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# Enhancing Quality Management & Recognition in Latin American universities to underpin the Latin American Higher Education Space (EQuAM-LA)

## WP2: *The Toolkit and internal quality assurance processes*

ANECA y ASCUN

### 1. Introduction

Quality assurance (hereafter, QA) has become one of the key issues for Higher Education (HE) Systems all around the world in the recent years. Societies and political institutions have increased their awareness of the importance of high-quality education as a means to support social cohesion and economic growth, and, therefore, society welfare and citizens living conditions.

The Erasmus+ Project 'Enhancing Quality Management & Recognition in Latin American universities to underpin the Latin American Higher Education Space (EQuAM-LA)<sup>1</sup>' wishes to put together the recent developments implemented in the European Higher Education Area and in some countries of Latin America and the Caribbean on the significance of the internal quality assurance management of higher education institutions (IES) as part of a rigorous process of co-responsibility between universities and QA bodies in the on-going enhancement of quality of higher education at the national and the regional level.

#### 1.1. A tool designed for promoting international cooperation and recognition through Quality Assurance of Higher Education

The stand-point of the project is the conviction that enhancement-led internal QA processes should be done taking into account the specific and diverse frameworks regarding QA of higher education and the academic and institutional traditions in each territory. This assumption led to testing, this time with the support of the Erasmus+ programme, the model of analysis to other very different geographical and university contexts, such as Jordan (Tempus EQuAM project, 2021-15), Morocco (Erasmus+ EQuAM-M project, 2017-2020), India (Erasmus+ EQuAM-BI

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<sup>1</sup> The Consortium that forms part of the project, coordinated by the University of Murcia (Spain), is made up of 7 European HEIs and bodies (4 Spanish, 1 Belgian, 1 Italian and 1 Irish) and 14 Latin-American HEIs and bodies (3 Argentinian, 3 from Nicaragua, 4 from Panamá and 4 from Colombia). Web: <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/erasmus-plus/projects/eplus-project-details/#project/609826-EPP-1-2019-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP>

project, 2017-2020) and even covering an entire region such as Latin America (Erasmus+ EQUAM-LA project, 2020-2023). The interest on the project explains its current development for a national-wide implementation in Tunisia (Erasmus+ EQUAM-T project 2021-2024).

The EQUAM-LA Project benefits from these previous initiatives and wishes also to be useful for other national or regional contexts in the world, where it could be used as an instrument for the reinforcement and enhancement of the HEIs internal QA systems and its management, as well as a means to set up an alliance of institutions internationally linked under the umbrella of the EQUAM label.

Perú, Chile and Colombia, for mentioning only three countries spreading on the Pacific coast of Latin America, have recently (2014, 2018 and 2019 respectively) renewed their QA frameworks giving a new momentum to the strengthening the internal QA systems of the HEIs. This approach should be observed and understood firstly as a support towards the institutional autonomy of QA policies led by HEI and, secondly, as the recognition of a long and fruitful debate run by both QA agencies and HEI networks or association: external QA processes should ensure a national quality threshold allowing and also fostering institutional diversity in quite diverse countries and regional settings.

The EQUAM-LA Toolkit, included as part of the Work Package 2 of the project, is aimed at responding to this double challenge providing the HEIs taking part in the project a useful tool to support their internal QA management and policies, while encouraging them to make the most of their own institutional capacities aligned with their particular vision and mission to promote internationalisation and therefore, based upon shared QA principles, recognition of both short periods of study and qualifications.

## **1.2. The relationship between internal and external QA: building trust among HEIs and HE systems**

Achieving international quality standards maintaining institutional diversity by means of a shared set of internal QA principles, could be the motto of the EQUAM-LA Toolkit. But, If this enhancement-based QA Toolkit is used to set the basis of a trustworthy international consortium or 'alliance' of HEIs at national or regional level, recognition –of shorts periods of student teaching and learning and qualifications – could also be favoured and eventually achieved within the scope of the EQUAM label.

The QA Toolkit has to be used by the HEIs as a strong way to build and strength internal QA processes to meet institutional needs, national requirements and international expectations and

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facilitate recognition for student mobility purposes, but also identifying the EQUAM label as an indicator for trustworthiness for the national bodies in charge of recognition of qualifications.

Recognition of study periods or credits is inherently linked to accreditation and quality assurance at an institutional and national level. Hence why the project links these important themes, and works to enhance capacity within universities, but also build trust between universities and QA agencies.

In general, the QA Toolkit that the project proposes as an outcome will help HEIs to face their internal QA management in order to respond to the HEI's international agenda ensuring students that their diplomas are internationally recognised. The QA Toolkit will be designed to connect QA priorities with the international strategy of the institution concerning the recognition of both short study periods and, above all, recognition of foreign qualifications related to admission criteria (i.e. foreign bachelor-level graduates applying to postgraduate programmes at the university).

Internal QA management will be therefore linked to the decision-making process of the international strategy of the university to attract foreign students as well as the correct management of recognition associated to the internal QA system.

But the experience derived from previous EQUAM projects also shows that a strong link between QA processes and the internationalisation strategy of HEIs ensures to get a double goal in terms of compliance with evaluation or accreditation requirements at the national level and the building of trustworthy higher education areas at the regional level.

## **2. Why a 'Toolkit'?**

The existence of different quality assurance regimes in different countries within the same regional setting requires that the internal QA systems of universities go beyond the necessary compliance with the criteria or standards established by governments and/or accreditation agencies to respond to their own challenges defined in their mission and vision as well as their international agenda.

Thus, the internal quality assurance systems become true drivers for the achievement of strategic objectives for the universities in the 21st century, as the effective management of information for decision making or the internationalisation through the national and international recognition of their reputation.

The design of a tool to support universities in defining and implementing their internal QA management has a twofold value. Firstly, it underlines the importance that each IQAS should be thought and developed in each university, closely linked to its mission, vision and strategic planning and within the framework of its own institutional governance architecture. Secondly, the concept of the 'Tool' refers to a methodological instrument that is easy to implement and facilitates the full autonomy of action of the body responsible for internal QA management in each university, but also gives importance to the possibility to establish principles concerning recognition of both short periods of teaching and learning and qualifications. That is the reason behind the notion of 'Toolkit', merging the practicality of the instrument as well as the need to work according a 'do-it-by-yourself' spirit at the level of each individual HEI.

## **2.1. A practical tool based on international QA standards**

The EQUAM-LA Project uses the long-term experience in internationalisation of QA of higher education in the European Higher Education Area, involving the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ESG) as a shared set of international general principles used in different national and legal jurisdictions regarding both higher education and QA arrangements. This approach ensures the preservation of institutional diversity which is also very close throughout Latin America as a way to safeguard both national and institutional diversity but favouring internationalisation.

The project does not want to bring an external scheme to be applied in Latin America and the Caribbean, but rather to learn from the existing mechanisms on regional integration in the continent developed by associations of higher education institutions and accreditation bodies as well as other stakeholders deeply involved in this approach. Furthermore, the reference to the ESG will allow the Latin-American HEIs involved in the project to show that their internal QA processes are compatible to the ESG.

Following these common principles and purposes ensures that quality assurance is understood in a shared way allowing, at the same time, that quality assurance will be understood within their own national contexts.

One of the pillars of the European Higher Education Area is the comparability and mutual recognition grounded in a shared way of understanding standards, strengthening of quality assessment and assurance mechanisms, and quality of higher education qualifications and certifications based on the ESG.

Thus, the principles on which the Toolkit is based are the criteria defined in the specific Higher Education Accreditation Framework and the ESGs agreed by the networks of QA agencies.

Therefore, the Toolkit does not reinvent the wheel, but connects the various national frameworks that bind the universities participating in the project with the European framework of QA standards adapted since 2005 by the HEIs and the QA agencies of the 47 countries involved in the European Higher Education Area.

The fruitful dialogue between the European and the Latin American and Caribbean frameworks, combined with the organization, strategy and level of self-imposed requirements of each university, will enable them to work on the same level of understanding and compliance without compromising the rich institutional and cultural diversity that exists in the Latin-American higher education. The Toolkit, thus, reflects the spirit of support and reinforcement of the institutional strategy adopted by the HEIs of the EQUAM label, contributing to the generation of the necessary confidence for the development and sustainability of the regional areas of higher education.

The scope of the management of the internal quality assurance of the university, associated with the governance model of the institution, is thus transformed into a key element to support strategic areas such as the quality of teaching, research, community outreach, or internationalization by using in an innovative way the information extracted in the data collection processes (Ruiz, 2021).

The internal QA system and its particular management shall be the one that each university governing body wants to design and develop. The only requirement has to be that its implementation shall contribute to the achievement of the institutional mission and strategic objectives beyond the 'sheer compliance with the national accreditation standards and the "checklist" of functional quality control that must be taken for granted as a basic condition of quality but never as its final goal.

Therefore, the base for this model is an internal QA management will allow linking the system to the recognition of shorts periods of study or credits, or academic hour (or minimum academic measurement unit in place at the HEI) and eventually to the recognition of the qualification derived from the study program. This new arrangement has to be inserted not only in the institutional processes, but also in the policies related to teaching and learning, research, innovation and internationalization, being coherent with international criteria, standards and guidelines as well (Llavori et al., 2019: 25).

## 2.1. A practical tool based on international QA standards

Since the second decade of the 21st century, the need in Latin America to “develop a second generation of quality assurance processes” was already noticed (Lemaitre, 2017, p. 21). Despite the fact that the region has been very dynamic since the 1990s in the generation, consolidation and reformulation of its QMs (in a regional, national and institutional levels), before starting 2020 the need to advance in some important changes was already noticed, in issues related to: strengthening national and institutional information systems, achieving greater coordination between policies, increasing institutional capacities, maintaining an academic and training perspective, increasing QM professionalization, involving the greatest number of stakeholders, permanently reviewing standards and procedures and, as previously mentioned, the need to recognize and promote institutional diversity.

It has also been shown that HEIs have made important changes to internal quality assurance that allow them to respond to the demands for accreditations and quality measurements in national and international settings, as well as to respond to the challenges brought by the present and the near future. The changes made are experienced in terms of institutional policies, participation of collegiate bodies in the internal QA, formation or strengthening of quality management units, formulation of articulating processes of different external and internal demands related to QM, participation of their educational and scientific communities, and even in some institutions internal quality assurance systems have already been established.

Currently, with varying degrees, the transition from external quality assurance and accreditation systems focused on inputs and processes, to a student-centered approach and learning outcomes, has been carried out. This has implied very important challenges for the institutions, among the most significant are:

- Financial challenges due to all the implications of these changes (e.g., information systems, infrastructure, teacher training, changes in regulations, internal resistance, etc.)
- A great opportunity for change, and in turn risks of homogenization and bureaucratization of the teaching function.
- Background conceptual concerns about the learning outcomes approach within the framework of university autonomy.
- Managing these changes in times of pandemic and facing future challenges that require greater educational innovation.
- Fear of overregulation of teaching and learning.

That is why it is necessary to strengthen institutional autonomy understood from its different areas, which include the axes of freedom, capacity, and responsibility. Consequently, a toolkit is proposed to strengthen the QM for institutional autonomy.

### 3. The Toolkit: principles and guidelines

The model explained in the former point should be based on a collaborative and risk-based approach at the institutional level, where the university/HEI will take care of its internal quality assurance arrangements, regardless of either national, regional or discipline-oriented requirements and expectations, and measured against a shared international QA benchmark.

This model must refer to a particular "quality assurance architecture" deployed on three levels:

- High level management in the governance of the university.
- Structure behind internal QA manahement: department, unit, office, bureau, etc.
- QA procedures or arrangements established at the HEI level that can be aligned to the EQUAM-LA project through the Toolkit (for instance: "AUDIT internacional" implemented in Colombian or Central-American HEIs in the last few years or any other similar initiatives.)

At this point in the evolution of QA in higher education practices around the world, it is time for external QA agents to devolve some of their internal quality management responsibilities to universities, in close linkage to the particular mission, vision and strategic planning of each institution. Thus, accreditation agencies can reorient their efforts and their external quality assurance tools towards those areas of the institutions that need more particular scrutiny and support for improvement, promoting and strengthening a quality culture within the university.

This approach, which allows agencies to pay different attention to each individual university, sends a very clear message of an external quality assurance mechanism aimed at value-added institutions and distances itself from the previous paradigm of a "one-size-fits-all" external quality threshold or minimum compliance standard. Finally, this approach emerges with the current debate on internal versus external quality assurance practices, which is taking place at the global level, as shown by the latest agendas of international networks of agencies in Europe, Asia-Pacific and Africa (Llavori and Oñate, 2020: 9).

As stated in the project, "the Toolkit should help each higher education institution (HEI) or university to define a strategic approach to quality management that will lead to the development of an explicit quality culture at the institutional level". Such an approach should be assumed and

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supported by the HEI's decision-making and governance body to ensure that it promotes and sustains a culture of institutional quality.

Furthermore, the Toolkit will show how QA, accreditation and recognition relate in different types of systems to promote the strengthening institutional governance but also laying the foundations for a shared and agreed set of principles promoting and internationalisation at the regional level, i.e. Central America, Andean Region, South America/MERCOSUR, etc.

Those Principles will allow HEIs to make the necessary arrangements to design a QA policy led towards the management of QA and international strategies related to mobility, recognition and institutional agreements as well as the core guidelines concerning the internal QA arrangements.

The European universities taking part in the EQUAM-LA Project will both support and contribute, by means of “case studies”, on how universities manage and relate their internal QA processes to their international strategy to attract foreign students and therefore recognition of prior learning to be enrolled in part of a programme (horizontal mobility) or in successive programmes (vertical mobility).

## **2.1. The Toolkit: Focus areas of analysis**

The premise behind the Toolkit is that enhancing internal QA structures and linking them to international cooperation structures will simultaneously improve internal QA management and also help to increase international recognition of degrees and credits across borders in LA.

The QA Toolkit will sharpen existing internal QA procedures at the HEI level and it should be used as a guiding tool for universities in their particular (individual) shift towards a quality culture.

Reinforcing internal QA management in universities is thus critical for HEIs in order to be ready for accreditation processes and to be self-enhancement oriented and ‘recognised’, but also as part of the international strategy of the institution. Recognition of studies and credits is inherently linked to accreditation and quality assurance at an institutional and national level. Hence why the Toolkit works to enhance capacity within universities, but also build trust between universities and QA agencies at the national level and, above all, at the international level.

Therefore, the principles behind the Toolkit should work as a powerful mechanism to promote regional integration in higher education through QA practices shared and agreed among Latin American HEIs as part of their international agenda.

It should be a tool to empower HEI's community (academic and administrative staff and students) with a simple mechanism to link their daily tasks and processes to the broader (coherence) and

further (mission and vision) institutional strategy (self-requirement) concerning its unique brand as university within a national HE system and an international position.

## **2.2. Recognition as a key process related to the Toolkit**

### Recognition of teaching&learning: the role of the Toolkit

Whatever the particular meaning of the recognition we can all agree on both sides of the Atlantic, that HEIs have a powerful voice that must be heard in terms of both meanings of recognition. It's absolutely up to every HEI to decide upon the admission requirements of a candidate student for a programme (degree/level). Furthermore, it is also responsibility of the HEI to decide upon whatever temporary arrangement related to a short mobility period within a particular programme, under the umbrella of a "mobility agreement" between two HEIs.

Therefore, the EQUAM-LA Toolkit will of course bear in mind both existing strategies from the viewpoint of the IQA arrangements of each HEI.

In order to avoid confusion, we need to clarify that with the expression "recognition" we are referring to a twofold meaning:

- a. Recognition of sort periods of teaching&learning (horizontal student mobility)
- b. Recognition of prior learning as an entry to an academic programme higher than that of graduation (vertical mobility)

From the perspective of higher education institutions on the processes of recognition of short periods (mobility) or access to programs by students from universities in other countries, the following has been proposed:

- It is necessary to have a national's regulatory frameworks that allow and promote recognition, in some cases the external quality assurance system limits these possibilities. It's necessary to avoid that.
- Mutual trust in the quality of the offer of HEIs is essential to advance in these processes.
- Some groups of HEIs have already started mutual recognition processes, it is worth recovering these experiences to identify possibilities and limits of these processes.
- Currently HEIs recognize this need to support greater mobility and more and more spaces are being opened for recognition, which is important to disseminate and analyze.

### Recognition of qualifications: the role of the Toolkit

But the Toolkit will also attempt to achieve a more ambitious objective within the realm of 'recognition', which takes us far beyond the regular responsibilities of a HEI: the setting of explicit conditions derived from the interrelationship between HEIs and QA agencies to facilitate the recognition of qualifications, or diplomas, by the various bodies in charge of this responsibility in the different countries involved in the project.

It does not mean that EQUAM-LA Toolkit will call for a change in the ownership of the body in charge of decide upon the recognition of qualifications or diplomas at the national level, a ministry, a national recognition body, a national "autonomous" university, a QA agency, etc.

The Toolkit will include a set of guidelines provided by the 'dialogue' between the QA agencies and the HEIs of the Consortium, to identify and, therefore, facilitate the actions to be taken by the recognition authorities or bodies in charge.

This objective for the Toolkit deals with the compromise assumed by QA agencies and HEIs and associations to contribute in the enhancement of the recognition of qualifications guided by the multilateral and international bodies, mainly UNESCO at the global level and IESALC-UNESCO at the Latin American and The Caribbean level.

### **2.3. The QA principles and guidelines of the Toolkit**

The initiatives accomplished by the project EQUAM-LA in the first year of its lifespan, mainly within Work Package 1, allowed identifying two significant needs:

- Firstly to submit a common and shared document including the manifold institutional and national approaches to internal QA processes resulting in a sort of bi-regional template of comparable and compatible QA framework and
- Secondly to identify practical ways in which both higher education institutions and QA bodies and/or governmental bodies related to QA cooperate and share responsibility, with a view to facilitating the recognition of teaching&learning periods as well as qualifications (diplomas) by the relevant bodies in charge on QA of Transnational Education or Cross-border Higher Education, using procedures underpinned by shared and agreed QA mechanisms.

The EQUAM-LA Toolkit aims at addressing these needs providing practical guidance and support all stakeholders involved (QA agencies, HEIs, Governments, national autonomous universities, etc.) on how they can improve the sharing of information relating to internal QA processes and recognition of transnational higher education short periods and qualifications, favouring both horizontal and vertical mobility of students and graduates.

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This objective is clearly aligned with the initiatives implemented by some of the regional and bi-regional organisations established in Latin America and the Caribbean related to European Union or Ibero-American organisations concerning either recognition or the creation of higher education areas or both, such as IESALC-UNESCO (related to the 2019 Regional Convention for the Recognition of Higher Education Studies, Qualifications and Diplomas in Latin America and the Caribbean), ENLACES (related to its Working Committees on Academic Mobility and Quality Evaluation and Accreditation), SIACES, (recognition of Good Practices among accreditation bodies), etc.

The EQUAM-LA Toolkit consists in a two-tier structure of 7 principles which governs 4 guidelines to support its implementation at the HEI level.

### The principles

The Toolkit is based on 7 principles:

1. The Toolkit is addressed to various stakeholders involved in QA and recognition of the different countries of the bi-regional sphere of influence of the members of the consortium: Latin America and the Caribbean and the European Higher Education Area.
2. The Toolkit therefore safeguards the diversity and autonomy of national systems and recognises the different approaches to QA and recognition nationally implemented and regulated according to each legal framework.
3. Thus, the Toolkit should not be followed as a “handbook” prescribing criteria on QA enhancement-led and recognition of either short-periods of study and qualifications, but rather as a practical and challenge-based tool that has to be rethought and applied at each particular case for the sake of mutual understanding and also as a benchmark for the individual performance of the institution in a local, national or regional context.
4. While we are talking of a ‘Toolkit’, the making of this institutional reflection should also be considered as a practical do-it-yourself exercise involving the broader range of the academic-environment representatives.
5. The success of the implementation of the Toolkit should be coordinated to any national regulation on QA and recognition arrangements.
6. The Toolkit has to be complementary of the existing initiatives led by the international organisations mentioned above in order to look for synergies to support further strategies of the regional agendas on higher education public policies.

7. The ‘crucial bit’ of the EQUAM-LA Toolkit (and the EQUAM-at-large label) is that complying with the national requirements shall not be a constraint to reach higher levels of institutional self-requirements aligned with the particular mission, vision and values of the HEI. Thus, the enhancement-led approach is both ensured and promoted.

#### The Toolkit: Guidelines

Bearing in mind the previous 7 principles, the Toolkit unfolds the following 4 guidelines to support individual HEIs in Latin America and the Caribbean to implement it and achieve the outcomes.

#### **THE GOVERNANCE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION AT THE HEI LEVEL<sup>2</sup>**

- a) Once quality assurance established within its Mission, Vision and Values and based on international expectations concerning academic standards, the HEI should progressively develop its quality enhancement processes to integrate these in the future as part of an emerging Quality Culture.
- b) The HEI has always recognised the need to embed quality assurance and continuous improvement mechanisms in all of its core activities, for it to operate efficiently and effectively, pursue its mission and meet the needs of its various stakeholders.
- c) As part of the development of the HEI’s Quality Policy a strategic approach to quality management is designed to ensure that these further developments are implemented in an effective and efficient manner and explicitly demonstrate its commitment to Quality Culture and its benefits, to its students, staff and external stakeholders both nationally and internationally.
- d) The development of an explicit Quality Culture is both a reflection of, and dependent upon, the commitment of individuals and groups of staff and students and continuing support of senior management.

#### **INTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE**

- a) linked to the institutional strategy embedded not only in the institutional processes but also in the teaching and learning, research, innovation and internationalization policies.
- b) This approach stems with an understanding of the ‘dialogue’ between external and internal QA processes based upon the needs and requirements of each particular HEI, far from the previous paradigm of an external QA threshold or minimum compliance standard.

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<sup>2</sup> This Guideline is based on Harris: 2017.

- c) This approach roots in the current debate on internal versus external QA practices which is taking part at a global level as the latest agendas of the international QA networks in Europe, Latin America, Asia-Pacific and Africa show.

## RECOGNITION

### Guidelines for the recognition of student short periods of study (horizontal mobility)

- a) Institutional reflection on international trends, qualifications frameworks and their possibilities of articulation with the characteristics, policies, and educational offerings of the countries and HEIs.
- b) Formulation of regulatory frameworks and political statements that encourage initiatives, progress, and good experiences in recognition.
- c) Generation of guides and support spaces for institutions interested in moving forward
- d) Identification of the different types of recognition, review of recognition processes that already exist and can be applied in a larger area and those that could be created.
- e) Review of conditions required to increase or create recognitions.
- f) Establishment of general agreements.

### Guidelines for the recognition of qualifications (vertical mobility)

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- a) Identification of the different actors involved and their role in the process (institutions involved in governance, development, monitoring, certification, and assessment of qualifications).
- b) Agreements on the qualification system, the national qualification framework (s) and the credit accumulation and transfer system that will be references for national and institutional recognition.
- c) Clarities on the procedures to be followed and the requirements.
- d) Establishment of resources that are needed to advance in these recognitions.
- e) Analysis of prejudices and risks, as well as of incentives, benefits and barriers that may participate in the increase or creation of recognitions.

## TRANSPARENCY AND INFORMATION CONCERNING QUALITY ASSURANCE AND RECOGNITION AS PART OF THE INTERNATIONALISATION STRATEGY OF THE HEI

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The HEI has a clear and easily accessible policy concerning internal quality assurance and how issues related to the recognition of short periods of study can be requested by external students as part of mobility schemes or applying for recognition of prior learning (RPL).

The HEI establishes updated and easily accessible mechanisms to identify the list of national and international institutions where existing agreements concerning recognition of short periods of study.

The institution has an internal information system that allows decision-making and monitoring of awards.

The IES establishes a permanent monitoring strategy to evaluate recognition experiences and make permanent improvement decisions.

Permanent communication mechanisms are established between the institutions and the different interest groups and actors involved.

### 3. Conclusions

As stated in the Introduction, high-quality higher education is a key topic for societies and citizens development, both from an increasing-employability and personal-enhancement points of view. Therefore, quality assessment and assurance has become one of the pillars for higher education systems all around the world. Comparability, trust and mutual recognition of academic diplomas are objectives in the building of globalized societies and citizenship. Finding comparable principles, procedures and tools to measure, assess and assure quality -respectful with diverse contexts and values- is, therefore, a common objective of higher education institutions and systems.

Drawing on previous advancements achieved in these regards in the European Higher Education Area, and paying also attention to diversity and specific variables and features of different institutional and social contexts, the EQuAM project aims at bridging these higher education systems through shared models of quality assessment and assurance. These projects' objective is to harmonise quality assessment and assurance principles, procedures, and tools of different national higher education systems. This harmonisation, to foster comparability among them, is to be reached through the interaction of universities with different degree of experience in the quality assurance culture and management, setting one-to-one and general partnerships as drivers to enhancing these experiences and the outcomes for each institution in this field.

In this context, this Toolkit aims at helping these interactive relationships, providing an instrument to facilitate the enhancement and improvement of the quality culture in universities or higher

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education institutions and its management, implementing and consolidating a suited internal quality assurance system based in benchmarking, in accordance with the specific context, mission, values of each institution. This tool is deeply rooted in the conviction that no-single model suits all the needs, but that context factors and diversity are to be taken into account when managing quality assessment. On the other side, several instrumental considerations may be shared by different actors regarding quality assurance and its management.

This toolkit provides the means to help the higher education institutions to develop such an internal quality assessment system based in a benchmark approach. Each University will periodically set the institution (and the dimensions and contents) it wants to benchmark against, assessing to what extent it fulfills these expectations and in what dimensions there is room for improvement, and how to make it possible.

Of course, in this exercise several challenges will be addressed. Among others, some identified by several partners in the meetings of the EQUAM-LA project can be mentioned:

- the need to establish robust information technology systems to increase the flow of data across the organizational structure of the higher education institution and to promote a data-based culture across higher education institutions.
- the development of a quality assurance model - which clearly identifies the information flows needed for effective and efficient management, and which is adaptable to the different contexts and priorities of different higher education institutions.
- to develop a model for evaluating university IQAS that will make it possible to define a threshold for compliance with standards at the national level, while at the same time ensuring that the institutional diversity and academic wealth that this entails is maintained.
- the need to design a methodology that promotes the participation in its design of all the agents of interest of each university and of the community in which it is inserted, laying the foundations of a quality culture that is proper and distinctive of the institution in the implementation process (in the form of a Toolkit).
- define general principles with recommendations "to guide rather than to prescribe" (OECD, 2017: 56), which can be used by universities in the development of their internal quality assurance system.
- to design an agile procedure so that the quality assurance agencies can implement it with the universities, promoting a focus on continuous improvement in the context of each university as opposed to a model of compliance or mere achievement of a threshold.

- to pilot the model within the framework of the EQUAM-LA project in order to be able to present conclusions and propose its gradual extension, on a voluntary basis, to interested Indian universities in the medium and long term.
- to create a monitoring committee to monitor the implementation of the model in the pilot universities of the project and those that may be incorporated into the model after the end of the project, ensuring its proper development.

Using this Toolkit as guidance will facilitate the thorough and comparable development of the quality assessment analysis and, therefore, making better educated decisions by the governance bodies at all levels of each institution. At the same time, it will allow to compare and identify good and best practices to address the enhancement of a quality policy and a quality culture in a country or region, improving its higher education system and, therefore, achieving its goals for the benefit of its community and society at large. Increasing the quality of our higher education systems and institutions and enhancing the mutual trust and mutual recognition of degrees and diplomas are the final aims. They will ultimately allow for improving the living conditions of our citizens and their mobility in an increasingly internationalized and interdependent globalised world.

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