

Quality Assurance Review for Higher Education

„Studiul privind implicarea părților interesate în asigurarea externă a calității” aduce noi provocări pentru învățământul superior

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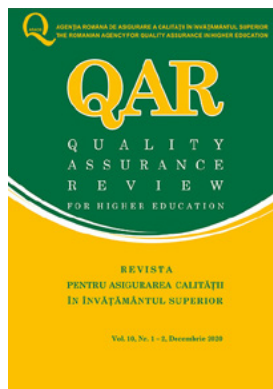
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**The “Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance”
Brings in New Challenges for Higher Education**

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The “Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance” Brings in New Challenges for Higher Education

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Rezumat: *Studiul a fost elaborat și publicat în cadrul proiectului „Implicarea eficientă a părților interesate¹ în activități externe de asigurare a calității” (ESQA), cu numărul 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3_BOLOGNA, co-finanțat prin programul ERASMUS+ al Uniunii Europene. Consorțiul este condus de Ministerul Educației și Cercetării, ca autoritate națională, și include trei organizații Europene reprezentând agențiile de asigurare a calității (ENQA), universitățile (EURASHE) și studenții (ESU), precum și cinci agenții de asigurare a calității din România (ARACIS), Franța (HCERES), Bulgaria (NEAA), Danemarca (DAI) și Republica Moldova (ANACEC).*

În studiu se constată că participarea părților interesate în asigurarea externă a calității are multe elemente comune în toate țările participante, ca de exemplu reprezentarea studenților, cadrelor didactice și angajatorilor. Totodată, se constată că reprezentarea unor categorii largi de părți interesate, ca de exemplu autoritățile locale și societatea civilă, așa cum este și cazul României, este destul de limitată.

Studiul este rezultatul unei largi consultări efectuate de consorțiul proiectului, care se bazează pe informații recente primite de la un număr relevant de participanți reprezentând actorii implicați în asigurarea calității. În perioada următoare, implicarea părților interesate reprezentând angajatorii, autoritățile locale și societatea civilă în asigurarea externă a calității va trebui să devină o prioritate și în România, în scopul de a ridica nivelul de încredere în învățământul superior;

¹ În limba engleză: “stakeholders”, în limba franceză: «parties prenantes».

al înțelegerii reciproce a problemelor, al transparenței și accesului la informație, pentru a face învățământul superior mai incluziv și mai bine adaptat la cerințele societății.

„Ghidul pentru implicarea efectivă în asigurarea calității a părților interesate”, elaborat și publicat, de asemenea, în cadrul proiectului, va trebui să devină în viitorul apropiat un document de referință al agențiilor de asigurare a calității pentru punerea în practică a acestor obiective.

Cuvinte cheie: *proiect ESQA, studiu, ghid, părți interesate, asigurarea externă a calității*

Abstract: *The “Study on stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance” was drafted and published under the framework of the project “Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities (ESQA)”, project number 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3_BOLOGNA, co-funded through ERASMUS+ Programme of the European Union. The consortium led by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research as national authority, includes 3 European organizations representing quality assurance agencies – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), universities – European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and students – European Students’ Union (ESU) and 5 quality assurance agencies from Romania (ARACIS), France (HCERES), Bulgaria (NEAA), Denmark (DAI) and Republic of Moldova (ANACEC).*

The study shows that the participation of stakeholders in the external quality assurance has many common elements in all participating countries, such as representation of students, teachers and employers. Also, the study shows that the representation of a large categories of stakeholders, like local authorities and civil society, is quite limited, as it is also the case in Romania.

The document is the result of a large consultation activity performed by the project consortium, based on up-dated direct information collected from a relevant number of participants, namely actors in higher education involved in quality assurance. For Romania, in the next period, enhanced engagement of stakeholders representing employers, local authorities and civil society in external quality assurance activity should become a priority, aiming at increasing trust and mutual understanding, transparency and access to information, in order to make the QA system more comprehensive and responsive to societal needs.

The “Guide for effective stakeholders’ involvement in QA” (4), also drafted and published in the framework of the ESQA project, should become, in the near future, a milestone document for the quality assurance agencies, in order to make this commitment effective.

Keywords: *ESQA project, study, guide, stakeholders, external quality assurance*

1. Introduction

In the Bucharest ministerial communiqué (2012), the ministers responsible for higher education affirmed: *“We commit to both maintaining the public responsibility for quality assurance and to actively involve a wide range of stakeholders in this development”* (1, p. 2). In the Paris Communiqué (2018) (2, p. 2), the ministers stated that *“Fulfilling our commitments depends on the concerted efforts of national policy-makers, public authorities, institutions, staff, students and other stakeholders as well as coordination at EHEA level”*.

The Bologna thematic peer-learning group C on Quality Assurance members identified the theme “Role and engagement of stakeholders in internal and external quality assurance” as being one in which work still has to be done in the member countries.

The “Study on stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance” was drafted and published under the framework of the project “Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities (ESQA)”, project number 607068-EPP-1-2018-1-RO-EPPKA3_BOLOGNA, co-funded through ERASMUS+ Programme of the European Union. The consortium led by the Romanian Ministry of Education and Research as national authority, includes 3 European organizations representing quality assurance agencies – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), universities – European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and students –European Students’ Union (ESU) and 5 quality assurance agencies from Romania (ARACIS), France (HCERES), Bulgaria (NEAA), Denmark (DAI) and Republic of Moldova (ANACEC).

As it is mentioned in the Methodology of the study, “The present study builds on six partially interlinked sources of information, namely 1) a survey sent to quality assurance agencies in the EHEA that are members or affiliates of ENQA; 2) an analysis of ENQA Agency Review reports; 3) interviews with quality assurance agency representatives; 4) outcomes of peer-learning activities by the ESQA partners; 5) a survey sent to National Unions of Students that are members of ESU and 6) interviews with EURASHE experts” (3, p. 9–13).

With the objective of mapping the current state of stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance activities in the EHEA, ENQA distributed a survey, developed by the ESQA consortium, to its members and affiliates. Most of the respondents represent national or regional comprehensive quality assurance agencies, while a few of them are from discipline specific agencies, working either nationally, regionally or at the pan-European level (3, p. 9).

The study covers in a logical order subjects as stakeholder categories and roles, objectives and benefits of stakeholder involvement, barriers for effective stakeholder

involvement, stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance activities, recruitment of stakeholders, training of stakeholders, independence vis-à-vis stakeholder involvement, communication with and towards stakeholders. Also, the analysis is performed against the ESG, with many examples from participating quality assurance agencies.

The results of the study are published (3). The study stood as starting point of the “Guide for effective stakeholders’ involvement in QA”, authored by independent experts Lucien Bollaert and Stefan Delplace, document which was recently published (4).

The aim of this QAR paper is to present the study but also to concentrate on a few topics, of immediate interest for Romania, in the perspective of an improved ARACIS methodology for external evaluation, for which work is in progress. These topics are related to engagement of representatives of civil society and employers in external quality assurance activities.

2. Stakeholders Categories

One first objective of the survey conducted in the framework of ESQA project was to define who are the “stakeholders”, in fact the understanding of the project partners, as well as other EHEA countries quality assurance agencies, of this concept. For people with English as mother tongue, the term seems to be clear, but in many other languages it does not even exist. In such cases, translation is somewhat more complex and even it may require explanations. For instance, “stakeholders” translates in both French {«parties prenantes»} and Romanian {„părți interesate”}, as “interested sides/parties”. This „ad-litteram” translation seems to be a somewhat weaker concept than “stakeholders” is in English, where it suggests that interest and participation are rooted together. Despite these differences, the result of the survey showed a high degree of compatibility between participants’ understanding of the term. The survey showed wide common participation of the categories of stakeholders who already are or should engage in external as well as internal quality assurance activities in all quality assurance agencies participating in the survey. The categories of stakeholders involved in external QA processes and activities, were students, alumni, employers, teaching staff, other staff of HEIs, teachers’ unions, students’ unions, professional bodies, university associations, national HE authority, local authorities, civil society, other (specific for each respondent, in the case of Romania the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Pre-university Education – ARACIP in drafting the national regulatory framework, in other cases research organisations, researchers etc.). The survey showed also that categories as students, students’ unions, teaching staff, university associations, national HE authority are present in most activities related to

quality assurance at study programs, institution level, as well as in participating at drafting legal and regulatory provisions. However, as the survey included also questions on present engagement of the rest of other important categories of stakeholders, such as employers, alumni, professional bodies, local authorities, and civil society, the results were showing differences between participants, in approach as well in the actual engagement involvement of representatives of these categories in quality assurance activities in higher education.

The survey results indicate that "About two-thirds of the agencies involve national higher education authorities, whereas local authorities have a smaller role. Likewise, only one-fifth of the agencies involve civil society in their processes and activities" (3, p. 14). In Romania the survey identified participation of most categories of stakeholders in quality assurance at different levels but no general involvement in external quality assurance activities of local authorities and civil society. It is interesting to notice that in the Analysis of external review reports of ENQA Agency Reviews, totalling 44 quality assurance agencies from 28 countries, including agencies working at the European level (3, p.10), there are very few direct mentions which would indicate that involving representatives of civil society should be a priority for the agencies.

3. Why Involvement of Stakeholders?

The question is a legitimate one for quality assurance and it may be reduced to two more pragmatic and complementary ones: what are the benefits for HE institutions and quality assurance agencies to make considerable efforts to make stakeholders interested, willing and available to engage in what seems not be their main concern and what would be the interest of external stakeholders to allocate their time and efforts to become engaged in higher education quality assurance activities?

The study gives detailed answers to the first question. Thus, the survey shows that "70% of the respondents consider making quality assurance system more comprehensive and responsive to societal needs as one of the key objectives" (3, p. 14–15). In the same survey, "60% of the respondents consider increasing trust and mutual understanding as a main aim for involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance" (3, p. 15). Other answers, quite relevant but with less widespread level of agreement can be found in the study.

Here, a paradox may be easily identified: while majority of respondents refer to societal needs and relevance of quality assurance for the society, very few agencies involve representatives of civil society in their evaluation processes. This contradiction is not approached in the section of the study dealing with barriers in engaging stakeholders, which is quite however relevant and useful, evidencing several other common problems the partner QA agency face in their countries.

We consider participation of civil society representatives in quality assurance of higher education as an important objective for the agencies and for the HEIs, as a means to regain confidence in this period of intensive coverage in the media of cases of plagiarism and corruption. Accountability of HEIs, with participation of stakeholders, should also stimulate enrolment in higher education and public investment. We believe that the society would welcome such an initiative.

Regarding participation of employers, the study indicates that “The survey explored stakeholder involvement in institutional and programme assessments separately. Nearly all respondents’ agencies perform programme assessments and almost as many carry out institutional evaluations” and also “that there are no big differences in the participation of different stakeholder groups between these two activities. Students, teaching staff and employers are respectively the most involved stakeholder groups in both types of assessments” (3, p. 17). However, although participation of employers seems to be as active as the one of students and teaching staff, in other sections of the study, especially in the one dedicated to barriers, important obstacles to their engagement are identified. The experience to involve students at all levels of activity of the agencies is very relevant in Romania but also in the other cases mentioned in the Study.

4. Barriers and Selection Methods

The study mentions, and also quotes previous findings, that “Student and employer engagements have been identified as areas that still need further work” (3, p.16). In the survey, 70% of the respondents consider that the main barrier for the effective involvement of students is the lack of sufficient knowledge or experience in QA, other options did not get many votes. As participation of students is an obligatory requirement of the ESG, the HEIs and agencies are approaching students’ organisations and even individual students aiming to engage them in all quality assurance activities, both internal and external. In Romania, student federations are contributing to the permanent up-dating of the ARACIS National Register of Evaluators - Students, which is a challenging activity having in mind that all study domains should be represented, as well all three study cycles, experienced students graduate and therefore they cannot participate to evaluations any more.

In the case of employers, lack of sufficient knowledge or experience in higher education management or administration, lack of interest or motivation to be involved and lack of time and/or financial motivation were found to be the most important barriers, reported in the majority of empirical evidence reported for the study. For ARACIS, employers in the fields of engineering, health sciences and some other “vocational” study domains have been more interested to become

engaged in quality assurance activities, as panel members for awarding EUR-ACE Label in engineering and drafting specific standards for study programs and in the above-mentioned domains.

Whereas for students and teaching staff selection methods for those willing to engage in quality assurance seem to be easier to be identified and agreed upon, for employers and representatives of civil society the first problem is to identify those willing to engage and then to “select” those who would bring real added value to the process. As selection methods differ for the same stakeholder category for engagement as review experts and engagement in e.g. governing bodies, in Romania the first category has proven to be more difficult to approach and involve.

Also, training methods for stakeholders may be very different of types of training the agency organizes for teaching staff and students, which is another problem identified by the study.

5. Conclusion

The “Study on stakeholder involvement in external quality assurance” (3) is the result of a quite large consultation activity performed by the project consortium, based on up-dated direct information of a relevant number of participants representing actors in higher education involved in quality assurance. For Romania, in the next period engagement of stakeholders representing employers, local authorities and civil society in external quality assurance activity should be a priority, aiming at increasing trust and mutual understanding, transparency and access to information in order to make the QA system more comprehensive and responsive to societal needs.

The “Guide for effective stakeholders’ involvement in QA” (4) should, as an important outcome of the project, become a milestone document, giving many possible answers on how to make this commitment effective. The Guide is to be considered seriously by quality assurance agencies and applied in their activity in the near future.

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