

Fostering Independence of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education Area

Progress report

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The rationale of the project

The context of this article and its findings are grounded in the activities of the project of the Slovenian Quality Assurance Agency (SQAA) focusing on exploring independence of quality assurance agencies in higher education from different national and European environments.

This project is contextualised with a focus on exploring the role of the agencies in different backgrounds, analysing differences and commonalities between different parts of Europe and evaluating the responsibilities of key actors in different procedures at the agency level.

From a system point of view, it seems difficult to consider academic freedom and institutional autonomy of higher education institutions without considering the role of quality assurance agencies. The quality of higher education emerged as an increasingly regulated area, where countries generally shifted away from direct control of centralized institutions, but still remained a strong influence. Especially challenging and concerning is the interference of government on the work and functioning of the quality assurance agencies.

In public debates and in formal procedures, the aspect of independence is being addressed in different perspectives, especially in ensuring that procedures and decisions are based on expertise. Obligations to establish independent public or private quality assurance agency are inspired by considerations of credibility, integrity, professionalism and trustworthiness. These obligations are important in ensuring students, teachers and higher education institutions that expertise plays a decisive role in the decision-making process.

Methodology for analysing independence of quality assurance agencies

Within this project, we developed a methodology for analysing independence of quality assurance agencies. The focus of our research relies on the five main categories of independence:

1. The appointment of chief executive of the quality assurance agency,
2. The process of preparing and adopting criteria / standards for accreditation and evaluation procedures,
3. The appointment of experts for accreditation and evaluation procedures,
4. The decision-making procedures on the accreditation and evaluation procedures and
5. The appeal procedures for the accreditation and evaluation procedures.

As a method of collecting the information about the independence of the quality assurance agencies we use open-ended questionnaires, based on these five main quality indicators. In the process of collecting data we determined the scale for each criterion - 1 being the most independent, which means that none of the relevant stakeholders has a predominant influence and 4 being the least independent, meaning that relevant stakeholders have a predominant influence on the functioning of the quality assurance.

Rating scale		Third party influence.		%
Compliant	Independent	None of the stakeholders has a strong influence	1	100
Substantially Compliant	Mostly independent	Stakeholders have certain influences	2	66
Partially Compliant	Partially independent	Stakeholders have a strong, indirectly predominant influence	3	33
Non-compliant	Dependant	Stakeholders have a strong and predominant influence	4	0

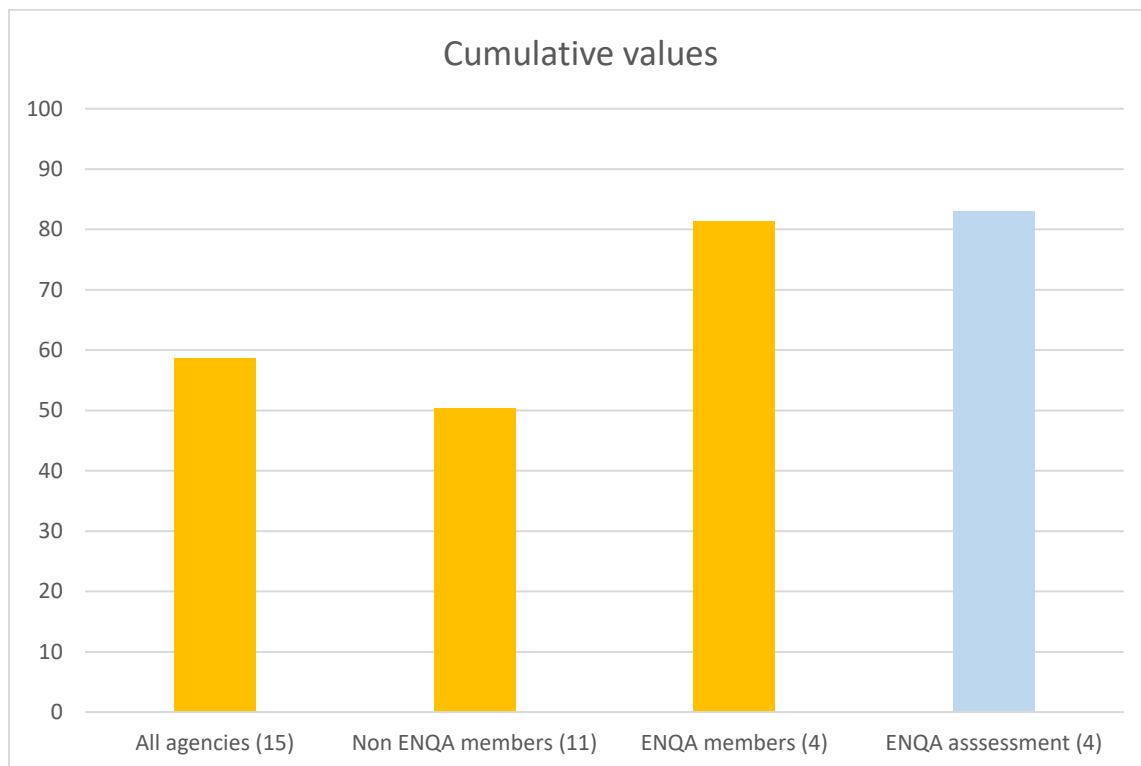
Criterion scale

Findings of the survey

We complemented the outcomes of the survey from the open-ended questionnaires with the findings of the examination of the other relevant documents, such as regulations on accreditations and evaluations and self-evaluation reports of quality assurance agencies. In the sample of agencies, that are members of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), we also analysed ENQA reports. Specifically, we analysed the 3. 3. standard of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), which refers to the independence of quality assurance agencies. In addition, we also took a look

at the general status of the quality assurance agency, connected to legal status, organisation and background.

Until now, we have qualitatively and quantitatively analysed the questionnaires of 15 quality assurance agencies. 4 out of 15 agencies, which were included in the sample, are members of ENQA and 11 out of 15 agencies are not its members. In quantitative terms, the total average or independence indicator for all agencies included in the analysis is 59. More precisely, the overall independence indicator of non-ENQA members is 50, while the independence indicator for ENQA members is a total of 81. The analysis revealed that non ENQA members due to different political, social and historical reasons, are less independent and autonomous than agencies, that are ENQA members. Within the ENQA members, included in the sample, we further analysed and compared our scores with the findings of the ENQA panel. The average or independence indicator, deducted from ENQA reports was 83, which is slightly higher than the result of our analysis, which is 81.

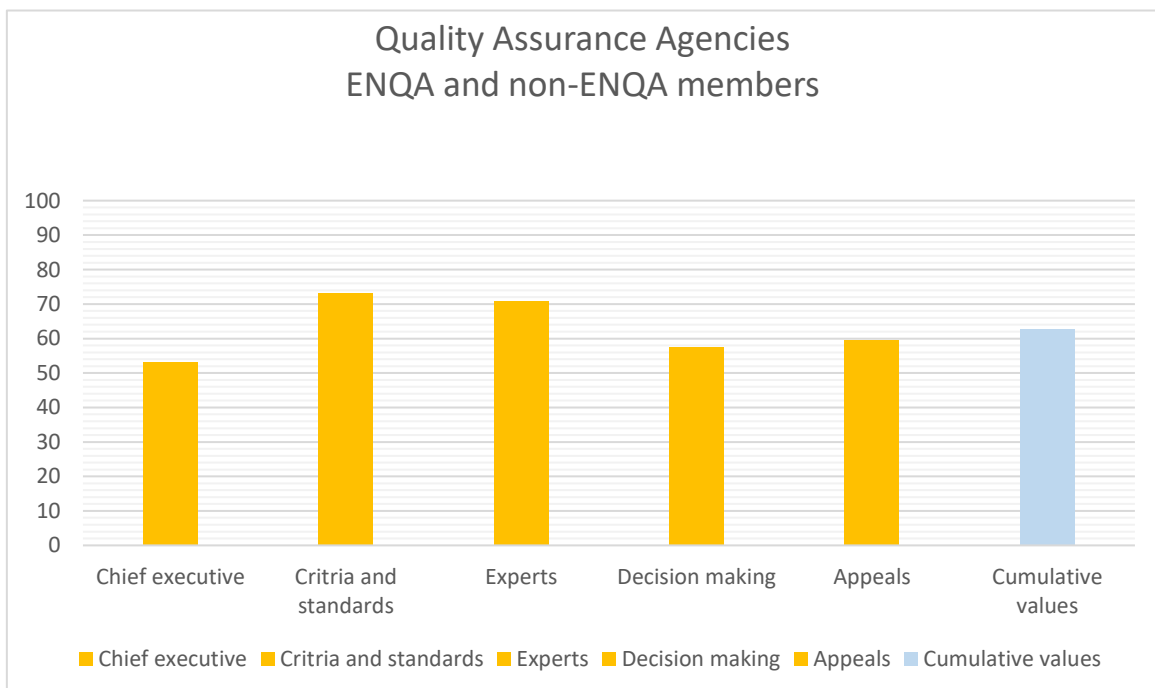


Cumulative survey values

In qualitative terms, the analysis of each of the five categories showed that on a general level quality assurance agencies have mostly established formal mechanisms to safeguard operations and outcomes of those operations without

third party influence. The analysis also showed that the influences from ministries or other political entities have diminished and that agencies have strengthened its operational and organisational capacities in last years. On the other hand, the analysis displayed there is still a great deal of indirect influence of third parties on the work of quality assurance agencies. It must be, however, noted that agencies pointed out the biggest threat for independence is coming from ministries and other political entities. Other stakeholders, the universities, the representatives of the labour maker, the students' organisations or other relevant higher education stakeholders are not being mentioned in that manner.

The results of the analysis exhibit that autonomy of agencies is most impaired in decision-making procedures and the process of nomination of the chief executive of the agency. Surprisingly, ENQA members pointed out bigger weaknesses in appeal procedures whether because of the unclear appeal procedures whether because of the power of decision making in appeal procedures.



QAA criterion per category

In the process of nomination of the chief executive, the governmental influence is manifested mainly through the direct governmental appointment of the chief executive or the indirect appointment of the chief executive by the collective body (i.e. the majority of board members, who appoint a chief executive are nominated

by the government). The indirect governmental influence, connected to the constitution of the collective body is seen also in the procedure of appointing experts, appeal committee members or in decision-making procedures. In the decision-making process, the level of autonomy is further demonstrated by the decision-making power, in particular by the fact whether the agency has the final call for appointment (i.e. the agency's competence to make final decisions in comparison to merely adopt recommendations). The impact from the government can be further seen by the possibilities of external influence on the procedures, for example by initiating an extraordinary evaluation or granting licenses / accreditation for higher vocational colleges despite the quality has been assessed negatively by agencies. In appeal procedures, third party influence can be visible mostly by the power to ignore the agencies negative accreditation decision or unclear rules of appeal procedures in so-called grey areas, which leaves room for possible influences. Alongside, the composition of the appeal committee (i.e. 2 out of 3 members are appointed by the government) in some agencies suggests there is a strong indirect governmental influence or even worse direct influence, where the second-instance body is established by the Government.

Further steps

The findings of our survey highlighted the need to further foster the organisations operational autonomy and autonomy of formal outcomes, especially in regards to indirect influences of the government in different processes at the quality assurance agencies.

In the second stage of the project, we plan to extend and upgrade the qualitative analysis of possible influences of external stakeholders on the work of quality assurance agencies by including wider sample quality assurance agencies from different countries.

As a final outcome, we will prepare useful guidelines and information on different aspects of the functioning of the quality agencies according to the level of autonomy, covering the areas which are vital for the successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. This can be useful on a general level, to build trust among different stakeholders and also in a practical sense – to foster the quality of internal evaluation procedures, conducted by ENQA, EQAR, ECA or other relevant organisations, working in the field of higher education.

Conclusions

This preliminary analysis shows a great diversity of quality assurance agencies across Europe. We believe further work is needed to identify common problems, exchange examples of good practices and propose relevant solutions. Well-

performing quality assurance agencies will equalize quality standards and constitute activities to fully support higher education systems and consequently fulfil expectations of teachers and students in an increasingly diversified European environment.