

REPORT

4th SEQA-ESG peer-learning workshop Stakeholder involvement Malta, 28 and 29 June 2022

The 4th SEQA-ESG peer-learning workshop on *Stakeholder involvement* was organized as part of the activities under the *Supporting European QA Agencies in meeting the ESG (SEQA-ESG)* project.

The aim of the workshop was to familiarize the participants with standard 3.1 of the ESG, namely it was addressed the involvement of stakeholders in the governance and work of the quality assurance agencies, their participation in the design of methodologies and criteria for external quality assurance.

The workshop was organized over two half days in Malta, on 28-29 June 2022, and was attended by representatives of all the partner institutions (quality assurance agencies, ministries of education) in the project, ENQA staff, including its President (as project coordinator), and two other experts in the project (Ronny Heintze, Deputy Director for International Development, AQAS, Germany, and Cristina Ghitulica, Vice-President, ARACIS, Romania).

The workshop started with the welcome speech from Douglas Blackstock, ENQA President, who reiterated his vision about ENQA as a more inclusive organization, comprising agencies in all EU countries, and the importance of such projects designed to help agencies to become more ESG compliant.



Having said that, Goran Dakovic, ENQA Review Manager, introduced the participants to the aims and objectives of the workshop to achieved:

- To address the involvement of stakeholders at all levels, and through a number of the agencies' activities;
- To discuss and analyze standard ESG 3.1;
- Involvement in the governance and work of the agency, but also their participation in the design of methodologies and criteria for EQA;
- To share experiences from ESG compliant agencies who have recently aligned their criteria to the ESG;
- To brainstorm on key challenges, possible solutions and good practices regarding standard ESG 3.1.



Ronny Heintze took the lead and spoke about the *Involvement of stakeholders in governance and work of a QA agency*, explaining to the participants the meaning of standard 3.1 in the ESG, leading to the idea that both institutions and the public should trust agencies. Discussions were held on the relevance of stakeholders where the participants agreed that their involvement is very important and jointly defined the types of relevant stakeholders (apart from HEIs, teaching staff, students, business representatives and ministries of education) that agencies also involve in their work and governance, including professional bodies, regional organizations, councils of rectors, churches, counterparts, administrative staff of universities etc. It was concluded that the list of potential stakeholders can be extended depending on the fields covered by the agencies.

Another important question was “What is the relevance of stakeholders?”, as they can be more or less important, the level of their involvement is different, and that agencies should define them depending on their priorities.

When asked “Why should we involve stakeholders?” the participants agreed that this is done so as to build trust on the agency’s work, to get a perspective from their view, that they can create a bridge, but concluded that it is not easy to involve and convince them to take active part. This led to the next logical question about “How to involve stakeholders in the governance structures and work, and how are they appointed?”. After presenting the experience of other agencies, all the participants learnt that there are different levels of involvement of stakeholders, but no matter what that level is, it should create possibility for collaboration and opportunity for their consultation and information.

Other questions that arose from the public, which were also of interest, referred to “How do we manage to balance the stakeholder involvement in governance?” and “How do we manage conflict of interest?”. Attendees agreed that people should be appointed in governance structures based on their personal capacity, providing them with no voting rights and no participation in discussions when their institution or program is evaluated, and, again, thoroughly consider the relevance of stakeholder involvement in the agency’s governance and work.



Cristina Ghitulica continued with the “Involvement of stakeholders in the design of methodologies and criteria for external quality assurance” and addressed the topic of effectiveness and impact of involving stakeholders, which led to the conclusion that criteria for involving different categories of stakeholders are different, and that the impact can be increased by involving them in training, for instance. The overall objective is to improve the activity of the agency through their involvement. Also, participants learnt that stakeholders should have a common understanding of what quality assurance is, and the scope of QA.

Another question discussed was “What is the aim of quality assurance and who defines this aim?”, and everybody agreed that usually ministries of education define it, e.g. for the purpose of external evaluation, accreditation or non-accreditation, the procedure etc.

Another conclusion was that different stakeholders can have different visions on quality assurance and also different expectations. Thus, agencies should be ready to adjust to their needs, provide them with the environment of interaction and communication, to make them understand the quality assurance principles and roles. Therefore, constant cooperation and communication between quality assurance agencies and their stakeholders is needed.

The participants learned, in this context, about the experience in other countries, that, for example, in Germany quality assurance is used to identify the universities that are doing well (given that there are many private institutions), and in other systems quality assurance is oriented to quality enhancement and improvement in HEIs.

Another question asked in this session was “Can we evaluate HEIs that have a long experience in internal quality assurance in the same way as a newly established one?” and everybody agreed that, no matter what, they have to be treated equally, or that there should be a random evaluation done etc.

When asked about “How important the context, political and cultural particularities are?” answers were that the political will can have a great impact (e.g. the Bologna system was introduced, external quality assurance is established, low quality institutions have been closed etc.)

Also, agencies should find the right balance between the effort they make and the resources they put in and know the goal they want to achieve when implementing their methodologies.

It was agreed that the Covid pandemic has also had an impact on our quality assurance procedures, which led to developing a new process. The methodology of face-to-face evaluation had to be adapted to the new realities, and, in this context as well, the perspectives of the stakeholders should be taken into account.

In conclusion, methodologies should be flexible and adjustable so that they are ultimately fit-for-purpose.



Discussions went on with regard to the involvement of students and “How important is the student in quality assurance?”. Everyone agreed that their role is really important, they are dedicated, they are aware of their role when they are members in a review panel etc.

But, “What are the challenges related to student involvement?”. Based on participants’ experience, students are the most fragile stakeholders, it is difficult to involve them when we think that they have many other activities (e.g., courses and laboratories to attend, projects and reports to write etc.). one other challenge encountered is that in many systems students are not regarded as members with equal rights. Also, students need more support from the agency, to create an environment for them.

One of the conclusions was that involvement of students represents a fundamental value of HEIs, but in the case of quality assurance agencies there are some barriers when trying to involve them, like the lack of sufficient knowledge, experience in quality assurance and motivation. Nevertheless, many quality assurance agencies involve students in their review panels quite successfully.

Participants learned about the different options that are in place when it comes to selecting students (e.g. by open call, appointment by student unions, councils of rectors and so on), but nomination of students by somebody else should not affect the agency’s flexibility in choosing experts in its panels.



The hosts of the workshop – Malta (MFHEA), Slovakia (SAAHE) and Moldova (ANACEC) - had the honor to present their examples of reaching compliance with ESG 3.1. The general topics covered by their presentations referred to the types of stakeholders and their level of involvement in agencies’ governance and work. It was again an opportunity to share best experiences and good examples with other partners and answer their questions on how this standard is fulfilled. The various challenges in the effective involvement of stakeholders were also addressed, including: maintaining and increasing trust, involvement of students in the accreditation process of programs, increasing the pool of local students’ peer reviewers, identification of

experts (representatives of teaching staff / students) for educational institutions in specific fields, short lifespan of the student status, lack of professional associations, low interest of businesses in quality assurance in education, involvement of international experts etc. It was found that these are some of the most common challenges that quality assurance encounter when it comes to stakeholder involvement.



In the session “Provision of support to HE Learning & Teaching: External Quality Assurance vs. other fields of work of a QA agency” moderated by Ronny Heintze, other different activities of agencies involving stakeholders were addressed, with a focus on the existing distinctions and synergies. Thus, the participants learned that in different systems quality assurance agencies can carry out many various other activities, apart from external quality assurance in higher education by applying ESG, including recognition, primary and secondary education, vocational education and training, research evaluation etc. agencies can also provide consultancy to higher education institutions, for example with regard to setting up their internal quality assurance. The question that arose referred to the existence of a clear conflict of interest in case that the agency provides both consultancy services to HEIs and then performs the external evaluation in that institution. Therefore, the solution found in Germany, where there are several quality assurance agencies established, is that one agency provides consultancy and another one conducts the external evaluation. Nevertheless, it was agreed that in other smaller systems, where only one agency operates, the German solution is not feasible and that there should be found a way to combine these two activities.



The practical session on “Designing an ideal external quality assurance system through the involvement of stakeholders” brought together all the participants in the workshop by actively taking part (in small groups) in drawing up such a system by reflecting on the types of stakeholders identified in an imaginary system, which encounters some problems in this regard, and try include those stakeholders in the governance and work of a newly established quality assurance agency. This exercise made the participants to once again reflect on the importance and role of stakeholders in an external quality assurance system at different levels of an agency, make their work and involvement effective and meaningful for the overall continuous enhancement and improvement of quality assurance.



An example of compliance with ESG 3.1., from ARACIS, Romania, was shared with the attendees of the workshop, mainly with a focus of the experience of ARACIS following the external review in

2018, including ENQA and EQAR views and recommendation in relation to stakeholder involvement. Thus, it was found out that, unlike many other agencies, the remuneration of experts taking part in peer review panels of ARACIS is equal for each member.



Thus, at the end of the workshop, following all the activities mentioned above, the objectives set from the very beginning were fully met and the partner agencies in the project had a comprehensive insight into stakeholder involvement in the governance and work of a quality assurance agency that makes considerable efforts to reach compliance with ESG 3.1., although different systems face different challenges. But it should be born in mind that these challenges and the way they are addressed make an agency unique in its approaches and provides that diversity that should be taken into account when being reviewed against the ESG.

