10th European Quality Assurance Forum

19-21 November 2015

Quality Assurance Agency and UCL Institute of Education

London, UK

Taking stock and looking forward

Paper presented during EQAF 2015

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Short bio:

Lucien Bollaert has been member of the executive board of NVAO since 2009. In 2012 he was also selected as member of the management group of the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA). Since its foundation in 2008 he has been vice-chair of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) Committee. In 2005 he was member of the E4 producing the first edition of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and founding EQAF in 2006, on whose organizing committee he served for 6 years. On last year's EQAF (Barcelona, 2014) his book *A Manual for Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education* was launched.

Before 2009 he was Education and Research Officer and acting vice-chancellor of a University College and chair of the QA experts' commission of the Association of the Ghent University. He was a Bologna Expert for Flanders dealing with QA, learning outcomes and qualifications framework. He was member of the 1st EQF experts' group.

Proposal

Title: The Future of Quality Assurance to and after Yerevan

Abstract:

One of the most successful actions of the Bologna Process is said to be QA. Yet, studies made clear that in quite some HEIs and Bologna countries internal QA was developed only after or because of external QA.

Four axes can be drawn on which the tendencies of QA can be depicted: the scope of QA, the use of learning outcomes, the standards and last but not least the dimension of quality culture. EQAR's RIQAA report adds the international dimension.

The Yerevan conference and adoption of the revised ESG and European Approach for QA on joint programmes have confirmed those tendencies. Yet, in Yerevan it has also become clear that the EHEA has not been fully or correctly implemented everywhere. Both ministers and researchers have concluded that the European and global context has changed. The

question is whether we also need another QA? The paper formulates the future QA dimensions.

Text of paper:

Intro : the success of QA in the EHEA

One of the most successful action lines of the Bologna Process (BP) is said to be Quality Assurance (QA). Indeed, since the first version of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in 2005 QA has been high on the European agenda, the national higher education (HE) policies as well as in the Higher Education Institutions (HEI). The success of the yearly EQAF is one of its proofs. Indeed EUA's (2007) *Trend V Report,* as well as ENQA's (2008) *2nd Survey* and Bologna's 2009 *Stocktaking Report* came to the conclusion the QA had gone through quite some developments and changes since 2005. The most important ones were the development of internal QA (IQA) systems in HEIs, national frameworks of external QA (EQA), and the diverse involvement of the stakeholders, students and academics being the most explicit. Thus ministers were proud to announce solemnly the realisation of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in their meeting in Vienna in 2010.

How successful has QA been?

Yet the MAP-ESG project by the E4 (2011), among other studies, has made clear that in quite some HEIs and Bologna countries IQA was developed after or because of the coming EQA.

The latest *Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (2014) of the European Commission (EC) is worth reading, not only because it also formulates 4 essential questions on the essence and impact of QA in HE.

The first question is how QA has supported the academic community, students and other stakeholders, in reaching quality goals. The EC rightly observes that a vast majority of HEIs have established explicit QA structures and processes, in which stakeholders, especially students, are involved more. On the other hand quite some QA systems are grappling with the way how to move away from process-orientation to establishing a genuine culture of continuous quality improvement.

The next 3 questions address the impact of QA on the quality of teaching and learning. Whether QA has helped HEIs to broaden access and ensure that students complete their studies cannot be answered easily. At the most only half of HEIs and countries use dropout figures as an indicator, involve students in the programme design and evaluate their educational support.

In order to answer whether QA has supported HEIs in providing students with high quality and relevant skills, the report observes that while most HEIs use intended learning outcomes to define their study programmes, it is still a challenge to translate them into appropriate teaching, learning and assessment formats. Furthermore internationalisation is often still not a subject of QA. ECA's CeQuint project being a qualitative exception. Another painful observation is that most students still do not take into account the results of QA in their choices. The EC report rightly concludes that progress can be observed, but that there are still important gaps to realise that *"QA has to become a support to creating an internal quality culture rather than a tick-box procedure."*
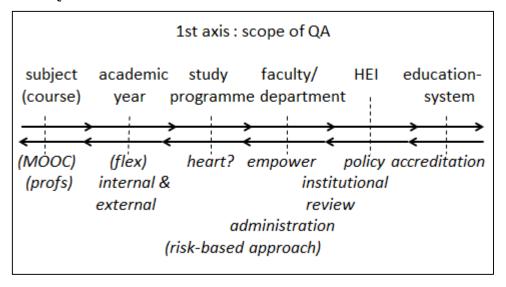
The 4 axes of (European) QA

The grade of success of QA within the EHEA is thus a mixed one. The reality of QA, both internal and external, and both on institutional and on national level, is not only diverse,

but also developing constantly. From an inventory of the many recent changes the most important tendencies to 2015 can be placed on 4 axes.

The first axis deals with the scope of QA. In Europe there is a well-known sway between the level of the study programme and that of the institution. Lately the pendulum is more towards the institutional level (Denmark, Sweden, Flanders, the Netherlands, Spain, Portugal) related to the vision, mission and policy of the HEI. Students tend to keep being in favour of QA on the level of study programmes, because this is their living reality. Governments have an ear to the institutional complaints of administrative and financial burden, but still want to have enough information and control on the quality via their national accreditation frameworks. They sometimes opt for EQA on institutional level combined with yearly risk indicators on the level of the study programmes and intervene on bad signals. Last but not least employers keep to the necessary information on study programme level linked to the knowledge and skills of their future employees.

The axis indicates both opposing tendencies and various stages. While above the opposite lines in figure 1 the applicable units are mentioned, under them are the various dimensions of policies and QA frameworks.
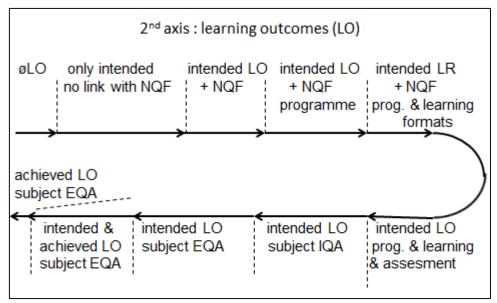

The 2nd axis deals with the learning outcomes (LO). Not surprisingly the Qualifications Framework (QF) of the EHEA was adopted by the ministers in the same Bologna conference as the ESG in Bergen in 2005. Within the EHEA the LOs have become popular in tools and projects such as ECTS and Tuning. The 2008 European Qualifications Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF for LLL) of the EC has even expended them to generic descriptors that can be used on 8 levels, and in informal and non-formal learning as well.

The use of LOs in QA is still subject of debate. Some fear a check-list approach that is too narrowly linked with employability and forgets the personal development during student life. Others proclaim that it is a good way to discuss the aims of a programme, choose the appropriate learning and assessment formats and be transparent while useful in QA that deals with the heart of the matter of education.

A second debate deals with the assessments of LOs. Certainly when a HEI or study programme consciously chooses for LOs as competences, in which knowledge, skills and attitudes are integrated in defined contexts, the integrated assessment is quite a challenge.
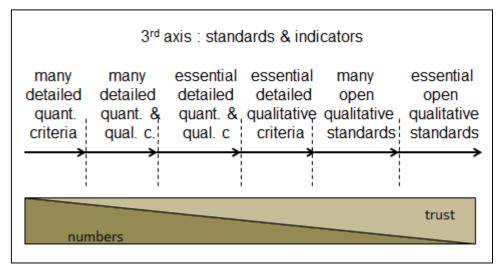
Still another debate is the methodology of EQA on the assessment of LOs. For this reason some QAAs deliberately make a difference between the intended LO and the achieved. Other QAAs or national frameworks differ in what they focus on in EQA. In Sweden the system still concentrates on the LOs in the final theses. While in most countries EQA limits itself to assessing on meta-level the appropriateness of the assessment methods used by programmes. The axis of the LOs in figure 2 thus becomes complicated. One thing is sure though, if the use of LOs is mostly an pure administrative effort things won't work.

While the previous axis deals with LO used as standards, the third axis deals with the technicalities of standards themselves. The degree of openness of standards, their amount and their quantitative versus qualitative character are important. It is not always easy to formulate standards and indicators that are appropriate to the vision and mission of a HEI and its education policy. Standard and indicators should be used not only in order to measure, but also to signal and communicate, both internal and external.

Linked with the swing to institutional level in national EQA or accreditation standards have become more open and less numerous. On the other hand it seems that with the economic and financial crisis governments have become less trustful in the performance of HEIs with the tax money. Consequently those governments tend to want to control the policies of HEIs stricter or use more precise indicators. The tendencies in standards in figure 3 are thus linked to the degree of trust that is given, which is inversely proportional to the number and quantitativeness of the standards.

3rd axis : standards & indicators

| many detailed quant. criteria | many detailed quant. & qual. c. | essential detailed quant. & qual. c | essential detailed qualitative criteria | many open qualitative standards | essential open qualitative standards |

trust

numbers

Last but not least it has become clear that the consciousness of the dimension of Quality Culture (QC) has grown. Just as in the failure of the purely managerial approach the importance of the organisational culture is more and more discovered. Although the definitions are either still vague or not agreed on, research in QC and its elements is rising.

Figure 4 can easily by recognized by those who are dealing with QA. The table gives a possible explanation why a HEI or study programme may have a technically good QA system but still fails on the quality threshold. The figure makes also clear that, as quality culture may be defined as that part of the organisational culture that deals with continuous quality enhancement in a natural way, there is a quality culture that is positively or negatively oriented, because in each organisation there always is a prevailing culture next to possible subcultures present.

Table QC + QA = quality as result

QC	+	QA	=	presumable quality result
O +		M +		++
M +		O +		++
O +		M -		+
M +		O -		presumably + (variable)
O -		M +		presumably - (variable)
M -		O +		presumably - (variable)
O -		M -		--
M -		O -		--

O = overwhelming M = minor (strength)

The Yerevan ministerial communiqué and QA : the revised ESG

The Yerevan conference and more precisely the revised ESG and the adopted European Approach for QA on joint programmes have confirmed those tendencies. The revised ESG are definitely clearer and easier applicable. They have also changed of scope. They now clearly envisage the management of HEIs and have opened the link between education, research and social service, while still focusing on the teaching and learning. The most

important changes, however, are in part 1, which addresses IQA. The number of standards has not only increased from 7 to 10. The most important and surprising new standard (1.3) prescribes the deliverance of student-centred learning, teaching and assessment. This is traditionally one of the items that firmly belongs to the so-called academic autonomy. The fact that the standard is added, indicates that QA wants to deal more with the heart of the matter of education, namely the added value of the learning process. It will take years before traditional lecture programmes will be re-designed toward student-centred learning and assessment.

Also the fact that the concept of working with intended LO linked to the NQF has entered a standard (1.2) and achieved LO is mentioned in a guideline (1.3) proves that the previous tendencies have been taken up. Just as it will take some years before part is realized by the HEIs, it can also take quite a period before the revised ESG are translated into national framework or legislation, if needed.

The Yerevan ministerial communiqué and QA : the European QA Approach to Joint Programmes

Next to the revised ESG the ministers also adopted the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes. Mobility and international cooperation have always been major goals of the BP. Nevertheless QA is still often not applied on internationalisation. The best HEIs try to build strategic international partnerships in which international student mobility is only one element, next to staff mobility, but where joint programmes and research striving towards excellence are more important.

Still QA is even in those strategic partnerships not often used, apart from the traditional quantitative indicators of 2020. Making joint programmes subject of a single audit recognized in all countries involved and based on an appropriate refocusing of the revised ESG is a major step towards the international recognition of QA decisions.

However, it will take again some years before even this approach is accepted by the countries and entered in the national legislation. Therefore it would be good that on European level an informative and cooperative contact point would be installed, as ECA proposes.

The Yerevan ministerial communiqué and QA : international QA and (automatic) recognition

The same observation applies to the automatic recognition of QA decisions, not to be confused with the automatic recognition of qualifications. The latter has been dealt with by the so-called Pathfinder Group (PfG), who also recommends the ministers to support the role of QA assessing recognition processes and strengthen QA by implementing the ESG and supporting EQAR. While recognizing the essential role of QA for recognition standards, the PfG has to conclude that access and admission processes are still not subject of QA assessment in 29% of the surveyed HEIs. Trust being the ultimate basis for recognition the role of QA could be stressed more. At the same time the PfG advocates for a Diploma Supplement (DS) based more closely on LOs.

EQAR's report on Recognising International QA Activities in the EHEA (RIQAA) proves that the international activities of QAAs have become more important. This has led to the last commitment in the communiqué *"to enable HEIs to use a suitable EQAR-registered agency for their EQA process, respecting the national arrangements for the decision making on QA outcomes."* Thus nations do not remove their national competence on (H)E. On the other hand HEIs should be given the possibility to choose for an foreign EQAR-registered agency that could be more suitable with their visions, missions, (strategic) policy and activities.

Some fear that this will create an open EQA market within the EHEA, in which prices and easy processes will be more important than quality (standards). The addition of respecting the national requirements for QA decisions prevents international purely automatic recognition of QA outcomes. This proves that, notwithstanding the ESG and EQAR, even within the EHEA trust is still not everywhere. Since the renewed commitment in the Bucharest communiqué only 2 countries have joint the 10 where the legislation had already enabled HEIs to work with foreign EQAR-registered QAAs. A common European QA framework does still not exist, although the minimum principles of the ESG should be shared. Even if there would be international automatic recognition of QA outcomes assessed by foreign EQAR-registered QAAs, the market would still not be completely open, but ruled by the ESG.

<u>The future of QA in a new context</u>

The impressive 2nd implementation report of the EHEA in 2015 by the BFUG in collaboration with Eurostat, Eurostudent and Eurydice, provides a wealth of statistical data and qualitative information. On QA it provides strong evidence that QA continues to be dynamic. Although information on internal QA is limited, the findings indicate that the trend for HEIs to develop their own strategies for quality enhancement is spreading and increasing. Equally the public accountability and transparency requirements are evolving, with a significant increase in the number of countries reporting that QA outcomes are published, even when negative. The report concludes that *"national quality assurance systems can still be differentiated by their tendency to be more accreditation oriented or focused on quality enhancement, there is an increasing consensus on the issues examined by quality assurance agencies."* (2015, p. 18) Teaching, research, internal management and the organisation of student services are mentioned as accepted QA subjects. On the other hand the data also show the existence of more tailor-made QA systems adapted for specialisation in HE(I) and focusing on topics as internationalisation and entrepeneurship. Another important conclusion is that *"the main issue is no longer whether or not a quality assurance system has been established, but rather whether the system is producing effective results and working in compliance with the ESG. In this respect, there is still progress to be made, particularly regarding student participation in quality assurance."* The report notices that it appears that student involvement may be slipping back as systems are reformed and reorganised.

The reason of the many changes of QA systems is the changed context. The EHEA is confronted with a continuing economic, financial and social crisis, high unemployment, important demographic changes, tensions and conflicts within and between countries, linked with migration, extremism and radicalization. After the triumphant Vienna communiqué (2010), in which the ministers declared the EHEA as realized, they now come to wake-up that both within the HEIs' grassroots as well as in some national legislations the BP is far from being realized.

The fact that many HEIs are in the process of reformulating their missions and (strategic) policies is a sign that they are becoming conscious of the new challenges. On the other hand the pitfall is that once again the same statements can be read everywhere. Gallup (2015) found in a recent study that more than 50% of vision or mission statements of HEI share striking similarities, regardless of size, public or private, land-grant status or religious affiliation, or for-profit or not-for-profit. While they may represent the broad views and aspirations of the leaders they offer little guidance to current and future students and staff. Gallup recommends to stablish a clear and differentiated purpose by answering the questions: *"Why do we exist?"* and *"What value do we provide to the world?"* and support identity with engaged culture primarily including the student experiences that should support the HEI's purpose and brand.

Those are also the questions that were raised in the 2nd BP Researchers' Conference in Bucharest on 24-26 November 2014. Their report asks to the whole of the EHEA "are we ready for the future?" Their answer is that a fundamental re-thinking with a new vision and not just technical adjustments is needed. As for QA they recommend after some critical findings that the ESG should be used to create a quality culture involving all stakeholders focussing on the students' experience in learning, together with better data collection and communication.

We need more out-of-the-box thinking to come to sustainable systems that focus both on minimum thresholds and continuous quality enhancement in the new context of diversified missions and policies to global challenges. Dimensions that will certainly need to be looked upon are:

- Quality as a multidimensional and contextual concept engaging all stakeholders and empowering the students and staff as essential actors;

- Quality culture as an important underpinning actor of quality, in which commitment and participation are as important as leadership and communication on each level;

- The link between the vision, mission and (strategic) policy of HEIs/study programmes on the one hand and the concept of quality (as added value) and QA, its systems, standards and tools on the other hand;

- The new styles of leadership and (minimal) management building on trust and empowerment;

- The new links and balances between IQA and EQA forming one process starting from IQA in which more and more HEIs take their own responsibility;

- The use of LO and transversal competences;

- The international dimension and the relationship with national policies;

- The social dimension from intake to employability;

- The link with research, the scope and modes of which are widened;

- The self-critical capacity of IQA as well as the independence of EQA;

- The necessary transparency and (international) recognition built on trust;

- The remaining presence of national and international rankings.

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