

EQuAM: Messages for Brussels from Barcelona and Rome Matching Exercises

The underlying concept for the initial phase of EQuAM:

- i. to identify the extent to which the partner institutions consider they meet the expectations of the ESG and HEAC standards, irrespective of whether they are in Europe or Jordan
- ii. to compare the expectations of the ESG and HEAC Standards
- iii. to recognise the different 'layers' of external QA, and institutional priorities in responding to them
- iv. to identify organisational approaches to internal QA (including the influence of EQA)
- v. to identify who can 'learn' what from whom

The initial work led to an exploration of the concept of 'layering' of external QA expectations and, in turn, to an evaluation of the extent to which HEIs had shared / different priorities in engaging with these different 'layers'.

i. Institutional self-evaluations against the ESG and HEAC standards: headlines from a comparative exercise

The Jordanian and European HEIs were asked to undertake a self evaluation (evidence not required) of whether, and to what extent, they considered that they met the expectations of BOTH the ESG and the HEAC standards. Results presented by the Jordanian HEIs indicated that none currently met ALL the HEAC expectations, even to some extent, and had some difficulties with the ESG in terms of the contexts in which they were expressed (as well as the expectations themselves). Of the European universities one was focussed solely on the requirements for ISO and thus found the ESG and HEAC standards 'outside' of their approach, and others whilst meeting the ESG to different levels of compliance, found some difficulties in aligning with the HEAC standards are set out.

Whilst there was some recognition of the 'overlaps' in expectations of the ESG and HEAC standards the ways in which the HEIs approached the expectations placed upon them varied as much within the Jordanian and European groups as between them.

ii. A comparison of the ESG and HEAC standards.

The comparison of the requirements / expectations of the ESG and HEAC standards appeared, at first, to be potentially straightforward although time consuming (whilst parts 1 and 2 of the European Standards and their Guidelines run to 10 pages (p13-22), the HEAC standards are detailed to such an extent that they require more than 60 pages. To make an initially more approachable task the ESG were compared with only selected HEAC requirements (closest equivalents to ESG parts 1 and 2).

This comparative analysis is on-going, however the following immediate aspects came to the fore during the work before and at the Barcelona and Rome Matching exercises:

- the HEAC standards cover MUCH more than the ESG (the ESG are predicated on the existence of an HEI with some form of internal QA 'system' whereas the HEAC also cover the requirements for establishment / formal recognition of an HEI; the HEAC standards cover aspects of student 'life' – accommodation, sporting facilities etc – that are not considered as integral to QA of *education* provision in Europe)
- the HEAC standards are set out with FAR greater detail than the expectations of the ESG
- there is some apparent 'duplication' in both the ESG and HEAC requirements
- there are ambiguities in both the ESG and HEAC requirements (particularly in terms of the expectations about internal quality assurance systems; HEAC expects a Quality Bureau but is not clear what responsibilities /authorities this should have; ESG is largely 'silent' on the relationship between responsibilities and authorities/governance of IQA within HEIs)
- a simple alignment of the requirements of the two sets of standards, that might lead in future, to some form of 'mutual recognition' is not straightforward – largely because of the context and detail rather than the underlying principles.

iii. The different 'layers' of external QA, and institutional priorities in responding to them

As discussions developed at the Barcelona and Rome matching exercises it became apparent (as might have been predicted) that HEIs, whether in Jordan or Europe, have different priorities in terms of meeting their external QA requirements and expectations, and that these can be reflected in different organisational structures within institutions.

Changes in prioritisations were most apparent in the Jordanian group of HEIs as they started (from different stages in the development of their internal QA systems) to look towards meeting the expectations of the (national) HEAC Standards, with some initial ambitions to meet international requirements for programme accreditation.

By contrast, the European HEIs were influenced in their prioritisations by a wider range of different EQA 'levels' and expectations. These included not just the national requirements but also (in the case of Spain) regional ones, and also European initiatives at institutional and programme level, as well as international ('global') accreditations such as ISO and ABET.

iv. Organisation of internal QA

Whilst the HEAC Standards anticipate the development / existence of an Internal Quality Bureau, the precise roles and responsibilities of QBs, and 'position' within the organisation of the HEI, appear to be different (with senior management playing a large part in this).

European HEIs described a variety of internal organisation systems (centralised or devolved – but with a centralised requirement for reporting IQA outcomes). These were designed to address in ways that reflected the institution's approach to IQA rather than national or ESG 'directives'. The ESG per se may not be a direct 'driver' for HEI's IQA system although the principles behind the ESG do appear to be widely shared.

The structural / operational characteristics of the IQA systems were also, to some extent, also dependent on the 'maturity' of the institution and its commitment to 'transparent' IQA.

A recurring / persistent theme was that limited 'buy in' by most academics to systematic and transparent IQA. Even where the 'system' is 'devolved' it appears to be dependent on a small core of 'the committed', where the system is 'centralised' there seems to be greater potential for IQA to be regarded as 'a bureaucratic burden' (sometimes but always necessary). Yet, simultaneously, there is a general belief that most academics think they are committed to doing the best ('quality') for their students/ research discipline.

Messages for Brussels

- 1) Whilst the ESG and HEAC standards are based on similar values they are completely different in 'range', 'approach', form and detail of content.
- 2) Institutions are subject to a much more complex 'layering' of EQA expectations that just the ESG or HEAC standards would suggest
- 3) Institutions prioritise their approaches to their IQA (systems) depending on their 'maturity', resources and mission – and, importantly, their leadership.
- 4) Whilst most academics consider that they are very committed to 'quality', achieving widespread and 'enthusiastic engagement' in systematic and 'transparent/ IQA is problematic – everywhere.

Next steps in EQuAM

rather depend on if you agree that this is a reasonable synopsis of stuff to date ...