2022 European Quality Assurance Forum

Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

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Call for contributions: Paper submission form
Deadline 22 July 2022

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Short bio (150 words max): I have a master's degree in business economics and law. Since 2006 I have been in charge of the Evaluation and Quality Office of the University of Verona, collaborating in the creation of a University quality assurance system. I was the University referent on the occasion of the site visits for the periodic accreditation of the University in 2018. I am currently enrolled in the first year of the Doctoral Course in Human Sciences of the University of Verona, where I am carrying out a research project on experiences integration of the University QA systems, with a view to transformative assessment and faculty development.

If there are several authors, please copy and fill in the fields for each author and indicate who is the corresponding author and <u>who will be responsible for presenting the paper</u> at the Forum.

IMPORTANT: If you are submitting a proposal, please do not register for the event until the results of the selection process have been announced. Papers selected for EQAF 2022 will benefit from one reduced fee per contribution, which will be applied through a special registration process.

During the Forum, the full text of all papers presented at the Forum as well as the associated Powerpoint presentations will be published on the Forum website. If you do not wish your paper to be published, please indicate so here. This has no consequences on the selection of the papers. Please however note that all Powerpoint presentations will be published, regardless of whether the full paper is published.

Proposal

Title: Integration of quality assurance systems in universities

Abstract (150 words max):

Quality assurance systems in Higher Education see the evaluation process as a fundamental phase of their development, as it is fundamental to the definition and verification of the achievement of their objectives. It moves on multiple dimensions that the literature identifies in a triple focus: research, teaching and organizational structure, to which is also added the third mission, an area only recently explored and considered in this perspective.

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It only rarely considers quality systems with a systemic and integrated approach, which allows to correlate subjects, actions and performance in a virtuous circuit of continuous improvement.

The ability to integrate a QA system is essentially linked in the definition of quality principles and requirements, which can become useful references for integration, but also for sharing at an international level for the definition of a common language of QA.

The corresponding sub-topic of the proposal:Value-centred international cooperation in higher education

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details. No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Concepts of quality assurance and management are now part of the organizational culture of the Universities. Quality Assurance (QA) systems are, in large part, provided for by national regulatory dictates or supranational indications (such as, for example, at European level are the ESG Guidelines "European Standard Guidelines"), but their specific definition, in terms of guiding principles, requirements and methodologies, are often delegated to the national evaluation agencies or to the autonomy of individual universities. For this reason, the experiences of implementation of QA systems in different countries and in different universities is an interesting source of information to understand how quality in universities is understood, pursued and verified.

The literature often deals with the treatment of the experiences of implementation of QA systems in the individual areas in which the University's activity is carried out - teaching, research, third mission, organisation - but only rarely considers quality systems with a systemic and integrated approach, which allows to correlate subjects, actions and performance in a virtuous circuit of continuous improvement.

The integration capacity of a QA system is essentially linked in the definition of quality principles and requirements, which can become useful references for integration, but also for the international sharing of a common language of AQ.

Evaluation in the three dimensions: teaching, research and organization in universities

The scientific debate regarding the development of quality assurance and management systems in universities has flourished considerably in the last 20 years, also as a result of important regulatory interventions by the various national and international academic institutions.

A turning point, at European level, was the Bologna Process of 1999, from which the Ministries of Higher Education of the European countries started the promotion of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA), based on shared characterizing elements, including the presence of external and internal evaluation systems of the Universities. However, at the international level, the experiences of different countries in implementing quality management systems differ according to the maturity of the sector, the level of flexibility given by the regulatory framework of reference (Billing, 2004) and the national cultural context in which it is inserted (Kells, 1999).

Quality assurance systems in Higher Education see the evaluation process as a fundamental phase of their development, as it is fundamental to the definition and verification of the achievement of their objectives. It moves on multiple dimensions that the literature identifies in a triple focus: research, teaching and organizational structure, to which is also added the third mission, an area only recently explored and considered in this perspective.

In the university field, the literature on evaluation addresses the issues of research, teaching and governance of a University.

Evaluation in the context of research is conducted through peer review – by other researchers – either through a real review of the product or through an indirect evaluation, as in the case of the use of citation indexes. The dimensions of the evaluation concern: internal quality, importance and impact in the scientific community and impact outside the academic and scientific community (Baccini, 2010,

p.40). The open debate in the literature concerns how to evaluate the internal quality of a product in the context of qualitative research. The main subject of the discussion is whether it is correct to use the same evaluation criteria for qualitative research as for quantitative research. In addition, it discusses what the different evaluation criteria should be used: "internal validity", "external validity", "reliability" and "objectivity" (Devers, 1999, p.1157) or whether it is correct to use the same criteria for all qualitative research areas or whether to provide for specific ones (Krefting, 1991, p.215). A proposal on qualitative research derives from the "gold standards" defined by Lincoln and Guba, which suggest evaluating a research based on its reliability, according to the criteria of: "credibility", "transferibility", "dependability" and "confirmability" (Lincoln & Cuba, 1986, p.189).

An interesting alternative to the use of evaluation criteria concerns the use of the "EPICURE" evaluation agenda that encourages the reflective dialogue of the evaluator and the researcher (Stige, Malterud, Midtgarden, 2009). The agenda considers the following elements for product reflection: "engagement", "processing", "interpretation", "self-critique", "social-critique", "usefulness", "relevance", "ethics". The process of peer reviewing qualitative research could be developed in the direction of a dialogic reflexivity that an agenda like EPICURE suggests (Mortari, 2018, p.116).

In the field of teaching, the literature focuses on practices useful for the construction of a knowledge management model for the evaluation of curricula; evaluation the latter which is seen as a series of actions aimed at continuous improvement of the quality of teaching in cyclical terms, as per deming's "Plan-Do-Check-Act" model (2000). The definition of quality standards of teaching, as experienced in the United Kingdom (Stowell et al. 2016, p. 517) could be useful for the evaluation of curricula, although there may be difficulties in defining unambiguous standards for all disciplinary areas.

The evaluation methodologies can be varied, in this field, but the most used and also the most debated is that of evaluation by students: Student Evaluation of Teaching (SET). Another method of evaluation, still not widespread, concerns peer evaluation, which allows you to collect constructive feedback from peers.

A very important strand in the evaluation of teaching concerns the evaluation of student learning, a very important moment in the training path of students, because it is able to reduce the gap between the current level of performance and the desired learning objective (Lizzio & Wilson, 2008). An important lever to improve this aspect would be the support to students to understand how to use the feedback received and how to make it useful, thus implementing the concept of self-regulation of students, that is, involvement and awareness on the state of their learning path.

The third theme of the theory of evaluation, in the university environment, concerns the governance of a University, which must be evaluated in close relation to the field of research and teaching, with which it influences each other (Rosa, Sarrico & Amaral, 2012). The scientific comparison has brought out very different evaluation models, some of which derive from evaluation approaches and management tools of the profit sector, calibrated however with respect to Higher Education.

The most widespread model for the evaluation of the governance of a University, starting from the mid-80s, is that of Total Quality Management (TQM), an organizational model that consists in considering the integrity with which the organization aims to improve quality through the achievement of the mission, in which everyone recognizes themselves. The principles of TQM can be applied to both profit and education (Farooq et al., 2007). Alongside the TQM, the model of the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) is also beginning to be adopted, whose characteristic concerns the definition of quality standards – of products, services and organization – in generic terms and therefore applicable to any body and company. In the European context, an important role in promoting evaluation models shared between the various European States has been played by the Bologna Process, which was born in 1999 as an intergovernmental collaboration agreement in the field of higher education. The aim was to build a European Higher Education Area based on principles and criteria shared between the signatory countries, including that of "academic quality, economic development and social cohesion". This process has evolved over time also thanks to international organizations such as EUA and ENQA, which have defined international quality standards in training: European Standard Guidelines (ESG, 2015).

The main critical issues in the application of TQM in the evaluation of governance in academic institutions concern: i) organizational fragmentation, ii) emphasis on internal competition, iii) the absence of strong leadership (Pratasavitskaya & Stensaker, 2010; Rosa, Sarrico & Amaral, 2012). A part of the literature has therefore hypothesized the use of evaluation approaches that focus on management and leadership as relevant factors in the evaluation of the effectiveness of the university (Hollenbeck et al., 2006). In this regard, it should be noted that in the Italian national context, on the

basis of this evaluation approach, a further line of evaluation has materialized since 2009, not so much of the governance of a University as instead of the "performance" of its technical-management structure of academic institutions.

At a general level, the phenomenon of evaluation is addressed by the scientific literature from different perspectives; Alkin & Christie (2004) identify three of them: i) the uses of evaluation in informing decision-making and determining organizational change; ii) the research method, focused on experimentation or quasi-experimentation, iii) the construction of judgments or the value given to the outcome of the survey carried out by the evaluators.

This threefold perspective makes it possible to fully grasp the validity and solidity of an evaluation program.

In the first perspective, in fact, the literature demonstrates the importance of stakeholder involvement in the definition of the evaluation question for the use of the evaluation. According to Stufflebeam's approach, the evaluator must involve the stakeholders of the evaluation program to define the evaluation questions, draw up evaluation plans, review the draft reports and disseminate the results (Stufflebeam, 2001, p.57).

Among the methodologists of evaluative research Campbell, he defined the important tool of field experimentation and, alternatively, other sets of "almost-experimental" methodologies for research (Campbell, 1957). Finally, the third perspective of evaluation theories concerns the evaluator's ability to determine value judgments, capable of guiding decision-making policies. If the evaluator were to limit himself, in fact, to simply providing information to the decision-makers and passing the responsibility for the final judgment to non-professionals, it would be a failure (Scriven, 1983, p. 248).

A transversal perspective of a new evaluative approach

A transversal perspective of a new evaluative approach, capable of overcoming working methods simply based on regulatory dictates and on a logic of mere accountability of the teaching, research and organizational action, consists in the theory of transformative evaluation. This new perspective, still in the process of evolution, focuses on the objective of transforming the reality object of the evaluation, starting from procedures that take on an improving sense first of all for those who act daily in the context; this is made possible thanks to the use of the research skills that academics have gained in their profession and that can be used for this heuristic path having as its focus that of improvement (Harvey & Newton, 2007). Such improvement involves actors in addition to public managers and practices beyond strategic management and is seen as an element of public value creation (Bryson, 2017).

A further evolution is due to the theory of "Development Evaluation", which with the 8 principles defined by Patton in 2016, allows us to think of evaluation as a lever to ensure success in a process of innovation and development (Patton, 2016). Empirical research has shown that the use of the evolutionary approach, for example, in research offers undoubted advantages for the management of complexity and innovation (Rey et al., 2014).
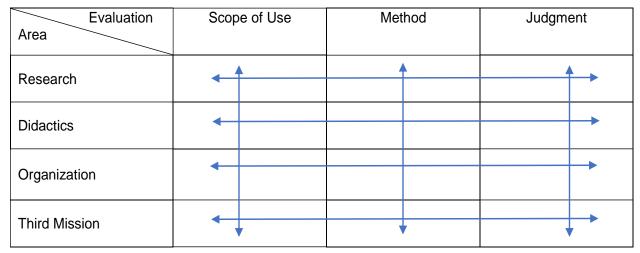
An interesting aspect to consider for the implementation of the evolutionary assessment concern the skills and qualities required by the subjects in charge of this role. To work collaboratively in the development process, in fact, it is necessary that the evaluator possesses a wide range of skills and qualities, such as:·the ability to build relationships of trust; adaptation and cultural competence; strong methodological skills; an in-depth understanding of the initiative (McDonald, 2016, p.86).

The evaluative moment, within academic practice, represents an integral and significant part of Faculty development, that is, the development and renewal of teachers' teaching skills. The transition from teacher-centred learning to that of student-centred learning, has made evident the need for change, to which the academic community is called to respond by finding in Faculty development new strategies and a new approach to teaching, aware of the fact that the improvement of teachers' professional skills leads to an improvement in student success (Sorcinelli, 2020). Research in the literature on Faculty development highlights the usefulness and relevance of the objectives and the increase in knowledge of educational principles and the key development perspectives consisting in the use of teaching through experience, the prediction of feedback, comparison with the community of colleagues, curriculum design interventions and the use of different teaching methodologies (Steinert et al, 2006).

Evaluations, through the collection of data on the activities and effectiveness of a programme, in a systemic logic should not be used only for summative purposes. We must "close the cycle". The evaluation of the programme is more than reporting to others and justifying the existence of a programme. A good evaluation system helps guide and improve your work, informs the decision-making process and allows you to prove your effectiveness to others. (Plank et al, 2010, p.148). Precisely for this reason the introduction of concepts of systemic thinking in evaluation is useful to face situations in a richer way and bring awareness of what is included in the evaluation and why this is done (Torres-Cuello, 2018, p.545).

Considering, therefore, the areas of the university system and the triple angle with which to theorize an evaluation, we can consider this research matrix, with which it would be useful to face the modeling of an effective evaluation system:

Evaluation / Area	Scope of Use	Method	Judgment
Research			
Didactics			
Organization			
Third Mission			

A systemic view of this matrix with the correlations existing between the various frameworks has not currently been addressed in the literature and it would be useful to do so to make a new evaluative approach possible. Consider, moreover, how an evaluation model that manages to encompass all the areas of action of the university, can favorably contribute to improving further possible areas of intervention, such as the third university mission, that is, the sphere of all those activities that have economic and social repercussions on the community.

The importance of sharing AQ practice integration solutions internationally

The perspective of integration with which a quality assurance system is developed in the university environment has been the subject of an interesting study by Manatos et al. (2015) which noted how reading addresses the integration of quality management in university institutions. Integration, in this research, is understood in a double meaning:

- Integration within the quality assurance system itself, which can take place: i) between the different areas in which the activities of the Universities are carried out (teaching, research, third mission, organization); ii) between the various organizational levels (Institution / Departments / Courses); iii) among the 8 internationally recognized quality assurance principles (focus on the "customer", leadership, active participation of people, process approach, systemic approach, continuous improvement, evidence-based decision-making, Mutually beneficial relationships) (ISO, 2012).
- The integration between those involved in quality assessment and management and the governance of the University; in fact, it is recognized that a guiding concept for the transformation of QA processes lies in a "tripartite" approach, that is, capable of combining quality that focuses on the pursuit of appropriate standards of excellence, with the strategy that guides the University towards a vision of the future and performance that provides for the identification of adequate measures and resources to support the improvement of quality and the pursuit of the strategy (O'Sallivan, 2017, p.195). For a QA system to be effective, it must be, in fact, oriented to the promotion and implementation of a University's strategy and therefore useful to political decision-makers to guide their strategic choices and the allocation of resources.

The concept of integration has been detected almost exclusively within the principles and quality criteria defined in the university QA system; rarely, however, it has been detected at the level of processes and organization.

With a greater globalization of higher education, global accreditation is also inevitable and the standards used should ensure transparency and comparability between the teaching programs offered and the research activities conducted. The presence of a supranational system that supports the implementation and harmonization of quality requirements, should involve the use of a common language and common concepts and criteria, starting from the experiences already in place and which already present transversal elements, such as the 7 ESG standards (Babikir Ali, 2018): 1) Policy and procedure for quality assurance; 2) Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards; 3) assessment of students; 4) quality assurance of teaching staff; 5) Learning resources and student support; 6) Information systems; 7) Public information.

It is therefore believed that a common language in terms of principles and quality requirements is the actual point of sharing on which countries at the international level can confront and on which they can find a global agreement. Otherwise, evaluation terms (in terms of judgments, uses and method), quality assurance processes and organizations, it is important that they are defined at national level according to the characteristics of the individual university system. It is, in fact, recognized that it is not effective to bring QA models from one country to another, without understanding the real needs of the country that "copies" these models. The best practices identified, therefore, can be shared by other countries that have similar national and cultural attributes, making them more effective reference points for building a new model for the national system. There are, in fact, strong connections between the national cultural attributes of a country (Hofstede, 1991) with the evaluation system that can be effectively developed within it (H.R. Kells, 1999, p. 229).

Discussion questions for the session:

1) **Can the integration of teaching, research and organization in the QA system of a University really be an added value?**
2) **At what level of discussion (intergovernmental, international, between Universities, ...) is it possible to share experiences of integrated QA developments of Universities?**
3) **Is the homogenization of QA systems a value or an obstacle?**

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