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Internationalisation in a changing world. New trends and challenges for QA

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Proposal

Title: Cross-Border External Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

Abstract

At European level, several developments such as the Bologna process, the creation of ENQA and EQAR and the promotion of the ESG have impacted quality assurance (QA) and contributed to the rise of new international opportunities for QA agencies (Hopbach, 2014; Amaral, 2014; Rosa & Cardoso, 2018). Cross-Border External Quality Assurance (CBEQA) can be understood as an external QA activity carried out in a country other than the one in which the QA agency is based (ENQA et al, 2017). This paper aims to provide an overview of CBEQA activities in the European Higher Education Area based on a descriptive statistical analysis of the data existent in the DEQAR database. This analysis is complemented with the views of international organisations and QA agencies on CBEQA. Results show that CBEQA has increased over the years and is seen as a way for HEIs to become more international. Despite advantages and disadvantages for institutions and systems, CBEQA is a market opportunity for many agencies in Europe.

Keywords: Cross-border; External Quality Assurance; European Higher Education Area; International Organisations.

Introduction

The increased relevance of internationalisation in the agenda of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) led to the growth of international accreditations, both as a response to the lack of international recognition that national quality assurance systems provide to HEIs, as well as to the increase of Cross-Border Higher Education provision (Hou et al, 2017; Trifiro, 2018; Amaral et al, 2016).

Cross-border external quality assurance (CBEQA) can be understood as the "external QA activities of a QA agency carried out in a country other than the one in which it is based or primarily operates" (ENQA et al, 2017, p 2). Although it may contribute to increase institutions and study programmes' internationalisation, as well as to assure the quality of CBHE provision, CBEQA processes also pose some risks.

According to ENQA et al (2017), cross-border activities provide some benefits to QA agencies, such as an increase in their profits, the opportunity to expand to new markets and gain more prestige, new experiences, improvement of know-how, and improved processes and methodologies gained from international practice. Moreover, HEIs may also enjoy some benefits of CBEQA, such as the reinforcement of institutional internationalisation policies and the cooperation with foreign stakeholders, the facilitation of recognition of degrees and qualifications, and the possibility to select the agency that better fits with their profile and mission.

This paper offers an overview of CBEQA activities in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) using as a point of departure the data provided by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education Database (DEQAR), combined with the perceptions of international organisations and quality assurance agencies on the topic.

Cross-Border External Quality Assurance (CBEQA): concept and current status

The design of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is one of the results of quality assurance developments promoted by the Bologna Process as an effort to build a EHEA (Amaral, 2014). This is also related to the ENQA establishment as a transnational organisation with the mission to promote the national quality assurance systems in EU countries and the need for common standards between countries. Furthermore, this scenario was impacted by the role of the European Commission (EC) in

educational policies, which promoted the liberalisation of higher education as a tradable commodity through the European Directive 2006/123/EC, promoting an internal market with fewer administrative and legal obstacles (Cardoso & Rosa, 2018).

For Hopbach (2014), the drafting of the ESG produced a convergence of procedures for external quality assurance, with processes and principles being shared between multiple approaches and actors. Moreover, the ESG opened space for the establishment of the EQAR. The EQAR is the register of quality assurance agencies that operate with a common set of principles for quality assurance in Europe, oriented by the ESG.

The EQAR establishment may be related with the need for cooperation between multiple and diverse quality assurance agencies across the European space. The EQAR intends to promote trust and transparency in the QA processes in Europe and aims to provide open and free information about quality assurance agencies operating in this region, contributing to the improvement of agencies, institutions, and systems. This allows building an environment of trust in the EHEA (Cardoso & Rosa, 2018).

All these developments contributed to the establishment and rise of an international market for quality assurance agencies. The movement of agencies between borders relates to the opportunity HEIs have to choose for external quality assurance one agency among the several ones operating in the EHEA (ENQA et al, 2017).

CBEQA may also perform a role in cross-border higher education (CBHE). On one hand, it may be used to regulate CBHE activities; this happens when a country's higher education system authorities ask for the evaluation of transnational institutions or programmes to be assured that they meet the same standards as home institutions. Moreover, CBEQA may also be used by HEIs to improve their internationalisation. In this case, the call for an international assessment or accreditation is seen by the HEI as a form of becoming more international (Szabo, 2015).

Carvalho et al. (2019) present multiple ways on how CBEQA may operate, as depicted in Figure 1. *Way 1* occurs when an HEI from country A offers educational programs in country B and the QA process is led by the quality assurance agency (QAA) of country B. *Way 2* occurs when the QAA of country A is in charge of the external quality assurance of an HEI in country B. This process can have a variation when the QAA of country A assures the quality of HEI A operating in country B. *Way 3* happens when the QAA of country A assures the quality of HEI B in country C.
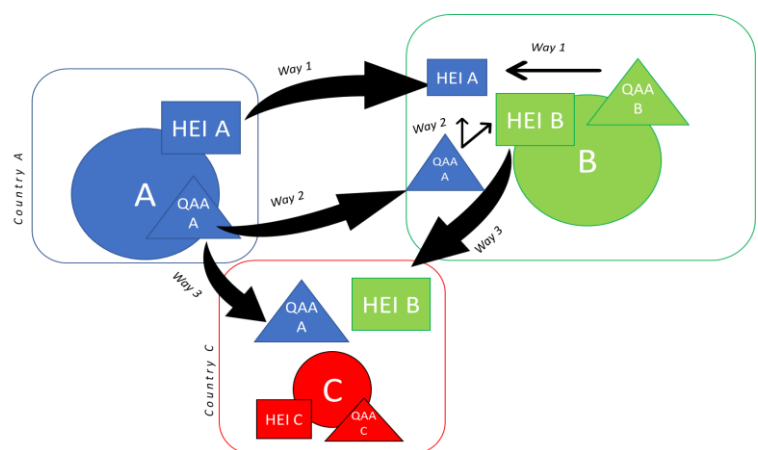

Figure 1 – Different possible ways for CBEQA

Methodological approach

To provide an overview of CBEQA in Europe, the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR) was used, namely the data collected for the following variables: *Country* (country of origin of the HEI); *Report_agency* (the agency responsible for the external quality assurance report); *Report_type* (type of report produced, such as program, joint-program or institutional quality assurance report); *Report_status* (status of the report, either voluntary or obligatory) and

report_crossborder (if the report results from a cross-border activity) Data was statistically analysed following a descriptive quantitative research approach (Coutinho, 2016).

To have a more complete overview, excerpts from a set of interviews conducted between December 2021 and November 2022 were analysed. The interviews were conducted with the presidents or designated staff members of international organisations involved in QA at European level, namely the ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, INQAAHE, ECA, ESU and EQAR, and ten European QA agencies: EKKA (Estonia), FINEEC (Finland), evalag (Germany), QQI (Ireland), ANVUR (Italy), SKVC (Lithuania), NVAO (Netherlands), A3ES (Portugal), AQU (Spain/Catalonia), and the QAA (United Kingdom. The data was content analysed (Bardin, 2011) to provide insights on the understanding of these organisations about CBEQA, based on the question "*In recent years there has been an increased interest of higher education institutions and study programs in accreditations carried out by foreign or international agencies – the so-called CBEQA. In your opinion, what may justify this phenomenon?*".

The DEQAR project and the DEQAR database

The DEQAR project was developed by the EQAR and co-funded by the European Commission under the Erasmus+ programme. The project aimed at developing a database to promote access to reports and decisions of program and institutional accreditations produced by EQAR-registered agencies (EQAR, 2020).

In 2022[1], the DEQAR database had approximately 82,000 quality assurance reports of registered agencies. For each report, the database devolves a set of information, such as the country of origin of the HEI/programme assessed; the identification of each HEI/programme; the identification of study cycle; the agency identification; the type of report (programme or institutional accreditation); the date of validity of the report; the decision; and, since 2020, the database also indicates if the report results from cross-border activities or not.

The database grows organically since all the EQAR registered agencies are invited to upload all their QA reports voluntarily. However, this can produce a bias on the information, since this process may lead to data that does not represent all the QA activities (and corresponding reports) developed by each agency. In addition, as more agencies register with the EQAR, the larger the database becomes, both in terms of the number of new reports and the total number of reports already carried out (through the upload of old reports).

Over the past years, a few studies have been conducted using the DEQAR database (Huisman & Manatos, 2019; Carvalho et al, 2019; Carvalho et al 2021; Munjishvili, 2021). However, none of them provides an overview of how CBEQA has been developing in the EHEA. In what follows, we present the main results of such analysis, combined with the views of a set of European QA agencies and international organisations operating the in QA field on the topic.

CBEQA as reflected in the DEQAR

Around 3% of the quality assurance activities reported in the DEQAR, occurred in HEIs from countries that are different from the ones where the QA agency reviewing them is located, representing 2457 activities, in 420 HEIs, from 45 countries.

Figure 2 presents the number of external quality assurance reports over the years, divided in CBEQA and national ones. The data shows that the number of national reports (QA agency and HEI/programme belonging to the same country) oscillates over time, with periods where the number of reports increases significantly and others where there is a decrease. Regarding the CBEQA reports, the numbers are more stable across the years, even if in 2022 there is a more significant decrease (which can be explained by the fact that there is a delay between the date of production of the report and its upload in the database). Overall, there is evidence that the provision of CBEQA has slightly increased over the past two decades. As previously referred, this increase may be explained by the pressures felt by HEIs to became more international, which makes them turn to international accreditations.

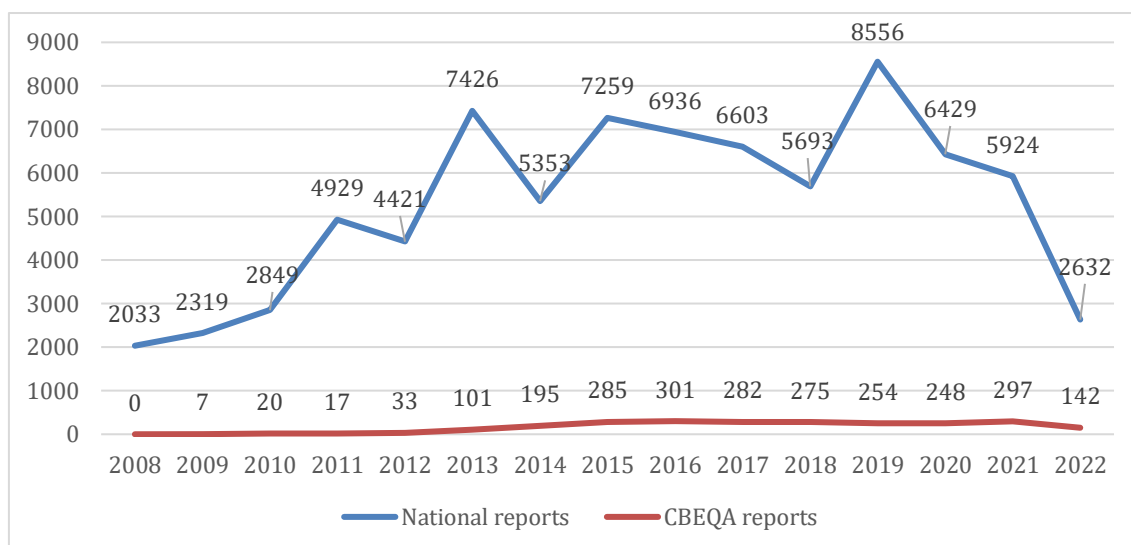[1] The data was downloaded in February 2023.

Figure 2 – Number of CBEQA and national reports compiled in the DEQAR by year.

The DEQAR analysis, also allows to conclude that 72% of the reported CBEQA activities are voluntary (Figure 3). As for the ways in which these CBEQA activities occur, *Way 2* was found to be the most predominant in the DEQAR: the QAA of country A assures the quality of the HEI B in country B (Figure 1).
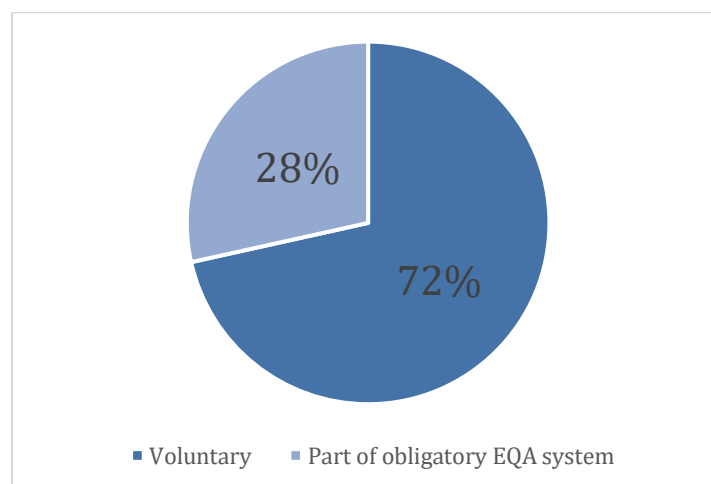

Figure 3 – Distribution of CBEQA activities by status (voluntary vs. mandatory)

Looking at the type of quality activity performed by the QA agency, 86% address the individual programme, while 9% concern the institution and 6% joint-programmes (Figure 3). The prominence of programmes' accreditation in the DEQAR may be related to the fact that accrediting a programme is easier and demands fewer resources, being, as such, less expensive than getting a full institutional accreditation, while also having an impact not only in the programme international recognition, but on the internationalisation of the institution itself. Also, a possible explanation for the biggest number of programme accreditation may be related to the offer of specific labels, such as EUR-ACE, Eurobachelor, Euro-info and Euromaster.

Figure 3 - Tree Map of the CBEQA activities by type.

An analysis of the agencies included in the DEQAR, reveals that 29 out of 45 are involved in CBEQA activities. These agencies are located in 16 countries, except for four that are supranational organisations. Interestingly, almost 68% of the CBEQA activities are conducted by German agencies (Figure 4), with one of them being responsible for almost 30% of all CBEQA activities reported (ASIIN) (Figure 5). In fact, ASIIN emerges as a very relevant agency in the CBEQA scenario represented in the DEQAR.
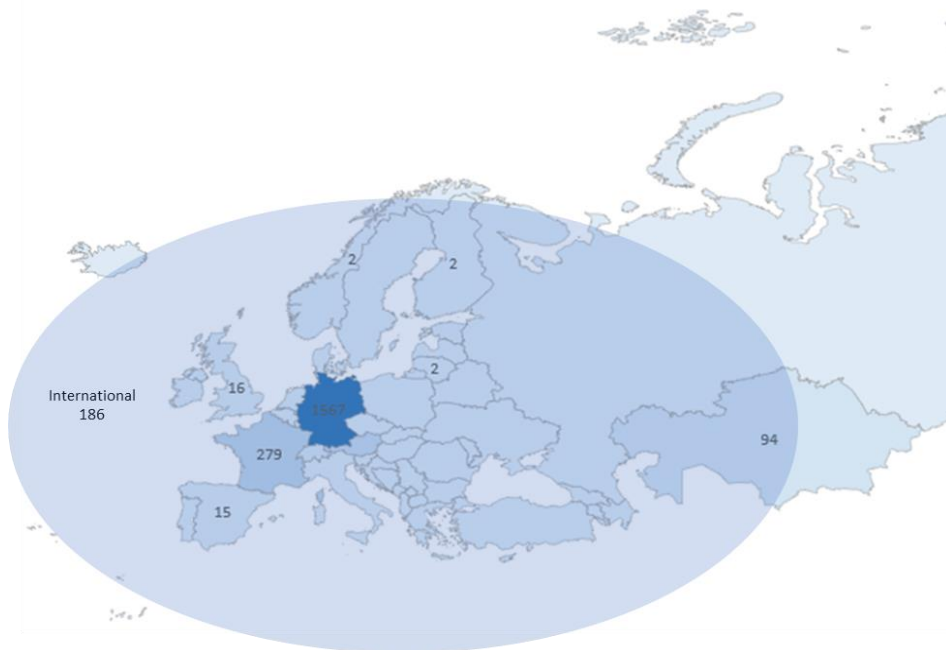

Figure 4 – Number of CBEQA reports by country of the origin of the QA agency
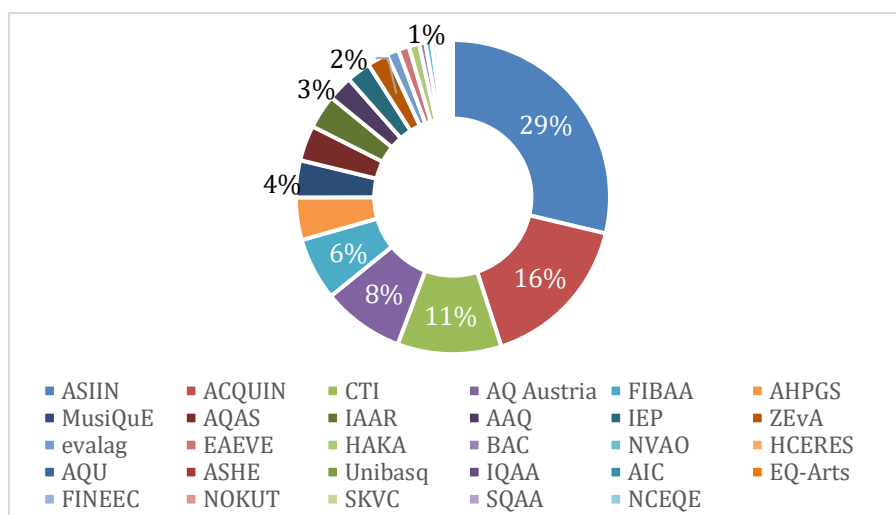
Figure 5 – Distribution of CBEQA activities (reports) by QA agency

This prevalence of ASIIN may be related to some European seals the agency allows study programmes to obtain as part of its external QA reviews, namely the EUR-ACE, Eurobachelor, Euro-info and Euromaster ones. In fact, the DEQAR data shows that currently, this agency is responsible for most of the reviews leading to these seals and that those reviews currently contribute to almost 35% of the agency's CBEQA reports. This result should, however, be read with some caution, since it may be a consequence of the DEQAR data collection process, once agencies upload their own reports voluntarily.

The views of QA agencies and international organisations on CBEQA

To build a more comprehensive understanding of CBEQA, a set of interviews were undertaken with the directors (or designated staff members) of European QA agencies and international organisations involved in quality assurance in Europe. The goal was to get their views on the phenomenon of CBEQA.

Four categories emerged from the exploratory content analysis of the data collected through the interviews (Table 1). The first one is related to the complementary approach that CBEQA can bring to the national/local QA processes. The interviewees highlighted that international accreditations could add value to local procedures when the HEI chooses a specialised accreditation in a specific field, complementing its national institutional evaluation, for instance. Also, one of the QA agencies mention that *"sometimes, we are even promoting them or telling them that they should [look for an international accreditation]"* (Agency 8).

	Categories	Answers by organisations	
		International Organisations	Quality Assurance Agencies
1	Complementary QA process	IO 1; IO 2; IO 5; IO 7	QA 5; QA 7; QA 8; QA 10
2	Marketing opportunities for HEIs	IO 2; IO 4; IO 5; IO 6; IO 7	QA 3; QA 4; QA 5; QA 6; QA 8
3	Market and Exchange opportunities for QA agencies	IO 3; IO 4; IO 5; IO 6	QA 2; QA 3; QA 9
4	Lack of trust in the national QA system or agency	IO 3; IO 7	QA 2; QA 1

Table 1 - Table 1 - Perceptions about CBEQA

The second category refers to CBEQA as a marketing mechanism used by HEIs to differentiate themselves in the national context and, consequently, attract more funding and students. Regarding this, one international organisation mentioned "*The more labels you have, the better*

for you" (IO 7). However, the student organization has pointed out that this process may not necessarily reflect the choices of students.

The third category highlights the opportunities for QA agencies to exchange and access new markets. Besides the possibilities for QA agencies to learn from a different environment, CBEQA can work as an opportunity to raise their income. However, it is important to highlight that, to avoid misalignment with local requirements and the recognition of degrees at the European level, agencies must be registered and follow the ESG, as expressed by one interviewee: *"Please choose an agency that is registered and the standards obliged them complied to ESG, otherwise will be trick"* (IO 4). Finally, a fourth category reflects the lack of trust in the national QA system or agency as a decisive factor for HEIs to apply for international accreditation. The lack of trust could be associated with a political misalignment between HEIs and agencies or governments, as suggested by the interviewed *"I have talked many times with people working in other quality assurance agencies and also heard that the institutions in their country are not happy with the National Quality Assurance Agency"* (Agency 2).

Concluding remarks

The results presented in this paper provide an overview of CBEQA in Europe. At first, an analysis of the DEQAR allows to see an increase in the number of CBEQA activities over the years. Moreover, it seems that these activities are mainly being performed by German agencies, addressing study programmes' accreditation and mostly on a voluntary basis. This trend is likely driven by the desire of HEIs to gain more recognition on an international level. The prominence of German agencies in this area can be attributed to how the German QA system is structured (HEIs can choose from a panoplia of different QA agencies), as well as to the possibility HEIs have of achieving specific accreditation labels through external quality assurance processes.

The growth of CBEQA activities may also be associated with some lack of legitimacy in the international arena of some national quality assurance agencies, which led the HEIs located in those countries to look for international QA agencies. Also, this increase can be related to the process of differentiation of HEIs in their local/regional market, enhancing their possibilities of attracting more students. However, for the students' international organization the fact of having an international accreditation is not paramount for students to opt for a study program.

It is important to note that the growth of the CBEQA in the EHEA may raise some concerns, especially if the agencies do not follow the ESG. Quality standards or mechanisms used by foreign QA agencies may differ from those used in the evaluated institutions or study programmes' country of origin, which can hinder their recognition within the national higher education systems.

The perceptions of international organisations and quality assurance agencies provide a complementary view of CBEQA in EHEA highlighting this as: i) a complementary process to national accreditation for HEIs, II) a marketing differentiation mechanism for HEIs; III) an opportunity for QA agencies to access new markets and gain experience by working with different realities; and IV) the result of a lack of trust by HEIs in their local QA frameworks.

In the future, it would be important to follow the development of CBEQA within Europe. The emergence of European Universities brings significant challenges regarding the quality assurance of these institutions and their study programs, It would be interesting to understand the role CBEQA may have in such a new scenario for higher education in Europe.

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