

# 2023 European Quality Assurance Forum

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

Hosted by University of Aveiro, Portugal  
23-25 November 2023

ISSN: 1375-3797

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Ann De Schepper is Vice-Rector of the University of Antwerp (Belgium), responsible for education and quality assurance. In this function, she twice prepared a successful institutional review and helped launch the Antwerp School of Education, which unites the teacher training, refresher courses for teachers and professionalization of university lecturers. In addition, she coordinates the development and implementation of a new programme-assessment system at the University of Antwerp.

She has been invited as an external expert in several assessment panels for new degree programmes by NQA and QANU in the Netherlands, and she actively contributes to the field of teaching and learning at the national level in Flanders, serving as a member and chairperson of various boards and working groups. Since 2019, she has taken on the responsibility of overseeing the quality plan and quality assurance of YUFE.

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### Short bio:

Liesbeth Opendacker has a diverse background in quality assurance, accreditation management, and policy advising. Currently serving as the Quality Lead at the YUFE Alliance, Liesbeth has been contributing to the development of the Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE). This collaborative initiative aims to establish a student-centred, inclusive European university model that fosters interdisciplinary cooperation between higher education institutions, the public and private sectors, and citizens.

Previously, as Accreditation Manager, she was responsible for the international accreditations at UAntwerp's Faculty of Business and Economics. Prior to her work in accreditation, Liesbeth gained valuable experience as a project manager of various e-learning initiatives, specializing in usability design, XML & CSS development, and content creation.

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She was very active in developing QA system at her Faculty and University of Rijeka. She had different roles in University QA – president of QA Board, member and president of QA Council (presently), co-author of QA Handbook. She was involved in several QA projects and panels at national level.

Presently she was the representative of the University of Rijeka in the YUFE project, actively involved in the development of the YUFE QA system.

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He has made significant contributions to academia and administration. From 2013 to 2019 he was the Vice Dean of the Faculty and from 2019 to 2022 he held the position of Dean. His expertise is in quality management and quality improvement, reflecting his extensive teaching and research experience. Throughout his career, he has actively participated in numerous EU-funded projects and national initiatives.

He is author or co-author of more than 140 publications. His commitment to quality assurance is also reflected in the fact that he has been involved in the University's quality assurance system for over two decades.

## Proposal

**Title:** Building a sustainable quality assurance system for university alliances: the YUFE approach

**Abstract**

The YUFE Alliance unites universities from ten European countries with diverse academic traditions and practices. These institutions share common values aligned with the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and adhere to quality assurance (QA) systems based on the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). At its core, the YUFE QA system is guided by a set of principles that foster a culture of quality, trust, subsidiarity, shared ownership, and continuous improvement. Transparency, sharing best practices and stakeholder involvement are emphasised, ensuring a sustainable, lean, and efficient QA system.

This paper aims to present the scheme of the YUFE QA system, including the challenges encountered in establishing a QA system for joint activities that harmonizes shared QA procedures while respecting the individual institutional QA approaches. The system will be presented through the development of QA procedures for joint YUFE minors.

## 1. Introduction

### a. The YUFE Alliance – Aims and Governance Structure

The Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE) alliance is a strategic partnership between ten young research-intensive universities from as many European countries (Belgium, Cyprus, Croatia, Finland, France, Germany, Netherlands, Poland, Spain, UK).



Figure 1: Young Universities for the Future of Europe (YUFE)

The YUFE Alliance, including its two associated non-academic partners, aims at bringing a radical change in European higher education by establishing itself as the leading model of a young, student-centred, non-elitist, open and inclusive European University. YUFE is based on cooperation between higher education institutions, the public and private sector, and citizens across Europe. The YUFE pilot project was implemented from 2019 to 2022 and the European Commission is currently supporting the second phase of the alliance (YUFE 2030), with focus on upscaling, deepening and further developing the activities and services.

The fundamental dimensions of YUFE 2030 are captured in 7 pillars: YUFE Identity – from values to policies and actions, Education for the Future, Academic Research and Innovation, Societal impact, Digital University, Institutional Development, Dissemination & Capacity-building. This is realised through 12 work packages, one of which is dedicated to Quality Culture.

Students stand at the centre of decision-making, and as co-creators they are present in all decision-making and advisory bodies, from the Strategic Council with executives from all universities to the Task Forces running the work packages.

### b. YUFE Open Programmes

Based on the vision of becoming the leading model of a student-centred, open and inclusive European University, one of the main activities of the YUFE alliance are the YUFE open programmes, an innovation in the educational offer for students, encompassing both curricular and extra-curricular elements. This ranges from a single course, over modules or minors to an entire programme, and also includes the acquisition of specific skills. Most activities yield ECTS credits and/or a YUFE Star (mobility star, language star, professional star, civic star).

Students enrolled at one of the partner institutions can add one or more YUFE components to enrich their curriculum, or they can enrol for a complete YUFE programme. Key in the open programmes is the ownership of the students towards their curriculum, and the possibility of multilateral (physical, virtual and blended) mobility. The YUFE catalogue with academic courses and skills trainings is based on the four YUFE Focus Areas: “European identity and responsibilities in a global world”, “Citizens’ well-being”, “Digital societies” and “Sustainability”.

The key milestone within the YUFE 2030 roadmap is the development of a joint open Bachelor’s programme, which is currently being prepared. The underlying idea is to empower YUFE students to craft their own curriculum, thereby fostering an equitable, diverse, and efficient education system that

recognizes and nurtures individual talents. As such, YUFE will provide students with unique opportunities for training in an inclusive research- and work-based learning ecosystem, leading to interdisciplinary and intersectoral knowledge and skills.

The YUFE European University will enable students to compile their bachelor curricula by enrolling in one of the YUFE universities and choosing three minors as part of the programme which are offered at each of the YUFE universities and include challenge-based learning. Upon successful completion of their studies, students are not only rewarded a joint diploma acknowledging their academic performance, but also recognizing their effort in mobility, language learning, professional training and community volunteering.

### c. YUFE Quality Culture

The development of a YUFE QA framework is challenging, primarily due to the diverse backgrounds of the ten partner universities and the introduction of an open curriculum format, a novel approach for all members. Consequently, specific QA solutions were conceived during the pilot phase and are being refined in the YUFE 2030 project.

The overarching objective of the YUFE QA system is to ensure high-quality implementation of all YUFE Alliance activities, with a special focus on the educational offer, and to foster a culture of quality in each partner institution.

The QA framework is consistently built on the Plan-Do-Check-Act cycle (PDCA), ensuring that monitoring and evaluation go hand in hand with improvement and innovation. Simultaneously, the alliance acknowledges the contextual differences among partner institutions and their ability to pursue ambitious yet realistic goals, leveraging each institution's expertise to advance beyond basic quality.

This paper presents the YUFE QA principles, dimensions, governance and indicators. The QA model, in which the QA of the YUFE partner institutions is combined with the YUFE QA Framework is presented using the example of the YUFE Open Programmes and the YUFE minors in particular.

## 2. YUFE QA System – Key Elements

### a. QA Principles

The YUFE QA System is built on five basic principles, with quality culture at the centre.



Figure 2: YUFE QA Principles

### 1. Trust and appreciative approach

Universities collaborate in teaching activities, underpinned by mutual trust in the quality of each other's education. All partners and their programmes hold accreditation by an EQAR-registered QA agency, meeting ESG standards. The appreciative approach fosters a quality culture, assuming shared responsibility for education quality from each institution's unique context.

### 2. Subsidiarity, decentralised responsibility, shared ownership

Quality responsibility should rest as much as possible with those directly involved. YUFE activities must be jointly initiated, developed, and monitored. Subsidiarity, while important, doesn't eliminate the need for central coordination. General principles, instruments, and methodology are outlined in a shared mission and implemented at the alliance's appropriate level.

### 3. Continuous improvement, sharing (best) practices, PDCA

All activities rely on the PDCA cycle, familiar to all YUFE partners. It offers a suitable framework for launching and improving plans, policies, and objectives systematically, fostering continuous improvement. The ten YUFE partners collaborate and share ideas and best practices towards advancement.

### 4. Transparency

Subsidiarity and an appreciative approach require transparency in all processes, procedures, and outcomes. This entails providing objective, visible, public, and evidence-based information on activities.

### 5. Involvement of stakeholders (quadruple helix)

Students, staff, and stakeholders are central to YUFE's quality culture, and contribute together to achieve the best quality of education. The quadruple helix enhances stakeholder engagement, integrating YUFE into society, promoting knowledge transfer, and empowering active citizens.

These five principles are the foundation for all methods and quality assessment instruments in the YUFE QA approach, always in accordance and combination with the ESG Standards and guidelines for QA in the EHEA.

#### b. QA Dimensions

The principles adopted formed the basis for the QA approach for all YUFE activities, which distinguishes three dimensions of QA relevant to YUFE:

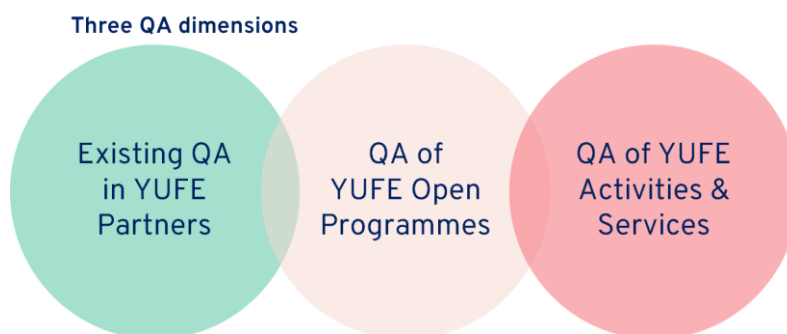


Figure 3: YUFE QA Dimensions

### **Dimension 1: QA in YUFE Partners**

YUFE partners conducted an extensive QA survey before YUFE's official launch to identify shared principles and values in their internal QA systems. These principles and values are applied through various procedures, meeting accreditation requirements with similar and complementary instruments and recurring indicators.

YUFE partner institutions and programmes are accredited by EQAR-registered agencies, aligning with ESG standards. These individual recognitions establish trust within the YUFE Alliance. Transparency on individual QA processes and results, provides a solid basis to build the YUFE initiatives upon the experience of the partner universities. No additional YUFE QA layer is necessary if the university-level QA procedures are adequate.

The YUFE Alliance encourages partners to improve the quality of their own programmes and initiatives, by exchanging knowledge and experience. This strengthens the quality culture in each of the partners and of the alliance.

### **Dimension 2: QA of YUFE Open Programmes**

As mentioned earlier, YUFE Open Programmes include curricular and extra-curricular components, with single courses, modules (minors) and entire programmes, and they also include the specific skill acquisition. All activities that yield credits or YUFE Stars, together with activities needed to obtain a YUFE degree fall under the scope of this QA dimension.

Student evaluations are crucial to monitor the quality of the various YUFE components. Wherever possible, evaluations already present at the YUFE partners are used or adapted in order to achieve as much information as possible without superfluous actions.

### **Dimension 3: QA of YUFE Activities and Services**

This third dimension focuses on YUFE's non-educational activities and services. The QA framework describes high-level quality indicators and assessment instruments, connecting them in QA roadmaps to specific stakeholders for each work package.

This paper focuses on how the dimensions 1 and 2 are combined when it comes to QA of the educational offer.

#### **c. QA Governance**

The YUFE Quality Task Force serves as YUFE's internal QA Board, responsible for QA management and development. It facilitates the exchange and comparison of QA practices among the ten universities and the implementation of the new QA "layer" according to the YUFE QA framework.

The YUFE Quality Task Force includes at least one quality expert from each YUFE partner and three student members. Quality experts serve as liaison officers to integrate a quality culture across YUFE Pillars and work packages systematically.

New instruments are collaboratively developed with other work packages. Figure 4 illustrates the steps, responsibilities, and collaborations between the Quality Task Force (WP10) and other work packages pre- and post-data collection.

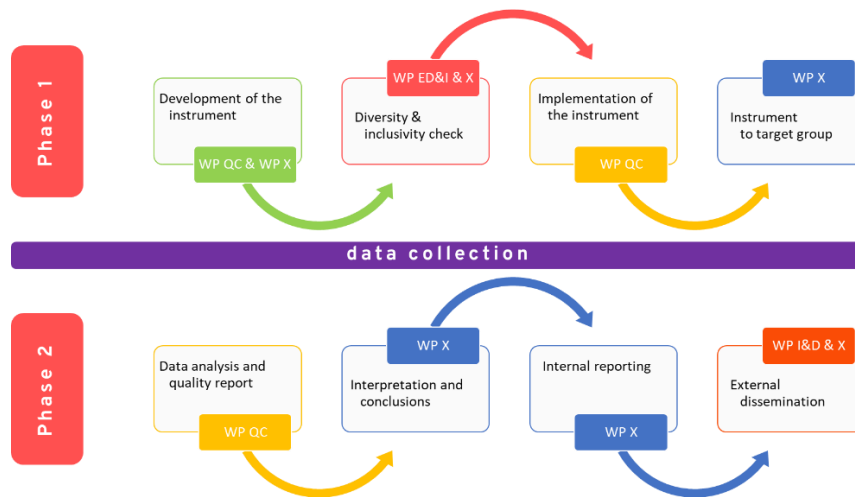


Figure 4: YUFE QA Workflow

For an external perspective on quality, an external QA Advisory Board will be established, acting as an essential advisory body to the internal YUFE QA Board. External experts in this board will evaluate QA procedures and results, offering new insights for monitoring quality across YUFE activities.

#### d. QA Indicators

To maintain YUFE's lean and consistent QA system, three quality indicators were chosen, applicable to all YUFE activities and services. These indicators form the blueprint for QA roadmaps.

The three quality indicators are a mix of qualitative and quantitative measures:



Figure 5: YUFE QA Indicators

Quality assessment instruments enable the Quality Task Force to monitor indicators in their QA activities. They include surveys, focus groups, pre- and post-evaluations, reflection documents, user testing, etc. Existing partner monitoring instruments are used to minimize administrative burden and leverage partner expertise.



### 3. QA of YUFE Open Programmes

#### a. Concept of YUFE Minors and YUFE Bachelor

##### From Courses to YUFE Minors...

Starting in academic year 2022-2023, YUFE offers students the opportunity to participate not only in selected courses (YUFE catalogue), language classes, community activities, but also YUFE minors. Partner universities offer minors in both the spring and fall semesters, allowing students to earn 30 ECTS credits through a blend of mandatory and elective courses. Students also engage in Challenge Teams, fostering problem-based learning in partnership with the university, the community, and other stakeholders.

Minor courses are held on-site at the offering university with online courses from another alliance university contributing to it. Each minor defines specific learning outcomes (ILOs) attained through courses and challenges, with students enjoying considerable elective choices.

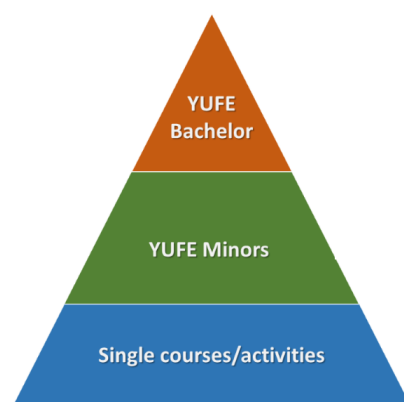


Figure 6: YUFE Educational Offer

##### ... and from Minors to a Joint YUFE Bachelor

The minors which are currently in the pilot phase, will also be integrated into the joint YUFE bachelor programme, which is planned to be accredited in 2024-2025.

The YUFE Joint Bachelor in Urban Sustainability Studies will be offered by eight degree-awarding partners offering the whole programme, and with two mobility partners offering minors. Successful completion of this bachelor leads to a joint diploma that fulfils the requirements of the laws of all countries involved and is legally valid in those countries.

The YUFE Joint Bachelor is a three-year, 180 ECTS (360 CATS) programme for personalised urban sustainability studies education across Europe (see Figure 7). Students enrol and start at one of the degree awarding “home” universities and complete the first year. In the following three semesters they can freely combine minors offered by all YUFE universities, with one to three mobility semesters. The last semester is dedicated to the bachelor’s project and is again carried out at the starting “home” university.



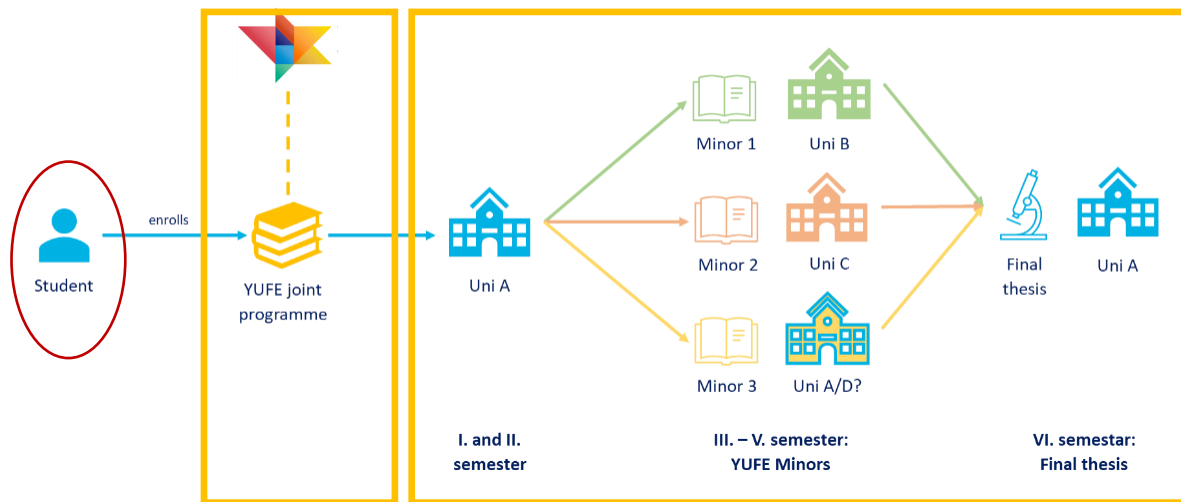


Figure 7: Concept Joint YUFE Bachelor

The YUFE Joint Bachelor aligns fully with open curriculum philosophy - students own their curriculum and enjoy multilateral mobility, choosing their "home" university, minors, and electives based on their interests and future plans.

To ensure curriculum coherence, ILOs are defined for the entire bachelor programme and its components, including the first year, the minors, the bachelor's project, and the challenge teams. Students receive guidance in constructing their personalised learning path to meet all overarching objectives.

#### b. Application of YUFE QA to the Minors

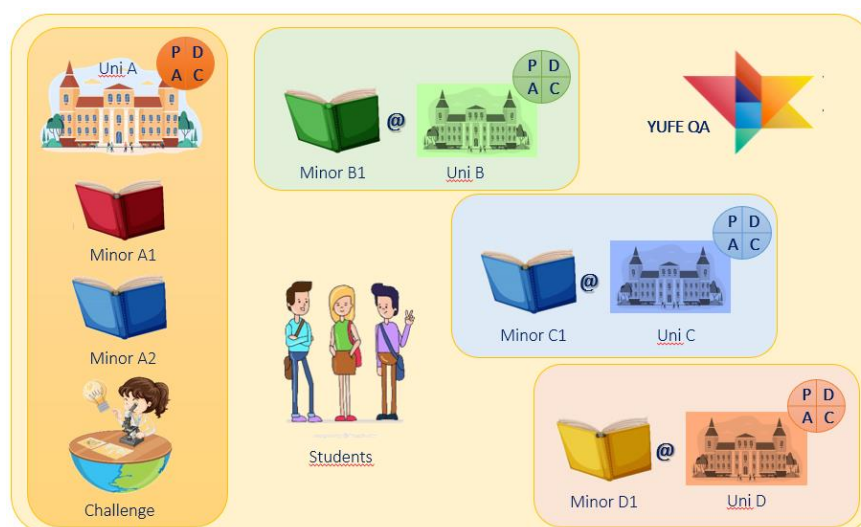
Each minor is organised by one of the YUFE partners, and consists of courses totalling at least 30 ECTS allowing students to choose. In line with the YUFE QA principles and YUFE QA dimensions, the QA of each of the minors will be a combination of QA procedures applied at two levels, see Figure 8:

##### (1) Minor components (courses, activities, challenge teams):

Quality of teaching and learning is assured by the QA mechanisms at the partner university, but YUFE oversees and helps monitoring it. For new elements, like the challenge teams, we provide additional support.

##### (2) YUFE minor as a whole:

Quality is assured by means of the YUFE QA mechanisms.



Images by Freepik (brgfx, storvset, pch.vector)

Figure 8: YUFE QA of Minor

### QA of Minor Components

As mentioned before, trust, subsidiarity, and transparency are vital in the YUFE QA framework. For courses delivered by partners, we leverage their existing QA processes. Each university has an effective QA system, including tools and processes to guarantee the PDCA-cycle, and is thus responsible for teaching and learning quality.

To strengthen quality and QA at YUFE level, minimum expected QA standards for minor components align with YUFE QA indicators: accessible information, stakeholder participation, stakeholder satisfaction. These minimum expected items are: detailed course content, study material, quality of teaching and general course satisfaction through surveys or focus groups. Each university guarantees that the evaluation of minor components is performed annually. This regime counts for both existing courses and courses newly created for the minor.

Via the PDCA-cycle, the follow up of QA activities and procedures stays with the partner university, but aggregate information on all minor components is provided to the internal YUFE QA Board by the liaison officers.

### QA of Minors as a whole

The responsibility for the QA of the minors as a whole lies with YUFE's internal QA Board, who developed an additional QA "layer".

During the preparatory stage QA focuses on minor design, emphasizing ILOs and course alignment. All minor ILOs contain the same three types of skills: content-specific skills, research skills and transferable skills, defined at European Qualifications Framework level 6 (Bachelor). A matrix connects course outcomes to minor ILOs, demonstrating student acquisition. This stage also considers minor prerequisites, admission processes, and mobility arrangements.

After establishing a minor, QA shifts to evaluating teaching and learning quality, ILOs, and student satisfaction. ILOs assessment relies on the matrix, supplemented by individual sheets for each student in the minor, particularly if the minor involves elective courses. Crucial to the QA process for minors as a whole is the introduction of a new survey, possibly complemented by focus interviews. This comprehensive assessment aims to measure overall student satisfaction, with a particular focus on their satisfaction with information regarding minors and minor components, the application process, the overall quality of teaching and learning, and YUFE community sense of belonging.

## 4. Conclusion and challenges

One of the key elements in YUFE's educational offer is the choice to work with an open curriculum philosophy, where students are co-creators of their curriculum. During the pilot phase (2019-2022) we emphasised individual courses and activities, with the YUFE course catalogue and the YUFE stars. The second phase adds minors and a complete undergraduate programme. This requires a new QA layer and QA governance, currently under full development.

We are preparing the accreditation of the YUFE Joint Bachelor, and its QA will follow the principles explained earlier.

The updated YUFE QA Framework will incorporate QA elements for minors and the joint bachelor. This entails the introduction of new governance structures and QA dimensions in line with YUFE QA principles. The follow-up will also include the benchmarking of indicators and procedures at the level of YUFE and the YUFE partners.

The choices on the design during development of the YUFE QA also present some challenges.

Over the initial four years of QA collaboration within YUFE, partner universities demonstrated shared values and ESG-based QA approaches. However, there are also differences due to the tradition and historical development of higher education systems in the different countries. Therefore, ongoing practice sharing is vital for enhancing comprehension of distinct national contexts.

The two QA layers (partner institution vs YUFE) will have to be fully implemented towards the minors and the joint bachelor. While smooth collaboration poses few issues, it is not unthinkable that disagreements could arise when putting together minors and minor components from different

institutions. In such cases, the internal QA Board will have to find a constructive, universally acceptable solution.

YUFE has chosen to work with an open curriculum philosophy, which creates particular challenges. On the one hand, open curricula are not part of the tradition of most partners, which will ask for a high level of flexibility. On the other hand, students will take up very different pathways, with, on top of that, programme components offered by different partners. This is not entirely straightforward in the context of the overall assessment of learning. It will be an important task for the YUFE internal QA Board, and the expertise in this area is yet to be built.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT**

This paper is delivered from the reports produced through YUFE alliance project 2019-2022 and reports and working materials produced through YUFE Alliance since 2022.