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**QUALITY ASSURANCE INTERNATIONALIZATION IN THE
EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA:
LEGISLATIVE FOUNDATIONS**

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The article clarifies the genesis of forming a European dimension of quality assurance in higher education. It provides for the analysis of official documents of the EU and the Bologna Process, which lay the basis for quality assurance in higher education within the European Higher Education Area. Particular emphasis is put on the progress and first outcomes of the development of the quality assurance in higher education at the national and supranational levels. A special focus is placed on a series of joint actions taken by European countries to improve the quality of higher education through developing the quality assurance mechanisms to gain more transparency, accountability and legitimacy in European higher education systems. These actions include the launch of the Institutional Evaluation Program (IEP), the European pilot projects for evaluating quality in higher education, the creation of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) renamed into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the creation of the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI) and the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). The adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is analyzed as an efficient way of creating the legal and regulatory environment in the European Higher Education Area.

Key words: quality assurance, internationalization, legislative foundations, European dimension, European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

У статті проаналізовано генезис формування європейського виміру забезпечення якості вищої освіти. Вона передбачає аналіз офіційних документів ЄС та Болонського процесу, що є основою для забезпечення якості вищої освіти в межах Європейського простору вищої освіти. Особливий наголос робиться на прогресі та перших результатах розвитку гарантії якості вищої освіти на національному та наднаціональному рівнях. Особлива увага приділяється низці спільних дій європейських країн з метою покращення якості вищої освіти шляхом розробки механізмів забезпечення якості для підвищення прозорості, підзвітності та легітимності у європейських системах вищої освіти. Ці заходи включають запуск Програми інституційної оцінки (IEP), європейських пілотних проектів для оцінки якості вищої освіти, створення Європейської мережі забезпечення якості (ENQA), перейменованого в Європей-



ську асоціацію із забезпечення якості у вищій освіті (ENQA), створення Спільної ініціативи якості (JQI) та Європейського реєстру забезпечення якості (EQAR). Проаналізовано прийняття стандартів та керівних принципів для забезпечення якості в Європейському просторі вищої освіти (ESG) як ефективний спосіб створення нормативно-правового середовища в Європейському регіоні вищої освіти.

Ключові слова: забезпечення якості, інтернаціоналізація, європейський вимір, Європейський простір вищої освіти (EHEA), законодавчі основи.

Introduction

In the current settings, governments of many European countries give greater priority to dealing with the issues of quality assurance and enhancement as they have reached consensus that traditional quality assurance mechanisms are inadequate in order to address today's challenges raised by electronic learning, international student mobility, and more diverse higher education landscape at large.

The issues related to quality assurance in higher education throughout the period of development of the phenomenon under study stand in the spotlight of a plenty of domestic and foreign researchers. In particular, the theoretical and practical aspects of the development of the quality assurance system in higher education at the national and global levels are considered in the studies of such scientists as M. Zhurovskyi, H. Kozlakova, K. Korsak, A. Sbruieva, V. Kremen, H. Stepenko, V. Andrushchenko and others. The foreign authors such as J. Brennan, E. El-Khawas, R. DePietro-Jurand, L. Holm-Nielsen focus on the recent progress and challenges related to quality assurance in higher education. V. Massaro has studied the institutional responses to quality assurance. In the works of D. Westerheijden and P. Maassen pride of place goes to changing contexts of quality assessment and recent trends in European higher education.

However, the development of the processes being the matter at issue has a mobile and contradictory character because of divergence of interests of the stakeholders involved in quality assurance in the system of higher education. In view of the foregoing, the problems of quality assurance internationalization in the European Higher Education Area are understudied, and of particular interest nowadays.

The aim of the study is to clarify the genesis of forming the European dimension of quality assurance in the context of the internationalization of higher education in the EHEA.

The transition from elite to mass higher education and an interest of the European states in promoting student mobility via the EU exchange programs, such as the Erasmus Program, have dictated the need to ensure the quality maintenance in the fast-paced environment resulting in the implementation of formal procedures for quality assurance at the national level. The pivot point for cooperation of European countries in systematic quality assurance in higher education traces back to 1991, when the European Association of Universities (CRE) decided to put an increased focus on the quality issue in its activities through launching the Institutional Evaluation Program (IEP) which was officially introduced in 1993, and the European



Council of Ministers decided to launch the European pilot projects for evaluating quality in higher education, subsequently implemented in 17 countries in 1994–1995. The main objectives of these projects were to promote awareness of the need for evaluation in higher education throughout Europe; to enrich national quality evaluation procedures; to disseminate experience in external evaluation and quality assurance; to endue quality evaluation in education with a European dimension. The launch of these projects is a first example of cooperation in quality assurance among the relevant actors in the higher education landscape at the European level [2, p. 6], and has resulted in the adoption of the Recommendation on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education by the Council of Ministers in 1998. According to the Council Recommendation, «autonomy and/or independence of the relevant structures, of the body responsible for quality assurance (as regards procedures and methods) is likely to contribute to the effectiveness of quality assurance procedures and the acceptance of results» [6, p. 3]. The Recommendation has pushed for introduction of transparent quality assurance systems having the creation of quality assurance agencies, aiming at quality improvement through external evaluation by most Member States, as its consequence. The above document outlines the eight evaluation or accreditation types: subject evaluation, program evaluation, institutional evaluation, program accreditation, institutional accreditation, institutional audit, subject benchmarking and program benchmarking.

Since that time, European countries have taken a series of joint actions to improve the quality of higher education through developing the quality assurance mechanisms to gain more transparency, accountability and legitimacy in European higher education systems and creating the legal and regulatory environment in this sphere. It is noteworthy that the above 1998 Recommendation has laid the foundation for the creation of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) in Higher Education in 2000 in order to enhance the better promotion of European cooperation in terms of quality assurance [1]. Shortly afterwards, it was renamed into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). It should be noted that the Sorbonne (1998) and Bologna (1999) Declarations have had an impact on the area of focus of this network. This string of initiatives was introduced under the auspices of the Bologna Process, one of the key objectives of which was to create a European Higher Education Area to promote cooperation of actors in quality assurance at the institutional, national and European levels [2]. In this regard, the creation of the Joint Quality Initiative (JQI), the basis of which has been laid in the Maastricht seminar held on September 24–25 in 2001, is considered to be a real project of cooperation and development in the field of international quality assurance and accreditation. Its goals are to cooperate and promote good practices in quality assurance and mutual evaluation, to accept and implement different accreditation mechanisms and to establish a transparent two-cycle («bachelor-master») structure in the Bologna model, is a significant step in the right direction [3, p. 13–14].

The Communiqué of the Conference of Ministers responsible for Higher Education held in Berlin on September 19, 2003 focuses on promoting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level, as well as mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance. The Communiqué



has made recommendations and proposals for a Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The progress and first outcomes of the development of the quality assurance in higher education at the national and supra-national levels were summarized in the EC Report of 2004. The experts indicated the creation of the national quality assurance agencies with the aim of evaluating external quality in order to facilitate its promotion in the vast majority of the EU and Bologna Club member countries. A special focus was placed on the availability of various national models of the QAA structure (for example, star model), and methodological approaches to their operation modes.

The fateful moment in the quality assurance history is the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), proposed by ENQA in cooperation with the European Students' Union (ESU), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European University Association (EUA), *at the Bologna Ministers' meeting held in Bergen on May 19–20, 2005*. The ESG 2005 contain the context, aims and principles of the report, the standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education institutions, the standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies themselves, as well as focus on the future of quality assurance in Europe. The revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) was adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in Yerevan in 2015. The ESG 2015 focus on the developments in European higher education since 2005, including the shift to student-centered orientation and the need for flexible learning paths and the recognition of competencies gained outside formal education. Furthermore, the document provides for major developments having impact on the quality assurance of higher education, such as an increased speed of HE internationalization, digital learning, and new delivery modes. The ESG 2015 give consideration to other instruments contributing to transparency and trust in higher education at the European level, representing the qualifications frameworks, the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and the diploma supplement. Both the ESG 2005 and 2015 focus on quality assurance related to learning and teaching, and the ESG 2015 refer not only to the learning environment, but also to research and innovation. The objectives of the ESG 2015 are to provide a common framework for quality assurance in Europe; to ensure the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education; to support mutual trust; to provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA. The ESG 2015 rest on the four principles:

- primary responsibility of higher education institutions for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- quality assurance response to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programs, and students;
- quality assurance support for the creation of a quality culture;
- quality assurance has to cater to the needs and expectations of students, relevant stakeholders, and society [4; 11].

While the above mentioned principles form the part of the ESG 2005 as well, the ESG 2015 focus on the necessity to respond to diversity of higher education systems, and to support a quality culture.



As the creation of quality assurance agencies had faced with the necessity of designing the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) to outline comparable criteria and methodologies for assessing the quality of higher education, the Ministers at the Bologna Ministers' meeting held in Bergen in 2005 asked ENQA to consider and deliver the practical aspects of the implementation of the EQAR. It is expedient to highlight in this regard that the EQAR's mission is to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing transparency of quality assurance, and enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education. The key objectives of EQAR are *information provision* (to identify credible quality assurance agencies, and programs/institutions they reviewed; to prevent «accreditation mills» from gaining credibility); *trust enhancement* (to facilitate recognition of qualifications and periods of study; to encourage mobility); *promotion of a European dimension* (to permit HE institutions to choose a suitable QA agency; to comply with external QA requirements subject to national legislation) [7].

It should be noted that both the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and the European Quality Assurance Register have given rise to the establishment of a European dimension to quality assurance.

The Recommendations of the European Parliament and of the Council on further European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education (2006/143/EC) are the document on continuation of the development of international cooperation in the field of quality assurance in higher education. These Recommendations focus on the following aspects:

- call for HEI to implement rigorous internal quality assurance systems, taking into consideration the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area adopted in Bergen in the context of the Bologna Process;
- call for all quality assurance or accreditation agencies to be independent in their evaluation, to apply the quality assurance features laid down in Recommendation 98/561/EC and the common set of general standards and guidelines adopted in Bergen, for the purposes of evaluation;
- encourage representatives of national authorities, the higher education sector and quality assurance and accreditation agencies, together with social partners, to set up a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies (European Register), and to determine the conditions for registration and the regulations for managing the register;
- enable higher education institutions to choose among quality assurance or accreditation agencies in the European Register an agency which meets their needs and profile, provided that this is compatible with their national legislation or permitted by their national authorities;
- allow higher education institutions to work towards a complementary assessment by another agency in the European Register, for example to enhance their international reputation;



- promote cooperation between agencies in order to build up mutual trust and the recognition of quality assurance and accreditation assessments, thus contributing to the recognition of qualifications for the purpose of study or work in another country;

- ensure public access to the assessments made by the quality assurance or accreditation agencies listed in the European Register [9].

To be noticed is that the first EC report on progress in quality assurance in higher education was published on September 21, 2009. In this regard, external quality assurance was intended to provide all stakeholders with the required information on the quality of higher educational institutions in an independent way. The experts concluded in this report that higher educational institutions in most countries were actively working to create and implement external quality assurance systems and bring them in line with external assessment procedures.

The 2009 Report provides for analysis of both achievements and shortcomings, and a vision of prospects for future development of quality assurance in higher education. The content of the Report testifies to the close cooperation between the EU and the Bologna process actors (the E4 Group), especially with ENQA. Pride of place in the Report goes to the problems of external (primarily, European) dimension of quality assurance. In particular, the document clarifies the functions of HEQA agencies:

- evaluating («auditing») of the quality of a given higher education institution, its programs or units;
- comparing quality at different HEIs in a given area/discipline («benchmarking»);
- ensuring that certain pre-defined «standards» of quality are met («accreditation»);
- awarding various quality seals usually designed to signal high quality or «excellence» [10; p. 3].

The next document on the development of quality assurance in higher education and its internationalization in Europe is the 2014 Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Based on the 2009 Report which focuses on the need to make quality assurance more transparent and to develop cross-border cooperation to improve quality, «the 2014 Report highlights the potential for quality assurance to play a more active role in supporting reform at system and institutional levels and proposes EU actions to support institutions and Member States» [8, p. 4]. This Report not also highlights some major gains made in quality assurance since 2009, but also reveals gaps in the way quality assurance supports higher education reforms such as expanding and facilitating access to educational services, improving employability and internationalization, or improving doctoral training and human resources strategies. This document states that quality assurance still has a limited European dimension.

Against the background of quality assurance, the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué, prepared by the Bologna Follow-Up Group and adopted by the Ministers during the Yerevan Ministerial Conference on May 14–15, 2015, is of special significance as it lays down a renewed vision of the EHEA and sets objectives to



be borne in view when planning any activities for the upcoming period of the Bologna Process. These objectives include: enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching; fostering the employability of graduates throughout their working lives; making systems of higher education more inclusive; implementing agreed structural reforms. Furthermore, the policy measures highlighted in the Yerevan Ministerial Communiqué provide for the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG); the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programs; the revised ECTS Users' Guide as an official EHEA document [12].

The EU Commission's Communication on a Renewed EU Agenda for Higher Education of 2017 is the last but not the least in the list of documents under study in the context of quality assurance internationalization in the European Higher Education Area. The 2017 Communication focuses on the four challenges dictated by the need to give new direction to EU support for higher education:

- tackling future skills mismatches and promoting excellence in skills development (addressing the shortage of higher education teaching personnel, as well as graduates in science, technology, engineering, (arts) and maths fields, medical professions and teaching; provision of well-designed higher education programs and curricula with a focus on students' learning needs; ensuring activities based around real-world problems and cooperation with employers, etc.);

- building inclusive and connected higher education systems (ensuring inclusiveness of higher education, civic-minded character of learning communities; ongoing cooperation between HEIs, schools and Vocational Education and Training providers; the proper conditions for students of different backgrounds, etc.);

- ensuring higher education institutions contribute to innovation (ensuring high quality post-graduate studies and doctoral training; strengthening centers of research excellence, etc.);

- supporting effective and efficient higher education systems (ensuring the prestige and rewards associated with good teaching; effective internal cooperation and resource management, etc.) [5, p. 5].

Conclusions

It is apparent from the foregoing that for the last 30 years the ways of assuring quality in higher education have undergone transformation, which is no less substantial than the operation of HE system as a whole. In addition to the traditional internal mechanisms of quality assurance, which operate at the individual, sub-institutional and institutional levels as part of the internal culture of quality, some new external arrangements embedded into the hierarchical structure have been implemented at the national, European and global levels.

The analysis of numerous documents and the chronology of notable events throughout the history of the development of the European dimension of HEQA enable to assert that the process under study is multi-faceted and has acquired a systemic nature. Furthermore, the official approval of the uniform international rules and standards of quality assurance in higher education legalize them under the European Higher Education Area. The cooperation of European countries under the auspices of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education



(ENQA) has resulted in the formation of a European Dimension in Quality Assurance, the fostering of which is the target of various stakeholders operating in the European Higher Education Area.

The above findings could direct further research that seems essential for better understanding of the internationalization of the processes of quality assurance in higher education.

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