

La Asociación Europea para el Aseguramiento de la Calidad en la Enseñanza Superior (ENQA- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education). Mision, relevancia y principales líneas de acción

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). Mission, importance and main action lines

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Resumen

The article provides an overview about the role of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and its relevance in the European Higher Education Area. After briefly describing the nature, composition and structure of the association, the main lines of action of ENQA in the horizon 2016-2020 are explained. The article ends with a description of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and some personal reflections on the main challenges currently faced by ENQA and the quality assurance agencies.

Palabras clave

Quality Assurance; European Higher Education Area; ENQA- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; ESG- European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area; quality agencies.

1. Nature and composition

ENQA, the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, was first established as the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in 2000, following the 1998 Recommendation of the Council on European co-operation in quality assurance in higher education (Council of Europe, 1998) and the Bologna Declaration of 1999, to promote European cooperation in the field of quality assurance (QA) in higher education. In 2004 it became the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

ENQA is currently a membership association which represents its members at the European level and internationally. ENQA members are quality assurance organizations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that operate in the field of higher education, also known as quality assurance agencies. The membership criteria of ENQA encompass Part III of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (ENQA, EUA, ESU, EURASHE, 2015). For a brief explanation on the European Standards, see section 4 of this article. Bodies that do not wish to, or for whatever reason are unable to, apply to become members of ENQA may request affiliate status within ENQA. Affiliates are bona fide organisations or agencies with a demonstrable interest in the quality assurance of higher education. All information on ENQA membership criteria and procedures can be found at ENQA website (<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/membership-criteria/>).

As of March 2016, ENQA is composed of 48 full members (European QA agencies at the national level) and 48 European and non-European affiliate members. Currently, 7 agencies operating in Spain (one at the national level and 6 at the regional one) are full members of ENQA:

- AAC-DEVA - Andalusian Agency of Knowledge, Department of Evaluation and Accreditation, Córdoba
- ACSUCYL - Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León, Valladolid
- ACSUG - Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System, Santiago de Compostela
- ANECA - National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain, Madrid
- AQU Catalunya - Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, Barcelona
- FCM - Madrimasd Knowledge Foundation, Madrid
- Unibasq - Agency for the Quality of the Basque University System, Vitoria-Gasteiz

Information on ENQA members is accessible at <http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/members/>.

2. Governance and partnerships

ENQA is organised in three bodies (<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/about-enqa/enqa-organisation/>).

- The General Assembly, composed of the representatives of the ENQA full member agencies, which is the main decision-making body of the Association.
- The Board, which is the main executive body of ENQA, in charge of ensuring the implementation of the ENQA annual work plan together with the Secretariat.
- The Secretariat, which takes care of the day-to-day operation and administration of the Association, including its financial management, and implements the Association's work plan together with the Board.

ENQA has recently set up a consultative body to deal with the possible appeals and complaints against decisions and the conduct of procedures in respect of membership matters done by the ENQA Board.

As for the main partnerships, ENQA works closely with its key European partner organisations: European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), European Students' Union (ESU), BusinessEurope and Education International. ENQA is a member of the E4 Group together with EUA, EURASHE and ESU.

ENQA is also one of the founding members of EQAR, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education, which was established in 2008 to increase the transparency of quality assurance in higher education across Europe and which publishes and manages a register of quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the ESG. The registry is accessible at <https://www.eqar.eu/>.

ENQA also cooperates with other quality assurance networks, such as the Central and Eastern European QA Network, the European Consortium for Accreditation, the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the Nordic Quality Assurance Network in Higher Education (NOQA), the Arab Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ANQAHE) and the Asia-Pacific Quality Network (APQN).

3. Vision, mission and values

The vision and mission of ENQA as well as its values and the main goals and action lines of ENQA are extensively described in the 2016-2020 ENQA strategic plan (ENQA, 2015). The mission of ENQA is to drive the development of quality assurance in higher education by representing agencies internationally, supporting them nationally and providing them with comprehensive services and networking opportunities.

This mission is supposed to contribute to achieving a long-term vision: a European Higher Education Area where students have access to high quality education and can achieve qualifications that are respected world-wide. This vision is shared with all actors in the European Higher Education Area.

ENQA is open to the diversity of higher education systems and quality assurance approaches and adheres to the values of transparency; independence of quality assurance agencies and autonomy of higher education institutions; and collaboration with

other European and international fellow organizations (see section 3 for an account of the main partnerships developed by the association).

ENQA has defined three main action lines in its strategic plan: Representation, services and promotion of quality enhancement.

At the core of ENQA's activities is the promotion of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Apart from different publications and information and networking events around this issue, ENQA organizes independent assessment of quality assurance agencies against the ESG. The outcome of these assessments are primarily used to decide on ENQA membership of a quality assurance body, but they can be used for other purposes (European Quality Assurance Registry membership, enhancement of the agency, etc.). All information on ENQA assessment activities can be found in its website (<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/reviews/principles-of-external-reviews/>).

4. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

In the September 2003 Berlin Communiqué (Conference of Ministers Responsible for Higher Education, 2003), in the context of the Bologna Process, the Ministers of the signatory countries had invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and other European associations to set up "an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance, to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies". A first version of such document was presented and approved at the Bergen Ministerial conference in 2005.

The ESG- European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, which have been extensively adopted by all concerned actors in the European Higher Education Area have been recently updated. Version 2 of the ESG was approved by the Ministers in the 2015 ministerial conference in Yerevan. The revision included several consultation rounds involving both the key stakeholder organisations and ministries. It reflects a consensus among all the organisations concerned with the promotion and implementation of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area:

- European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)
- European Students' Union (ESU)
- European University Association (EUA)
- European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE)
- In cooperation with:
 - Education International (EI)
 - BUSINESSEUROPE

- European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)

The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. In addition institutions have policies and processes to ensure and improve the quality of their other activities, such as research and governance. The ESG apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery.

The ESG are not prescriptive in nature; they intend to provide guidance and define the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education. They intend to be extensively applicable in a highly diverse European higher education environment.

The document is structured in three parts:

- Part 1- Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, which relate to the internal quality assurance mechanisms put in place by higher education institutions for teaching and learning.
- Part 2- Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance, which relate to the processes developed (normally by quality assurance agencies) to externally assess the quality assurance mechanisms put in place by the institutions
- Part 3- Standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies, which relate to quality assurance mechanisms put in place by quality assurance agencies to ensure that they operate with independence, effectiveness and professionalism.

The nature and structure of the ESG have remained essentially the same between the 2005 and 2015 version. 2015 version of the ESG introduce a number of rearrangements and improvements in order to increase clarity. They also put forward important notions, such as “student centered learning” and “student life-cycle”. These notions have long been in the European Higher Education agenda but are not completely implemented in all countries.

5. Concluding remarks

Since its creation in 2000, ENQA has greatly contributed to promoting the development of quality assurance in higher education in Europe and other regions. Quality assurance is undoubtedly one of the pillars of the European Higher Education Area, however, both ENQA and quality agencies implemented at the national or regional level are generally not well known and their action, though vital, remains at the back-stage of the teaching and learning processes implemented by the higher education institutions.

A fundamental challenge faced by the quality assurance sector is to be able to communicate in an understandable language, on the relevance of quality assurance processes implemented and the results achieved. It would be of the utmost importance to

show that the action of agencies, often criticized for increasing bureaucracy, is leading to a real impact in terms of improving the teaching and learning processes.

This improvement should result in better recognition of academic qualifications at European and international level, which is one of the most important objectives of the Bologna process. However, the extent of the impact of the action of the agencies in a complex system such as higher education faces significant methodological difficulties. The IMPALA project (Impact Analysis of External Quality Assurance in HEIs), a still ongoing project funded by the European Union, intends to develop a methodology to establish causal relationships between external quality assurance processes (the processes generally implemented by quality agencies) and the changes in quality management and organisational structures in higher education institutions. Extensive information about this project can be found at: <http://www.impala-qa.eu/impala/>.

In this context, the action of ENQA should contribute to help agencies become relevant stakeholders in their territorial context, capable of generating a real improvement in their higher education systems. The design of effective actions by ENQA is hampered by the fact that the political and economic realities are very different between European regions. The challenge is to implement actions which, while contributing to ensure that the agencies act with minimum standards of quality, independence and professionalism, could be declined properly across highly diverse higher education systems.

These difficulties are particularly evident in the process of external evaluation of quality agencies against the European standards (ESG). This is a function that ENQA shares with other major players in the sector, such as the European Register of Quality Agencies (EQAR). Both organisms increasingly collaborate to ensure consistent assessment criteria and procedures.

6. References

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