

Building HE Institutional QA system and QA offices: the QA-SURE Project in Kosovo and Albania

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Abstract

Through the Erasmus+ QA-SURE project, this study examines the institutional development of internal Quality Assurance (QA) offices and systems in higher education institutions (HEIs) in Kosovo and Albania. The initiative concentrated on creating or improving specialised QA offices at three HEIs in Albania and two in Kosovo, as opposed to more general national QA system changes. The study emphasises the ways in which training, participatory governance, strategic planning, and infrastructure support aided in the development of institutional capacity, drawing on ESG 2015. Results show advancements in digitisation, student and stakeholder interaction, and quality culture. The report makes the case that system alignment with European standards and sustained academic success are made possible by institution-driven QA systems.

Keywords: Quality Assurance in Higher Education, Quality Assurance Offices, ESG 2015, Institutional Development, Kosovo, Albania, QA-SURE Project

1. INTRODUCTION

The establishment of efficient internal quality assurance (QA) systems at the institutional level has become more and more important in recent decades for the quality of higher education. Higher education institutions (HEIs) are where significant, ongoing improvements are implemented and maintained, even

when national QA frameworks establish broad expectations (ENQA, 2020). The establishment of dedicated QA offices is one of the fundamental forces behind this institutional evolution. According to Harvey and Williams (2010) and Loukkola and Zhang (2010), these organisations play a key role in operationalising internal quality assurance systems, supporting evidence-based management, guaranteeing adherence to European Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015), and improving overall academic and administrative performance.

The creation and growth of QA offices at five HEIs in Albania and Kosovo as part of the Erasmus+ project QA-SURE is the main topic of this study. This study focusses only on the institutional layer, where policy is implemented on a daily basis, as opposed to research that examine systemic transformation at the national level. Through a variety of initiatives, such as requirements analyses, strategic planning, employee training, policy creation, and the creation and deployment of digital tools, the QA-SURE project aided institutional strategies.

The project's guiding philosophy recognised the necessity of participatory and data-informed quality cultures. Stakeholder involvement, digitisation, external visibility, and internal QA processes can all be improved over time with deliberate investment in QA offices, as the five partner institutions' experience showed.

Design/methodology/approach: This work uses a qualitative case study methodology, referencing participant input gathered throughout the QA-SURE project, project deliverables, and institutional documentation. Three HEIs from Albania and two from Kosovo took part. ESG criteria were used to evaluate institutional-level solutions, paying particular emphasis to capacity building, stakeholder participation, and innovation in QA systems.

Findings: The study demonstrates that a quality culture in HEIs is greatly aided by the establishment or improvement of QA offices. Improvements were documented in stakeholder participation, process formalisation, and QA documentation systems. Each institution tailored its QA framework to local contexts while aligning with European standards (IAU, 2019). In addition to aiding in strategic planning and inter-institutional learning, the initiative showed that, with the right resources and integration into institutional governance frameworks, QA offices may function as centres for sustainable development.

2. BUILDING ROBUST INSTITUTIONAL QA SYSTEMS: FRAMEWORKS, MECHANISMS, AND GOOD PRACTICES

Robust institutional frameworks are the cornerstone of a long-lasting quality assurance (QA) system in higher education. These are created through iterative monitoring, evaluation, and improvement procedures, internal and external stakeholder interaction, and conformity to international standards. The primary reference framework for establishing quality policies and practices at the institutional level is still the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG 2015).

While maintaining comparability and adherence to regional norms, higher education institutions (HEIs) must adapt QA methodologies to local, disciplinary, and institutional settings (Harvey & Williams, 2010). Comprehensive needs analysis and stakeholder involvement are the first steps in designing successful QA systems, since they guarantee that the opinions of academics, administrative personnel, and students influence objectives and establish success measures (Liu et al., 2015; Trunk Širca, 2018).

A strategic QA process consists of a number of essential elements. First, it necessitates well-defined institutional goals that are in line with research productivity, graduate employability, and learning outcomes. Second, to promote continuous improvement, the QA system should be evidence-based, cyclical, and based on the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) logic. Third, organisations should use a Quality Management System (QMS) to integrate QA across academic and administrative domains, including faculty development, curriculum design, support services, and teaching and learning evaluations (Lonneke et al., 2020).

In order to promote institutional reflection, self-evaluation is essential. Through structured internal reviews, HEIs identify operational gaps and prioritise enhancement measures. Data-driven changes are informed by self-assessment tools, including performance dashboards, internal audits, and stakeholder surveys (Rodman, 2010; Middlehurst, 2001). To offer sectoral alignment and objective validation, this procedure should be supplemented with external review and benchmarking (Adina et al., 2014).

Systematic data gathering, curriculum reviews, alumni and student feedback systems, and strategic employer relationships are examples of important institutional activities. In addition to bolstering internal quality loops, these components address the growing calls for accountability and openness in higher education (Kayyali, 2023).

Effective QA is also supported by administrative infrastructure. QA offices are responsible for organising policy compliance, accreditation preparation, and internal evaluations. Employees must receive ongoing professional development in the use of assessment tools, documentation, and ESG implementation. Strategic planning, stakeholder collaboration, and converting audit findings into implementable changes are all part of the QA officers' job description (ENQA, 2020).

HEIs build robust frameworks for ongoing improvement by integrating QA into governance frameworks, coordinating it with ESG principles, and investing in employee capabilities. These procedures guarantee that quality is

3. FOSTERING A CULTURE OF QUALITY OF HE INSTITUTIONS: VALUES, STAKEHOLDERS, AND ORGANISATIONAL DYNAMICS

Establishing a QA office alone is not sufficient; it must be integrated into the larger institutional quality culture. The term "quality culture" describes common beliefs, customs, and dedications that support progress beyond legal requirements. By encouraging responsiveness, inclusivity, and transparency, QA offices serve as enablers of this culture. Quality culture, according to the European University Association, is the fusion of psychological and structural components, where involvement, trust, and intrinsic drive are added to institutional frameworks (EUA, 2018).

Leadership that prioritises excellence, promotes transparency, and invests in people is the first step towards creating a culture of quality. University administrators need to strategically invest resources, empower QA personnel and committees to lead transformation, and actively model and build a quality vision (Schein, 2010; Trunk Širca, 2018).

Involving stakeholders is essential to this process. Students, faculty, administrative personnel, alumni, and employers contribute unique educational quality perspectives. These perspectives are acknowledged and incorporated into effective QA cultures. For example, employers prioritise graduate readiness and curriculum relevance; administrators seek compliance and efficiency; faculty value academic freedom,

research support, and pedagogical innovation; and students demand relevance, support, and fairness in assessment (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Koester et al., 2006).

Mechanisms for engagement include student representation in QA committees, alumni surveys, industry advisory boards, and consultation workshops. These procedures strengthen legitimacy and foster confidence among university community members when they are institutionalised and made transparent.

Communication is equally crucial. Decisions and assessments pertaining to quality must be publicly shared via easily available reports, websites, and public dashboards. Accountability is strengthened and internal efforts are matched with external expectations when there is clear messaging (Adina, 2014; EUA, 2018).

Professional development is essential for fostering continuous learning. QA practice certifications, mentorship, and training equip professors and staff with the knowledge and attitudes necessary for long-term progress. In order to promote a positive feedback loop of motivation and quality, institutions should also reward and recognise good practice.

When all actors view themselves as contributors and stakeholders, a quality culture thrives. Higher education institutions in Kosovo and Albania can change quality assurance from compliance to shared goal by making investments in human resources, institutional transparency, and cooperative procedures.

4. CASE STUDY OF QUALITY ASSURANCE PROGRESS AND IMPROVEMENTS - ERASMUS + PROJECT QA-SURE

4.1 About the project

Erasmus+ project "Improving University Quality Assurance Resilient Strategies Towards Excellence" (QA-SURE 2023) is being implemented between December 2023 and November 2025.

The project aims to support higher education institutions (HEIs) in Albania and Kosovo in aligning with the European QA frameworks (notably ESG 2015), strengthening internal quality systems, and fostering sustainable institutional excellence. Three Albanian institutions—Western Balkans University, Luarasi University, and POLIS University—two from Kosovo—University Isa Boletini Mitrovica and International Business College Mitrovica—and two program country partners—South East European University, North Macedonia, and ISSBS, Slovenia—are part of the consortium.

4.2 Activities of QA sure project

In order to improve quality assurance, a number of initiatives were carried out at partner institutions in Kosovo in Makedonia. These included conducting research on needs analyses, establishing or reorganising quality assurance offices, conducting study visits in Slovenia and North Macedonia to share best practices, and providing training in both Kosovo and North Macedonia.

Three activities will be thoroughly explained in this chapter: a.) needs analyses completed in early 2024, b.) the creation or restructuring of quality assurance offices, and c.) trainings for academic staff, administrative staff, and students, and roundtables for external stakeholders delivered in summer & autumn of 2024.

a) Analyses of the needs of HE institutions in Kosovo and in Albania

As a key preparatory phase of the QA-SURE project, the needs analysis aimed to identify existing capacities and challenges in implementing quality assurance (QA) systems within partner institutions in Albania and Kosovo. The study was conducted between January and March 2024, using a combination of stakeholder surveys, benchmarking exercises, and institutional self-assessment, to assess the alignment of current practices with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015). This multi-layered diagnostic phase was essential in order to guarantee that later project activities, such as training and policy formulation, were firmly based on actual institutional needs

The needs analysis drew on three complementary sources (QaSure, 2024): the Needs Analysis Report (WP2.1), the Introduction to Benchmarking System (WP2.2), and the Report on Stakeholder Surveys (WP2.3). The methodology involved structured institutional self-assessments using ESG-aligned benchmarks and comprehensive surveys targeting students, academic and administrative staff, and external stakeholders.

Although all partner institutions had formal QA policies in place and made them publicly available, the level of execution and operational integration differed, according to the benchmarking exercises' findings. Program design and approval processes generally followed formal protocols, but in some cases, periodic review and updating mechanisms were underdeveloped. Student assessment practices were largely in place; however more work was required to guarantee that student input was methodically gathered, examined, and taken into consideration.

With average satisfaction scores above 4.0 on a 5-point scale, students at all institutions gave the general quality of instruction a positive rating. Students' opinions of support services, however, were more divided; in some institutions, especially the two in Kosovo, they gave access to career counselling, academic advice, and mental health support lower scores. Students also voiced doubts about the significance of their comments, indicating the need for evaluation procedures that are more open and flexible.

The significance of professional growth and more transparent processes for quality assurance were underlined by the faculty and staff. Many highlighted the lack of systematic training in QA processes and as well as the scarcity of chances to make significant contributions to institutional decision-making and program design. These worries were also expressed by administrative workers, especially with regard to the intricacy of documentation procedures and the requirement for improved communication between academic departments and QA units.

External stakeholders, including employers and alumni, provided valuable views on graduate readiness and university-industry cooperation. Although there were some good examples of partnerships, like advisory board involvement and internships, the majority of stakeholders observed that cooperation remained dispersed and frequently informal. Establishing more organised avenues for outside participation in curriculum development and graduation monitoring received a lot of praise.

Across all institutions, the needs analysis identified five recurring priorities. First, student support services need to be improved, particularly those pertaining to career development and academic counselling. Second, professors and staff require organised professional development opportunities, particularly in the areas of digital literacy, pedagogy, and quality assurance implementation. Third, organisations need to improve feedback systems to make sure that staff and student opinions result in fast and noticeable changes. Fourth, it is important to formally establish and carefully include external collaborations into QA procedures. Lastly, to increase effectiveness and institutional clarity, QA documentation and procedures should be standardised and made simpler.

The needs analysis stage gave a thorough and fact-based grasp of the partner universities' institutional QA capabilities. Although there are basic structures in place, it was discovered that additional alignment with ESG 2015 is required, especially in the areas of operational procedures, stakeholder involvement, and the strategic use of feedback. The creation of customised training, institutional development, and cross-border cooperation initiatives under the QA-SURE project's later phases was based on these findings.

b.) Establishment or reorganisation of quality assurance offices

The QA-SURE project prioritised the restructuring and enhancement of institutional Quality Assurance Offices (QAOs) as a foundational step in developing resilient internal QA systems. This activity was tailored to the unique needs and circumstances of the partner institutions rather than being implemented in a one-size-fits-all manner. The (re)structuring of QAOs was intended to deeply integrate quality assurance into institutional planning, monitoring, and improvement processes. It was positioned within a larger strategic development logic that was in line with ESG 2015 requirements. Three sources serve as the foundation for the overview of the creation or restructuring of quality assurance offices (QaSure, 2024): Establishment/Enhancement of Internal Quality Assurance Offices/Units (WP 3.1), Action and Sustainability Plan (WP 3.2), Report on quality assurance mechanisms (WP 3.3).

The project made it possible for the five HEIs to take a similar set of steps: first, QA offices were more thoroughly included into the institutions' main management and governance frameworks, enabling them to serve as focal points for coordinating efforts to improve academic and administrative quality. Second, new procedural manuals and job descriptions that detailed duties including internal reviews, KPI (Key Performance Indicators) tracking, and stakeholder discussions helped to clarify the tasks and scope of these offices.

Capacity-building initiatives, such as focused trainings and mentoring for university administration and QA personnel, were put in place to facilitate operationalisation. Additionally, computerised tools for gathering feedback, recording assessments, and producing reports were installed in the QA offices. By guaranteeing the participation of students, outside stakeholders, and non-academic staff in QA activities, universities simultaneously aimed to promote inclusivity.

One of the key achievements was the institutionalisation of medium- and long-term sustainability plans for QAOs. These plans comprised personnel development and resource allocation methods, regular review procedures, and organised performance monitoring. The QA-SURE project ultimately promoted a transition from dispersed quality initiatives to integrated QA frameworks supported by strategically located, professionally staffed QA offices.

c) Trainings & roundtables in Kosovo and in Albania

Trainings were implemented in August 2024 and in October 2024 in Kosovo and Albania by experts from North Macedonia and Slovenia. Trainings were conducted in Albania and Kosovo each term, and at least one training was held at each HE institution. Students, faculty, and administrative staff were the focus of the training. Roundtables were held for external stakeholders in the autumn during the same time as training.

Strengthening higher education institutions' (HEIs') internal quality assurance (QA) systems in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and fostering a long-lasting quality culture among the student, administrative, and academic communities were the primary goals of the program. The trainings were organised around the University Quality Assurance Strategies e-learning course, which was created by project partners to give a theoretical basis on curriculum development, research quality, teaching and learning evaluation, and quality frameworks. Based on the results of requirements evaluations, training and materials were developed (WP2).

In both countries, about 180 students, 50 academic personnel, and 50 administrative staff profited from the training. Twenty external stakeholders attended roundtables.

1. Administrative Staff

Administrative staff members' comprehension of internal QA frameworks and the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) was greatly enhanced by the training sessions. Sessions focused on their operational role in supporting institutional QA cycles, which includes handling student feedback data, keeping teaching and learning records, and organising accreditation documentation.

Administrative staff learned how to better assist academic departments in collecting and utilising performance indicators. They also discussed challenges in communicating with outside authorities and maintaining consistency in documents. Many participants perceived the training as directly enhancing institutional compliance with national and European standards, and many reported feeling more confident while performing QA-related documentation and coordination responsibilities.

2. Academic Staff

Academic staff were the primary beneficiaries of several in-depth workshops focused on ESG implementation, curriculum development, and improving teaching and research quality. The training introduced European QA models, peer review processes, and student-centred teaching strategies.

Participants reflected positively on sessions matching curriculum to labour market demands and effectively utilising student evaluations. Additionally, they learnt more about plagiarism detection software, KPIs for monitoring academic achievement, and publishing to raise awareness of research.

Importantly, the training stressed the dual roles of academic staff members: their active participation in institutional growth and their contribution to quality in teaching and research. Another important lesson for long-term progress was the adoption of structures for continual professional development.

3. Students

Students were trained to better understand their roles in QA structures, especially in terms of feedback mechanisms and representation in institutional QA bodies. They took engaged in conversations about

how ESG criteria, such as fair assessment, resource accessibility, and instructional quality, directly affect their academic experience.

The training encouraged students to participate actively in QA procedures rather than only as passive recipients. Participants were urged to work with staff in QA committees, offer helpful criticism, and participate in conversations about curriculum reform. Numerous students expressed feeling more empowered and knowing how their contributions could result in changes within the university.

4. External Stakeholders

Employers, alumni, and representatives of civil society participated in roundtables that emphasised the significance of their role in coordinating academic programs with the demands of the labour market and society. Stakeholders learnt how QA procedures may integrate outside perspectives into community involvement, graduate employability tracking, and program design.

Enhancing university reporting transparency (e.g., QA reports) and maintaining continuing collaborations between HEIs and outside parties were the main topics of discussion. Stronger mutual acknowledgement of shared duties in forming pertinent and superior educational outcomes resulted from the events.

By connecting academic endeavours with practical demands and promoting sustainable growth through better higher education practices, the roundtables gave universities a forum to interact meaningfully with their communities.

4.3 Project QA sure and its impact

Numerous quality assurance advancements have been noticed at HE institutions of Kosovo and Albania, also due to the QA-SURE project's achievements.

Luarasi University in Albania refined its program design and approval processes and established a new QA Policy Manual in line with ESG 2015. Along with improved student and alumni participation in QA procedures, transparent learning outcomes, student lifecycle management, and KPIs were implemented. Workshops for international QA capacity-building also improved accreditation preparedness.

By incorporating new processes (PMP, AMRP) and upgrading QA guides, POLIS University in Albania concentrated on improving its procedural architecture. Both a Financial Sustainability Plan and a Quality Action Plan were established. Furthermore, RASH-U:CRIS software and new equipment were purchased to fortify the digital infrastructure for QA monitoring.

The Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU) at Western Balkans University in Albania underwent a restructuring that involved foreign specialists, student representatives, and academic personnel. The institution introduced direct student participation in decision-making, improved QA openness, and created new tools in line with ESG 2015. Education, research, human resources, finance, and public relations are now all regularly evaluated.

International Business College Mitrovica (IBCM), Kosovo, finished institutional and program accreditation with Evalag and finalised its new QA procedures. New employees and technology, such as laptops and smart screens, were added to the QA Office. Important procedures were updated,

including international feedback loops, stakeholder evaluation forms, and QA guides. Additionally, QA was included into administrative functions including IT and library services.

QA-SURE was utilised as a catalyst by University Isa Boletini in Kosovo to enhance standards for syllabuses and increase institutional QA capability. Training, updating documentation, and creating feedback systems were the main priorities.

These improvements show a dedication to capacity growth, quality culture, and cross-border sustainable QA frameworks. They show how international cooperation may support accreditation objectives, encourage stakeholder involvement, and operationalise ESG principles—all of which help to ensure the region's higher education is resilient over the long run.

5. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The QA-SURE project underscores the significance of institution-level QA offices as engines of systemic change. Institutional QA offices offer operational continuity and immediate influence, in contrast to national QA policy reform, which frequently faces implementation gaps. Transparency, inclusivity, and evidence-based decision-making were improved by newly created or reorganised QA units at each of the five partner HEIs in Albania and Kosovo.

Going forward, these offices' viability hinges on ongoing investments in employee capacity, digital infrastructure, and stakeholder cooperation. Agile, well-integrated QA methods are necessary to meet emerging difficulties like AI in education, hybrid learning models, and changes in the labour market. HEIs can guarantee relevance, accountability, and conformity to European quality standards by integrating QA into the core of their institutional strategy..

The QA-SURE project offers a replicable model of internal QA transformation based on regional cooperation, participatory development, and ESG alignment. Comparative institutional case studies and the long-term development of QA offices in resource-constrained environments should be the focus of future research.

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