

Project No: 101129398- ERASMUS-EDU-2024-CBHE-STRAND-1

Improving University Quality Assurance Resilient Strategies Toward Excellence QA-SURE

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Introduction to Benchmarking System Report

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Executive Summary

This report introduces the Benchmarking System as part of the QA-SURE project, an initiative funded by Erasmus+. The project aims to elevate the standards of quality assurance (QA) in Western Balkans Higher Education Institutions (WB HEIs) by aligning them with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) 2015.

Participating institutions include Western Balkans University, Albania; Luarasi University, Albania; Polis University, Albania; International Business College Mitrovica, Kosovo; and University Isa Boletini Mitrovica, Kosovo. Through a collaborative and comprehensive benchmarking approach, the project seeks to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, fostering a culture of excellence and continuous enhancement in quality assurance processes.

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Introduction

The evolving landscape of global higher education demands consistent adherence to quality assurance standards, ensuring that institutions provide educational offerings that meet international benchmarks of excellence. The QA-SURE project, with its focus on the Western Balkans region, represents a strategic effort to benchmark local HEIs against the revered ESG 2015, fostering alignment with European best practices in quality assurance. This initiative is not only pivotal for the participating institutions but also serves as a beacon for quality enhancement across the region.

Methodology of Self-Assessment

The benchmarking process involved a detailed self-assessment of the participating institutions against specific criteria outlined in the ESG 2015. This assessment covered both internal and external quality assurance mechanisms, encompassing policy development, program design, student assessment practices, staff recruitment, learning resources, information management, and ongoing program review. The methodology emphasized transparency, stakeholder engagement, and a commitment to using the findings for continuous improvement.

The self-assessment process is a critical element of the benchmarking system, which allows each participating institution to conduct an introspective evaluation of its practices against the established criteria of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG). The aim is to gauge current performance levels and identify areas requiring development or showcasing excellence.

To ensure a structured and quantifiable self-assessment, institutions are encouraged to apply one of the following techniques:

a) Numerical Rating Scale: Institutions may use a numerical rating scale that ranges from 1 to 5, with 1 indicating a low level of alignment with the ESG criteria and 5 indicating a high level of alignment. This scale allows institutions to quantitatively assess their practices across various domains of quality assurance such as governance, academic programs, teaching and learning, research, community engagement, and infrastructure. For instance, an institution might rate its student support services a '4', suggesting strong performance, yet still room for improvement.

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Using this method provides a more nuanced insight into how each aspect of the institution's operations measures up to the ESG criteria. It also helps to break down the overall assessment into specific areas, making it clearer where targeted efforts and resources are needed to improve.

b) Binary Response of 'Yes' or 'No': Alternatively, institutions may opt for a straightforward binary response system. In this method, they respond with either 'Yes' or 'No' to statements derived from the ESG criteria. A 'Yes' would indicate that the institution meets the specific standard or practice in question, whereas a 'No' would suggest non-compliance or a gap in the institution's QA mechanisms.

For example, an institution might be presented with a statement like "The institution has formal procedures to monitor and periodically review its programs." A response of 'Yes' would imply that such procedures are in place and active, while a 'No' would highlight this as an area for potential improvement.

Both self-assessment techniques are valid and serve to create an initial benchmarking profile for each institution. The choice of method may depend on the institution's preference for granularity in the assessment, the complexity and detail of the information available, and the desired simplicity or speed of the evaluation process. Whichever method is chosen, the self-assessment is a starting point for ongoing dialogue, reflection, and action towards achieving higher education excellence in line with European standards.

Findings

The findings from the benchmarking exercise under the QA-SURE project, which compared the quality assurance practices of Western Balkans Higher Education Institutions (WB HEIs) against the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) 2015, offer a detailed insight into the current state of quality assurance across the participating institutions. This section elaborates on these findings, providing a deeper analysis of the observed practices and their alignment with ESG standards.

Quality Assurance Policy and Public Availability

All participating institutions have established and publicly shared their quality assurance policies. This reflects a foundational commitment to transparency and accountability, setting a positive precedent for institutional openness.

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The public availability of quality assurance policies is a critical first step in engaging the academic community and external stakeholders. It sets the stage for a culture of trust and collaborative improvement. However, the mere existence of such policies does not guarantee their effectiveness; the implementation and lived experience of these policies within the institutions remain key areas for further exploration.

Program Design and Approval

There is a general adherence to rigorous processes for program design and approval, ensuring that programs meet their intended objectives and learning outcomes. However, the level of rigour and adherence to these processes varies across institutions.

The design and approval of programs are foundational to ensuring quality education. The variance in implementation suggests that while some institutions may be leveraging best practices effectively, others could benefit from further alignment with ESG standards. Sharing best practices among institutions could facilitate a more uniform approach to program design and approval.

Student Assessment and Engagement

Institutions demonstrate a commitment to student-centred learning and assessment practices. However, the degree of student engagement in the learning process and their involvement in assessment practices varies.

Active student engagement is crucial for deep learning and the development of critical thinking skills. The variance in student engagement indicates potential gaps in fully realizing student-centred learning environments. Institutions might need to explore innovative pedagogical strategies and assessment methods that more effectively engage students as active participants in their learning journey.

Staff Competence and Development

There is a uniform recognition of the importance of recruiting and developing competent staff, with practices in place across institutions to ensure teaching quality.

The emphasis on staff competence and development is a positive indicator of the institutions' commitment to high-quality teaching and learning. Ongoing professional development opportunities for faculty are essential for maintaining and enhancing instructional quality, especially in the face of rapidly evolving educational technologies and pedagogies.

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Learning Resources and Support

Institutions prioritize providing adequate and accessible learning resources and support, underlining their dedication to student success.

The availability of learning resources and support services is critical for an inclusive and supportive educational environment. This area of strength across the institutions suggests a shared understanding of the role of resources and support in enhancing student learning experiences and outcomes.

Information Management

Effective management of program-related information is commonly practised, albeit with variations in the extent of data analysis and utilization.

The collection and use of relevant information are crucial for informed decision-making and continuous improvement. The observed variations highlight opportunities for some institutions to leverage data more strategically for program management and improvement efforts.

Program Monitoring and Review

Continuous monitoring and periodic review of programs to ensure they meet objectives and respond to societal needs are established practices. However, the effectiveness and thoroughness of these reviews vary.

Regular program reviews are essential for ensuring that educational offerings remain relevant and of high quality. The variability in review practices suggests that while some institutions have robust mechanisms in place, others could enhance their review processes, potentially incorporating more comprehensive feedback loops and outcome measures.

External Quality Assurance Compliance

All institutions engage in external quality assurance activities, showcasing a commitment to meeting and exceeding regional and European QA standards.

Participation in external quality assurance activities is indicative of the institutions' openness to scrutiny and their desire for continuous improvement. This engagement is a positive step towards aligning with European best practices and standards, fostering a culture of quality that transcends national borders.

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Conclusion

The QA-SURE project's benchmarking initiative represents a significant step toward enhancing quality assurance practices in WB HEIs. By identifying strengths and areas for improvement in alignment with ESG 2015 standards, the participating institutions are better positioned to implement strategic enhancements in their QA processes. This collaborative effort not only benefits the institutions involved but also contributes to raising the overall quality of higher education in the Western Balkans, fostering a culture of excellence that resonates with European and global standards.

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Benchmarking System, as filled out by each WB HEI partner in the QA-SURE project

No.	Part 1: Standards for internal quality assurance	Western Balkan University	Luarasi University	Polis University	UIBM University	International Business College Mitrovica
1	Do you have a quality assurance policy at your institution?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	Is it publicly available?	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	Is it implemented through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders?	4	5	5	4	4
4	Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes.	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No
5	The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes.	4	5	5	3	5
6	The qualification resulting from a programme should be specified and communicated and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.	Yes / No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that	4	4	5	3	4

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	encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.					
8	Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.	5	4	5	5	3
9	Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.	5	4	5	4	5
10	Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
11	Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.	4	4	5	4	4
12	Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which are clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
13	Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set	3	4	5	3	4

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	for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.					
14	Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
No.	Part 2: Standards for external quality assurance	Western Balkan University	Luarasi University	Polis University	UIBM University	International Business College Mitrovica
1	External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance described in Part 1 of the ESG.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
2	External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in its design and continuous improvement.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
3	External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include: - a self-assessment or equivalent. - an external assessment normally includes a site visit. - a report resulting from the external	3	5	5	5	5

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	assessment. - a consistent follow-up.					
4	External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
5	Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of external quality assurance should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
6	Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals. If the agency makes any formal decision based on the reports, the decision should be published together with the report.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7	Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes



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