2022 European Quality Assurance Forum

Shaping or sharing? QA in a value-driven EHEA

Hosted by West University of Timisoara, Romania
17-19 November 2022

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.

Author(s)

Name: Anna Prades Nebot

Position: Head of the Internationalisation and Knowledge Generation Department

Organisation: AQU Catalunya

Country: Spain

E-mail address: aprades@aqu.cat

Short bio (150 words max): Dr. Anna Prades is the Head of the Internationalisation and Knowledge Generation Department of AQU Catalunya, where she has been working since 2001. She has a degree in Psychology (1996) and a PhD in Pedagogy (2005) from the Universitat of Barcelona. She was the Technical Director of Via Universitaria (since 2018), which is an adaptation of Eurostudent carried out in three regions of Spain. She coordinates, in Catalonia, the graduate, master and PhD's employment outcomes survey, as well as the recent graduates' satisfaction survey and the employers' survey. She also has been active in designing quality assessment methodology and designing good-practices guidelines.

Name: Dani Torrents Vilà

Position: Project managerof the Internationalisation and Knowledge Generation Department

Organisation: AQU Catalunya

Country: Spain

E-mail address: dtorrents@aqu.cat

Short bio (150 words max): Dr.Dani Torrents is project manager in AQU Catalunya, where he has been working since 2017. He has a PhD in Sociology (2017), focussing on inequalities in access to Higher Education. He manages different projects that generate knowledge on the Catalan Higher Education System, and disseminates them to different stakeholders.

Proposal

Title: Challenges of promoting and ensuring equity in Higher Education: a case study of the gender perspective in Catalunya

Abstract (150 words max):
In this paper we explore how equity and inclusion in Higher Education (HE) can be promoted from a quality assurance agency. The inclusion of assessment of the social dimension in external quality assurance could be a step forward towards what is labelled as the "next Bologna", i.e. an European

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

Higher Education Area based on shared values, promoting both accountability and improvement in this arena. Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs), from their position between governments and HE Institutions, may steer the assessment, but not without challenges. The case of AQU Catalunya implementing the gender perspective as an axis of inequality is presented. Finally, we identify the main lessons of this case study that may be useful not only for other agencies interested in the gender perspective, but also to understand the challenges of assessing the social dimension based on different axis of inequality like social background, ethnicity or disability.

.

The corresponding sub-topic of the proposal: Student participation in governance and quality assurance of higher education

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? No

Text of paper (3000 words max):

1. The social perspective of quality assurance

The social dimension of Higher Education (HE) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) can be traced back to 2001 in the Prague Communiqué. Since then, the relevance of this perspective has been gaining momentum, to the point that, at the Paris Communiqué, in 2018, the ministers declared that "the student body entering and graduating from European higher education institutions should reflect the diversity of Europe's populations". More recently, in 2020, the Rome Ministerial Communiqué states that external quality assurance systems should consider the social dimension and how it is embedded in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs).

From the educational actors' point of view, we find two relevant examples of this increased awareness. On the one hand, the Global University Network for Innovation (GUNI) states that HEIs have the singular responsibility of helping to provide appropriate responses to address the global challenges of the world, which are very well summarised in the 2030 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[1] (Grau et al, 2017: 503). On the other hand, UNESCO has recently presented and discussed in-depth during the 3r World Higher Education Conference, the Roadmap 2030 to reinvent higher education (UNESCO, 2022). One of the principles of the Higher Education of the future is Inclusion, Equity and Pluralism; it contends that countries and HEIs should accelerate the efforts to remove barriers to HE, along with the need to flexibly respond to an increasingly diverse student population.

Therefore, the commitment of both European governmental bodies and educational institutions with the social dimension is increasingly clear and recurrent, and some relevant initiatives have been developed. However, there is still a long way to go, and the social dimension is, at the moment, more a framework and a commitment than a reality (Salmi & Claville, 2022).

The social dimension is also referred to as DEI dimension (which stands for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion), highlighting the triple challenge it faces: it is not only about who is in the classroom (diversity), but also about to what extent policies are fairly implemented to achieve this diversity, allowing equal opportunities for everybody (equity), and about the actors involved in policy-making (inclusion). There are a few major axes of inequality that range from gender to social background, including other conditions that imply different resources and opportunities such as disability, ethnicity or rurality. "Higher Education for all" means the equality of opportunities regardless of each social condition but, of course, the priority axis might vary depending on the national and cultural context. When we refer to equality of opportunities, we do not limit the term to issues around access. We also include the opportunity of having a successful and fruitful educational and social experience throughout the duration of a given course.

2. The role of Quality Assurance Agencies in the social dimension implementation

This paper discusses the role that Quality Assurance Agencies (QAAs) should play in fostering the social dimension in HE. QAAs have been at the heart of the EHEA since 2003 (Berlin communiqué,

---

[1] https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/

EQAF
European Quality Assurance Forum

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

2023). They have acted as policy levers that push HEIs out of their comfort zone to meet quality standards (defined through a process of stakeholder negotiation), using a methodology than hinges on self-assessment and peer review.

It is interesting to note that the narratives on what is important to assess have been changing throughout the years: accountability vs improvement, learning outcomes, teaching and learning, and, recently, social impact. According to Bergan & Deca (2018), to move to the next Bologna level, we must focus both on fundamental values relevant for our time (equity in access, ethical integrity, etc.) but also on concrete commitments and goals in connection with developments in other policy agendas (EU, OECD, UNESCO, the Council of Europe, etc.).

The assessment of the social dimension of HE can be a tool for DEI's accountability and improvement. Quality Assurance Agencies are in a privileged position between governments and HEIs, often in a complex equilibrium with education and societal demands or international agendas. In fact, although the standards regarding the social dimension might and should be global, barriers to equity and solutions to overcome them will necessarily be local, since they might imply changes in regulation, funding, organizational and information policies, both at the HE's system level and at the HEIs' one.

In this paper we address the study case of the Catalan Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya). Its commitment and experience in the implementation of the social dimension as a cross-cutting perspective in its processes, focused mainly on the gender perspective, can be useful to identify the key challenges and lessons of the deployment of the DEI dimension by QAAs, either focused on gender or on other axis of inequality.

3. AQU Catalunya's strategy for the inclusion of the social dimension in assessment processes, focussing on gender

In recent years, AQU Catalunya has incorporated the challenge of gender equality as a cross-cutting issue in all its processes: the assessment of degrees and institutions, teaching staff evaluation, and the thematic studies of the Catalan HE system. The agency has defined women[2] as the main equity target to focus on, triggered by a specific regulatory context[3] that promotes the gender equality in the Catalan society and public administration.
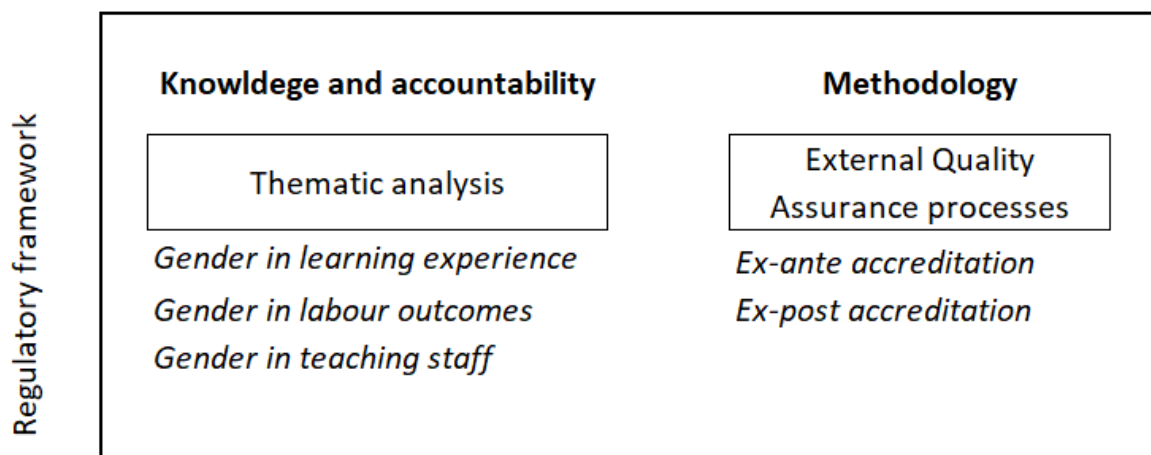
This perspective assumes that a gender-sensitive quality assurance process not only allows to meet the national and international regulatory trends, but also enhances the quality assurance process itself and its impact. As Benito & Verges (2020) contend, the omission of a gender-sensitive perspective must be addressed by quality assurance agencies, as it allows to rise new quality concerns, improve quality frameworks, and engage new stakeholders in the process.

Besides the fundamental regulatory mandate, the implementation owes its successes to the internal leadership. Proof of this commitment allies in that all the agency's staff are trained on the gender perspective to raise awareness about gender roles and inequalities of opportunity.

AQU Catalunya's strategy for the inclusion of the gender dimension in quality processes can be mapped in the following processes:

---

[2] Recently some other regulatory developments have been released, promoting the inclusion of a non-binary perspective of this gender equality. Therefore, the agency will also shift its focus accordingly.
[3] Law 17/2015, about effective equality between women and men. Government of Catalunya. Article 28.1 calls on universities to "introduce the mainstreaming of the gender perspective" and establishes that gender must be mainstreamed in the external QA processes.

Regulatory framework

Knowldege and accountability

Thematic analysis

Gender in learning experience
Gender in labour outcomes
Gender in teaching staff

Methodology

External Quality
Assurance processes

Ex-ante accreditation
Ex-post accreditation

1. Thematic analysis:

Three major studies have been carried out to expand the knowledge on the situation and trends of gender inequalities in the Catalan Higher Education system: one related to the student learning experience, one analysing the labour market outcomes from a gender perspective, and a third about the teaching staff accreditation process. Following is a summary of their key conclusions.

a. **Gender bias in student' learning experience**: in coordination with the Catalan-speaking universities network (Xarxa Vives), a study was carried out in 2021 about the learning experiences of students during their higher education paths. A survey to enrolled students collected data on access and degree choice, financial resources and teaching and learning experiences, among other issues. Two main results can be highlighted in relation to the gender perspective in Quality.

  i. As it is widely known, there is a horizontal stratification by gender in the choice of a degree programme. Women are less likely to choose STEM degrees, which tend to yield more lucrative careers. The first consequence is that men and women start from very different position with different labour market opportunities.

  ii. In these male-dominated degrees, women are more sensitive to stereotyping in contrast with men. For example, women are less confident about their abilities for applying the skills learnt and perceive that their classroom contributions are less appreciated by teachers and peers (Soler, 2022).

Figure 1. Perception in male-biased degrees by gender (out of 10)
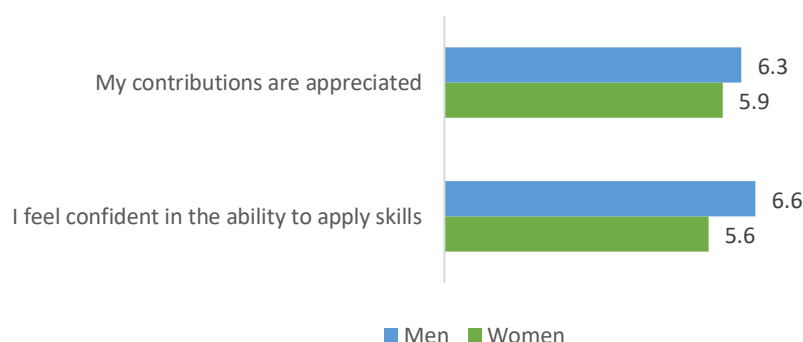
From the quality assurance perspective, agencies should assure that institutions present gender-sensitive attraction policies to minimize these differences. But the challenge is not limited to access, also the learning experiences are different between men and women, specifically in STEM degrees, and a quality

EQAF
European Quality Assurance Forum

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

perspective should take into account a gender perspective in teaching and assessment

b. **Gender inequalities in labour market outcomes:** in 2021, a study analysed if inequalities in employment outcomes by gender can be identified 20 years after graduation (AQU, 2021). In previous studies it was concluded that at 3 or 10 years after the graduation little differences between women and men could be identified, controlling for subject of study.

As mentioned before, women and men, on average, apply for different types of degrees, and different average choices bring women and men to different labour "routes" with different prospects. Having the disciplinary segmentation as one of the main problems of gender inequality in Higher Education, the study pointed out that other type of inequality mechanisms could be identified 20 years after the graduation. Maternity is common at this moment, and triggered these other mechanisms of inequality like, for example, the increase of part-time job, the higher use of conciliation measures by women or a different willingness of being away from home like in business trips. The gender-role of women in childcare push them out of the main employment competition.

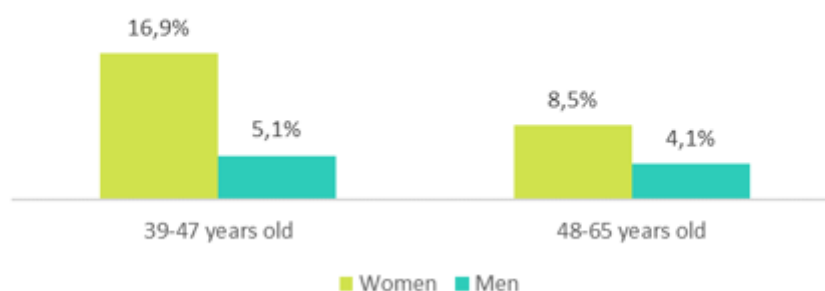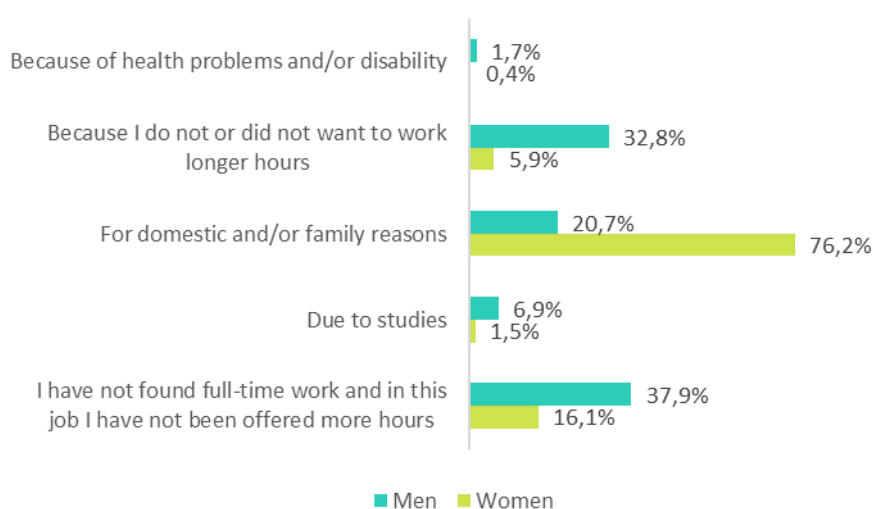**Figure 2. Part-time employment by sex and age group 20 years after graduation**

Figure 3. Primary reason for choosing part-time employment 20 years after graduation


The glass ceiling and the wage gap are two other phenomenon that have been well documented by research. They are closely related with the maternity role of women too, and they were also identified in our research, 20 years after the graduation.

Little can be done either by Quality Agencies or HEIs to revert these trends. Gender inequalities, as other kinds of inequalities, need to be addressed from a multilevel and intersenctional perspective and with a life-course approach, as Juliette Tourabian states, "no miracle is going to happen at the last level" (2022).

c. **Gender inequalities in teaching staff accreditation**: another study[4] analyses both the glass ceiling in teaching staff positions in the Catalan Higher Education System and the gender inequalities in the accreditation of research activities.

One of the key optimistic messages that could be identified was the decrease of the glass ceiling between men and women in scholar career. It is far from equal, but the so-called "genders scissors" appear to have been narrowing in the past 10 years.

**Figure 4. Teaching staff by Frascati classification and gender (2011-2020)**
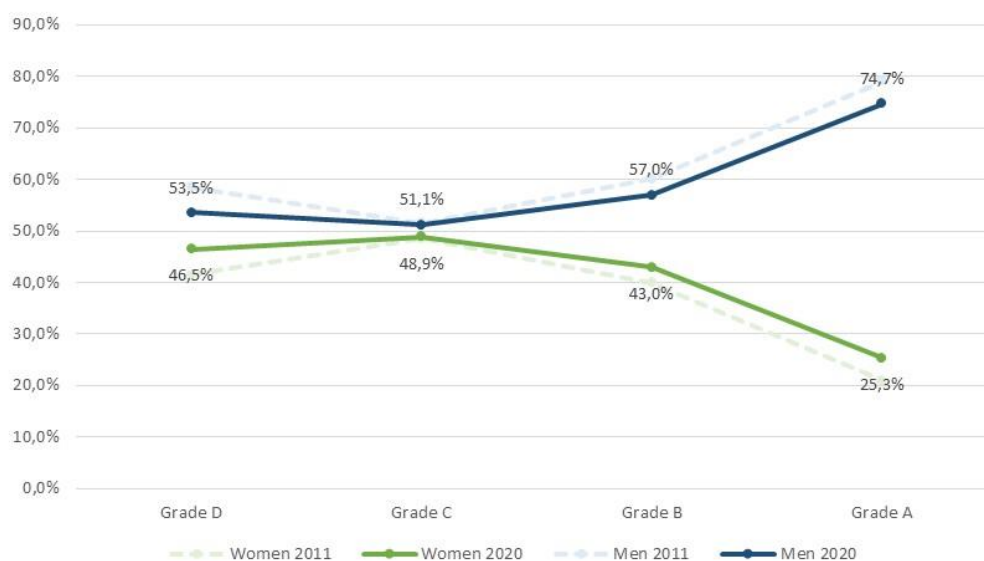
Whether this trend is caused by a generational effect (previous teaching staff generations are more men-dominated than recent ones), or an actual reduction of inequalities in career promotion will be confirmed in the coming years. Probably both effects are involved. However, it is not plausible that inequality is going to disappear completely, as the vicious circle of the academic progress for women is still a reality: women tend to publish on average almost 2 papers less than men each year. Lesser research outputs, brings fewer opportunities to get funds and projects, and in turn more difficulties to promote.

A lower level of academic outputs for women has multiple causes, of course, but again maternity is one of them. An analysis of maternity leaves/reduced workday requests in Catalan universities shows that around 90% of them are requested by women. Women interrupts their research career in a higher proportion than men.

---

[4] Publication pending

Figure 5. Proportion of conciliatory measures requested by women in Catalan Universities
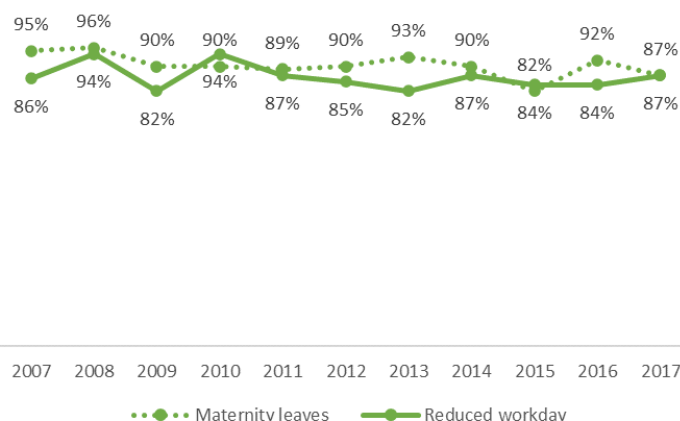
Considering that, in the same study it is identified that women postpone their research accreditation more than men on average, and that women need a higher proportion of attempts to get a successful research accreditation than men. Despite this trend, no bias in the results obtained in the accreditation were identified between men and women who finally apply for an accreditation (identified also in a previous study (Mancho, 2020)).

These results mean that there is not a gender-bias in research accreditation, and that reviewers do not assess men and women systematically different (even though women publish fewer papers, this is compensated by the fact that they tend to be more involved in a higher number of projects and research mobilities). The reality, however, is that women are more cautious in applying for the accreditation (specially in advanced positions), and they postpone the decision in a higher proportion than men. In addition, they will need, on average, more attempts before getting the accreditation. In the long term it can keep reproducing the gender structure of teaching staff.

This is a key issue which both Quality Agencies and HEIs can address, rethinking the accreditation process of teaching staff and their recruitment policies. For example, interruptions in the academic career might be compensated, as they are not equally distributed by gender. Moreover, a continuous training of reviewers in gender perspective is crucial to identify the systematic mechanisms of inequality.

2. The incorporation of the gender perspective in degree accreditation processes

Following the new regulation, AQU released a framework for effectively mainstreaming a gender equality perspective in all areas of HE teaching (AQU, 2018). It defines what is teaching with a gender perspective, its benefits and how to integrate it in the curricula. In addition, AQU reviewed its programme assessment guidelines to include the gender perspective. For example, it is now required an analysis of how the gender perspective is implemented in the design of the study plan (learning outcomes, syllabi, how the internal quality assurance system will guarantee that the gender perspective is mainstreamed, etc) and its outputs (achievement, graduation and employability).

In 2022 a review of its implementation took place (AQU, 2022), and below are the main conclusions:

a) **Ex-ante accreditation**[5]: HEIs are including the gender perspective as transversal skills of new degree proposals (some referring to UNESCO SDGs in a broad sense). However, the learning outcomes and specific contents of this transversal skill are rarely defined, and any degree proposal includes gender-sensitive teaching methodology or assessment. Recently, review panels are including recommendations about the inclusion of the gender dimension in new degree proposals. For example:

---

[5] Guidelines of ex-ante accreditation [in Catalan]: https://tinyurl.com/5ch48ezc

EQAF
European Quality Assurance Forum

"*The panel considers that before the implementation [of the gender perspective], the expected learning outcomes should be defined in further detail to enable an evaluation of their achievement*" (2021 master's degree ex-ante review report. Humanities).

Or,

"*Due to the complexity and the broad scope of the [gender-sensitve] skill, the degree should ensure that the contents, the learning activities and the evaluation methods could assess its level of achievement*" (2021 master's degree ex-ante review report. Health Science).

b) **Ex-post accreditation[6]**: despite being compulsory in the current regulation, most HEIs do not introduce a gender perspective analysis in the self-assessment reports. However, indicators are presented by gender and some HEIs include improvement plans that include short term gender-sensitive actions, or references to institutional policies. Generally, the external review panels do not assess the gender perspective in their reports if HEIs do not mention it in the self-assessment report. Some examples of recommendations of the review panel are:

"*Considering the proportion of women enrolled, it is in a low range of 10-20%. We suggest to push the necessary activities to balance the relation between men and women in the degree*" (2021 master's degree ex-post review report. Engineering).

Or,

"*We suggest to use the inclusive language in all published information*" (2021 master's degree ex-post review report. Humanities).

4. Conclusion

Higher Education systems worldwide cannot longer ignore the social dimension. It is not just a clear demand from the higher education community and society at large, but also it is increasingly present in international agendas. QAAs should decide if they want to be just an observer of this change or take an active role, taking advantage of their position between governments, HEI's and society, and their process of pushing quality enhancements.

The introduction of a gender perspective in AQU Catalunya has had two main outcomes: thematic analyses which have generated knowledge about gender inequalities and its mechanisms, and changes in its assessment guidelines to embed the gender perspective. Rising awareness is probably the first step of a real change and identifying the main mechanisms from a local point of view is fundamental before trying to address them. For example, the persistent disciplinary segmentation and its impact in the employment outputs, or the effect of the maternity interruptions in the professional career, points out that probably quality assurance processes should consider gender-sensitive enrolment procedures or weight maternity interruptions in research accreditation processes.

Some lessons from our experience may be useful not only for other agencies but also when considering other social dimensions based on different axes, such as social background.

a) A commitment from the agency's board is necessary, exerting a strong leadership in the transformation of the agency and its processes.

b) Knowledge as a tool to raise awareness: a training programme for review panels is fundamental, in parallel with the dissemination of trends, mechanisms and benchmarking of inequalities among stakeholders.

c) Adaptation of procedures and guidelines of the main relevant processes so different actors can use the same framework of implementation. Also, it is important to identify quality standards and the evidence to assess these standards.

d) One fundamental element in the case study is the regulatory framework that has triggered the changes described. However, as has been seen, to be fully effective, either the framework

---

[6] Guidelines of ex-post accreditation: https://www.aqu.cat/en/doc/Universitats/Metodologia/Guia-d-acreditacio-GM-EN

should go beyond set of principles or a declaration of intent by a given government (soft law), including incentives or real sanctions, or more training should be delivered in order to fully commit those who are in charge of the design, delivery and assessment of programs.

As identified before, the social dimension is an emerging issue in quality assessment but is far from being generalised and systematised. It seems it is necessary to bring the social dimension (and the EHEA based on shared values) to the next level.

Discussion questions for the session:

1. It seems that the gender perspective is an emerging but superficial issue in a growing number of Quality Agencies. Which measures can be taken to foster the gender-sensitive assessment in Higher Education and its implications?

2. Is it possible an actual and effective deployment of the social dimensions, in any of the axes of inequality, without a regulatory framework that enforces it? Is it enough with commitment?

3. Is the social dimension perspective suitable in emergent Higher Education Systems or should they focus on previous quality issues? By contrast, in mature Higher Education systems, should it be the main Quality Assurance perspective?

References:

AQU Catalunya (2018). *General framework for incorporating the gender perspective in Higher Education teaching.* [Methodology documentation] https://www.aqu.cat/doc/doc_21331700_1.pdf

AQU Catalunya (2021). *Women's Employment Outcomes 20 years after finishing university.* Barcelona: AQU Catalunya. Available at: https://www.aqu.cat/en/doc/Estudis/il-titulats/Genere/Women-s-Employment-Outcomes-Twenty-Years-after-Finishing-University

AQU Catalunya (2022). *Actuacions d'AQU Catalunya en el marc del desplegament de la llei 17/2015, d'igualtat efectiva de dones i homes. Una anàlisi preliminar.* [working documentation. In Catalan]

Benito, E. & Verge, T. (2020). Gendering higher education quality assurance: a matter of (e)quality, *Quality in Higher Education*, DOI:10.1080/13538322.2020.1769268

Bergan, S., Deca, L. (2018). Twenty Years of Bologna and a Decade of EHEA: What Is Next?. In: Curaj, A., Deca, L., Pricopie, R. (eds) *European Higher Education Area: The Impact of Past and Future Policies.* Springer, Cham. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-77407-7_19

Grau, Xavier, Goddart, John, Hall, Budd L., Hazelkorn, Ellen, & Tandon, Rajesh (Eds.). (2017). *Higher Education in the World 6. Towards a Socially Responsible University: Balancing the Global with the Local.* Girona: GUNI. Retrieved from http://www.guninetwork.org/files/download_full_report.pdf

Mancho, N. (2020). The accreditation of merits in research and gender. *elBulletí*, 96. https://www.aqu.cat/en/el-Butlleti/butlleti-96

Salmi, J. & Claville, M. (2022). *Quality Assurance and Equity – A CIQG Discussion at the UNESCO World Higher Education Conference (WHEC2022).* Retrieved from: https://www.chea.org/sites/default/files/2022-06/JS_MOC.pdf

Soler, I (2022). Via Universitària des de la perspectiva de gènere. In: Ariño, Antonio; Llopis, Ramon; Martínez, Miquel; Pons, Ernest; Prades, Anna (Dir) (2022). *Via universitària: accés, condicions d'aprenentatge, expectatives i retorns dels estudis universitaris (2020-2022),* p 88-102. Castelló de la Palma: Xarxa Vives d'Universitats. ISBN: 978-87-09-38049-7

EQAF
European Quality Assurance Forum

http://bit.ly/EQAFLinkedin

Torabian, Juliette (2022, May 18). Is Higher Education Doomed wiht Inequalities? WHECH2022, Barcelona. Hed Talk: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z6IcPwu5Now

UNESCO (2022). *Beyond Limits. New Ways to Reinvent Higher Education*. Working document for the World Higher Education Conference. 18-20 May 2022.

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 22 July 2022 to eqaf@eua.eu*.*
The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not
send a hard copy or a PDF file.