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Short bio

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Paper

From Formal Requirements to Institutional Learning? Quality Assurance, Employability and Academic Mission in Western Balkan Higher Education

Abstract

External quality assurance (QA) reviews may confirm compliance, but they tell us less about the decisions universities take afterwards. Drawing on twelve accounts from QA agencies, universities and employers in Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro, this paper examines that missing link. External scrutiny was described as a safeguard for standards, a source of new procedures and, at times, a reason to act on concerns already recognised. Employer involvement took different forms, from consultation and placements to changes in course content and jointly designed programmes. Its influence was easier to identify when respondents could point to a particular academic decision. In none of the six illustrative pathways, however, did the account report an assessment of the consequences of that specific action. This is a limit of the evidence, not proof that no assessment occurred. Two interpretive criteria—decision traceability and evidence of effectiveness—help distinguish an institutional response from evidence that it worked. The findings inform debates on skills, partnerships and institutional learning without treating employability as the university's only purpose.

1. Introduction

An external review may identify a problem, but the university must still decide what to do about it. That decision is not necessarily visible in a completed accreditation report. This matters across the European

Higher Education Area (EHEA), where quality assurance (QA) must address skills and innovation alongside academic standards. The Council of the European Union (2025) calls for systems responsive to societal, technological and economic developments. The European University Association's Trends 2024 survey covers 489 institutions across 46 higher education systems (Gaebel et al., 2024).

Earlier research shows that QA's organisational impact is hard to isolate (Stensaker, 2003; Stensaker & Leiber, 2015; Leiber et al., 2015). What deserves closer attention is the route from an evaluator's observation or a stakeholder's suggestion to an academic decision—and, eventually, to evidence of its effects. The twelve accounts offer contrasting perspectives, not nationally representative findings. For the 2026 European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF), the issue is especially pertinent: how can cooperation with employers shape education without reducing the university's purpose to immediate labour-market demand?

2. Conceptual Framework

A policy can exist on paper and have little influence on daily work. Institutional theory has long described this separation between formal structures and practice (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Yet institutions do not respond to outside pressure in identical ways; they can comply, negotiate or adapt selectively (Oliver, 1991). Leadership and professional engagement shape whether quality arrangements take hold (Stensaker, 2003; Bendermacher et al., 2017). Organisational learning distinguishes immediate correction from reconsidering underlying assumptions (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), including Standard 1.9, already require monitoring and periodic programme review (ENQA et al., 2015). The paper uses two interpretive criteria—decision traceability and evidence of effectiveness—to examine how incoming evidence informs decisions and what can be established about their consequences. These criteria clarify rather than replace the monitoring and review expected under ESG 1.9. This matters for innovation, which QA may support or constrain (Mello Silva & Vargas, 2022), and for employability, which concerns graduate capabilities rather than placement alone (Harvey, 2001).

3. Research Questions

RQ1. How are external QA requirements translated into institutional decisions and practices, and under what conditions may they support learning beyond compliance?

RQ2. How do universities negotiate labour-market expectations with academic priorities and their wider societal mission, and what role does external QA play?

4. Methodology

The study brings together twelve purposively selected accounts, with a representative of a QA agency, a university and an employer or chamber from each of Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Montenegro. The exploratory study compares perspectives from actors involved in QA processes, without estimating national or regional prevalence. Country respondents do not necessarily describe the same institution or event; review cycles also differ.

The material was gathered between September and October 2026 through recorded interviews, written replies and contemporaneous notes. Respondents were told the purpose of the study and its intended academic use, and agreed to contribute. No formal approval was sought from a research ethics committee. The Albanian university account (AL-U) is based on edited contemporaneous notes, not a verbatim transcript; it is not used for direct quotation. A theory-informed thematic comparison examined findings, interpretation, decision authority, implementation, stakeholder influence and assessment of consequences. Contradictory accounts, including internally initiated changes, were retained. Claims were not systematically checked against institutional records or outcome data.

Respondents are identified by country and role (AL, XK, MK and ME; QA, U and E). These codes do not guarantee anonymity. Distinctive details were generalised; interview consent was not treated as permission for public identification. The author formerly led an Albanian university and worked as an external QA evaluator. The institution described in AL-U is not the university she led. This calls for attention to alternative explanations. In particular, the Albanian funding pathway remains an interview account, not a verified sequence of decisions or expenditure. The study makes no causal or national-level claims.

5. Findings and Discussion

5.1. Accountability Does Not Guarantee Academic Change

The Kosovo accounts show why rigorous oversight and meaningful academic change should not be treated as equivalents. The agency respondent (XK-QA) defended detailed checks of staffing and facilities after earlier reliability concerns. The university representative (XK-U), while supporting common standards, recalled a peer-teaching evaluation introduced for accreditation in which favourable forms circulated without observation or serious feedback. Strict scrutiny can coexist with weak professional learning. Neither interview establishes how widespread the problem is.

The Albanian agency respondent (AL-QA) described a second complication. Some institutions had extensive regulations that were not consistently followed; others performed activities but left too little documentation. The first resembles the familiar separation between formal rules and practice. The second means that poor paperwork may conceal real work. A count of procedures or recommendations closed cannot resolve either problem on its own.

5.2. Evaluation Findings Become Consequential Through Internal Decisions

What an evaluation finding becomes depends in part on who can decide about it. In the Albanian university notes (AL-U), concerns over inadequate funding for research and conference participation reportedly travelled through internal QA and international-relations offices to the Rectorate and Senate, where support was approved. Evaluation may have reinforced an existing concern. This reconstruction has not been verified through Senate minutes, spending records or later results (Table 1).

The same notes describe a more straightforward response: missing website information, including material in English, was corrected. That matters for transparency, but it is different from allocating academic resources. One action changed public information; the other reportedly required a

governance decision about funding. Both may close an issue raised during review, yet neither can be called effective on the strength of completion alone.

Nor does every improvement begin with external review. A North Macedonian university representative (MK-U) traced quality councils, self-evaluation and annual action plans to internal work beginning in 2024, without linking their introduction to a regular external institutional evaluation. In Kosovo, accreditation-related responsibilities were spread between departments and central authorities (XK-U); in Albania, some internal QA units lacked staff or autonomy (AL-QA). External requirements can also create procedures, as the Kosovo peer-evaluation case shows. The cases suggest procedural adoption, reinforced priorities and possible acceleration, without proving which mechanism mattered most (Oliver, 1991).

5.3. Employer Participation Matters When It Informs an Academic Decision

Being invited to a consultation is not the same as influencing a curriculum. The Albanian chamber representative (AL-E) recalled meetings with universities but could not identify a resulting programme revision, although cooperation on placements was more visible. Other accounts offer more specific links. A Kosovo university representative (XK-U) connected industry input to syllabus changes, including artificial intelligence (AI) content; a Kosovo employer (XK-E) described internships and an Industry Week. In North Macedonia, a chamber respondent (MK-E) reported joint work on a short-cycle technical programme. These forms of engagement are not equivalent to evidence of impact; neither outcomes nor QA causation were established.

The comparison is not straightforward. Technical subjects may lend themselves more readily to employer proposals than other fields. A Montenegrin chamber respondent (ME-E) was critical of consultations linked to accreditation yet described closer cooperation under a particular faculty leader. That example cannot establish the relative importance of leadership and institutional type. And employers are not the only external voices: the AL-U notes refer to a programme proposed by a civil-society organisation. The important distinction is between participation and an opportunity to shape an actual choice.

There is also a question of whose views enter the room. According to the Kosovo agency representative (XK-QA), universities select the employers invited to evaluation meetings. Such selection may narrow the perspectives heard. A stronger account of engagement would show how a proposal was considered, whether it was accepted, revised or rejected, and the academic reasons for that choice.

5.4. Skills and Innovation Must Be Negotiated Within Academic Mission

The interviews do not support a simple opposition between employability and academic mission. The Kosovo university representative (XK-U) questioned the expectation that graduates should arrive ready for a firm's particular job and pointed to company training academies. Yet the Kosovo employer (XK-E) also valued judgement, ethics, adaptability and lifelong learning, not only digital competence. A Montenegrin chamber respondent (ME-E) acknowledged universities' scientific and humanistic responsibilities. The accounts suggest some common ground on broad capabilities, but not on who

should provide occupation-specific training: a company academy might fill a sensible niche, reveal a gap in university provision, or do both. The interviews cannot settle this.

Curriculum change also runs up against governance constraints. The Albanian agency representative (AL-QA) described rigid programme rules; the Kosovo university (XK-U) pointed to procedural obstacles to joint degrees. Neither account makes accreditation agencies solely responsible for those constraints. The reported responses range from altering syllabi to introducing interdisciplinary provision, without evidence here of their effects on student learning. In the context of EQAF's emphasis on skills, entrepreneurship and innovation, the question is whether QA permits well-judged adaptation while safeguarding academic purpose. Entrepreneurship education was not itself a subject of the interviews.

5.5. From Reported Decisions to Evidence of Effectiveness

The clearest common gap concerns evidence of results. In none of the six pathways set out in Table 1 did the respondent report an assessment of the consequences of the specific action described. That does not mean such assessments never took place. Agency accounts distinguish follow-up arrangements from demonstrated effects. In North Macedonia, MK-QA described intended feedback processes, while the first external institutional evaluation cycle was still in progress. In Montenegro, ME-QA described action plans and a two-year follow-up that examines implementation and evidence of effects. Neither agency account supplies outcome evidence for the specific decisions in the table. The Montenegrin university respondent (ME-U) described improved checks on corrective action following an ISO 9001 audit. This was a management-system audit, not national higher education accreditation, and the results of the revised checks were not reported.

Two questions emerge from these contrasts. First, can a finding or stakeholder proposal be followed through to a particular institutional decision, including the people authorised to make it? Decision traceability links paperwork to practice (5.1) and to decision authority (5.2–5.3). Second, what evidence shows whether that decision achieved its purpose, and was the evidence used afterwards? Evidence of effectiveness follows from the curriculum and partnership cases (5.3–5.4). A website correction and a reported research-funding allocation (AL-U) require different measures of success, even if both respond to review findings. Together, the two criteria distinguish an identifiable decision from evidence that it was effective; they are not new accreditation requirements. They share an interest in mechanisms with process tracing (Beach & Pedersen, 2013), but these interview accounts do not prove causal sequences. The website correction resembles a single-loop adjustment; no account documents the reconsideration of underlying assumptions associated with double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978).

Table 1. Illustrative respondent-reported institutional responses; not independently verified.

Source	Reported action	Assessment evidence
AL-U	Research-funding decision	No assessment of this decision's effects reported; Senate route unverified

Source	Reported action	Assessment evidence
AL-U	Website transparency correction	No assessment of effects reported; correction described
XK-U	Syllabus content adjusted	No assessment of educational consequences reported
MK-U	Internal QA action plans	Progress monitoring described; consequences of a specific action not established
MK-E	Joint technical programme design	No assessment of programme outcomes reported
ME-U	Effectiveness-check procedure	New assessment procedure described; its results not reported

Table 1 summarises six illustrative responses. Documentary follow-up is needed to assess their effects; their wider prevalence cannot be inferred from these interviews (Stensaker & Leiber, 2015).

6. Conclusions and Implications

For RQ1, the accounts show several possible roles for external QA. It may bring in a procedure, give weight to an existing concern or make a decision more urgent. But the ability to act rests with internal bodies that hold authority and resources. The Albanian and Kosovo accounts illustrate how governance authority and internal capacity shape the reported responses; they do not isolate the causal role of scrutiny's intensity. Moreover, none of the six illustrative pathways included a reported assessment of the specific action's consequences. The accounts identify responses but cannot establish sustained institutional learning.

For RQ2, consultation with the world of work mattered most clearly where respondents could identify a change: revised course content, workplace learning opportunities or a programme developed with industry. Attendance at consultation meetings, by itself, told us little about influence. Employers and universities also differed over how much firm-specific preparation a degree should provide, even as they recognised the value of broader capabilities. The interviews document some changes linked to stakeholder input but do not establish their subsequent educational effects. Entrepreneurship education was not examined.

For EQAF 2026, the practical challenge is therefore specific: ask what evidence or stakeholder input reached a university decision, who was able to act, what changed, and how the consequences were checked. Decision traceability and evidence of effectiveness offer a focused way to examine such skills partnerships without adding accreditation standards. The next step for research is to trace selected

decisions through committee records, programme changes and subsequent results—and to examine why institutions sometimes choose not to follow external advice.

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