

Joint trainings as a bridge for cooperation

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STRUCTURED ABSTRACT

This paper explains the experience of the two agencies Unibasq (Agency for Quality of the Basque University System-Basque Country/Spain) and AQAS (Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes-Germany) outlining the beneficial input of foreign experts for procedures referring to different cultural backgrounds leading to a different perspective in the assessment as well as the experience in different higher education contexts leading to a different set of questions while preparing, but also during the site visit period. The introduction will then outline discussions both agency representatives had during the preparation to sign a memorandum of understanding recognising that the above-mentioned issue is a shared perspective. Based on the known challenges of different languages and cultural barriers the agencies were looking for options how to increase the number of foreign experts in their procedures. Encouraged by positive experiences within the ECA training academy the agencies agreed to intensify their cooperation in this issue and to join their efforts regarding this shared challenge.

Keywords: Experts training, Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Language barriers, Cross-border.

ARTICLE

Introduction

AQAS and Unibasq are both quality assurance agencies registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). They come from different review environments, competitive versus non-competitive. While in Germany the agencies compete to review study programmes and institutions, in the Basque Country, Unibasq oversees the review of the study programmes and institutions, as stated by Spanish and Basque laws. EQAR registered agencies could compete outside their own higher education systems, nevertheless AQAS and Unibasq are part of different networks: the International Network for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education (INQAAHE), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the European Consortium for Accreditation in higher educations (ECA), which have helped setting the basis for collaboration.

The origin of this specific collaboration was the mutual interest in the potential evaluation of joint programmes from German and Basque universities which could be reviewed applying the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes (https://www.eqar.eu/fileadmin/documents/bologna/02_European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_v1_0.pdf). Once this interest was clear and both agencies checked for joint programmes between German and Basque universities, the idea that there could be further options for collaboration arouse and a memorandum of understanding with the general objective to use experience and good practices in the field of quality assessment and accreditation in higher education was signed. This memorandum states the potential activities to be perform, such as to:

- promote quality culture in higher education;
- share skilled experts;
- share information on development of procedures and quality assurance systems;
- exchange expertise, opinions and publications;
- promote conferences, seminars and other experts' meetings;
- exchange information about their educational systems, especially about areas referred to higher education;
- collaborate in the field of training of experts and staff;
- participate in site visits as observers;

- facilitate the development of new joint programmes between Basque and German universities.

This agreement was seen as a chance for increasing the number of foreign experts in the procedures of both agencies following the recommendations of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) (2015). This issue is specifically stated in Standard 2.4 “Peer review experts” establishing that “The involvement of international experts in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.” and Standard 3.1 “Activities, Policy and Processes for quality Assurance” where “The expertise in the agency may be increased by including international members in agency committees” is outlined. In addition, the need of an “appropriate training and/or briefing” is established “to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts”, while doing a “careful selection” and assuring that they have “appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task”.

Most times memorandums of understanding are usually well used tools; however, their practical effect usually remains limited. So, both agencies unite to address a challenge both agencies face: the incorporation of foreign experts. At the same time, it could be stated that: 1) the experience of the agencies shows that the inclusion of foreign experts usually is very beneficial for the character of the procedure, and 2) the challenge of foreign experts is a shared phenomenon of many agencies, recognizing language as the most limiting factor. This last statement is also found in the “Recognising International Quality Assurance Activity in the European Higher Education Area (RIQAA)” Final Project Report (<http://www.eqar.eu/topics/cross-border-qa/riqaa-final-report.html>). This project examined among other topics regarding cross-border external quality assurance (EQA) activities and experiences, the benefits and challenges observed by the agencies. In the case of benefits, it was found out that it was an “opportunity to promote continuous improvement within their expert pool”. On the other hand, in the case of the challenges “overcoming language barriers and finding suitable peers for the review” were some of the outcomes. In addition, one of the solutions that some agencies used was to “include a native speaker within the external review team or arranged for simultaneous translation for their panel meetings”. Finally, among the suggestions to improve this kind of activity was “developing a data-base of international

experts". This all leads to a clear conclusion of the difficulties to include foreign skilled experts in every agency's own review procedures.

Although some preliminary experiences between both agencies regarding the sharing of skilled experts were quite successful, the need of specific training to have a broader pool of foreign experts was detected. Moreover, as mentioned above, one of the topics covered in the agreement was to collaborate in the field of training experts and staff.

Research methodology

Desk-based research has been carried out once the idea of developing a joint training for experts was agreed. For this aim the agencies representatives discussed the different options for this training with the following issues to be considered: Looking for a methodology, Language, Target group, Training needs, Training design, Putting it into practice and Next steps and challenges.

Both agencies intensively considered the positive experiences within the ECA training academy, one of the outcomes of the ECA project "European Training of Quality Assurance Experts (E-TRAIN)". These experiences served as a basis for the development of the Unibasq/AQAS training. The goal of E-TRAIN was "to train and to share a community of knowledgeable and internationally experienced experts in the domain of external QA in higher education". In addition, two action lines were specified in order to ensure the meeting of this aim: "1) to develop a European training programme for experts in QA procedures and 2) to develop a database to share experts among QAAs in Europe" (Braathen and Zwiessler, 2011 and King, 2012). The approach of this project was very broad and focused on the European dimension of Quality Assurance, not being its aim "to extend the experts' subject specific knowledge nor to train them to be able to apply all different sorts of European standards" (Zwiessler, 2011), as it "would not be feasible regarding the sheer extent", not all experts are interested in each national/regional system and it is the responsibility of each agency to train its experts regarding its specific framework (Frederiks, et al, 2012). Nevertheless, its different outcomes ("Guidelines for Training of Experts", "Guide to Good Practices for Training of Experts", "Handbook for the Training of Panel Members" and "Training Experts for Quality Assurance: Lessons Learned. The results of the E-TRAIN Pilot Trainings") proved very helpful to

design this specific training. In addition to the mentioned publications, this project was also the origin of the ECA's Experts Exchange Platform (EEEP) which aim is to share trained or experienced experts across borders among agencies (<http://ecahe.eu/home/eeep/>).

After early considerations to use experts from the existing ECA database of experts it became clear that, on the one hand, these experts were trained on the European level in many parts particularly focusing on quality assurance of Joint Programmes or in assessing the quality of internationalisation. On the other hand, the question of language would not be solved. Parallel consideration was given to the European Student Union's (ESU) Quality Assurance Student Expert Pool (<http://quest.esu-online.org/QA+Student+Experts+Pool>). Recognizing the benefits of this existing pool of trained experts on the European level with defined structures and quality criteria, the agencies concluded that on the one hand the ESU pool faces the same challenges as the EEEP of ECA; and on the other hand it is also limited to students. Consequently, both agencies returned to the idea of developing specific trainings for each other's needs.

At this early stage of checking feasibility already logistical reasons were considered as using experts from the region of the other agency would in most of the cases also involve expert mobility. Both agencies simulated a number of mock cases where an expert from one region would have to travel to the other region. Both budgetary limitations and scheduling issues were considered. It showed that due to the well-established infrastructure and frequent flight connections to Bilbao as well as Frankfurt or Munich the use of experts from the other region would be feasible (frequent approximately 2 hours flights), but— not as a surprise - be more costly. However, the additional costs would not be economically justifiable compared to the extra value the international expertise adds to the procedure.

Looking for a methodology

Both agencies actively used different meetings in existing networking structures to discuss options how to come up with a realistic opportunity to increase foreign expert participation. It was considered to create a joint event for experts from both regions allowing reviewers to also share their experiences in the different systems. However, considering the specific needs of the agencies, it seemed more practical to offer training for Basque/Spanish experts covering

the German standards and in a separate event to offer training for German experts covering the Basque/Spanish standards. Consequently, both agencies decided to prepare two independent trainings one after another and to start with the training of Basque/Spanish experts for German procedures. In the next step, there shall be a training for AQAS experts in Germany to become reviewers in the Basque system.

Language

Once the option of just one joint training event was dismissed, the question about the language of the training raised. The discussion about Spanish, German, English, and even Basque, as options for trying training activities was held, as usually trainings for foreign experts are held in English when it comes to cross-border activities reviews, as these reviews are mostly done in English and sometimes with the help of native speakers or translators, as already mentioned. The decision to have two different events then led to the selection of German language for the training on the Basque Country and Spanish as the language for the training held in Germany. There are two important factors that must be considered: One is the recognition of the language selection has a limiting factor when it comes to the number of potential experts; the other is the decisive factor of the languages of the procedure both agencies offer. In fact, in the Basque Country, Spanish and Basque are both co-official languages and the university could ask for a review in Basque, although currently most of the reviews are made in Spanish, and the available documentation is usually in this language or Basque, but not English. So, this could be an additional challenge for a foreign expert, if not fluent at least in Spanish. The same challenge exists for AQAS in the German system as their procedures are almost exclusively run in German language. Consequently, the existing rules, regulations and documentations are all written in German language. This issue, the lack of available documentation in English, was also one of the challenges of a cross-border EQA found during the RIQAA project.

Target group

Regarding their accreditation procedures, both agencies have different expert profiles (academic, students, professional and quality assurance experts). At the beginning, the training was planned to be open only for academic experts coming from Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). In the end, it was also decided to open it for students. In Germany, the agencies use

experts from professional practice representing the labour market (this is not the current practice in the Basque Country, although there are professionals in some procedures) and it was decided not to cover these experts in this specific training. As both organizations are involved in programme and institutional level activities, the bigger intersection could be found in procedures addressing programmes. While the institutional accreditation is still developing in the Basque Country, in Germany the number of procedures on the institutional level is much smaller when compared to the programme level. Additionally, expert groups for institutional procedures receive a full day individual training when starting the procedure. Hence an international expert familiar with the German regulations for programme accreditation can then easily develop the required skills for the system accreditation once he or she is part of the nominated expert group. With the decision to focus on programme accreditation another limitation had to be introduced relevant for the definition of the target group: As in Germany the fields of Law and Medicine are excluded from the requirement of programme accreditation, the planned training would also not be opened for academics in this field as there is no relevant number of procedures in this field.

Training needs

In this field a comparison of the methodologies and criteria of both agencies was required to identify training needs for the experts. The common orientation towards the ESG (2015) proved very helpful, as it was identified that both procedures to a great extent cover comparable areas, as can be seen in the following paragraphs.

Basque/Spanish accreditation system:

The evaluation of study programmes (bachelor, master and doctoral study programmes) in the Basque Country, as in the rest of Spain, takes place in a cyclical manner: validation (ex-ante accreditation), monitoring or follow-up, modification and accreditation. During the evaluation of study programmes for their authorisation and validation (ex-ante accreditation) stage, the report submitted by the university must include the following: The name and description of the degree; justification for the degree; competences; student access and admission; programme content; academic staff; physical resources and services; intended outcomes; Internal Quality Assurance System (IQAS); timetable for implementation and an economic report, including incomes, expenses and investments related with the degree.

In the follow-up process, emphasis is put on both the public information and the analysis of some indicators. The universities should analyse the development of the study programme, and, if necessary, make proposals for corrective or improvement actions. Besides, they should review the implementation of their IQAS and, if necessary, reflect on the recommendations given in previous review reports.

In the accreditation process, the self-report submitted by the university must include: Organization and development of activities; information and transparency; Internal Quality Assurance System; academic staff; infrastructure and services; learning outcomes and performance and satisfaction indicators. Unless the previous evaluation processes, which are desk-based, in the accreditation process a site-visit to the university is included.

Although there is the voluntary option for the institutions to ask for the certification of their IQAS, the institutional accreditation procedure in the Basque Country/Spain is still under development.

German accreditation system:

The German system allows the Higher Education Institutions to choose between programme accreditation and system accreditation. Both approaches are cyclical, once a university received an accreditation for its quality assurance system (System Accreditation) the obligation to undergo program accreditation is waived. All standards for both types of accreditation are defined by the German Accreditation Council and agencies follow these predefined standards. None of the procedures is desk-based, and independent from the nature of the procedure, may it be initial accreditation or re-accreditation, a site visit is always required including face-to-face interviews with all relevant stakeholders.

In programme accreditation, the standards used for initial accreditation and re-accreditation are identical and only differ in perspective. 11 standards defined by the German Accreditation Council are assessed including the Learning Outcomes, the quality of the curriculum, Quality assurance mechanisms, feasibility of the program, staff and material resources, equal opportunity mechanisms, employability, and transparency.

In System Accreditation, the focus of the procedure checks in how fine the requirements of program accreditation are implemented by the University itself and in how far the criteria of the German Accreditation Council are transparently implemented and assessed by transparent and defined quality assurance procedures of the institutions themselves.

Training design

When comparing the different methodologies of the agencies the joint orientation towards the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) proved very helpful and both agencies agreed that experts might not be overly challenged to adjust to the outlined standards. However, Unibasq and AQAS agreed that experts require an understanding of their position in the system explaining to them chances and limitations of their role in the procedure. When comparing the practical implementations of a procedure, both agencies identified numerous differences relevant to the experts. Compared to AQAS Unibasq e.g. uses an online tool managing the workflow and assisting in the procedure, that experts are required to use. Consequently, one of the key training needs are the practical aspects of an accreditation procedure in the other system, and it had to be one focus of the training in order to allow the foreign experts to equally participate even in all steps of the procedure.

Based on all these considerations in a joint meeting AQAS and Unibasq agreed to a defined set of learning needs for the first training for Basque/Spanish experts. Based on these learning needs, learning outcomes for the training were defined. As the target group of the training would be experienced reviewers who have already participated in one or more reviews, or at least are familiar with their home accreditation system, the design of the trainings would reflect the needs of an advanced learner. For those experts who feel less experienced, Unibasq has some on-line modules to help them become familiar with their accreditation procedure. Considering the defined intended learning outcomes, the training would cover the awareness dimension, the cognitive dimension, as well as the interactive dimension as outlined in the ECA "Guidelines for Training of Experts" (Braathen and Zwiessler, 2011).

However, with a specific target group defined before hand, it was decided that the cognitive dimension, specifically explaining the German/Basque context of Higher Education as well as

Quality assurance context would require extra attention. Hence this will have to include an awareness dimension of a different organizational or even quality culture in the other region. On this issue the pros and cons of including additional knowledge about intercultural aspects were discussed. Due to the specific nature of the panel, where the expert who is member of this training most likely will be the only “international expert” in the group, it was decided to make this only a minor point of training when it comes to the awareness dimension. Regarding the interactive training dimension, it was decided to clearly familiarize the experts with the different style of writing in the other region, as well as familiarize them with the approach of report writing, which is different in both agencies.

One target of the training design was also to provide the opportunity of informal learning. Since the training would be given by representatives of the other agency, trainees should have the opportunity for less formal encounters, to raise questions that maybe they would not want to raise in front of the group. This seemed particularly important, as the target group of the training are experienced experts, so it could be expected that there is already knowledge about the other system or information to be discussed informally. In order to take advantage of this opportunity the preferred design of this training would be of two half days with a joint dinner providing a more social surrounding and a perfect opportunity for informal discussions (Table 1).

Table 1. Training schedule and contents.

Day 1	
11:00-12:30	Introduction <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AQAS and the German Higher Education System • Memorandum of understanding Unibasq and AQAS
12:45-13:45	The German accreditation system
13:45-15:15	Lunch
15:15-16:45	Procedure AQAS
17:00-18:30	Evaluation criteria
20:00	Dinner

Day 2	
9:30-11:00	Roles and responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experts • Coordinator Writing the report
11:00-11:30	Coffee break
11:30-13:00	Outlook and practicalities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ESG 2015 • Changes in Germany
13:00	Feedback and certificates

Putting it into practice

The first step to put the training into practice was to check into the Unibasq pool of experts and see how many of them could be fluent in German. One of the questions that can be found in this pool of experts' platform is their knowledge of different languages. There was a selection of academic and students who claimed that they had at least an upper-intermediate or advance level of German. Then an email communicating our joint training activity was sent to around 60 people. From them 10 positive answers from academics were received. In this group of experts there were experts from the Basque University System and from some other Spanish universities.

The number of students who were fluent in German in Unibasq pool was quite low and most of them were from Germany or living in Germany, and already working with AQAS. So, it was decided to make an open call to the three universities of the Basque University System to have more potential academic experts that were not included in the Unibasq pool and to increase the number of students participating.

Next steps and challenges

The next step in this joint venture is the implementation of the first training. It is planned to happen at the end of March 2017 in the Basque country. While the preparations at this time progress very well, one of the defining success factors will be the actual use of the trained experts in accreditation procedures in Germany. The frequency of Basque/Spanish expert-participation in AQAS procedures will depend on the one hand on the profile and background of the trained experts, and on the other hand, on the number of procedures AQAS runs in these specialisations in the months after the training.

Following an evaluation of the first training the second training will be implemented in Germany in order to train German experts for their participation in Unibasq procedures.

Results

As the described project is still in the midst of its implementation phase, no final results can be presented at this time. The progress in the different steps towards the first training, particularly jointly developing the substance as well as identifying potential trainees worked very well and gives the reason for optimism towards the final outcome. However, already at this time as a clear side-effect of the intense preparation of this joint project an increased trust between both participating agencies can be identified. The intense discussion about common challenges, as well as the presentation of different procedural, technological, and operational approaches towards the everyday requirements of an accreditation agency lead to a deeper understanding between the actors and help building trustful relationships between agencies. As trust is seen to be a key factor in the relationship between agencies and HEIs, at the same time this trust is required between agencies when creating a European Higher Education Area (EHEA). With EQAR safeguarding minimal standards, active cooperation will be the path to sustainable structures beneficial for all actors.

At the moment of writing this paper, these are the steps already taken in this cooperation before performing the first pilot experience of this joint training:

- Comparison of frameworks and reflection on training needs regarding the specific backgrounds of trainees as well as requirements of receiving agency.

- Adaptation of training concept to individual cultural background of the experts of the other HE-system (agency exchange).
- Selection of a small number of experts (academics and students) to do a small pilot training first in the Basque country (March 2017) and then in Germany (autumn 2017).
- Evaluation of learning needs of potential participants.
- Definition of learning outcomes for experienced experts from foreign HE-systems.
- Design of a training following the defined learning outcomes.

Conclusions

Incorporation of foreign experts in the external quality assurance procedures remains a challenge that requires individually tailored responses, as the limiting factor of language cannot be overcome but needs to be addressed. Hence it is not the language of joint training activities which limits implementation, but different languages used in every day operations of the external quality assurance procedures. Recognizing that the final result cannot be presented at this time, the manifold positive side effects of the cooperation of two agencies from different European countries prove that it is worth the effort. Both authors believe that the challenge of language must not only be seen as a limiting factor, but also a fundamental root of the rich cultural diversity higher education builds on. Consequently, the reality of different languages should be an aspect that should be respected in collaborative procedures, instead of only identifying it as a limiting factor.

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