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**ESQA**  
Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in  
External Quality Assurance Activities

Romanian Ministry of Education and Research  
Unit for the Management of Externally financed projects

# **GUIDE FOR EFFECTIVE STAKEHOLDERS' INVOLVEMENT IN QUALITY ASSURANCE**

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# **PART I: INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1 The ESQA project

The objective of the ‘Effective involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance activities’ (ESQA) project<sup>1</sup> is to increase knowledge about the involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance (EQA) activities, which can lead to actions that further improve their overall involvement in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The goal of this project is to foster the interest of stakeholders’ organisations to participate in quality assurance (QA) activities by empowering them to increase their engagement and to participate more effectively in external quality assurance. The project has also produced a study<sup>2</sup> which takes stock of the current involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance across the EHEA and presents activities that QA agencies of the ESQA project and beyond have implemented to engage their stakeholders.

The project is co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union and aims at supporting the activities of the Bologna Peer Support Group C<sup>3</sup>. This Guide is the most important outcome of the ESQA project. It has been developed by two international experts in co-operation with the partners of the consortium.

## 1.2 Scope, objective and concepts of the Guide

This Guide aims to provide guidelines primarily to the QA agencies and national authorities in the EHEA, to strengthen dialogue and co-operation with stakeholders, as well as for their effective involvement in QA processes. The guidelines mainly address the stakeholders’ involvement at the level of external QA activities<sup>4</sup>, aiming to find ways to deepen and make their involvement more effective in the EHEA member countries, according to the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA* (ESG 2015). Yet this Guide can also be inspirational for countries and regions outside the EHEA.

Thus, the objective is a practical one: namely to provide practice-based guidance on effective stakeholder involvement. Its purpose is to inspire a positive development; the document is not intended to prescribe standards to be copied and complied with. Experience shows that merely copying good practices is full of pitfalls and dangers if they are not adapted to the local policy and cultural contexts.


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<sup>1</sup> <https://esqa.ro>

<sup>2</sup> Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance (2020), [https://esqa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Study-on-stakeholder-involvement-in-EQA\\_web\\_n.pdf](https://esqa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Study-on-stakeholder-involvement-in-EQA_web_n.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> The Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) formally set up the Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance on identified interest and needs, following a survey among BFUG members in 2018. More information at <http://www.ehea.info/page-peer-group-C-QA>

<sup>4</sup> In this Guide, ‘external QA activities’ includes all types of reviews as well as the management and internal quality assurance of QA agencies and organisations, platforms or bodies that have a place in the EQA processes, such as accreditation councils, advisory platforms on (re)designing QA systems, etc.



As this Guide uses ‘effective involvement of stakeholders’ as the ultimate aim, it is important to define it as an involvement which shows a clear impact on the quality of QA activities and ultimately on the quality of higher education (HE). With this definition, ‘impact’ is synonymous to ‘effect on a longer term’ and not just a quick outcome or a result in the chain of added value. The term ‘stakeholder involvement’ is used when the different stakeholders are referred to as a single group, while ‘stakeholders’ involvement’ refers to the differences among the categories.


Stakeholders are involved in different ways in external quality assurance and consequently also in the work of QA agencies. This Guide distinguishes the stakeholders’ engagement in the development of QA systems, their involvement within QA agencies as organisations, and as members of review<sup>5</sup> panels. The guidelines aim to offer guidance on how to make stakeholders’ involvement effective in all these areas, as they require different approaches.

The main target group of these guidelines is thus the QA agencies, their board members, their management teams, and their staff. Because of the subject of this Guide, stakeholder categories and especially those stakeholder representatives that are already working together in or with the QA agencies – most commonly students, teachers, other staff at higher education institutions (HEIs) and employers – will also be among its readers. The Guide is also expected to be inspirational for national authorities, and to all organisations or bodies that are involved in QA systems.

Within the Bologna Process, the development and practices of quality assurance have been commended among the most important achievements in the EHEA. One of the pillars of the so-called European model of quality assurance is the stakeholder model. It is understood that a QA system that is shared by all stakeholders is better than one that is developed and run by only one stakeholder. Stakeholders’ support is part of a democratic process, and builds a better basis of trust, which is crucial in quality assurance. Even if one advocates that quality assurance should only deal with the teaching and learning reality within the triangle of learner, teacher and learning environment, it is essential to have all these actors on board. How would one otherwise know about the realities of education, certainly as an ecosystem, without for example knowing the opinions and reflections of both the internal and external stakeholders. Thus, one of the underlying beliefs of this Guide is that the involvement of multiple stakeholders increases the chances of a robust and comprehensive QA system, in spite of potential conflicts of short-term and opposing objectives of the stakeholders and the wider HE system.

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<sup>5</sup> The term ‘review’ is used in this Guide as a synonym for all types of external quality assurance, including audits, accreditation, evaluation, etc.



The stakeholders' involvement is not only linked to the national QA system, but also to the HE system as a whole and the missions of the HEIs. Although the HEIs' missions are generally three-fold (teaching and learning, research, and societal service), because the ESG and QA agencies mainly focus on teaching and learning, this Guide mainly deals with the stakeholders within this area. Yet, with the recent extension of the HEIs' mission to societal relevance, which has entered external quality assurance via subjects such as employability and community learning and research, it is important that those stakeholders representing the local and international (civic) society not be forgotten.

A main feature of the EHEA is its national and regional diversity. This is also reflected in the differences among national quality assurance systems, and in the national responsibility for external quality assurance, even if increasingly countries allow foreign QA agencies to operate within their borders as approved in the Bucharest Ministerial conference of the EHEA.<sup>6</sup>

Research also indicates that, apart from the impact of national policy and culture, there is also a correlation between the national system and the evolution of external quality assurance<sup>7</sup>, sometimes referred to as 'the maturity of EQA', which can on some occasions be observed in the shift from programme to institutional level and in the move from output to societal impact. These shifts can have as an important consequence that external stakeholders such as employers and civil society are also engaged in the HEI's internal quality assurance (IQA).

It is important to mention that both the ESQA project and this Guide were conceptualised and developed before the outbreak of the COVID-19 virus and its implications for higher education and quality assurance. While online meetings and virtual visits increase the possibilities to invite stakeholders, the quality of online involvement still needs to be investigated.

### 1.3 Methodology and structure


The guidelines in this Guide are informed by the aforementioned 'Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance' developed in the framework of the ESQA project.

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<sup>6</sup> See Bucharest Communiqué, [http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial\\_declarations/Bucharest\\_Communique\\_2012\\_610673.pdf](http://www.ehea.info/Upload/document/ministerial_declarations/Bucharest_Communique_2012_610673.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> See Jeroen Huisman and Maria Manats (UGent/CHEGG), in two DEQAR studies commissioned by EQAR in <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/projects/deqar-project/pilot-studies/>





The authors have also made use of a variety of other sources, such as the CEENQA members survey results on the involvement of stakeholders in EQA activities in the EHEA<sup>8</sup>, the 2018 Bologna Process Implementation Report<sup>9</sup>, QA agencies' Self-Evaluation Reports, External Review Reports of QA agencies, ENQA and EQAR information sheets on QA agencies and national QA systems, available on the respective websites, as well as EQAR registration decisions<sup>10</sup>. The experts also relied on their personal experiences in the work of the E4 Group and its constituent organisations, their Board membership in QA agencies, their involvement in various projects and studies in the field of quality assurance, as well as their engagement with universities and other higher education institutions.

The guidelines are structured in ten thematic areas ('themes') covering the points of attention for effective stakeholder involvement, presented in the following way: 1. Introduction of the theme, with the reasoning behind why it was selected as a theme; 2. One or more guidelines highlighting the main recommendation(s) for the theme; and 3. Guiding elements for putting the guidelines into practice.

It is important to realise that for every thematic area, effective stakeholder involvement starts from the specific country or other (socio-economic, cultural) context, and what contributes to this ('the guiding elements') is also very much dependent on the context. The guiding elements should therefore be seen as a pool of good practice by which the QA agency can be inspired, while most of them are also interconnected. For example, there cannot be a strategy of working with stakeholders (theme 10) without sharing the underlying concepts (theme 1) and objectives (theme 3). The guidelines are listed from very open and abstract to detailed and practical. While the addressee of most guidelines is the QA agency, others are identified where needed. The addressee is written in bold.

Putting these guidelines and elements into practice, even when adapted to the different contexts, may not increase stakeholders' effective involvement right away. The analytic tool that is presented in Part 3 is not linear. It may only be used as a way to identify the degree of stakeholder involvement, without any automatic result. Like the process of involvement itself, the effective impact of the stakeholders' engagement is a road with successes and failures. And just like in quality assurance in general, the very root of the issue is to learn from one's failures and to turn the weaknesses and threats into opportunities through reflection and action.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.ceenqa.org/ceenqa-general-assembly-and-workshop-2019/>

<sup>9</sup> European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018, The European Higher Education Area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, downloadable at [https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report\\_en](https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report_en)

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.eqar.eu/register/agencies/>

The background of the page is composed of various overlapping triangles in shades of blue and white. The triangles are of different sizes and orientations, creating a dynamic, geometric pattern. The colors range from a deep navy blue to a very light, almost white blue.

## **PART II: GUIDELINES**

## II.1 Theme 1: Sharing underlying concepts of quality in HE and QA systems

Quality as well as QA systems are contextually embedded in the HE system, which in turn is highly influenced by national politics and cultures. Sharing the basic concepts of quality in HE and QA systems is an essential foundation for building understanding, commitment and trust, which are necessary elements in building a positive quality culture. The European concept and model, which is the basis of the ESG, is the so-called stakeholders' model. This means that ultimately the QA system and the HE system in which it is embedded needs to be shared by all relevant stakeholders in such a way that they see themselves as co-creators and co-owners, irrespective of their own background and competences. For instance, a national QA framework should ideally be agreed to by all stakeholders, even though the implementation of the framework mainly lies with the national QA agency.

The underlying concepts of quality and quality assurance system, as embedded in the higher education system, should be shared and co-created by involving relevant stakeholders. This way a commitment is built which is embedded in a quality culture that is based on trust and mutual understanding. Relevant stakeholder categories are all those that reflect the opinions present in the wider society linked to the quality of higher education.

Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also themes 3 and 10)

- It is important for **all stakeholders** as well as **QA agencies** to always keep in mind the underlying essential concepts of quality and added values of QA and HE systems. Sharing these underlying concepts is the ultimate basis for an effective commitment by all stakeholders.
- Make sure that **all stakeholders** as well as the **QA agencies** have a good knowledge of the political and cultural context in which HE and QA systems are embedded and can work strategically as well as tactically within those contexts.
- **QA agencies** for their part
  - may organise open dialogues about or linked to those underlying concepts with the stakeholders.
  - have to bear in mind and accept that stakeholders can often have quite different views and should therefore be approached to commit themselves in different ways.
  - should involve stakeholders in collaborative partnerships rather than merely consulting them.



## II.2 Theme 2: Diversity of categories of stakeholders and their different roles, especially in consultations

The stakeholders that are most frequently involved in EQA activities are students and their unions, teaching staff and other HEI staff, employers and professional bodies, alumni and national HE authorities. University associations are only involved by about half of the QA agencies. Local authorities and civil society are even less structurally involved.<sup>11</sup>

It should be noted that some categories of stakeholders, such as HEIs and national and local authorities can be represented by different sub-categories, with different points of view. For instance, (Vice-) Rectors or (pro-)deans can have different views compared to (QA) managers and to teachers, who still differ from other staff members, such as administrators. Politicians often engage differently than civil servants. Consultants hired by organisations to represent them will normally be more technical in their approach.


The same applies to student representation. There could be quite a difference between the opinions of official representatives of student unions and the individual students. The challenge is to involve both at the right level and for the appropriate tasks. Official student union representatives should be structurally involved on an institutional and (inter)national level. When evaluating study programmes, as many students as possible – with diverse socioeconomic backgrounds and academic performances – should be heard, and there should be a mix of official representatives and of individual students focussing only on their own learning experience. Meetings and interviews with both categories have an added value in internal as well as external quality assurance.

Alumni are a specific and very useful category of stakeholders. They are a bridge between the study programme or institution and the world of work. When their study experience is quite recent, they can provide input with greater authority on the quality of programmes, learning and assessment and at the same time bring in their first experiences from the world of work.

A category that is not often identified as a stakeholder is the ENIC-NARIC centres, recognition experts and credential evaluators. From the point of view of stakeholders, recognition based on guaranteed and documented quality of processes and results is an important objective of external quality assurance.

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<sup>11</sup> Study on Stakeholder involvement in External Quality Assurance



It should therefore be common practice that QA agencies have close contacts with recognition experts. Some QA agencies already combine their activities by being the national ENIC-NARIC centre.

In most countries, regulatory arrangements at the national and/or at the agency level govern the involvement of particular groups of stakeholders. The greater the variety of stakeholder categories involved, the more comprehensive the QA system could be, and this is true for both external and internal stakeholders. The stakeholders' motivation or justification for their involvement is what matters most. However, (external) actors like employers are rarely consulted first on how they see the added value of their involvement, while this is mostly the case for the students or student organisations, who claim their overall involvement as a matter of principle.

All identified and relevant stakeholders that have an interest in the quality of higher education should be systematically involved, especially when (re)designing a QA system. This may lead to more openness, transparency, and effective stakeholder involvement based on co-ownership.


Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also themes 3, 6 and 7)

- **QA agencies, national authorities and all stakeholder organisations** should bear in mind that co-ownership does not imply that all stakeholders have the same expectations and opinions, but that they co-own the (E)QA system from their point of view as a whole.
- **QA agencies, national authorities and all stakeholder organisations** should therefore try to go beyond the existing different and sometimes opposite expectations and opinions by focusing on the multiple aspects, layers and objectives of a HE and (E)QA system and thus aiming for co-ownership of them.
- The process of (re)designing quality assurance should always be led by a respected authority who is co-responsible for the functioning of the QA system.
- **QA agencies, national authorities or other organisations** organising consultation rounds for the (re)designing of a QA system should always try to raise the stakeholders' interests in higher education and in the nature of their contributions. Especially for stakeholders external to HE(Is), the added value of their engagement is not always clear to them. They should involve all stakeholders, including the ones not often involved nowadays, in a structural and systematic way and on a regular basis.

- It can be productive for QA agencies and for other organisations to consult the stakeholders not only 'on paper', but to build a truly mutual dialogue with them, for instance by organising (specific) resonance groups and regular thematic dialogue groups.
- **QA agencies** and **other organisations** should give the stakeholders enough time to formulate their reflections and remarks, e.g. by directing open calls on their websites and by making clear and suitable indications in the differences between the first and subsequent draft versions of their input and the final document.
- **QA agencies** and **other organisations consulting stakeholders** should mind the time and duration of the meetings with stakeholders. For instance, meeting with students should not be planned during class hours and employers mostly like short and to-the-point meetings.
- When consultations by **QA agencies** and/or **other organisations** take a lot of time and are difficult, it is good to start with the general principles and then gradually refine towards more specific statements and longer texts.
- **QA agencies** should identify all stakeholders, their diverse backgrounds, their interests and points of view on (the quality of) higher education and quality assurance.
- **QA agencies** can invite stakeholders first for an open agenda in which an open dialogue prevails over immediate engagement.
- **QA agencies** should organise consultation rounds with individual stakeholders and their organisations on what they see themselves as useful stakeholder involvement in relation to the mission and strategy of a qualitative higher education.
- **QA agencies** should bear in mind that some categories of stakeholders, such as HEIs and national and local authorities can be represented by different sub-categories, with different points of view.
- **QA agencies** should make sure that stakeholders are aware of the impact of their future involvement in the QA agency and in external QA activities. For instance, external stakeholders such as employers and civil society tend to show a greater interest if there are specific standards and/or indicators that refer to their work and environment.

### II.3 Theme 3: Objectives of stakeholders' involvement

Since different stakeholders can have different concepts of quality and quality assurance, it is important to be aware of the varying levels of implication of the stakeholders as panel members or as members of a QA agency body as well as their different views, needs and interests in quality assurance.




While it is legitimate to have these differences, it is equally important that all stakeholders also feel united within the different objectives, based on their understanding of the societal mission of a qualitative education. The more transparency about the aims and objectives, the greater chance there is of effective engagement. It is important that all stakeholders realise that QA systems are only tools and that the heart of the matter is the quality of higher education as a service and a response to societal and individual needs.

Be transparent and explicit in collectively sharing the different objectives of the involvement of stakeholder categories in order to raise the effectiveness of their involvement.

As stakeholders are not a single, homogenous group, dealing with them requires a diversified approach; this may imply that their involvement is 'unequal' and happens at different stages.

Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also themes 1 and 10)

- **All stakeholders** as well as **QA agencies** should try to develop a true community of stakeholders that engages itself collectively instead of separately per stakeholder. This effective collectiveness can be attained by transparently bringing together the stakeholder's specific viewpoints, competences and skills.
- It is useful to have a list of the **agency's** specific objectives for engaging with specific stakeholders before discussing these openly with them.
- Bear in mind that an effective commitment of stakeholders in external quality assurance on the side of accountability is and should be mirrored with an effective engagement in internal quality assurance on the enhancement side, both as far as the internal quality assurance of the **agency** itself is concerned and for the internal quality assurance of **HEIs**.
- As part of the **agency's** strategy, prioritise which stakeholders to work with in terms of desired effects, availability of resources, and time constraints of the stakeholders.
- While principally all stakeholders should be involved, it may be more effective and practical that **QA agencies** involve them at different levels, for different purposes and at different stages. For example, in the agency's governance there are usually representatives of stakeholder bodies (e.g. students' and teachers' unions and professional bodies) but not all stakeholders can be expected to be represented. It is better, for example, that national authorities have no decision-making representation in the agency's governance.

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- **QA agencies** should understand the importance of subject-specific initiatives (e.g. quality labels) for certain HE programmes and specific stakeholders, while other initiatives and stakeholders may value more monitoring of research and societal engagement.

#### II.4 Theme 4: Recruitment/Selection of stakeholders

Whether experts are participating in review panels or representing stakeholder groups in the governance or functioning of an agency, a form of careful and well-prepared ‘selection’ of experts is needed. Selection mostly happens in two ways: initiated by the agency, or by the stakeholder group itself.

The recruitment or selection depends on the purpose of the involvement. For a review, the selection is more often done by an open call, whereas when the purpose is to take part in the governance of an agency, the recruitment is more frequently done through nomination by the respective stakeholder organisation, sometimes in combination with a personal invitation by the agency.

The selection criteria vary per stakeholder group. For program reviews, students and teaching staff are selected based on their academic background, while with other staff of HEIs the managerial (QA) experience is of primary importance and, understandably, the professional experience for employers. QA experience and ethical concerns are also considered when selecting stakeholders. Language proficiency and knowledge about the higher education system of the country/region naturally plays a role in international EQA activities.

Whereas it seems a growing practice that the recruitment or selection is regulated, structured and transparent, a certain flexibility is observed when approaching stakeholders personally before the official selection or nomination.

The selection methods should be clear, publicly known and used consistently by the agency and all stakeholders, including the national authorities.

The recruitment methods may vary among the stakeholder groups. While nomination by the stakeholder’s organisation is a sign of greater trust and independence, selection by the agency based on clear criteria can help find a better candidate as far as vision, knowledge, experience and commitment are concerned. A combination of both has better chances of selecting more engaged stakeholders.




Preparatory meetings should best be held with the nominating stakeholder organisations in order to clarify roles and expectations of the future representatives.

Guiding elements towards realisation:

- **QA agencies** should not forget that the primary selection criterion is always the person's individual commitment and is directly related to his or her effective impact (as a stakeholder's representative). A person's commitment is linked to his or her vision on higher education and quality assurance. It is therefore recommendable to have a discussion with a candidate or nominated person on his or her vision on higher education, its quality and how to assure quality.
- **QA agencies** should involve stakeholders from the development process onwards, and not only for implementation, when their opinions can no longer be taken fully into consideration.
- Creating pools of review experts is a common practice, which can also be used when nominating stakeholders' representatives in governance functions or in decision-making bodies of the **QA agency**. Among students there is a practice of student-pools managed by either only **student representative unions** or in cooperation with **agencies**, which ensures a collaborative environment and an independent student voice in QA procedures. In all cases, such pools should be renewed on a regular basis with clear criteria.
- When seeking involvement of (external) experts like employers, it may be more effective if QA agencies approach them personally, on their grounds (e.g. on-site visits to companies/organisations). They are sometimes reluctant to engage themselves for events, etc. by third parties and prefer a direct, personalised approach.
- A national platform of practitioners in (external) quality assurance coming from different stakeholder groups and organised by and for **stakeholder categories** can be a suitable pool for choosing review experts and representatives for QA agency bodies.

## II.5 Theme 5: Training of stakeholders

The guideline under ESG 2.4 on peer-review experts states that *"In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of experts, they (...) are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing."* Organising an appropriate training for all stakeholders involved in reviews is essential and common practice. Face-to-face, subject-oriented seminars with hands-on-sessions are often used, and more and more in combination with online training courses.



Most trainings to become or remain a member of a pool of review experts are on generic aspects and skills. They mostly make use of anonymised examples, cases and role plays. Tailor-made or ‘method-specific’ ones are reserved for specific methodologies, targeting either institutional or programme reviews, or for specific functions in review panels, such as chair or secretary.

It also happens that knowledge transfer sessions are set up for specific stakeholders. This is often done for students, because of their specific background, angles and the usually more extensive rotation of experts and selected nominees due to the natural length of student’s enrolment. Knowledge transfer sessions are organised both by student unions and QA agencies.

However, trainings are less often organised for stakeholders participating in agencies’ bodies. Representatives in the various agency bodies are mostly given a briefing before starting their mandate. They are sometimes invited to take part in seminars and conferences on specific subjects, but less often for a full knowledge transfer on higher education and (external) quality assurance. Still, participating in discussions and knowledge-enhancement activities on QA topics are usually a good start of an effective involvement and it is also a crucial step towards shared ownership of quality assurance.

Well-prepared knowledge transfer about higher education and quality assurance should be organised in order to raise the commitment of stakeholders in the governance and work of the QA agency.

Trainings for review panel members should be obligatory for admission to pools of new experts as well as before actual evaluations. The trainings should be informative and develop the trainees’ review skills in practice. Briefings must be held before any review.

Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also themes 2, 9 and 10)


- **QA agencies** should develop a policy of regular trainings and knowledge transfer.
- To be effective, trainings by **QA agencies** are on both generic subjects and method-specific ones, hence tailored to a specific context. Trainings should be adjusted according to the purpose, the kind of involvement aimed at and the type of activity (governance, advisory, function, review, etc.).
- It may also be beneficial to train different stakeholders as a group/collectively for involvement in a specific discipline.
- **QA agencies** should remember that purposeful training comprises information sharing, simulation exercises, feedback and a developmental aspect.

- It is beneficial for **QA agencies** to combine face-to-face meetings with hands-on sessions and special modules for specific functions such as chair and secretary.
- **QA agencies** should not forget that training review skills in practice is a real added value and is often done by using role plays and simulations.
- Trainings by **QA agencies** can be more effective when there is a part for all stakeholders concerned and other parts that are specifically tailored towards specific stakeholders, their profiles, angles and roles.
- **QA agencies** can also organise knowledge transfer through seminars and thematic meetings.
- Online sessions by **QA agencies** must be well-prepared and with clear instructions. Although they partly miss the group dynamics, they are good as general courses that can be consulted on a permanent basis. Thematic webinars and short videos with diagrams are useful as instructional tools as well as for refreshment purposes. Yet, they can never fully replace the group dynamics.
- The choice of going online and/or hybrid is a strategic one that should not only be well-prepared, but also involve a well-thought choice of technical requirements.

## II.6 Theme 6: Involvement of stakeholders in reviews

One of the main EQA activities in which various stakeholders are involved are the external review processes. This theme only deals with stakeholders' representation in review panels and processes, and not with their involvement in (decision-making) bodies of QA agencies. The latter is dealt with in themes 4, 7 and 8. The categories of stakeholders that are most frequently involved in institutional and programme assessments are students, teaching staff, employers, other staff of HEIs and professional bodies, participating as full members of the panels. It is surprising that in these times when impact and engagement have become elements of a HEI's performance, civil society is still not often involved in reviews. Although in a minority of EHEA countries some categories of stakeholders still seem to be only observers without voting rights, the participation of the panel members is equally divided among the main stakeholders.<sup>12</sup> The responsibility for the review report generally lies with the whole panel, although for instance the chair, the secretary, and a coordinating member from the QA agency can have special duties during the review process.

<sup>12</sup> Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance



Review panels should contain all perspectives of the institution, programme and/or topics under review. If the subjects are the QA processes and the output of a HEI or study programme, the perspectives are those of learners (students), teachers (academic peers/experts), the leadership of the institution (senior leaders or managers), the professional field and of the future lives of the graduates (employers and/or alumni). The opinions of all review panel members should receive equal attention during the review and decision processes, irrespective of their different roles and duties.


The international perspective is important in a review panel in the context of global higher education and certainly when the HEI or study programme has a specific international strategy and/or dimension.

Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also theme 5)

- **All stakeholders involved in external reviews** should start from the belief that the involvement of each perspective linked to the HEI or study programme to be assessed is an added value for the review itself as well as for the assessed programme or HEI.
- **QA agencies** should select the panel members not only because they represent a relevant category but primarily because they are fit as a member of that category. For instance, the opinions of employers who lack a vision on the future needs of the sector may be negligible.
- **QA agencies** should check the involvement of stakeholders in the faculties or on the programme level as well, as this may have a greater impact than on the institutional level, which may be mainly formal.
- **QA agencies** should guarantee that already from the preparation phase and during the site visit each stakeholder category is approached on an equal basis and has the same rights and responsibilities during the entire review, notwithstanding the different duties or roles they might have in the review.
- Make sure that the international dimension is represented in the review panel, especially when the HEI/study programme formulated it as a point of policy.

## **II.7 Theme 7: Involvement of stakeholders in the governance and organisation of QA agencies**

Apart from reviews, several categories of stakeholders are involved in a variety of other EQA activities, such as involvement in the governance and in advisory bodies of QA agencies as well as in the agencies' internal quality assurance. They can also be involved in the (re)design and in the meta-assessment of QA systems (see theme 2).



External stakeholders are also more and more linked to internal quality assurance of HEIs, as the HEIs' responsibilities for organising external quality assurance on programme level is rising. External stakeholders such as employers, local and civil community are also linked to other qualitative items of education, research and societal service, such as learning outcomes and applied research.

The main categories of stakeholders – i.e. students, teaching staff, employers, other staff of HEIs and professional bodies – are thus commonly involved as interviewees during site visits. Alumni too are mostly interviewed during site visits. Thanks to their official recognition, the internal policies of student unions and the requirements of student involvement given by the ESG, in many instances students are represented as stakeholders in EQA interviews and site visits. Local authorities and civil society are rarely involved in other types of EQA activities.<sup>13</sup> This is remarkable since the local engagement of a HEI has recently been added and explicitly mentioned in the mission of HE(Is). The role of civil society and of alumni in other QA activities can be important in relation to employability, which is another, commonly used, new impact indicator in quality assurance. It may also be useful to involve International Relations Officers and peers when developing and assessing the global performance of a HEI. The IQA systems of HEIs are outside the remit of this Guide though.

The categories of the stakeholders and their degree of engagement are related to the mission and strategy of a QA agency as well as to the national QA system. Consequently, all relevant and identified stakeholders should be involved in internal and external QA activities of the agency.

Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also themes 4 and 9)

- It is important for **QA agencies** to have regular meetings with representatives of all stakeholders. A yearly overview of the state of affairs of the quality of HE(Is) is an excellent theme of national interest and can offer feedback on the effective impact of the stakeholders' engagement in QA matters.
- When **QA agencies** move to the stakeholders' environment, it is also important to talk to the staff and not only to management.
- The creation of a community of practitioners by a **QA agency** and/or **stakeholder organisations**, who are already actively engaged in QA activities and who share their experiences with internal QA officers on national and/or at the agency level, can raise these stakeholders' commitment and effectiveness.

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<sup>13</sup> Study on Stakeholder Involvement in External Quality Assurance, op. cit.

- An important practical step towards a structural and effective engagement of all stakeholders could be a creation of a national help desk for stakeholders by the **QA agency** and/or **stakeholder organisations** in order to respond to questions on the 'quality of education'. This digital platform could also be used for electronic consultations. This could also be done on (broad) sectoral levels; or on European qualifications framework (EQF) levels, each targeting a specific community of quality assurance experts.
- The work with learning outcomes is an important meeting point of both internal and external quality assurance, as well as for **all stakeholder categories of higher education**. It is a place where all stakeholders feel engaged based on common ground that should show its impact in the graduates' learning outcomes, and thus in the quality of education. Since the learning outcomes are decided at the national level, the level of HEIs as well as within study programmes, all stakeholders can be involved through internal as well as external quality assurance. A good methodology to formulate, decide and review the learning outcomes is of utmost importance and needs to be coached and coordinated well.
- While the involvement of stakeholders can also be the subject of a thematic analysis by a **QA agency** itself, all or particular stakeholders can be invited to take part in a thematic analysis on topics such as student-centred learning (ESG 1.3) or employability. These thematic analyses bring the agency closer to (specific) stakeholders and can make their involvement more effective.

## II.8 Theme 8: Independence vis-a-vis stakeholders' involvement

Standard 3.1 of the ESG prescribes that agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their governance and work. Standard 2.4 requires that peer-review experts need to be external. On the other hand, Standard 3.3 points out that agencies should be independent and act autonomously without any third-party influence in their operations and their outcomes. The combination of these standards may cause tensions on the level of an agency's governance as well as in peer reviews. Many agencies use codes of ethics and declarations of confidentiality, impartiality and absence of conflict of interest.


The involvement of stakeholders should be organised in such a way that the independence of the QA system, the governance and activities of the agency are enhanced.

Guiding elements towards realisation: (see also theme 9)

- **QA agencies** as well as **stakeholder organisations** should always make clear and ensure that stakeholders work within their personal capacity when formally and structurally involved in decision-making and other EQA activities.
- It is crucial that there be no representative of the **national authority** with a decisive vote in any body of the **national agency** that takes formal decisions because of reasons of independence.
- Sometimes a formal representation of stakeholders is needed apart from an individual engagement in the decision-making body of a QA agency or in a review. This could apply for instance in the development of a new (inter) national QA system or framework. In this case, the **international coordinator** of the review can work with (temporary) consultative platforms or bodies next to the existing advisory and decision-making councils or review panels.
- **QA agencies** must make use of codes of ethics and declarations of confidentiality, impartiality and absence of conflict of interest.
- It is important for **QA agencies** to guarantee representation of all stakeholder categories in review panels as well as in decision-making bodies, governance and advisory boards of the agency. The more stakeholders involved, the better chance there is of a higher degree of independence.
- It is important for the independence of both the **QA agency** as well as the review panels to not involve those stakeholders who are also members of the agency's decision-making body in review panels.
- A successful way of involving stakeholders in an **agency** is by setting up special advisory councils in which all stakeholders are represented on equal grounds, and in which the stakeholders are invited to formulate advice and reflections instead of making decisions. In this way, the members act as representatives selected by their organisations.

## II.9 Theme 9: Communication and transparency towards stakeholders

The communication with and transparency towards all stakeholders of higher education and quality assurance has a great impact on the extent of their involvement. As our starting point is quality assurance as a stakeholders' model, in which stakeholders feel like and are co-creators and co-owners, the communication with and transparency among them is essential. The more a stakeholder feels like a co-creator and co-owner of quality assurance, the higher his or her commitment can be. The greater the stakeholders' commitment, the more impact it can have. The more feedback is given to stakeholders, the more effective it can be. The more mutual the communication is, the more the involvement will be mutual, and thus more committed and effective.



Thus, communication is not just a question of officially inviting a stakeholder, nor just having the stakeholder's formal background. It is a matter of mutual engagement among all stakeholders, including the QA agency and the national HE authorities. Communication and transparency are crucial pillars in the creation of mutual trust and understanding.

There are various channels of communication between QA agencies and their stakeholders, in different stages of the cooperation starting from informing stakeholders about processes and providing updates on the outcomes of QA activities such as reviews of HEIs and thematic analyses. The published full reports following the review activities, but also thematic analyses, cluster reports and trends reports contain concrete and evidence-based information on the state of affairs of higher education in a country or field of study. Such information should be shared with all stakeholders in higher education, including the wider public and civil society.

Communication and transparency with all stakeholders should be considered as essential and strategic building blocks of quality assurance that functions as an effective stakeholders' model, in which there is a culture of co-creating and sharing of knowledge and practice.

Guiding elements towards realisation that all address **QA agencies**:

- Develop a specific policy for communication and transparency in which all stakeholders are specified and addressed.
- Include communication and transparency as specific domains in the internal quality assurance of the agency.
- Use language that is clear and accessible to not only those within the EQA sector but also to non-specialist readership.
- Consider the particularities of the different stakeholder categories and adjust communication channels and timing accordingly. It is equally important to share information in a coherent and consistent way.
- Invite stakeholders to communicate and share their own experiences and expectations with the agency and other stakeholders e.g. in the agency's newsletter.
- Remember to give feedback on the effects of stakeholders' involvement.
- Effective communication with national and local authorities may include annual meetings with parliamentarians, local authorities and other political representatives.
- Try to work towards creating a common language on quality and quality assurance issues, and avoid the use of jargon and technical language.



- The use of summary reports can bring added value in addition to the full reports.
- Disseminate review, trend and thematic reports in a way that is relevant to all stakeholders.
- Work consistently along the principles of Open Data sharing, Open Access and Open Science. Respect the European General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

## **II.10 Theme 10: Strategic approach to stakeholder engagement and supporting activities**

From what is said in the thematic areas before, it should be clear by now that stakeholder engagement is one of the pillars of effective quality assurance and performant higher education. From this observation follows that stakeholder engagement is a crucial aspect of the agency's legitimacy and competence. Thus, it needs to be the subject of the agency's strategic and other policies, such as structural development, networking and communication.

In developing a strategy, policies and activities for stakeholder involvement, it is important not to forget that the degree of effective involvement may vary per stakeholder as well as per activity. For instance, national authorities may be quite forceful in (re)designing a national QA system, but should abstain from operational management and reviews, for reasons of independence. To improve the impact of stakeholders' involvement, a QA agency needs a strategy and policies on this aim. There is also a clear link with the agency's own internal quality assurance.

The different degrees of effective involvement by and with the stakeholders seem to correspond with different degrees of trust among everyone involved and the belief that each stakeholder, notwithstanding their different angles and points of view, wants to contribute to reaching the highest quality of higher education on the basis of a shared concept of 'quality'.

The different stages of (the development of) stakeholder engagement as well as the national and cultural differences make a uniform approach difficult. An organic growth of such involvement may lead to more sustainable results, together with an increase of knowledge of the QA system, getting to know each other, common experience, and indeed trust.

Stakeholder involvement which is aimed at having a qualitative impact should be integrated in the agency's strategic policy, and should also be linked to other policies, such as structural development, networking, communication and the agency's own internal quality assurance.

Guiding elements towards realisation (see also all previous themes)

On building a **QA agency's** strategy for stakeholder involvement:

- Develop and implement a strategy about stakeholder involvement that is linked to the general strategy of the QA agency as well as to specific policies.
- Clearly define with(in) the strategy the precise role of stakeholders and what is expected from them, which will contribute to their understanding of the system and the creation of a common language.
- A good strategy is to try to build a win-win situation with each of the stakeholders.
- Treat all stakeholders respectfully from a belief that their effective commitment is needed to develop a qualitative HE and QA system, and not only because their consultation is mandatory.
- Bear in mind that an effective involvement of stakeholders is also part of a culture that needs to be addressed, which takes time to develop.
- A bottom-up and top-down combination of working with stakeholders is most effective and sustainable/may be more effective and sustainable.
- Share all relevant information with the stakeholders concerned, including underlying relevant data.

On building a **QA agency's** activities for stakeholder engagement:

- A thematic approach towards stakeholders is often more productive than a general one.
- Give stakeholders some preparatory work and a responsibility in the governance of the QA agency, the (re-)designing of national policies, systems, frameworks and procedures. Students could for example work on satisfaction of and participation in the learning processes and services, teachers on the design of programmes, and employers on placements and employability in relation with learning outcomes.
- Invite stakeholders as contributors to knowledge-transfer events that the agency organises. The agency's annual forum for example is an excellent opportunity to invite them for a plenary talk or to a breakout session.
- For the sake of 'continuity' of a particular type of stakeholder engagement, it is important to keep the same people involved for some time, but constant monitoring is advisable. A good balance between experienced stakeholders and new ones with fresh ideas is best practice.
- Organise informal events and moments with stakeholders, such as 'drinks and snacks', 'meet and greet' in addition to formal meetings.



## **PART III: SUMMING UP**


### III.1 Final observations

The following final part sums up some general observations and underlying concepts that run through all guidelines.

The chart below is an attempt at conceptualising different development stages of stakeholder involvement: from a simple invitation because of an external (national and/or ESG) requirement to full involvement in the governance and other activities of a QA agency. In the first phase the stakeholders are not structurally involved. In the second phase the stakeholders mainly feel obliged to represent their organisations and do not engage much. In the third phase stakeholder involvement is a truly strategic policy of the QA agency based on the trust in them. In the last phase the stakeholders feel like co-creators and co-owners of the QA system and external QA activities and thus engage in an effective way with an impact.



The figure above is only meant as a model or tool to identify the degree of stakeholders' involvement. It cannot be regarded as an automatic linear process. Although the development stages can be recognised as underlying all ten themes, their guidelines and guiding elements, the reality of stakeholders' impact is more complicated. The figure may thus not be interpreted in a strictly linear way. The involvement of different stakeholder groups can be situated at different phases at the same time. The different ecosystems of the various stakeholders not only generate different points of views but also complicate the synergy and progress of their involvement in QA systems and agencies. It is for example quite possible that the students feel like co-creators of quality assurance as participants of their learning processes (phase 4), while national authorities or employers are structurally involved because of the agency's strategy but do not feel co-owners (phase 3). The same applies for the different (external) QA activities. Employers may feel like they are co-responsible as members of a review panel, while they sometimes do not act that way as representatives in the agency's organisation.



Thus, a stakeholder's involvement within one stakeholder group may also differ depending on the different EQA activity. All phases are sometimes not necessary in all contexts. If a particular stakeholder trusts the way other stakeholders are functioning, he or she may well decide to stay aloof from being involved in further co-creation. It should therefore not be forgotten that in reality the road to best practices and impactful effect of stakeholders' involvement is never a straight line, but a road with challenges and failures, which may be turned into opportunities and strengths.

### **III.2 List of guidelines**

The guidelines describe the most important and generic features of the highest phase of stakeholders' involvement. While the first three guidelines and the last one lay the foundations of impactful stakeholder involvement, the further guidelines deal with more specific items such as selection, training and communication.

#### **Theme 1: Sharing underlying concepts of quality in HE and QA systems**

The underlying concepts of quality and quality assurance system, as embedded in the higher education system, should be shared and co-created by involving relevant stakeholders. This way a commitment is built which is embedded in a quality culture that is based on trust and mutual understanding. Relevant stakeholder categories are all those that reflect the opinions present in the wider society linked to the quality of higher education.

#### **Theme 2: Diversity of categories of stakeholders and their different roles, especially in consultations**

All identified and relevant stakeholders that have an interest in the quality of higher education should be systematically involved, especially when (re)designing a QA system. This may lead to more openness, transparency, and effective stakeholder involvement based on co-ownership.

#### **Theme 3: Objectives of stakeholders' involvement**

Be transparent and explicit in collectively sharing the different objectives of the involvement of stakeholder categories in order to raise the effectiveness of their involvement.

As stakeholders are not a single, homogenous group, dealing with them requires a diversified approach; this may imply that their involvement is 'unequal' and happens at different stages.



#### **Theme 4: Recruitment/Selection of stakeholders**

The selection methods should be clear, publicly known and used consistently by the agency and all stakeholders, including the national authorities.

The recruitment methods may vary among the stakeholder groups. While nomination by the stakeholder's organisation is a sign of greater trust and independence, selection by the agency based on clear criteria can help find a better candidate as far as vision, knowledge, experience and commitment are concerned. A combination of both has better chances of selecting more engaged stakeholders.

Preparatory meetings should best be held with the nominating stakeholder organisations in order to clarify roles and expectations of the future representatives.

#### **Theme 5: Training of stakeholders**

Well-prepared knowledge transfer about higher education and quality assurance should be organised in order to raise the commitment of stakeholders in the governance and work of the QA agency.

Trainings for review panel members should be obligatory for admission to pools of new experts as well as before actual evaluations. The trainings should be informative and develop the trainees' review skills in practice. Briefings must be held before any review.

#### **Theme 6: Involvement of stakeholders in reviews**

Review panels should contain all perspectives of the institution, programme and/or topics under review. If the subjects are the QA processes and the output of a HEI or study programme, the perspectives are those of learners (students), teachers (academic peers/experts), the leadership of the institution (senior leaders or managers), the professional field and of the future lives of the graduates (employers and/or alumni). The opinions of all review panel members should receive equal attention during the review and decision processes, irrespective of their different roles and duties.

The international perspective is important in a review panel in the context of global higher education and certainly when the HEI or study programme has a specific international strategy and/or dimension.

### **Theme 7: Involvement of stakeholders in the governance and organisation of QA agencies**

The categories of the stakeholders and their degree of engagement are related to the mission and strategy of a QA agency as well as to the national QA system. Consequently, all relevant and identified stakeholders should be involved in internal and external QA activities of the agency.

### **Theme 8: Independence vis-à-vis stakeholders' involvement**

The involvement of stakeholders should be organised in such a way that the independence of the QA system, the governance and activities of the agency are enhanced.

### **Theme 9: Communication and transparency towards stakeholders**

Communication and transparency with all stakeholders should be considered as essential and strategic building blocks of quality assurance that functions as an effective stakeholders' model, in which there is a culture of co-creating and sharing of knowledge and practice.

### **Theme 10: Strategic approach to stakeholder engagement and supporting activities**

Stakeholder involvement which is aimed at having a qualitative impact should be integrated in the agency's strategic policy, and should also be linked to other policies, such as structural development, networking, communication and the agency's own internal quality assurance.

## **III.3 Epilogue**

The authors hope that the issues raised in this Guide will be the subject of further studies as well as lead to reflections and new practices by all those concerned. A follow-up could start from the various domains of co-operation that exist at present and from an examination of what would be potential domains of co-operation. In such an exercise it seems logical to begin with areas in which a lack of co-operation is felt, or where it could be improved. Such areas could be pedagogical and other innovations, recognition, employability of graduates, entrepreneurship, internationalisation, societal engagement, citizenship, diversity, professional development (of staff), etc.

May these guidelines be building blocks in the development of formulating strategies for stakeholders' involvement and contribute to more performant and impactful external QA activities, visionary QA agencies, more comprehensive QA systems, and indeed more qualitative HE(Is) and better graduates.



## ANNEXES



## A.1 List of acronyms and abbreviations used

<b>BFUG</b>	Bologna Follow-Up Group
<b>CEENQA</b>	Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
<b>E4 Group</b>	The European Association of Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Students' Union (ESU).
<b>EACEA</b>	Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission
<b>EHEA</b>	European Higher Education Area
<b>EQA</b>	External Quality Assurance
<b>ENQA</b>	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
<b>EQAR</b>	European Quality Assurance Register
<b>ESG (2015)</b>	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
<b>ESQA</b>	Effective Involvement of Stakeholders in External Quality Assurance Activities Project
<b>HE</b>	Higher Education
<b>HEI</b>	Higher Education Institution, used for every organisation providing education on the tertiary level
<b>IQA</b>	Internal Quality Assurance
<b>QA</b>	Quality Assurance



## A.2 Short C.V. of authors

**Lucien Bollaert** is an independent international QA expert, visiting professor, author, keynote speaker on (inter)national conferences, and international reviewer. He is currently a board member and advisor of several QA agencies and a member of the Education Quality Board of Ghent University. He has been involved in the development of QA and NQFs in something like 10 countries, mainly through European projects. Currently he is the leading expert on IQA in the World Bank QA project in Uzbekistan. The 2nd edition of his successful book *A Manual for Internal Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (2019, EURASHE: Brussels) has as subtitle *Looking for a new quality in HE in a new world*.

**Stefan Delplace**, former Secretary General of EURASHE (2004-2014), is an educationalist, with expertise in external quality assurance, recognition and accreditation issues, and the relation business and education. Board member of QA agencies, and of not-for-profit organisations engaged in higher education. Chair of the Board of Directors of International Business College Mitrovica (Northern Kosovo). Expert for the Council of Europe and the European Commission. Associate of the IAU-AIU (UNESCO, Paris). Member of Scientific Committees of ongoing projects in Western Africa and South-East Asia.



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