2021 European Quality Assurance Forum

Building trust and enhancement: from information to evidence

Online event
18-19 November 2021

Call for contributions: Paper submission form
Deadline 26 July 2021

Please note that all fields are obligatory. For a detailed description of the submission requirements and Frequently Asked Questions please consult the Call for Contributions.

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Proposal

Title:

Quality Assurance in the context of a European University: a lean and trust-based approach for joint programmes.

Abstract (150 words max):

This papers presents a quality assurance approach for joint programmes which has been developed by the Una Europa alliance.

The Una Europa partners developed a lean joint internal quality assurance strategy for the joint programmes, which seeks to build on the existing practices within the partner institutions to the maximum extent. Trust between the partners is the key aspect of the joint quality assurance strategy.

The approach is based on the principles of verified trust, subsidiarity and core practices. From this follows a need for accountability and transparency. To ensure transparency, the partners share information on their internal quality assurance methods in a 'knowledge base'.

Furthermore, the partners agreed on core practices for a smooth operation of the joint quality assurance system: involvement of stakeholders, timing, scope, tools and communication.

Based on this lean strategy, all Una Europa partners commit themselves to safeguarding the quality of joint programmes on a continuous basis.

Has this paper previously been published/presented elsewhere? If yes, give details.

No

Indicate whether your contribution is based on practice, policy or research:

Practice and policy

Text of paper (3000 words max):

Introduction

Since the launch of the European Universities Initiative, the European Higher Education Area is undergoing a slow but certain transformation. European Universities are becoming important forces of change in all aspects of higher education, not in the least in the field of quality assurance. The launch of new international joint programmes and courses brings about new questions regarding the quality

assurance of these educational formats: What is needed in order to guarantee the quality of programmes with contributions from many participating institutions? Is there a need for a new overarching quality assurance system? Which data to collect regarding the quality of locally organised courses? How do we bring information coming from diverse sources together?

About Una Europa

The Una Europa alliance brings together eight leading research universities:

- Freie Universität Berlin;
- Alma Mater Studiorum Università di Bologna;
- University of Edinburgh;
- Helsingin Yliopisto / Helsingfors universitet;
- Uniwersyete Jagiellonski w Krakowie;
- KU Leuven;
- Universidad Complutense de Madrid;
- Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne.

Una Europa aims to draw on its collective strengths to create a truly European inter-university environment, a future-looking European virtual campus. To translate this joint ambition into concrete actions, two core projects have been launched. The 1Europe project was funded among the first European University pilots selected by the European Commission in June 2019 and focuses on a strong collaboration related to education. The second core project, Una.Resin (launched in 2020), focuses on the development of a joint strategy for research and innovation.

Ambitious joint formats: towards joint bachelor programmes

In the framework of the 1Europe project, the Una Europa partners are developing and implementing joint innovative formats for education and mobility. The most ambitious joint format is without a doubt the joint bachelor. The members of the Alliance are creating a joint bachelor in European Studies and a joint bachelor in Sustainability. The joint bachelor in European Studies is currently (July 2021) undergoing its accreditation procedure, either according to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes or according to national regulations in countries where the European Approach is not yet allowed. The first cohort of students is expected to start in the academic year 2022 – 2023.

A lean joint internal quality assurance strategy, based on trust between partners

In preparation of the launch of the joint bachelor in European Studies and in accordance to the requirements formulated by the European Approach, the Una Europa partners developed a joint quality assurance system for the joint bachelor. This system will be tested and further optimised in the first years of operation of the joint bachelor in European Studies, and will also serve as a blueprint for the quality assurance of future joint programmes and courses to be developed in the context of Una Europa.

The joint quality assurance system presented in this paper has been developed in close consultation between all the partners, in the context of the Una Europa Quality Assurance Cluster. This Cluster is composed of quality assurance experts of the eight Una Europa partner institutions and led by the KU Leuven. This joint internal quality assurance strategy enables the partners to continuously oversee and enhance the quality of the joint programme, in collaboration with all relevant stakeholders.

In essence, the partners choose to develop a lean joint internal quality assurance strategy for joint programmes, which seeks to build on the existing practices within the partners institutions to the maximum extent, adding only minimal agreements required to ensure smooth communication and cooperation on enhancement activities between the partners.

1. A common understanding: trust in each other's internal quality assurance systems

Trust between the partners is the key aspect of the joint internal quality assurance strategy of Una Europa.

Each partner involved in the delivery of the programme undergoes cyclical external reviews, either on institutional and/or on programme level, in which the internal quality assurance methods applied by the institution are being scrutinized. These external reviews are carried out systematically by trustworthy agencies which have demonstrated to be operating in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG). This allows the partners to have full confidence in the fitness for purpose of the quality management systems of each partner institution.

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Based on the common understanding that each of the partner institutions operates a well-functioning internal quality assurance system, the partners opted to make maximal use of the partners' existing methods. This allows for a lean joint strategy, which avoids duplicating efforts and which is focused on effectiveness and continuous improvement.

At the same time, when designing the internal quality assurance strategy, the partners acknowledged the need for a joint framework to ensure effective decision-making and communication between the partners. All partners need to know exactly what each partner is responsible for, how the outcomes of each partner's internal quality assurance procedures are shared, and how actions for further enhancement are discussed and dealt with whenever required. To this end, the partners decided to take three main actions in order to design a joint overarching system:

- Establishing general principles for the internal quality assurance;
- Establishing a joint structure to monitor the quality of the entire programme;
- Ensuring transparency in the functioning of the internal quality assurance systems of each partner.

Together, these elements should allow for a solid and practically feasible approach to implement a joint quality assurance system for joint programmes, with a good balance between central management at programme level and flexibility to act at the level of the partner institutions.

2. General principles: verified trust, subsidiarity and core practices

The Una Europa partners jointly established three main principles for the internal quality assurance of joint programmes: the principle of verified trust, the principle of subsidiarity and the principle of core practices.

- *Principle of verified trust*: with the principle of verified trust, the partners indicate that each institution receives the trust from the other partners to apply its own quality assurance system at institutional level to the parts of the programme which the partner is responsible for. At the same time, however, each partner agrees to communicate in a complete and transparent way about its quality assurance mechanisms and activities, and justifies its way of operation. To ensure trust, the partners went through a joint process of understanding each other's quality assurances methods.
- *Principle of subsidiarity*: with the principle of subsidiarity, the partners recognize that those issues which can be tackled at the local institutional level, should be dealt with on the local institutional level. Issues for which support and consultation on programme level between the partners is required, will be dealt with on the programme level.
- *Principle of core practices*: the partners agree on core practices to ensure a smooth functioning of the joint quality assurance system. These agreements are minimal but strict, and concern the following elements: involvement of stakeholders, timing, scope, tools and communication between the partners.

3. Joint structure to monitor the quality of the entire programme

All partners are committed to actively contribute to the continuous enhancement of joint programmes, by sharing and collectively discussing the output from all quality assurance activities that take place within the programme.

The management of the joint programme will be responsible for analysing and presenting the relevant information shared by all partner institutions. Students will play an active and important role by participating in the governance structure of joint programmes.

The responsibilities of the project management with regard to internal quality assurance include:

- Monitoring whether each partner adheres to the general principles and core practices agreed on by the partners.
- Considering and discussing the feedback resulting from quality assurance activities. This encompasses (i) collecting input from quality assurance activities from the partners, (ii) formulating and following up on actions for further improvement of the programme, and (iii) communicating the results of the joint quality assurance process, both internally and externally.
- Safeguarding the overall fitness for purpose of the curriculum and the entire joint programme in all its aspects.

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The programme management can at any time ask the partners to further clarify any elements raised in the output from their own internal quality assurance processes, and will make recommendations for further improvement to the partners whenever required.

4. **Ensuring transparency in the functioning of the internal quality assurance systems of each partner**

From the general principles presented above follows a need for accountability and transparency among the partners, so as to ensure that each partner understands how all partners apply their own quality assurance mechanisms within their own institution. The partners decided to ensure full transparency by sharing and collecting information on their own internal quality assurance methods in a 'knowledge base'.

The knowledge base constitutes a self-serve digital information tool, through which the staff of the joint programme, can get a full insight in the way of operation of each partner. The knowledge base allows all stakeholders involved in the management of the programme to consult and compare information about the local systems with speed and ease.

The knowledge base is designed to provide staff and stakeholders with clear answers to concrete questions relating to any aspects of the internal quality assurance systems of the partners, such as:

- General description of the quality assurance system
- Governance structure of the quality assurance system
- Timing of the quality assurance system
- Stakeholder engagement
- Tools

All partners provided their own information in relation to the abovementioned topics, based on a set of accompanying questions. Before finalising the knowledge base, all information submitted by the partners in relation to each question was checked for completeness, accuracy and readability in a system of multiple peer-review, and was fine-tuned based on the feedback received. The information can be easily updated by the partners in the future whenever required.

The knowledge base can be consulted with simple navigation tools. The information can be browsed either by selecting specific partner institutions, or by selecting concrete topics (such as 'stakeholder engagement') or questions (for example: 'How are stakeholders informed of changes made based on their input?'). Concrete instructions on how to navigate through the available information are included in the homepage of the knowledge base.

5. **Core practices for a smooth functioning of the system**

The partners agreed on core practices for a smooth operation of the internal quality assurance system of joint programmes. The core practices concern the following elements: involvement of stakeholders, timing, scope, tools and communication. Each of these elements is illustrated below. The agreements on these topics are minimal but strict, and seek to offer all partners the flexibility to operate their own internal systems, while at the same time ensuring effective communication and decision-making at programme level. The implementation of the core practices by the partners will be given shape in close consultation between the programme administrators in each partner institution.

Involvement of stakeholders

All partners will involve both internal and external stakeholders in line with their own practices. Internal stakeholders include the students, teaching staff and support staff of the programme. External stakeholders include academic peers, representatives of the profession and alumni of the programme. The partners commit themselves to be fully transparent about which stakeholders they involve and how, and will share the input from the stakeholders with the management of the joint programme.

Partners have the opportunity to involve additional stakeholders if required by national regulations.

Timing

In the first years following the initial accreditation of a joint programme, each partner will engage students, teaching staff and support staff with an annual frequency as a minimum. The partners will also gain input from external stakeholders at least once in the same timeframe. The partners will report on an annual basis to the programme management about the input received.

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After the accreditation of the joint programme, the partners will jointly establish a timeline to continue the internal quality enhancement at an optimal pace.

Scope

Each partner decides independently which elements to focus on in the consultation of stakeholders. There is no strict list of criteria established which each partner should query on a regular basis. The programme management can, however, suggest specific topics to query whenever deemed appropriate for the improvement of the programme.

The programme management will collect information from the partners, and will consider the input so as to ensure that all the aspects of the programme are monitored and improved on a regular basis. The management will look in particular into the following aspects of the programme:

- Learning outcomes
- Curriculum
- International mobility
- Teaching staff
- Student support
- Learning environment
- Assessment
- Information on the programme
- Information on the quality of the programme

The programme management will establish a set of operational guidelines for the partners with instructions on annual deadlines and reporting.

Tools

The partners will use their own tools and methods to seek input from stakeholders according to the above mentioned timeframe. The partners commit themselves to be fully transparent on which tools are being used, and will report on the results on an annual basis. A mix of both qualitative and quantitative tools will be used.

At programme level, the management will have the possibility to make use of programme-wide questionnaires to gather feedback from all students on the programme as a whole.

Communication

Each partner will communicate in a transparent manner which issues were identified by stakeholders, and how they will be remedied by the partner institution. Those issues which cannot be dealt with on local level will be shared with the programme management for consideration. Each partner will also actively identify good practices and share these with the other partners.

The programme management will communicate both internally and externally about the outcomes of internal quality assurance activities, and about the actions taken for further enhancement.

6. **Concluding remarks: working together on a strong joint quality culture**

With the lean joint quality strategy based on general principles and core practices as presented in this paper, all Una Europa partners commit themselves to safeguarding the quality of joint programmes on a continuous basis. Together, the partners seek to monitor and further develop the programmes in all its aspects in a sustainable and enhancement-driven manner.

By doing so, the Una Europa partners can ensure that the joint programmes are embedded in a strong joint quality culture in which students, staff, institutional policy-makers and external stakeholders work together to give shape to the best possible learning environment.

References:

https://www.una-europa.eu/

Please submit your proposal by sending this form, in Word format, by 26 July 2021 to eqaf@eua.eu. The file should be named using the last names of the authors, e.g. Smith_Jones.doc. Please do not send a hard copy or a PDF file.

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