EUROPEAN APPROACH TO EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF STUDY PROGRAMMS

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Abstract This paper explores the European standards and processes of External Quality Assurance (eQA) in higher education, focusing on the role of quality assurance agencies and their methodologies. Based on the principles outlined in the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG), the study examines key aspects of eQA, including assessment processes, peer review mechanisms, and reporting requirements.

1. Introduction The assurance of quality in higher education institutions (HEIs) is fundamental to maintaining academic integrity and ensuring student success. External Quality Assurance (eQA) plays a crucial role in this process by assessing institutional and programmatic compliance with predefined standards. The ESG framework provides a structured approach for evaluating HEIs, aiming to enhance quality, protect stakeholders, and uphold national academic standards.

2. External Quality Assurance: Key Concepts External Quality Assurance refers to the assessment conducted by independent agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of higher education programs. Unlike internal assessments carried out by institutions themselves, eQA involves third-party evaluators, ensuring objectivity and transparency. The primary goals of eQA include:

- Quality improvement and enhancement
- Accreditation of study programs and institutions
- Protection of students and stakeholders
- Ensuring transparency in higher education data
- Safeguarding national academic standards

3. Standards for External Quality Assurance The ESG outlines seven core standards for effective eQA:

- Consideration of Internal Quality Assurance: External evaluations should assess how institutions implement their internal quality assurance mechanisms.

- Designing Methodologies Fit for Purpose: Quality assurance processes should align with institutional objectives and regulatory frameworks while incorporating stakeholder feedback.

- Implementing Processes: eQA involves a systematic process that includes self-assessment, external assessment, site visits, reporting, and follow-up actions.

- Peer-Review Experts: Assessment teams should consist of experts, including student representatives, to ensure a comprehensive evaluation.

−   Criteria for Formal Outcomes: Decisions should be based on transparent and consistently applied criteria.

−   Reporting: Evaluation reports should be publicly available and accessible to relevant stakeholders.

−   Complaints and Appeals: Institutions must have clear procedures for addressing grievances related to quality assurance processes.

4. Processes and Procedures of External QA The eQA process varies based on its primary objective, whether it is aimed at quality improvement, accreditation, or consumer protection. Common elements include:

−   Definition of objectives

−   Evaluation of educational processes, resources, and institutional management

−   Review of monitoring mechanisms and student learning outcomes

−   Integration of self-assessment reports into external evaluations

−   Site visits by expert panels

5. The Role of Quality Assurance Agencies Quality assurance agencies are responsible for conducting eQA and ensuring compliance with ESG standards. The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) facilitate collaboration and standardization among agencies. Key responsibilities of agencies include:

−   Regular assessments of HEIs and study programs

−   Establishing and maintaining accreditation frameworks

−   Conducting thematic analyses and publishing evaluation findings

−   Ensuring institutional independence in quality assurance processes

6. Conclusion External Quality Assurance is essential for maintaining and improving the quality of higher education in Europe. By adhering to the ESG framework, HEIs and quality assurance agencies contribute to a transparent, effective, and internationally recognized education system. As quality assurance practices evolve, continuous stakeholder engagement and methodological refinement will be crucial to addressing emerging challenges in higher education assessment.

Keywords: External Quality Assurance, Higher Education, ESG Standards, Accreditation, Quality Assessment, Peer Review.

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