HEIs would develop a cohesive strategy on how to include data to continue linking HEIs' activities to QA.

In Sweden, UKA provides an emerging practice and lessons on redesigning a QA system which was deemed as failing to adhere to the ESG. As the Swedish QA system evolves, it has transitioned from a process-oriented system in the 2000s which focused on program evaluations and institutional audits, to an output-oriented system focused on program evaluations (during 2011-2014). The new QA system is designed as a unified approach which focuses on *both* processes and outcomes from 2017 onwards. To design the new system, UKA conducted a pilot study in 2016 to test the method for reviewing the QA procedures of Sweden's HEIs. The study included four HEIs: the Blekinge Institute of Technology, Dalarna University, Newman Institute, and Umea University. HEIs were selected mainly based on their interest in participating, then narrowed down based on profiles, study programs, and other factors. The pilot study was recently concluded. A key component of Sweden's redesigned QA system is the inclusion of several stakeholder groups, namely HEIs, students, employers, and labor market representatives. Stakeholder consultation is critical to the design of standards being used in QA procedures.

UKA

> "This is the first time in Sweden that a system has been developed which takes a more unified approach to the work of assuring the quality of higher education. It is a model that continues to focus on outcomes but also on the quality assurance procedures at the HEIs"
>
> -- Kari Linde
> Head of the Department of Quality Assurance
> UKÄ

In Germany, HEIs which apply to ASIIN for QA procedures, are required to prove that they have established an internal QA system which is oriented toward the respective institution's improvement. If ASIIN determines that an institution is not fit for purpose, then it is highly unlikely that ASIIN issues institutional accreditation to the HEI. As a result, the HEI may request an evaluation which is advisory in nature. The evaluation is a guideline for the institution on how to enhance its activities and operations without being accredited.

QA agencies in Spain and Norway also provide examples of good practices in managing polarities between (minimum) standards and standards focused on enhancement. These practices center on establishing mechanisms to receive feedback. This feedback is leveraged in several ways to enhance the higher education sector, including the QA system and the HEIs.

In Spain, AQU Catalonia conducts surveys on labor market outcomes and student satisfaction in the context of QA and the relevance of higher education in the Catalonia region (Figure 5). The former survey—labor market outcomes—includes two surveys, one of which is focused on the perspectives of recent graduates of Catalan universities, while the latter is focused on employers' perspectives. The survey of recent graduates is conducted annually while the employer survey is conducted every three years. The second edition of the employer survey is being conducted currently for the period 2017-2019. The data collected from these surveys are linked to, and feed into, Catalonia's higher education system to improve the QA process. The student satisfaction survey is the only survey financed by AQU Catalonia. The survey results are publicly available on AQU Catalonia's website.

The survey on labor market outcomes of graduates is financed by the region's HEIs. More than 27,000 graduates were surveyed during the first quarter of 2017, which represented approximately 48.1 percent

of the reference population.[43] The survey includes graduates from each cycle—bachelor degrees, master degrees, and doctoral degrees.

The employer survey—is financed by one of Catalonia's private financial institutions. The previous survey, conducted in 2014, included a general survey and sector-specific surveys on the public sector, teaching, as well as the medical sector and nursing. The survey for the period 2017-2019 has expanded to include 16 sector-specific surveys.

Figure 5. Surveys conducted by AQU Catalonia

Source: *AQU Catalonia, Knowledge website*

In Norway, NOKUT conducts an annual student survey titled *Studiebarometeret*. The survey's purpose is to strengthen quality assurance in higher education, and to provide data on the quality of higher education in Norway. The survey gauges students' perceptions of education quality in their respective study programs. Students' responses are available for Norway's 1,800 study programs. Norway's higher education stakeholders can access a portal which hosts the data and results from the annual survey. NOKUT administers the survey and maintains the portal. Both initiatives were mandated by Norway's Ministry of Education and Research.[44]

The surveys conducted by AQU Catalonia and NOKUT are relevant in the context of good practices in quality assurance. More specifically, the surveys are key practices in the context of polarities regarding (minimum) standards and enhancement. The surveys are critical for providing feedback to each QA agency on early warnings—as noted in the Polarity Mapping model—which may reveal underlying challenges in quality assurance at Norwegian HEIs.

[43] AQU Catalonia, *Labor Insertion: Prospect of Graduates*, http://www.aqu.cat/estudis/ocupadors/index.html (last visited December 10, 2017)
[44] NOKUT, *Studiebarometeret, About the Student Survey*, http://studiebarometeret.no/en/artikkel/2 (last visited December 10, 2017).

Legislative and Policy Frameworks on Quality Assurance

Section Summary

- Legislative and policy frameworks introduced a combination of reforms which addressed the higher education sector, HEIs, and/or quality assurance.
- Many of the legislative frameworks were adopted or amended in recent years to align more closely with the standards and expectations of the European community.
- Additional frameworks are being discussed (or are under review) which may either nullify or supplement existing frameworks.
- There is nuance in each QA agency's interpretation and *practice* of "independence."

The QA systems included in this study developed as a result of key legislative and policy frameworks. These frameworks introduced a combination of reforms which addressed the higher education sector, HEIs, and/or quality assurance. In some of the systems, HEIs merged, QA agencies merged, or assurance procedures were restructured. Many of the legislative frameworks were adopted or amended in recent years to align more closely with the standards and expectations of the European community. In addition to the legislative frameworks, there are several policy frameworks to guide the direction of the higher education sector and quality assurance in the medium- and long-term. Table 4 provides a summary of the legislative and policy frameworks for higher education and quality assurance in the systems included in this study.

Table 4. Legislative and Policy Frameworks for Higher Education and Quality Assurance (Selected Countries)

Country	Country Legislation, Legislative Decisions, Decrees, and Acts	Policy Documents, Strategies, and Plans
Austria	ACT on Quality Assurance in Higher Education (HS-QSG) Federal Act on the Organization of Universities and their Studies (Universities Act 2002 – UG) Federal Act on the External Quality Assurance in Higher Education and the Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (Act on Quality Assurance in Higher Education – HS-QSG) Federal Act on University of Applied Sciences Degree Programs (University of Applied Sciences Studies Act – FHStG) Private Universities Act – PUG	Austrian University Development Plan 2016-2021 National strategy on the social dimension of higher education Austrian Strategy for Education for Sustainable Development Strategy for Lifelong Learning LLL:2020 Strategy Global Learning in the Austrian education system

Country	Country Legislation, Legislative Decisions, Decrees, and Acts	Policy Documents, Strategies, and Plans
Germany	Foundation for the Accreditation of Study Courses in Germany Common structural guidelines of the Länder for the accreditation of Bachelor's and Master's study courses Qualifications Framework for German Higher Education Qualifications	National Action Plan on Integration Reform of Vocational Education and Training in Germany Excellence Initiative The new High-Tech Strategy, Innovations for Germany
Ireland	Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012	Action Plan for Education International Education Strategy 2016-2020 Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025 Irish Further Education and Training Strategy 2014-2019 National Strategy for Higher Education to 2030 The National Strategy on Education for Sustainable Development in Ireland, 2014-2020
Norway	Regulations relating to suitability assessment in higher education Regulations concerning quality assurance and quality development in higher education and tertiary vocational education Act relating to Universities and University Colleges	Norwegian Strategy for Skills Policy 2017-2021 Panorama (Strategy for cooperation on higher education and research with Brazil, China, India, Japan, Russia, and South Africa (2016-2020) Strategy for research and innovation cooperation with the EU
Romania	National Education Law Law on the approval of the Government Emergency Ordinance No. 75/2005 regarding the education quality assurance EMERGENCY ORDINANCE no. 75 of July 12, 2005 on the education quality assurance	National Strategy for Tertiary Education 2015-2020
Spain	Organic Law 4/2007, of 12 April, which amended Organic Law of 21 December on Spanish Universities The Spanish Organic Law on the Improvement of the Quality of Education (LOMCE) Royal Decree 1393/2007	Strategy for the Internationalization of Spanish Universities 2015 - 2020 Strategy University 2015 Development Education Strategy Paper

Country	Country Legislation, Legislative Decisions, Decrees, and Acts	Policy Documents, Strategies, and Plans
Sweden	The Swedish Higher Education Act The Higher Education Ordinance	Vision for Sweden 2025 The Swedish Innovation Strategy
Netherlands	Higher Education and Research Act (WHW) (only in Dutch available)	The Value of Knowledge, Strategic Agenda for Higher Education and Research 2015-2025 Action Plan, Make it in the Netherlands 2013-2016 Quality in Diversity, Strategic Agenda for Higher Education, Research and Science in the Netherlands

Source: World Bank authors.
Note: Links included for easy reference

Pending Changes to Legislative and Policy Frameworks on Quality Assurance

Table 4 illustrates a significant number of legislative and policy documents existing in the countries included in this study. Additional frameworks are being discussed in these countries which may either nullify or supplement existing frameworks (if the former become effective). This section discusses some proposed changes being discussed in these countries which may impact the respective higher education sectors, and quality assurance. It is worth reiterating that good practices cited in the systems included in this study may also be affected by the implementation of new legislative and policy frameworks. As such, the practices included in this study are likely to evolve if legislative frameworks are passed, amended, or repealed.

Germany: In February 2016, Germany's highest court—the Federal Constitutional Court (FCC)—handed down a ruling which would prompt fundamental changes to the country's accreditation system. In its ruling, the court ruled that certain aspects of QA in Germany were unconstitutional. Germany's Rectors' Conference noted in late 2016 that the ruling was an opportunity to improve the overall accreditation system as well as "procedures for external quality assurance."[45]

One of the imminent changes to external QA in Germany, emerging from the FCC's ruling, relates to the functions of the German Accreditation Council (GAC). The ruling transfers a key accreditation function from the GAC to EQAR. Based on the ruling, the GAC will no longer conduct a national review of Germany's

[45] German Rectors' Conference, Resolutions, *Reorganization of the Accreditation System, available at* https://www.hrk.de/resolutions-publications/resolutions/beschluss/detail/reorganisation-of-the-accreditation-system

QA agencies which relates to accrediting the QA agencies. Instead, Germany's QA system would rely on QA agencies which are evaluated by EQAR and registered with GAC. As a result, the FCC's ruling would allow for European QA agencies which are evaluated by EQAR and registered with GAC to perform accreditation functions in Germany. The ruling is expected to increase competition for program (accreditation) assurance procedures in Germany's crowded QA landscape, which currently hosts nine national QA agencies.

The FCC's ruling has implications for the GAC's future, and the Council's role. The ruling's impact, however, is not fully known since the changes emerging from the ruling have not been implemented. The FCC's ruling is scheduled to become effective in January 2018. From an operational perspective, QA agencies in Germany—such as ASIIN—will continue to conduct accreditation procedures and render decisions. The final decision concerning accreditation, however, will now reside with the GAC. In the existing system, Germany's universities would resolve disputes—which may result from the accreditation process—directly with QA agencies such as ASIIN. Under the changes emerging from the FCC's ruling, universities would resolve disputes, which includes initiating legal action, *with the GAC* based on results of the accreditation process *conducted by the QA agency*. The ruling is not expected to affect international accreditation procedures concerning Germany.

The FCC's ruling is not expected to increase competition for institutional (accreditation) assurance in Germany due to an existing reporting requirement. Documents prepared for the reporting process related to institutional reviews are required to be provided in the German language. As a result, there are few QA agencies abroad—other than Swiss and Austrian agencies—with the potential capacity to adhere to this reporting requirement.

The changes emerging from the FCC's ruling are being implemented with an insufficient period for stakeholder consultation. Previous changes were implemented after public consultations were conducted. It appears that some of Germany's QA agencies assert that HEIs may require more support as the institutions interpret and implement the new regulations. Due to the compressed timeframe within which the changes will take effect, ASIIN organized a conference with peers and experts to explore the legal and operational details of the FCC's ruling.

Ireland: In Ireland's QA system, there are expectations for greater synergies between education and training. More specifically, in the context of having strong mission-driven funding, there is a need to ensure that QA is supportive of various initiatives.

Legislative changes are being considered regarding QA in Ireland. A draft legislative bill exists in which conferring self-accrediting abilities to private HEIs—such as the Institutes of Technology—is being considered.

Norway: As noted in the discussion on polarities in internal and external QA, structural reforms are ongoing in Norway's higher education sector. The reforms focus on the merger of HEIs. Due to the reforms, HEIs with self-accreditation authority have expanded. This expansion of self-accrediting HEIs has led to the existence of fewer institutions that are obligated to apply to NOKUT to establish new study

programs (or change existing ones substantially).[46] In addition, new legal requirements being considered would require private University Colleges without self-accreditation authority to apply for institutional (accreditation) assurance procedures. NOKUT anticipates a reduction in its assurance activities related to program (accreditation) assurance, leading to the possibility of reallocating resources from program (accreditation) assurance toward supervisory activities.[47]

There is another pending legislative change to consider in Norway. Recently, the Ministry of Education and Research resolved to reorganize the Ministry and the agencies under its management. This reorganization is only possible by amending the Universities and University Colleges Act. In the proposed changes, NOKUT will remain an independent agency governed by a board. The changes would allow the Ministry to shift some of its operations to NOKUT, allowing the Ministry to impose new tasks on NOKUT which fall outside the ESG.[48]

Sweden: In July 2017, the Government of Sweden assigned an additional responsibility to UKÄ. Going forward, UKÄ will be tasked with QA procedures for research at Sweden's HEIs. This assignment adds to UKÄ's existing responsibilities for QA in higher education. UKÄ is in the preliminary stages of convening stakeholders to undertake the activities related to conducting QA for research activities.

The Independence of Quality Assurance Agencies

Representatives of each QA agency included in this study highlighted the respective agency's independence—both during site visits/interviews and in resources published by each agency. Research revealed, however, that there is nuance in each agency's interpretation—and practices—of "independence." While the independence of the QA agency falls outside the scope of practices for external QA of HEIs, agencies are assigned significant responsibilities in the context of the higher education sector. As a result, the independence of the QA agencies is critical to a discussion of practices in QA, particularly when the ability of QA agencies to conduct their operations and activities are threatened by legislative changes.

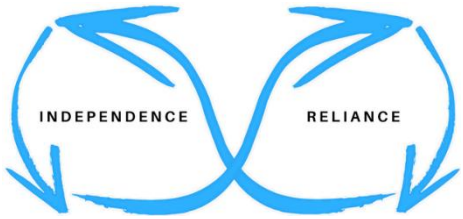
Standard 3.3 of the revised ESG is focused on the *administrative independence* of QA agencies, noting that "Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have **full** responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence."[49] In the context of a QA agency's independence, this is a narrow standard. It focuses only on the operations of the QA agency, and neglects to highlight that there are other relevant aspects of independence. These other relevant aspects influence the ability of the various QA agencies to operate independently. One aspect that is important to note concerns the leadership structure of each agency. While QA agencies in the study enjoy legal and operational independence, each agency's leadership team included members who were appointed by line ministries.[50] As such, while the QA agency may assert independence in its operations, certain individuals

[46] NOKUT (2017), *supra* note 26, at 57.
[47] *Id.*
[48] *Id.*
[49] Emphasis in bold and underline is based on the guideline in the EQUIP Project's *Comparative Analysis of the ESG 2015 and ESG 2005*. The emphasis indicates new elements included in the ESG 2015.
[50] In this context, the name of the leadership team varies across agencies.

who contribute to the decision-making process of the agency's leadership team, are externally appointed; not internally appointed. One analysis of the ESG—based on reviews of QA agencies' self-evaluations and external review reports—noted this concern euphemistically that there were "very few comments in the review reports about the structures of the agencies, such as the qualification or the development of the employees" in the context of human resources at the relevant QA agencies.[51] Although this concern emerged from the ESG related to resources, ESG 3.4, there is a direct link to the independence of the QA agency's staff to conduct their operations beyond the text of legislative acts or instruments of governance.

Fiscal independence is another noteworthy aspect where a narrow standard is included regarding the independence of QA agencies. Standard 3.5 of the revised ESG notes that "Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work." It is important to state that the income sources of QA agencies are important in a discussion of respective agencies' independence. Many of the agencies in the study have multiple income sources with an annual allocation in the national budget serving as a main source. Other sources include fee-based/consulting services provided by the QA agencies for local as well as international HEIs. In addition, legislation and guidelines in some European countries allow for an HEI to select any QA agency registered with EQAR to perform certain QA procedures involving the HEI. As such, fee-based services may be provided by QA agencies other than a national agency, potentially limiting the ability of the national QA agency to generate "adequate and appropriate resources" domestically. [52]

As a result, although the independence of QA agencies falls outside the scope of this study, there are polarities which need to be managed within each agency. These polarities focus on the *independence* of the agency as well as the agency's *reliance* on decision-making bodies operating outside of the agency, whether to appoint individuals to the QA agency's leadership team, allocate a key source of annual funding for the agency, or assign new activities and responsibilities.



In Romania, ARACIS is an autonomous public institution. It has financial autonomy, and is funded by evaluation fees paid by HEIs, and projects (both European and Romanian projects financed by European funds). The MoNE has no direct institutional influence on decisions made by ARACIS regarding external evaluation procedures and institutional QA.

[51] ENQA (2015). "Analysis of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) In External Review Reports: System-Wide Analysis, Resources, and Independence," Workshop Report 23. Brussels, Belgium: European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.
[52] ESG, *supra* note 17, at 23.

Evaluating the Impact of External Quality Assurance Systems

Section Summary

- There are fundamental challenges which exist in evaluating the impact of QA procedures.
- It is challenging to evaluate the impact of external QA given the restructuring of European higher education sectors in recent years.
- The Impala Project is a research activity focused on evaluating the impact of external QA. The core group of QA agencies represent Finland, Germany, Romania, and Spain. Results for the Impala Project are currently being peer-reviewed.

There is no shortage of analyses which have explored the impact of various external QA procedures in higher education. Several reviews of impact analyses have asserted that methodological problems emerged in previous studies which aimed to evaluate the impacts of QA, however.[53] A review of the studies noted that methodological limitations may have biased the research findings of the impact evaluations.[54]

There are fundamental challenges which exist in evaluating the impact of QA procedures. A common challenge is the difficulty in isolating conditions to determine causality. More specifically, there is the question of being able to isolate the impact of QA assurance procedures mandated by legislation and public policy, from initiatives adopted by HEIs for strategic purposes. For example, one study evaluated NOKUT using data from 2007/2008 to explore the impact of external QA in the Norwegian context. As stated previously, NOKUT's higher education sector has undergone a wave of structural reforms, which have not concluded. These reforms have been implemented after the study. As a result, there is also the emerging question on the relevance of impact evaluations in the context of QA systems which remain unsettled due to system-wide changes, whether imposed by national governments or the European community.

It is particularly challenging to evaluate the impact of external QA given the restructuring of European higher education sectors in recent years, marked by a "flurry of QA activity that has led to the setting up of multiple organic structures in different countries."[55]

A recent research project focused on evaluating the impact of external QA proved to be promising.[56] The project focused on HEIs in several European countries with a core group of QA agencies and HEIs represented by Finland, Germany, Romania, and Spain. Results for AQU Catalonia from the Impala Project—in the context of external QA—revealed that program accreditation did not lead to changes in teaching methodologies i.e. there was no change in the number of classes offered. The observation of no changes resulting from program accreditation stems from the role of accreditation in the Catalan assurance framework.

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[53] Liu, S., Tan, M., and Meng Z. (2015). "Impact of Quality Assurance on Higher Education Institutions: A Literature Review," Higher Education Evaluation and Development, Vol. 9 Issue:2, pp.17-34.
[54] *Id.*
[55] Rodríguez, S (2013). "International Overview of Quality Assessment in Higher Education," Madrid, Spain.
[56] AQU Catalonia, The Impala Project

A key conclusion for AQU Catalonia emerged that accreditation was not a useful instrument for assessing change.[57] Despite the limitation of program accreditation as determined in the context of AQU Catalonia, it is worth stating that program accreditation plays a key role due to the outcomes generated from the procedure. In Catalonia, the impact of program accreditation is evident in the legal outcome resulting from the procedure: programs are either closed or allowed to continue. The Impala Project focused on one HEI in each of the core countries. As a result, findings should be used with caution, given both the challenges of conducting impact evaluations in QA and the participation of only one HEI in each of the core countries.

Box 2. The IMPALA Project

The Impala Project was a three-year research project which aimed to assess whether external QA procedures conducted by QA agencies had an observable impact. The Project used one methodology to evaluate the impact of different external QA procedures across universities in several European countries. The core project was implemented by European QA agencies in collaboration with four HEIs from Finland, Germany, Romania, and Spain. The QA agencies involved in the core project were FINEEC, evalag, ARACIS, and AQU Catalonia. Other partners in Belgium and Norway participated in the project.

The methodology of the Impala Project was based on a before-after comparison approach, analyzing data obtained prior to an external review. This data was compared with data obtained six months after the review.

Source: AQU Catalonia, The Results of the Impala Project

Some countries conduct regular system-wide analyses. In the past, both the GAC and AQU Catalonia (along with other QA agencies in Spain) conducted meta-evaluations. In the case of GAC, the evaluation was conducted when system accreditation was implemented in Germany. In Spain, agencies conducted periodic evaluations in collaboration with universities and cross-evaluations among themselves with the intent of checking the homogeneity of results.[58] It is worth noting that these evaluations in Germany and Spain predate the Impala Project. It is also worth noting that these system-wide evaluations were conducted in countries with multiple QA agencies. In most European countries, there is a single QA agency for the higher education sector.

Quality Assurance 2.0?

This study focused primarily on QA practices in selected systems. As discussed in the study, QA systems must evolve over time. The growth of higher education globally has contributed to the need for QA

[57] *Id.*

[58] AQ Austria (2014). "Quality Audit in the European Higher Education Area, A Comparison of Approaches," Vienna, Austria: AQ Austria.

agencies and stakeholders to consider the next step for QA in their respective contexts. In the European context, the ESG has been a critical step for establishing a common set of guidelines and principles.

The strong history of higher education in Europe has led to European HEIs partnering with peer HEIs globally. In the European context, the growth of cross-border higher education prompts the need for cross-border QA. Cross-border QA refers to "external QA activities of a QA agency carried out in a country other than the one in which it is based or primarily operates."[59] NVAO cited cross-border QA as being the next challenge on the horizon for its agency. Cross-border QA may be particularly challenging in large higher education sectors with several HEIs with global partnerships, and in sectors where there are large HEIs with a rich history of strong study programs and research.

As a result, another pair of polarities is likely to emerge for the next step of QA in Europe: national higher education and cross-border higher education.

Conclusions

It is clear that, despite the increasing number of strong practices in external QA existing in Europe, undoubtedly aided by the refined ESG, a lack of knowledge transfer of external QA practices remains.

Effective knowledge transfer of external QA practices should begin with establishing common terminology. Based on the systems included in this study, there is a shared understanding of key QA concepts such as internal and external QA, standards and guidelines, as well as program accreditation and institutional accreditation to name a few. However, there is also a gray area of understanding across systems where a common understanding of concepts—such as evaluations, reviews, and audits—resides.

This study explored sound practices in European countries regarding quality assurance, specifically external QA.

Using polarities as criteria to compare various QA systems, several conclusions have emerged.

1. QA systems in Europe which are regarded as having "good" and "best" practices are managing polarities well as their systems continue to mature and evolve. The common polarities that are managed well emerge as internal and external QA; program assurance and institutional assurance; as well as minimum standards and standards for enhancing the higher education system.

2. Quality assurance cannot be scaled from one context to another. Sound practices which exist in one (small) system may not have similar results in other (larger) systems. Each country has a competitive advantage of proprietary knowledge about its higher education system. The size of the higher education system has a direct impact on the QA system, particularly in the context of resources available to the QA agency/agencies. Large higher education systems—resulting from the (net) growth in student enrollment, study programs, and HEIs—become unmanageable over time without commensurate checks and balances to maintain the QA systems. Legislative frameworks also challenge the ability of higher education stakeholders to manage the QA process. Based on the QA systems compared, large (higher education) systems are comprised of smaller subunits. These

[59] ENQA/ESU/EUA/EURASHE/EQAR (2017). "Key Considerations for Cross-Border Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area," Brussels, Belgium.

subunits take the form of specialized QA agencies responsible for specific fields of study or programs in the case of Germany. Subunits may also emerge as a result of geographic regions, in the case of Spain and the United States, or where there is a relatively small number of HEIs, in the case of Ireland.

3. Related to the size of the higher education systems, there is a breaking point, beyond which, QA mechanisms are ineffective. This point emerges when the QA system does not evolve to reflect changing circumstances, whether it is an increase in the number of universities, student enrollment, or programs.

4. Legal frameworks are critical to the operational activities of QA agencies particularly in the context of resources. Several systems are considering changes in the legislative and policy frameworks which govern QA. In the short- and medium-term, the impact on QA of the proposed changes is unclear.

5. Insufficient budgets are often viewed as a constraint that cripples action in many countries and contexts. In the model of polarity management, stakeholders in many countries managed polarities, even if they were unaware of the model. As a result, insufficient budgets may be a rare occurrence or an ongoing situation. Stakeholders used the adverse scenario of insufficient budgets as an impetus for action to transform the higher education system. Ireland is the most prominent European example, which used the adverse fiscal events in recent years as an opportunity to transform its education system, including quality assurance in higher education.

Recommendations

1. **In the context of polarities in Romanian quality assurance, ARACIS should consider the following:**
    a. Identify which organizational challenges are polarities and which challenges are problems which may be solved;
    b. Become adept in identifying and naming polarities;
    c. Conduct a Polarity Mapping exercise;

2. **ARACIS' staff should participate in ongoing professional development activities** as observers in evaluation procedures at peer QA agencies around the world, both regionally in Europe, and internationally. Participants in the evaluation process in Romania's QA agency may pursue the following options:
    i. observe QA processes in different countries *as individuals* to allow for a diverse range of experiences, and deep understanding from directly observing a range of systems;
    ii. observe QA processes in different countries *as a team* to gain a shared understanding of the QA systems which are similar to Romania's.

    There are advantages to both approaches (listed as i and ii above), and neither is considered better than the other for the purpose of gaining from the QA experiences of other countries and economies.

3. **In the context of building trust, ARACIS should consider exploring opportunities to collaborate on research with universities and student organizations in Romania.** Trust-based relations and collaboration between the QA agency and HEIs would strengthen the higher education system and,

ultimately, the HEIs. The portals created by AQU Catalonia and NOKUT are two examples to consider as foundational elements of collaboration.

4. **Simplified processes are more desirable than complex processes which are difficult for stakeholders to understand.** ARACIS should consider reducing the complexity of its external QA procedures while simultaneously defining its procedures clearly, including the agency's roles and responsibilities in higher education.

5. **HEIs have the primary responsibility for QA.** ARACIS should collaborate with HEIs to strengthen each institution's internal QA processes while simultaneously enhancing its own external QA procedures based on lessons from European countries and economies.

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Annexes

Annex 1—Acknowledgements

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Annex 2— Sample Interview Guide

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION
GENERAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

Sector Context	How would you describe the main strengths of the quality assurance mechanisms established in your country?
	How would you describe the main areas for development regarding the quality assurance mechanisms in your country? What needs to be introduced or changed?
	Could you identify 1-2 good practices in quality assurance emerging from your agency (which can serve as an example for countries seeking to strengthen their QA practices)?

Purpose	What is your agency's purpose and how was it identified?
	Does your agency have procedures in place for evaluating its own purpose periodically?
	Has the QA agency, in consultation with HEIs developed a limited number of standards?
	How does your agency evaluate higher education institutions?
	Is an institution's improvement evaluated? If so, what does this procedure entail?
	Could you please describe your institution's structure, composition, and main functions?

Classifications/Categorization of HEIs	Has the agency sufficiently differentiated institutions by their purpose?

Legislative Framework	Could you identify key events in the higher education system in your country which prompted changes to the QA system?

Outcomes of Quality Assurance	What role does the agency have in evaluating new study programs?
	Are the outcomes of the QA process published?
	How are they analyzed and used in the QA process moving forward?
	Does your agency provide training for the panel of experts during the external quality assurance process?

	Are there options available to appeal decisions made by your agency and/or the external panel of experts regarding an institution's quality assurance practices? If so, please describe.
	What specific criteria and standards are used for your agency's external quality assurance evaluations and mechanisms?

Agency Independence	How would you describe your agency's independence within the higher education sector? Legal, fiduciary, operational, or other?
	Can you briefly describe the internal economy or budgeting system for your agency?