



ENQA OCCASIONAL PAPER

EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE OF RESEARCH AT HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

**Taking stock of the practices of European
quality assurance agencies**

ENQA WORKING GROUP ON THE QUALITY ASSURANCE OF RESEARCH
MARCH 2025

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European Association for
Quality Assurance in Higher Education



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*External quality assurance of research in higher education institutions.
Taking stock of the practices of European quality assurance agencies*

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Author:
Sophie Guillet, Hcéres

Contributors:
John Butler, EQ-Arts
Caroline Olsson, UKÄ
Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir, IAQA

Editors:
Anna Gover, ENQA
Luis Miranda, ENQA

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Foreword

As an association of quality assurance agencies whose work is rooted in the framework and tools of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), ENQA has accordingly focused much of its work on supporting the quality assurance of institutions' learning and teaching mission. Within institutions, research is intimately linked with the education process as it is widely used to inform learning and teaching.

It has long been recognised that within the diversity of agencies under our umbrella, there are many that also have a mandate for the external quality assurance (EQA) of research. This has led to calls from ENQA members to explore this topic in more detail, and I was therefore delighted when two members, the High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres, France) and the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) proposed a working group to do just that.

EQA presents a complex picture of interrelated frameworks, approaches and mandates and this report sheds some much-needed light on an area that has received little attention until now. It examines the diversity of interpretations that the concept of "quality assurance of research" can generate, and provides coherent definitions to facilitate common understanding between research management and governance experts, researchers and stakeholders.

It also provides an excellent basis for further discussion by setting out the current landscape and by identifying trends, challenges and successful practices. Even for agencies that do not have a specific mandate for the EQA of research, it provides some food for thought about how the links between the different university missions, which are increasingly interconnected, can be addressed by agencies in their work.

The report also comes as a timely contribution to the ongoing discussions about related research policies and practices: for example, the new approaches to research assessment, which is moving away from the traditional focus on quantitative success indicators, towards a more holistic and nuanced approach.

On behalf of everyone at ENQA, I would like to thank all the agencies and staff who have been members of the working group for dedicating their time and effort to this exercise. Special gratitude goes to Sophie Guillet (Hcéres) and Nina Bandmann and Caroline Olsson (UKÄ) for their hard work, enthusiasm and leadership in chairing the working group and coordinating the preparation of this report.

Final thanks go to all ENQA member and affiliate agencies who contributed to the outcomes by responding to the survey taking part in interviews, and participating in discussions.

I hope that this report provides inspiration and impetus for further discussion and peer learning, not just on specific approaches to the EQA of research, but also on how EQA in general can be fit-for-purpose in supporting institutions to meet academic and societal needs.

Douglas Blackstock,
ENQA President

Executive summary

As part of the activities of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), a working group of quality assurance (QA) agencies¹ investigated the topic of external quality assurance (EQA) of research in higher education institutions (HEIs), which is of growing interest in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Indeed, EQA of research carried out by agencies contributes to improving the quality of research, is in line with developments in QA of research across the higher education sector and aims to strengthen the link between teaching and learning and research. This study shows that there is limited available literature on the subject of EQA of research, although it is an area in which QA agencies are increasingly active. The EQA of research is overshadowed by literature on EQA of learning and teaching, and is often confused with research assessment.

This study has therefore adopted the concept of EQA of research as an all-embracing term referring to a regular process of reviewing (monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and enhancing) the quality of the research environment at HEIs, including its interrelation with the education and societal impact missions of HEIs. By shedding light on the activities of many agencies, this report presents the major trends related to EQA of research that were identified through the analysis of a survey and interview results and provides agencies with some reflective questions for developing or implementing EQA of research activities. Indeed, the results show that 17 out of the 59 agencies surveyed do not engage in EQA of research and for those willing to do so, they face two significant challenges: the lack of a supportive national framework and the reluctance of the HEIs.

Among the 42 agencies that reported to be already involved in the EQA of research, most explained that they lack international guidelines to carry out their practice, particularly as the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) hardly address research. By mapping the agencies' practices, this study found out that they mainly carry out the EQA of research at the institutional and programme levels and to a lesser extent at the level of the research units that are part of HEIs. This study also asked agencies about the topics they cover most when it comes to the EQA of research under three main themes:

- General aspects of research management and policy: agencies mostly address the organisation and management of research, research policy and strategy, and QA policy for research;
- Research environment: agencies mainly look at the research infrastructure, libraries and archives as well as the collaboration and mutual learning with other bodies engaged in the research;
- The link between research and learning and teaching: agencies mostly review the impact of research on the curricula and if researchers are involved in teaching activities.

These three themes related to the EQA of research are intersected by a transversal area of interest, which also happens to be a hot topic in the QA debate: namely the third mission or societal engagement of HEIs, which is addressed by most agencies already engaged in the EQA of research.

Testimonies from the agencies show that close collaboration with their stakeholders and integrative EQA approaches, consisting of embedding EQA of research in the overall review of HEIs were considered to be success factors.

¹ A3ES (Portugal), ACSUCYL (Castilla y León, Spain), ANVUR (Italy), AQ Austria, ANQA (Armenia), ASHE (Croatia), CTI (France), EQ-Arts, evalag (Germany) HAKA (Estonia), Hcéres (France), IAQA (Iceland), MAB (Hungary), NCEQE (Georgia), THEQC (Türkiye), UKÄ (Sweden)

The study identified three main types of challenges to the successful implementation of EQA of research:

- challenges related to the global environment of the EQA of research;
- challenges related to the national environment;
- challenges related to the practices of the agencies (training of experts, staff recruitment policy...).

Finally, while this report remains a mapping exercise providing agencies with examples of practice and reflective questions, it only lays the foundations of knowledge on the EQA of research. To be effective and impactful, discussions on the EQA of research should be broadened to include all key stakeholders in the EHEA and the European Research Area, and go beyond the scope of this report, which, as intended, focuses on EQA carried out by QA agencies.

I. Introduction

The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) regularly supports the establishment of working groups to explore topics of particular interest and relevance to its community. As the external quality assurance (EQA) of research has become a subject of increasing interest and importance in recent years, a group of European quality assurance (QA) agencies seized the opportunity provided by ENQA to undertake a study with the aim of informing stakeholders about the EQA of research activities and to share practices on a subject that is not widely discussed in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The main objective of this report is to shed light on activities carried out by a significant number of European agencies in relation to the EQA of research.

WHY THE EQA OF RESEARCH?

With its broader perspective on the research environment, the EQA of research seems to be an important pillar that can support and improve the quality of research, and complement research assessment procedures that focus on the quality of research output. It is also a matter of endorsing international efforts regarding the quality of the research environment, such as UNESCO's recommendation on science and scientific researchers, for which "Member States should encourage conditions that can deliver high-quality science in a responsible manner" (2018). Beyond the will to endorse international commitments, the working group study is a continuation of developments already undertaken by higher education institutions (HEIs), as 93% of European HEIs cover research in their internal quality assurance (IQA) procedures (EUA, 2023a), while there was limited knowledge on how many agencies cover research in their EQA procedures until a recent study² in the context of the QA-FIT (Quality Assurance Fit for the Future) project (Cirlan and Gover, 2024).

Higher education and research are indeed the missions common to most HEIs and a recent European University Association (EUA) study (2024a) shows that 56% of European HEIs consider education and research to be two equally important missions and 11% consider research to be more important, prioritising research over the delivery of taught courses. In addition, this EUA study shows that the third mission (often referred to as societal engagement) is becoming increasingly important for HEIs. The synergies between research and higher education are key to training enlightened students who can face the challenges of the 21st century by acquiring cross-disciplinary, scientific and artistic skills, developing critical thinking skills to counter the rise of fake news, cultivating up-to-date knowledge, understanding the changing needs of society, etc.

An effective research environment encourages the transmission of knowledge and fosters the impact of research on learning and teaching. Therefore, examining the EQA of research is also a means to explore how agencies can remain fit for purpose and aligned with the needs of HEIs, in a landscape where the primary focus of QA was placed on learning and teaching, reinforced by the success of the ESG as a common framework for this. The link between education and research is already emphasised as being a key feature of QA in three ESG guidelines: ESG 1.1, ESG 1.5 and ESG 1.9, as explained in detail in the literature review ([section 4.1](#)). However, as explained in the introduction to the ESG, guidelines are merely examples of implementation of the standard and are not as important as the standard itself.

IN WHAT CONTEXT IS THE EQA OF RESEARCH EMBEDDED?

This report has been developed within a particular European policy context which has influenced it and which it hopes to inform. From 2022 to 2024, ENQA coordinated the QA-FIT project, which gathered evidence and reflected on whether and how the ESG are perceived to limit the

² According to QA-FIT data, 39% of the responding agencies evaluate research at HEIs (Cirlan and Gover, 2024).

responsiveness of QA to trends and innovations in higher education, and whether and how there should be more room for the development of alternative approaches to QA. When considering the future of the ESG, the results show that 72% of European QA agencies are in favour of extending the ESG to research to a large extent or to some extent (Cirlan and Gover, 2024). Meanwhile, the African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ASG-QA), developed in 2018 and benchmarked against the ESG and other international QA frameworks, already cover research with a specific standard on “research and innovation” and one on “community engagement”, which is more often referred to as the third mission in Europe (Guillet *et al.*, 2023). In addition, the quality of research is an increasingly important issue in Europe, as has been demonstrated by the movements to reform research assessment and initiatives supported by the European Research Area (ERA), such as the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA). Unlike the EHEA, the ERA is not an intergovernmental initiative but a policy initiative of the European Union aimed at creating a unified and borderless market for research, innovation, and technology.

It is important to note that such endeavours are related to the evaluation of research output, also called research assessment, and are therefore not what we understand by QA of research, which focuses on the conditions and environment provided by HEIs to conduct research and link it to their other missions. However, research assessment and QA of research influence each other as EQA of research enhances the quality of research and can have an impact on research assessment. On the other hand, research needs a functioning environment that supports its dissemination to inform and impact on society and policymaking. The EHEA, steered through the Bologna Process, focuses on only one of the two pillars of education and research, namely learning and teaching, and there is limited dialogue between the EHEA and the ERA. However, already in 2003, the Bologna Process ministerial conference on “Realising the EHEA” mentioned that “The emerging EHEA will benefit from synergies with the ERA, thus strengthening the basis of the Europe of Knowledge” (Berlin Communiqué, 2003). In 2005, the ministers agreed that “the efforts to introduce structural change and improve the quality of teaching should not detract from the effort to strengthen research and innovation. We therefore emphasise the importance of research and research training in maintaining and improving the quality of and enhancing the competitiveness and attractiveness of the EHEA (Bergen Communiqué, 2005).” More recently, some initiatives (such as an *ad hoc* task force of the Bologna Follow-Up Group) have been developed to reflect on the synergies between the two areas. A commitment to further efforts was made by Ministers in the last Bologna Process Ministerial Communiqué (Tirana Communiqué, 2024a).

WHAT IS THE AIM OF THIS STUDY?

The study by this ENQA working group on the EQA of research relies on the hypothesis that QA agencies can play an important role in ensuring that HEIs create a research environment that supports education and research activities to have a greater impact on society. As there is limited existing literature on the topic, the working group only looked at the EQA of research at the level of HEIs. However, since the EQA of research and research assessment can sometimes be intertwined, the report will also mention some of these overlaps. Moreover, as this report is the first of its kind on this topic, the authors did not wish to identify “good practices” and make recommendations but rather to map the different activities related to the EQA of research carried out by European agencies, to give concrete examples and to pose some reflective questions to agencies interested in this topic.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The working group co-chairs (Sophie Guillet from Hcéres and Caroline Olsson from UKÄ) would like to thank all those who contributed to this project, including Nina Bandmann, the former co-chair from UKÄ, who stepped down six months before the publication of the study; all the members of the working group for their active participation and for being “critical friends”; ENQA for its support and

wisdom throughout the process, in particular its Project Officer, Luis Miranda, and Director, Anna Gover, for their valuable comments on the draft report; and all the agencies who responded to the survey, were interviewed or simply gave us feedback. This report is a collaborative effort and will hopefully address some of the needs related to the EQA of research in European agencies and serve the QA community.

2. Purpose and organisation of the working group

This working group was set up following the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the French High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres) and the Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ). The two agencies were already engaged in EQA of research and took the opportunity offered by ENQA to establish a working group with the purpose of providing a forum to discuss issues related to the EQA of research through a state-of-the-art exercise.

Coordinating a working group of 16 agencies from 15 European countries on such a complex and new topic required rigorous organisation and an inclusive process to produce a collective output that recognised the diversity of practices, agencies and cultures. This section presents the organisation of the working group and the steps that led to this report.

Hcéres and UKÄ submitted an application for a working group to ENQA in February 2023. They were then invited to present the objectives of the working group at the ENQA Members' Forum in Tbilisi (Georgia) in April 2023. This was an opportunity for the two agencies to raise interest among the agencies attending the event and to start collecting information on what they need in terms of EQA of research and what they could expect from such a working group. A call for participation in the working group was then sent by ENQA to its agencies in June 2023. ENQA undertook the selection process to ensure a geographical balance and provided the co-chairs with a list of 14 agencies with a diverse scope of missions, most of which were already engaged in the EQA of research. An ENQA project officer was also assigned to support the group's work.

The first kick-off meeting took place in September 2024, bringing together the 16 agencies, including the two co-chairs. The overall methodology adopted for this working group was based on two operational levels:

- The general meetings, where all the members of the working group met to discuss the progress and results of the working group as well as the main strategic orientations;
- The task forces, made up of a smaller number of agencies in order to have a more agile discussion format, which provided draft documents for the general meetings and carried out some specific activities. Five task forces were responsible for: conducting a literature review, drafting a survey, analysing the results of the survey, conducting interviews and drafting the final report. Agencies could join the different task forces on a voluntary basis.

Table 1. Members and organisation of the working group

| Agency | Country | Representative | Involvement in the working group |
|---|---------|--|--|
| Co-chairs | | | |
| High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres) | France | Sophie Guillet | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: survey, survey analysis, interview and report • Presentation of the study and discussion of the results at two ENQA events |
| Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) | Sweden | Nina Bandmann (until July 2024) and Caroline Olsson (from August 2024 onwards) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: survey, survey analysis, interview and report |

| Members of the working group | | | |
|--|----------------------|--|--|
| Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León (ACSUCYL) | Spain | Sonia Martín-Cerro | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings |
| National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) | Italy | Marilena Maniaci | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: survey and survey analysis • Presentation of the study and discussion of the results at one ENQA event |
| National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (ANQA) | Armenia | Varduhi Gyulazyan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings |
| Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) | Austria | Elisabeth Froschauer-Neuhauser | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: survey and survey analysis |
| Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) | Croatia | Mia Đikić | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings |
| Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES) | Portugal | Maria Teresa Restivo | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task force: survey |
| Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI) | France | Solange Pisarz | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task force: interview |
| Enhancing Quality in the Arts (EQ-Arts) | International agency | John Butler | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: survey, survey analysis and report • Language editing of the final report |
| Evaluation Agency of Baden-Württemberg (evalag) | Germany | Peter Mall | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings |
| Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) | Estonia | Maiki Udam (until July 2024) and Liaa Lauri (from August 2024 onwards) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task force: interview |
| Icelandic Agency for Quality Assurance (IAQA) | Iceland | Ólöf Gerður Sigfúsdóttir | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: survey and report • Presentation of the study and discussion of the results at one event |
| Hungarian Accreditation Committee (MAB) | Hungary | Valéria Csépe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: literature review and interview |
| National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) | Georgia | Lasha Macharashvili | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General meetings • Task forces: literature review, survey and survey analysis |

Turkish Higher Education
Quality Council
(THEQC)

Türkiye

Meryem Aysegul
Kozak Çakır

• General meetings

The 18-month timeframe given to this working group was punctuated by five main steps steered by the five task forces:

- Step 1: kick-off and launch of the survey and literature review task forces (September 2023 - January 2024). While the survey task force focused on developing a draft survey to be tested and discussed with the full working group before its launch in January 2024, the literature review task force began its work in September 2023 and adjusted the scope of its activities to meet the ongoing needs of the working group until August 2024.
- Step 2: survey dissemination (January-February 2024).
- Step 3: analysis of the survey results (March-April 2024).
- Step 4: interviews (May-August 2024).
- Step 5: drafting of the final report (September 2024 - January 2025). The final report was also sent for factual verification to the agencies whose practices were cited as examples in the report.
- Step 6: peer review of the final report by the ENQA Secretariat (January- February 2025).

3. Methodology of the study

3.1. CONCEPTUAL CONSIDERATIONS

European QA agencies are both the recipients and stakeholders of this 18-month project, which was inspired by action research methodology (Cohen *et al.*, 2017). The report aims to provide a map of existing practices in EQA of research, complemented by some specific case studies for inspiration. The topic of EQA of research is of particular interest and relevance to ENQA members, which were at the same time consulted throughout this project: a sample of agencies participated in the working group, another sample was interviewed and agencies from the EHEA were surveyed.

This approach gave the working group more flexibility and adaptability, which was useful to reorient the project as the working group started from scratch. As there was limited existing overarching or comparative knowledge on the EQA of research on which to base the project, it quickly became essential to carry out a literature review on the subject. The literature review was an important milestone as it formalised the lack of clear concepts to define the EQA activities of agencies covering research and made it inevitable to coin the term “EQA of research.”

In particular, the distinction between EQA of research and research assessment was central to this study as the two can be intertwined and the concept of research assessment can be misused to speak of the EQA of research. Indeed, the working group struggled to overcome semantic issues related to the vocabulary of research-related activities covered by agencies. These semantic issues may also have been exacerbated by the fact that the agencies involved in the work of this group operate in different cultural and non-English speaking national contexts. Defining the concept of “EQA of research” therefore seemed to be a way of overcoming translation and semantic issues as the commonality of the agencies involved in ENQA’s activities is the conduct of EQA activities (primarily focused on learning and teaching, in line with the ESG). The literature review section will explore the distinction between EQA of research and research assessment.

3.2. GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Given these considerations, it quickly became necessary to develop a glossary of the key concepts used in this study. These were fine-tuned over the course of the group's activities, after gathering stakeholder feedback and reviewing the literature. Overall, we had a broad and inclusive definition of research, encompassing all types of research, including fundamental, applied, artistic, as well as innovation and knowledge transfer, in line with the continuum defined by the EUA (2023b). The final glossary is presented below.

QA of research: An all-embracing term that refers to a regular process of reviewing (monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and enhancing) the quality of the research environment at HEIs, including its interrelation with the education and societal impact missions of HEIs. QA of research can be both internal (managed by the HEI) and external (managed by an external organisation, most often a QA agency).

Research assessment: The process of evaluating the quality of research output.

Research environment: Culture, behaviours, policies, procedures and support systems that help create excellent research practice and output, resulting in research that is inclusive and ethical in design and practice, and that engages with relevant community stakeholders.

Research integrity: Research integrity [...] encompasses the basic responsibility of the research community to formulate the principles of research, to define the criteria for proper research behaviour, to maximise the quality, reliability, and robustness of research and its

results, and to respond adequately to threats to, or violations of, good research practices. (ALLEA, 2023)

Research policy: An umbrella term referring to a higher education institution's mission and strategy for research and including specific key objectives broken down into a range of activities to be undertaken and the resources/infrastructure (office, human, financial and material) to be provided to support the achievement of these objectives.

Research organisation: An independent non-university organisation, irrespective of its legal status (public or private) or mode of funding, whose main mission is to carry out basic and/or applied research.

Research unit: A structure that brings together a group of researchers, often from the same higher education institution, who work together on research related to the same or cross-disciplinary projects or topics. Such a structure, set up to provide a working environment for researchers, may also be called a "research group" or "laboratory."

Four key statements and documents related to research assessment, the use of which could be extended to QA of research, were also briefly summarised and included in the introduction to the survey. They are available in the appendix ([p. 63](#)).

3.3. DATA COLLECTION

Data was collected using four different methods in order to build a horizontal web of information and identify general trends through a survey, which was then complemented by in-depth interviews and a workshop to gain a deeper understanding of the practices and visions from a sample of selected agencies. The literature review also provided the group with more conceptual knowledge that has underpinned the rest of the work.

3.3.1. Literature review

The literature review task force considered both scientific and grey literature. Sources that were searched included Web of Science, Scopus and Science Direct for publications and websites such as ENQA, EUA, OECD, CoARA and QA agencies for manuals, evaluation practices, concepts related to the EQA of research, guidelines, reviews and position papers. The literature review included publications, position papers, guidelines and project abstracts that, after full-text review, covered the following aspects "research assessment/evaluation"; "QA of research"; "guidelines for advanced assessment and evaluation." The initial database search identified very few non-duplicates after abstract screening. The task force used a narrative synthesis of the results of the selected publications.

However, an in-depth and detailed literature review was hampered by the limited number of existing publications on the EQA of research. The search also revealed a lack of focus on QA of research in the literature, which is mainly concerned with general issues or aspects related to learning and teaching in higher education, often neglecting research or research-based education.

3.3.2. Survey

The design of the survey required decisions about the scope of the study. After discussions within the working group, it was decided to focus on the EQA of research at HEIs. Although some agencies carry out EQA procedures for national research organisations, these seemed too specific and less relevant for the purpose of this study. The study thus took a modest approach and looked only at the EQA of research in the different elements that make up HEIs: the institution itself, its programmes and its research units. The choice of questions within the survey was driven by a desire to learn more about institutional practices. Respondents were provided with a glossary of key terms.

The survey was divided into three main sections, containing both closed and open-ended questions, in order to balance extrapolation and testimonials:

- Profile of the respondent (open to all agencies).
- Profile of the agency (open to all agencies). This section aimed to provide a brief identity card of the agencies and to learn more about their missions, scope of activities and involvement in EQA of research. Agencies were asked to specify whether they were involved in EQA of research in HEIs. It was decided to ask such a yes/no question on a declarative basis, rather than to analyse the agencies' answers and leave it to the working group to decide whether agencies were or were not involved in QA of research, in order to avoid misinterpretation and see how agencies endorse the concept of EQA of research.
- In the third section, agencies that declared that they undertook EQA of research were asked to explain what research-related content they cover in their standards and guidelines for HEIs, programmes and research units under three overarching themes:
 1. general aspects of research management and policy,
 2. the research environment,
 3. the link between research and higher education.
- Concluding section (open to all agencies). The conclusion provided an opportunity for agencies to state how they would like to see the future of the EQA of research.

The survey link was emailed by ENQA to all its members and affiliates that are QA agencies located in Europe and EHEA³, and was open from 19 January to 29 February 2024. 59 agencies from 34 countries and with very diverse scopes and missions (see Figure 1) replied to the survey. Nine of the responding agencies were from Spain and six were from Germany.

Figure 1. A diversity of responding agencies operating in different settings



3.3.3. Interviews

The working group used the results of the survey to identify a sample of agencies engaged in the EQA of research whose practices would be interesting to explore and could serve as examples in this report. Such agencies were interviewed individually. The working group also explored the views of the agencies that said they were not engaged in the EQA of research. They were interviewed in a

³ ENQA members are ESG-compliant QA agencies based in the EHEA. The survey additionally targeted certain ENQA affiliate QA agencies that are based in geographical Europe and may or may not be compliant with the ESG. Agencies based in Russia were not included.

focus group to enable them to discuss with agencies in the same situation as themselves. All interviewees were required to sign a consent form. The interviews were conducted online, recorded and transcribed. The interviewees were then asked to check the transcription.

As regards the focus group, all the 17 agencies that declared not being engaged in the EQA of research were contacted to set up a date for an interview. Eight answered and were interviewed:

- Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (A3ES, Portugal)
- Accreditation Agency in Health and Social Sciences (AHPGS, Germany)
- Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (AQAS, Germany)
- Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra (AQUA)
- Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders (NVAO, Belgium)
- Polish Accreditation Committee (PKA)
- Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (SAAHE)
- Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (SKVC, Lithuania)

Twelve agencies already engaged in the EQA of research were selected for interview. The working group wanted to take into account the diversity of agencies and practices in their interviews and therefore selected the agencies according to five main parameters:

- Public and private agencies
- National or international mandate
- Geographical distribution
- Type of procedures for the EQA of research (institutional, programme, research units)

The interviews were semi-structured and a list of key general questions about the national framework, methodology, content, examples of challenges and success stories, and views on the future of the EQA of research was asked in each interview. It provided a common basis for trend analysis. The interviewer was tasked with directing the questions towards a focus that was specific to the selected agency.

Table 2. List of agencies individually interviewed

| Agency interviewed | Country | Focus of the interview |
|--|---------------|--|
| Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León (ACSUCYL) | Spain | Evaluation of research units and university research institutes |
| National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (ANVUR) | Italy | General overview of EQA of research and research assessment procedures |
| Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ Austria) | Austria | QA of research-based learning as a common ground to all procedures (audit, institutional accreditation, programme accreditation) |
| Enhancing Quality in the Arts (EQ-Arts) and Music | International | Specificities of the EQA of research in the field of arts |

| | | |
|---|---------|--|
| Quality Enhancement (MusiQuE) (simultaneously) | | |
| Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) (private agency) | Germany | Research-based learning and the EQA of research in the institutional review |
| Estonian Quality Agency for Education (HAKA) | Estonia | EQA of research in institutional reviews and links between institutional and programmes reviews |
| High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (Hcéres) | France | “Integrated evaluation process” and embeddedness of the EQA of research units in institutional reviews |
| Kosovo Accreditation Agency (KAA) (ENQA affiliate) | Kosovo | Research-based learning and the EQA of research in the institutional review |
| Hungarian Accreditation Committee (MAB) | Hungary | EQA of research in doctoral schools and links with other procedures |
| National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (NCEQE) | Georgia | EQA of “research capacity” at institutional and programme level |
| Swedish Higher Education Authority (UKÄ) | Sweden | Participatory process to develop standards for the EQA of research and importance of gender equality and collaboration with the community in the EQA of research |

3.3.4. Workshop

The working group was invited to present the preliminary results of its report in a plenary session at the ENQA General Assembly in Malta on 23-25 October 2024. This plenary session was followed by the facilitation of two one-hour breakout sessions organised in a workshop format, with about 35 participating agencies in total. This was an opportunity to present some challenges and success stories in the implementation of the EQA of research identified by the working group before giving the floor to the participants to discuss the implementation of the EQA of research in practice in a fishbowl activity. The fishbowl is a useful technique to spark inclusive debate and enable peer learning between agencies. The responses were used as data in this report. The session was open to all agencies, whether or not they were already engaged in the EQA of research.

3.4. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study faced several challenges, not all of which were overcome, which constitute some of its limitations. First, it has empirical constraints due to the fact that the agencies surveyed and interviewed have very different missions and practices. Indeed, there is little common ground, and it was sometimes difficult to identify major trends. As explained above, the EHEA has been developed mainly around the theme of learning and teaching, which has proved useful in providing a European basis for discussion, but research themes are not covered by this.

Second, this study has analytical limitations. In analysing the responses to the survey and in discussions with agencies, the working group identified some semantic, philosophical or political issues with the concept of EQA of research. There may also have been some differences in how respondents interpreted the questions. Some agencies that we would believe as being involved the EQA of research, based on their publicly available standards and guidelines, stated that they were not. Other agencies we talked to stated that although they are engaged in the EQA of research through research-based learning and teaching, they did not feel comfortable saying that they are engaged in the EQA of research because it is a sensitive political issue in their national context. The key figures presented in the report should therefore be read cautiously, bearing in mind that they have been collected on a self-reporting basis.

It is also important to note that this study only presents the activities and views of QA agencies and does not take into account those of other stakeholders such as HEIs, students or ministries.

4. Literature review

4.1. THE TOPIC OF RESEARCH IN THE EHEA FRAMEWORKS FOR QA OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The Bologna Process has focused on the introduction of European standards for QA in higher education since the signing of the Bologna Declaration in 1999, which endorsed cooperation in QA at European level, with the prospect of developing common QA criteria. These intentions became more concrete in the Berlin Communiqué of 2003, when ministers committed to developing European standards by 2005, together with requirements for national QA systems, including:

- A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved
- Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results
- A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures
- International participation, cooperation and networking

The first ESG were introduced in 2005 and were revised to their current form in 2015. The ESG 2005 intentionally omitted the topic of research from their scope, placing focus on the three cycles of higher education instead. The focus on learning and teaching was maintained in their revision, as the ESG 2015 also paid little attention to the topic of research. However, research is mentioned in the ESG 2015 when setting the context: "The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation" and in the guidelines of three standards to emphasise the importance of the link between higher education and research:

- Guideline ESG 1.1. "Quality assurance policies are most effective when they reflect the relationship between research and learning & teaching"
- Guideline ESG 1.5. HEIs provide a supportive environment that "encourages scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research"
- Guideline ESG 1.9. Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes "include the evaluation of the content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline thus ensuring that the programme is up to date"

In the ESG, guidelines are not binding (unlike the standards) and instead "set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by those involved in quality assurance."

In parallel with the development of the ESG, the Salzburg Principles (2005) and the Salzburg II Recommendations (2010), with their focus on doctoral education, covered some aspects of the EQA of research, mainly by endorsing the need for separate QA mechanisms for doctoral studies, due to their unique nature and conceptual support for the development of quality research at the doctoral level. However, as the doctorate is only one part of the three cycles of higher education within the Bologna Process, the impact of the Salzburg Principles on research per se have been very limited at best, as no other initiatives directly related to research could be located within the higher education QA discourse.

4.2. QA OF RESEARCH BY EUROPEAN QA AGENCIES

Although research is not addressed in the context of the Bologna Process, there is considerable evidence that it remains part of national higher education and QA systems across Europe. A 2023 EUA report, developed as part of the QA-FIT project (EUA, 2023a), includes feedback from 260 HEIs in more than 40 countries, with most respondents indicating that research is integrated into the

external QA mechanisms in their national contexts. While 35% consider it is integrated “to some extent,” 53% of respondents report research is integrated in EQA “to a large extent.” In addition to these findings, most of the respondents also indicated that QA agencies are the main stakeholders providing guidance on the EQA of research, and 80% of them agreed with the idea of including research-related criteria in the next revision of the ESG. Such findings are corroborated by the results of the QA-FIT study on agencies’ perspectives (Cirlan and Gover, 2024) showing that 91% of agencies in the EHEA evaluate whether the IQA system of the HEIs addresses research.

Already in 2019, another EUA report (EUA, 2019) pointed out that QA offices are among the most important actors in terms of HEIs' internal measures for research, while Alzafari and Ursin (2019), in their study of up to 300 respondents representing HEIs from 20 European countries, point to the existence of institutional measures for QA of research. That study outlines that the QA mechanisms related to the research mission within the institutions are also widely implemented by the HEIs, although they are less important for the HEIs than those related to learning and teaching (Alzafari and Ursin 2019).

4.3. A CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF QA OF RESEARCH

Despite the apparent implementation of mechanisms for the EQA of research by some QA agencies in Europe, little to no attention has been paid to this issue either by policy makers and European agencies or by academics, to the extent that no agreed definition of QA of research can be found in the literature. Lee Harvey (2004-2024), highlighting the importance of research in relation to overall QA in higher education, defines quality management as a “process, supported by policies and systems, used by an institution to maintain and enhance the quality of education experienced by its students and of the research undertaken by its staff.” However, a previous comprehensive review published in 2010 also noted that “little quality assurance has been directed at research in the majority of HEIs and this is reflected in the paucity of articles directly addressing research quality” (Harvey and Williams, 2010b). Since then, the situation seems to have evolved, at least in the EHEA, given that most HEIs cover research in their IQA system, as mentioned in the previous section. However, there are no general Europe-wide QA standards for research carried out within HEIs that are used by agencies in external reviews. Given the absence of such general standards, HEIs mostly use those of their national agency to get guidance on QA of research (EUA, 2023a). Ejigu Berhane (2023), who focuses more on this issue, defines QA of research as “the care and control with which research has been conducted.” This definition is rather simple and therefore not broadly shared by academics for whom QA of research is more complex and is not simply equal to the oversight and control of research, such as the traditional code of conduct, that is regulated by different research fields including the research ethics requirements (WHO, 2019).

Therefore, the working group came up with a new definition of QA of research as an all-embracing term that refers to a regular process of reviewing (monitoring, guaranteeing, maintaining, and enhancing) the quality of the research environment at HEIs. As we believe that all three missions of HEIs should be interlinked, the quality of the research environment should support the learning and teaching activities and reinforce the societal impact of HEIs. QA of research can be both internal (managed by the HEI) and external (managed by an external organisation, in most cases a QA agency). This definition was inspired by UNESCO’s definition of QA (Vlăsceanu and Grünberg, 2007) and adapted to research. By focusing on the research environment, the definition of EQA of research coined in this study has been able to encompass a continuum of activities that are affected by the research environment of HEIs: learning and teaching, the general aspects of research management and policy, and the research units of HEIs.

4.4. DISENTANGLING THE QA OF RESEARCH FROM OTHER RELATED PROCEDURES

It is noteworthy that the scarcity of academic publications is also accompanied by the vague and confusing wording of the topic in the available papers, which further complicates the accumulation of literature on this topic, and entangles QA of research with other related procedures, for example, "quality management of research, development and innovation activities" (Kajaste, 2018) or "quality in scholarly knowledge production" (Starkey *et al.*, 2022).

Although three decades have passed since the first fiery debates about the quality of teaching and research, the polarisation has not changed and the QA of research and QA of learning and teaching are still seen in the literature as conflicting rather than complementary activities. In these debates, the leading argument (Gibbs, 1995) stated that the EQA of research does not automatically produce quality in teaching. However, as Johnston (1996) pointed out, this is difficult to understand given that the academic staff's own research supported by sufficiently good internal QA of research may contribute to the quality of teaching delivered by teams and individuals, rather than QA per se changing it. Gibbs (1995) also believed that academics already know how to support quality in their research, and that in this way, QA of research is not needed. However, at least three processes intertwine in this assertion: the achievement of quality research, research assessment and the undefined QA of research. Other debates have tended to fully separate QA of research and QA of higher education as summarised in a 2005 OECD report, mainly to facilitate the processes, although it was recognised that research and higher education influence each other.

In addition, research assessment (also known as research evaluation) is becoming an increasingly important issue, particularly in the midst of movements to reform research assessment, which aim to take better account of qualitative indicators and move away from a sole reliance on quantitative indicators. Some of the most notable of these are the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA, 2012), the Leiden Manifesto (Hicks *et al.*, 2015), the Frascati Manual (OECD, 2015) and, particularly important for the European context, the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) and the Agreement on Reforming Research Assessment (2022). However, misunderstandings about QA of research arise from the lack of a clear distinction between research assessment and the EQA of research. It is very important to distinguish between the two as research assessment evaluates research output and focuses on research quality and performance, with the latter dominating the academic discourse on assessment and evaluation in research.

However, like EQA in higher education, research assessment is generally seen as an outcome of wider New Public Management-type reforms, with initiatives such as the Research Assessment Exercise launched in the UK in the 1980s, and is often linked to research funding (Hicks, 2012; Marques *et al.*, 2017; Adams *et al.*, 2022). Due to the links with funding, QA agencies can be seen as less important actors in research assessment, which is clearly the case in initiatives such as CoARA. It is also worth noting that a few QA agencies have a mandate to carry out research assessment, but, in most cases, it is not part of their mission and falls within the remit of another body. It is also important to note that currently more than ten QA agencies across Europe are CoARA signatories, which can be seen as an indicator of the desire of agencies to be at least informed about, and for some to be involved to some extent in, research assessment.

The main impetus of the research assessment movement is to reduce the extreme reliance on quantitative metrics, which are perceived as detrimental by a wide range of stakeholders and institutions, and to support more diversified approaches to evaluation, focusing on more intensive use of qualitative measures and peer review (Rushforth and Hammarfelt, 2023). The EUA Research and Innovation Agenda for 2027 considers responsible research assessment as one of the key development directions to achieve its priorities (EUA, 2023b).

The lack of focus on QA of research may be the reason why Tia Loukkola (2020), in the EUA Expert Voices, called for more consistent approaches to this issue within European higher education, while Giller (2023), in his report prepared for the Irish QA agency (QQI), discussed research as a novelty within the EQA spectrum and called for the development of QA practices including research in Ireland with close consideration of contemporary movements for research assessment reforms.

It is noteworthy that within these discussions, the EQA of research and research assessment are often entangled, and research assessment is often discussed as a measure for the EQA of research. Macharashvili (2024), in his comparative analysis of the mechanisms for the EQA of research used by agencies in Finland, Italy and Georgia, points to the similar perception of the EQA of research by key stakeholders, namely the QA agencies and ministries in charge of higher education. He observed a dual perspective of EQA of research, whereby it is linked to research assessment metrics. EQA of research and research assessment are seen as two sides of the same coin, with the former concentrating mostly on the evaluation of research capacity, research policy and other processes that ensure an effective research environment within the HEIs, while the latter is mostly concerned with the evaluation of actual research output. EQA of research is part of the total quality management (TQM) process and research assessment is a fully independent measure of results achieved in research, development and innovation.

4.5. CONCLUSION OF THE LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted above, the topic of the EQA of research has been rather understudied within higher education scholarship. As with policy initiatives, the academic literature on the EQA has been dominated by topics related to learning and teaching, with the EQA of research receiving little attention (Kajaste, 2018; Starkey *et al.*, 2022; Harvey and Williams, 2010a).

Overall, the extremely limited number of sources on the EQA of research, both from a policy and an academic perspective, does not allow any specific conclusions to be drawn on the state of the art in this area. Rather, it points to a lack of research and of consistent approaches at the European level. There is a need for systematic research on the origins, trends, standards and future possibilities and expectations of the EQA of research in Europe and beyond. This report aims to lay the foundations and provide a first mapping and analysis of agencies' practices in EQA of research.

5. Study results

This section presents the results of the study carried out as described in the previous sections. It is divided into two sub-sections, looking at the main trends in the EQA of research (carried out by European agencies) and at some of the challenges and success stories identified by agencies. After presenting the main points, each sub-section will provide concrete case examples to illustrate how the EQA of research is implemented in practice.

5.1. MAJOR TRENDS IN THE EQA OF RESEARCH

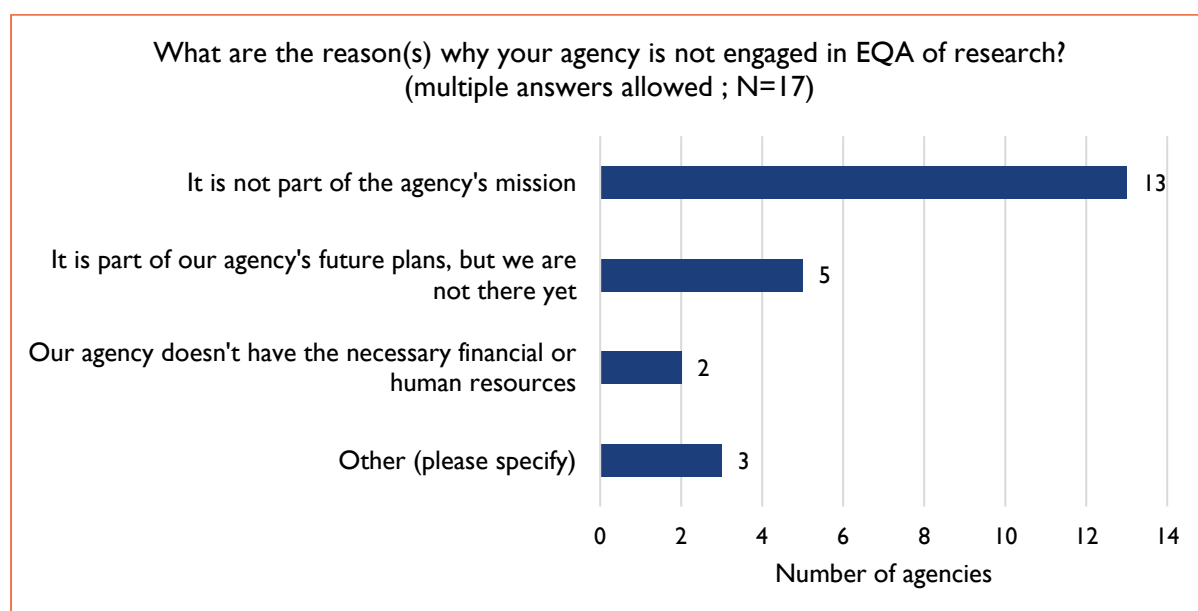
This first sub-section will give a broad picture of the scope of the EQA of research carried out by agencies before looking at the tools and procedures they use.

5.1.1. The broad picture: the scope of EQA of research

When agencies were asked whether they carried out EQA of research activities, as defined in the glossary, 42 out of 59 stated so. The remaining 17 agencies declared that they did not carry out EQA of research activities.

The survey data and the focus group with the agencies not engaged in the EQA of research were useful in understanding the reasons why they have not been involved in such activities to date and what would be needed by those interested in the topic to develop the EQA of research. As shown in Figure 2, 13 of the 17 agencies explain that they do not carry out EQA of research because it is not part of their mission, while five plan to develop it in the future. It is worth noting, however, that many of these 17 agencies that state that they do not carry out the EQA of research do address the link between learning and teaching and research in their standards and guidelines. This link was included in the definition of the EQA of research used in this study as it is considered part of the research environment.

Figure 2. Reasons for not engaging in the EQA of research



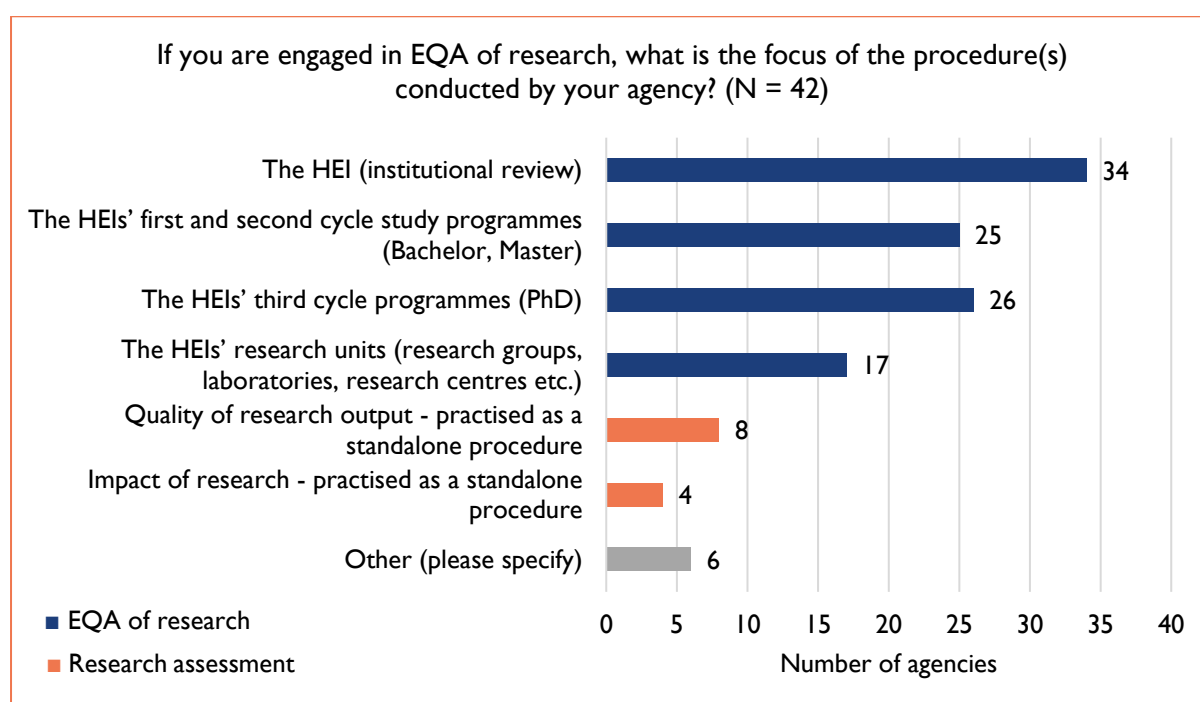
The focus group with eight of the 17 agencies not engaged in the EQA of research revealed two main barriers to further engagement in these activities. First, most of the agencies did not have a national framework that supported, mandated or incentivised them to undertake the EQA of research. However, in the majority of the countries of these agencies, there was another body responsible for research assessment whose reports could in some cases inform the agency's EQA activities (e.g.

Portugal, Lithuania) and compensate for an insufficiently supportive framework. Indeed, some countries suffer from the absence of any research law and few references to research in the higher education law (e.g. Andorra), while others have a fragmented system where the research falls into the remit of another body (e.g. Poland, Germany). The national frameworks therefore do not provide a specific mandate or incentive for agencies to engage in the EQA of research. In Germany, the QA system has excluded research from the scope of some agencies because 30 years ago universities were seen as focusing too much on research at the expense of learning and teaching, which required QA.

The second obstacle to the development of the EQA of research is related to the perception of such procedures by the HEI community. In two countries, the QA agency reported that HEIs were clearly reluctant to be reviewed on research aspects, even though the agency was willing to do so, because they feared that it might influence the funding they received. In this case, there seems to be a confusion between the role of the EQA of research and research assessment, which is more often linked to funding allocation, as explained in the literature review. As a result, some HEIs believe that there is a reputational and financial risk in being reviewed on their IQA of research activities, whereas IQA of learning and teaching would not be considered a problem.

As regards the 42 agencies that carry out EQA of research in HEIs, most of them (34) report that they do so at institutional level and more than half at the level of third-cycle programmes (26) and first and second-cycle programmes (25). Agencies can carry out EQA of research at more than one of these levels. 17 agencies also indicate that they review research units, either as a stand-alone procedure or as part of an institutional review. As shown in Figure 3, some agencies also carry out research assessment: eight assess the quality of research output through a stand-alone procedure and four assess the impact of research. In addition, some Spanish agencies also mentioned that they are involved in other types of evaluation of research-related activities: e.g. assessment of academic staff for the purposes of career progression/promotion (e.g. ANECA, Unibasq), grants and research projects (e.g. AQUIB). Research assessment and these last two examples of evaluation of research-related activities carried out by agencies are not detailed in this report as they go beyond the scope of the EQA of research.

Figure 3. Scope of EQA of research procedures



ANVUR (National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes, Italy) seems to be one of the few exceptions in the European landscape as it is responsible for both the EQA of research and research assessment.

Box I. The Italian specificity: ANVUR 's dual mission to carry out the EQA of research and research assessment

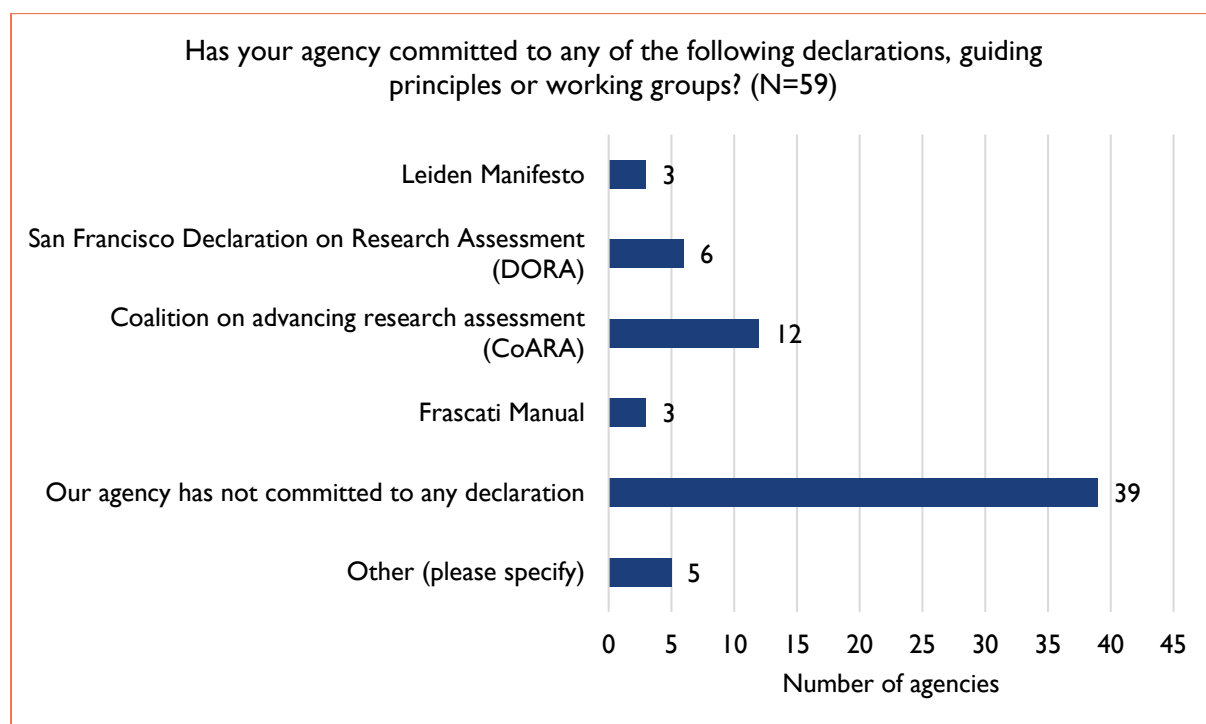
ANVUR is engaged in both the EQA of research and the evaluation of research results for the allocation of public funding.

The EQA of research and impact activities is conducted as part of the periodic accreditation of universities and their programmes, including PhD programmes, carried out in a five-year cycle and called AVA (*Autovalutazione, Valutazione e Accreditamento*). Universities are reviewed on their ability to define, formalise, and implement a clear, coherent public vision for the quality of teaching, research, societal impact, and institutional activities, following the steps set out in ESG standards 2.3 (self-assessment, external assessment, reporting, and follow-up). Regarding research, universities are specifically reviewed on their ability to align the strategies of their departments with the main goals set at institutional level, to establish systems for planning, monitoring, and improvement, and to publicly define criteria for resource allocation.

Every five years, ANVUR also conducts a comprehensive research assessment (VQR - *Valutazione della qualità della ricerca*) through a peer review process, where groups of experts assess articles, books, and other contributions, along with selected dissemination projects. The objective is to promote the improvement of research quality in the assessed institutions and allocate performance-based funding to the Italian university system. The VQR also has a QA component, as it separately assesses the research carried out by newly recruited or promoted researchers, thereby indirectly reviewing the institutional recruitment policies.

Although not the main focus of this study, the survey results show that nine agencies carry out the EQA of research in national research organisations that are not part of an HEI. Of these nine agencies, two are entitled to review research organisations abroad (ASHE, Hcéres) and one is international and carries out the EQA of research organisations in the field of music (MusiQuE). However, where the agency is not responsible for such reviews, this in many cases seems to fall under the remit of the National Research Councils (e.g. Finland, Ireland, Lithuania) or the Academies of Science (Slovakia). In other countries, reviews of research organisations are carried out at the initiative of the government or ministry and are based on a call for tender (e.g. Latvia, Switzerland). Finally, some countries rely on ad hoc institutions to review research organisations (e.g. Poland, Serbia).

Whether agencies are already engaged in the EQA of research or not, there appears to be a lack of awareness of available international guiding principles in relation to research, which could be used as inspiration for the EQA of research. Figure 4 shows that most agencies (39) have not committed to any of the declarations related to research assessment, but whose content can be partly extended to the EQA of research. Only 12 agencies joined the CoARA, six referred to the DORA, three to the Frascati Manual and three others to the Leiden Manifesto. It is interesting to note, however, that five of the 17 agencies that do not engage in the EQA of research have committed to or follow the principles of one of these documents.

Figure 4. Agencies' commitment to general guiding principles on research assessment

In the end, it seems that the most important factor influencing the involvement of agencies in the EQA of research is the existence of a supportive national framework, the absence of which was seen as an obstacle by the agencies not engaged in the EQA of research, while it was seen as an enabler by most of the agencies already involved in the EQA of research interviewed. The EQA of research is therefore highly country specific. The next section focuses on the tools, mainly standards and guidelines, used by the agencies to carry out their EQA of research activities for institutional reviews, programme reviews (from the first to the third cycle) and reviews of research units.

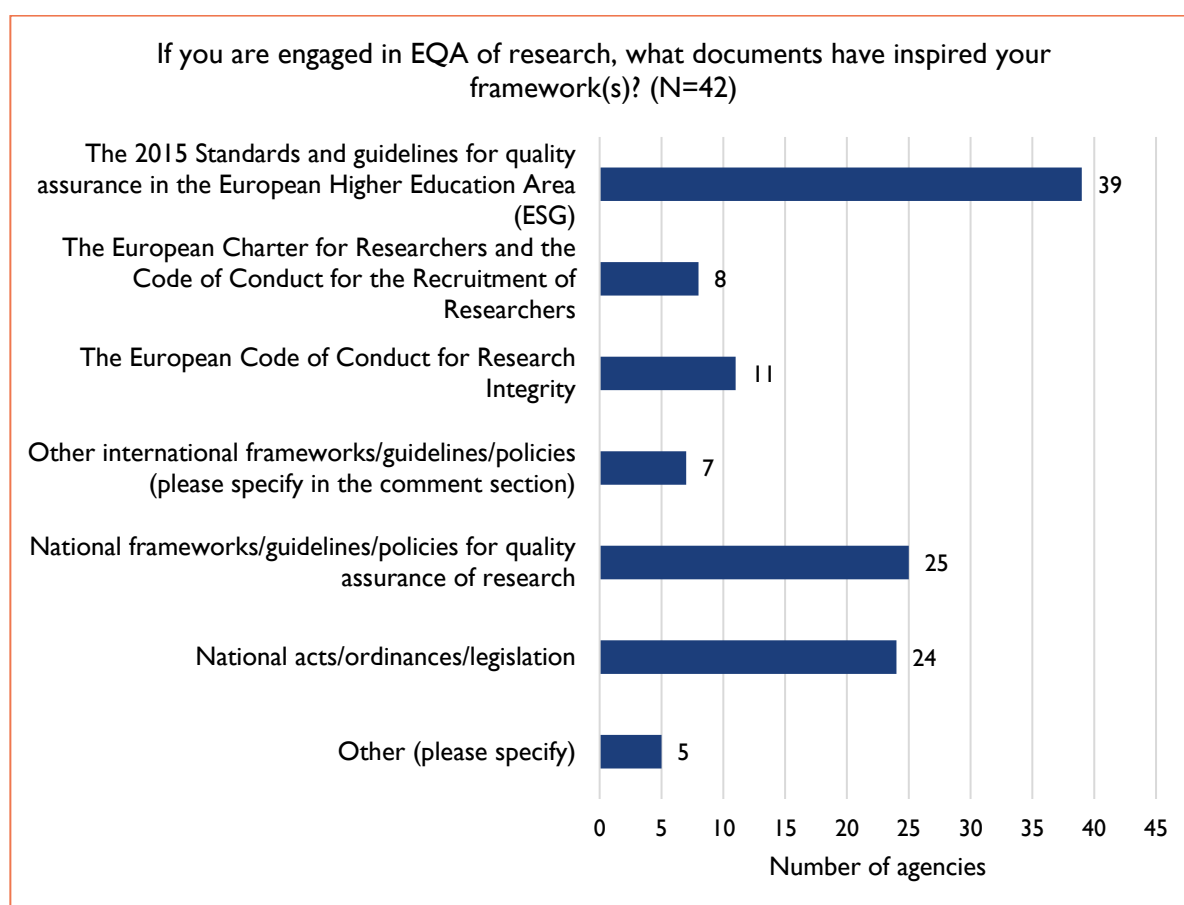
5.1.2. The tools for EQA of research

Most agencies use the same set of standards and guidelines for their EQA procedures that include research. This means that the EQA of research is embedded in their “traditional” practice of EQA of learning and teaching, which in most cases is an institutional review. On the other hand, only the agencies having a wide scope of activities use a different set of standards and guidelines that they adapt to the type of review (e.g., institutional, third cycle, research units, etc.).

In order to develop their EQA of research tools, almost all agencies (39 out of 42) used the ESG, 25 also used their national frameworks, guidelines or policies for the EQA of research, while 24 relied on national laws, ordinances or other types of legislation, as shown in Figure 5. While the ESG are rather used to provide guidance on the general procedures to follow for EQA, these data confirm the main findings of the previous sub-section: national frameworks play an important role in the EQA of research. Beyond the ESG, which have little focus on research, a dozen of the agencies used other European guidelines such as the code of conduct for research integrity (ALLEA, 2023) and the Charter for researchers and the Code of conduct for the recruitment of researchers (European Commission, 2005; Council of the European Union, 2023). The other documents that inspired agencies for their framework are the aforementioned Salzburg Principles for doctoral education, the principles set out in the ERA Policy Agenda (2021) and several documents related to research in the arts such as the ‘Share handbook for artistic research education’ (Wilson and Van Ruiten, 2013), the ‘Florence Principles’ on the doctorate in the arts (ELIA, 2016) and the ‘Vienna Declaration’ on artistic research

(Artistic Research Alliance, 2020, 2024). Some agencies also used the standards of the World Federation for Medical Education (WFME, 2024) that interrelate education and research.

Figure 5. Documents that have inspired agencies in developing their frameworks



The commitment to, and especially the involvement of, agencies in the development of such guiding principles can be very important in supporting and endorsing their implementation. The two independent, international agencies working in the fields of arts and music (EQ-Arts and MusiQuE) provided us with interesting examples that could also inform the work of agencies involved in the EQA of research in artistic fields (see Box 2).

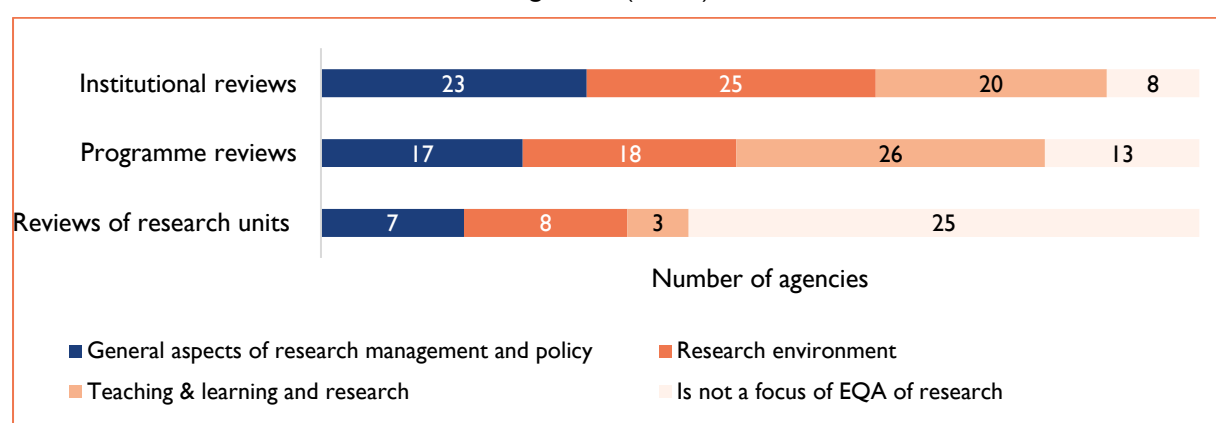
Box 2. QA agencies as advocates of the EQA of research: the experience of EQ-Arts

EQ-Arts argues that one of the major problems it faces as regards the EQA of research is that scientific research has long been subject to assessment and QA, whereas artistic research and its impact on society is more recent. The agency does not directly evaluate all research output during an enhancement review or accreditation but needs to understand how the institution itself does this through an EQA process. However, it seems that "institutions need support in finding ways not just to count, but to find qualitative ways of looking at impact. And one of the answers to this challenge is research methods and methodologies in the arts. Looking at where research output and methods impact on and are delivered in the curriculum, learning and teaching, how they are delivered incrementally across the three cycles, etc. EQ-Arts has a role to play and is doing such work in its wider projects, e.g. ERASMUS+ 'Creator Doctus, Doctoral Study in the Arts handbook'." [Interview with a representative of EQ-Arts, 11 July 2024]. EQ-Arts has given itself an important advocacy role there, reinforced

by its status as a cross-border agency that needs to be sensitive to different political and cultural contexts, which has made it more flexible and agile in addressing European issues in the arts. There therefore seems to be a dialectic between the HEI communities and the agencies: while the evolution of HEI sectors shapes the way agencies conduct their reviews and adapt their standards accordingly, agencies can also shape the way HEIs perceive and address new issues, including those related to research.

The survey also asked precise questions about the research-related topics covered by the agencies in their standards and guidelines, in order to get a sense of what lies behind the concept of EQA of research. The topics were grouped into three main themes: general aspects of research management and policy, the research environment, and the link between learning and teaching and research. Figure 6 shows that in institutional reviews, agencies mostly look at the research environment (25 agencies) followed by the general aspects of research management and policy (23) while a still significant number of agencies (20) review the link between learning and teaching and research. Not surprisingly, the link between learning and teaching and research is mostly scrutinised in programme reviews while the research environment, closely followed by the general aspects of research management and policy, is most often the focus of research unit reviews.

Figure 6. Share of the core themes of the EQA of research per type of procedure covered by agencies (N=42)



It is worth noting that the way in which agencies address research in their standards and guidelines varies. While some have chosen to include research in one or more specific standards, others have chosen to spread research-related aspects across several guidelines (see Box 3).

Box 3. The great divide between the higher music education institutions: MusiQuE's approach to the EQA of research

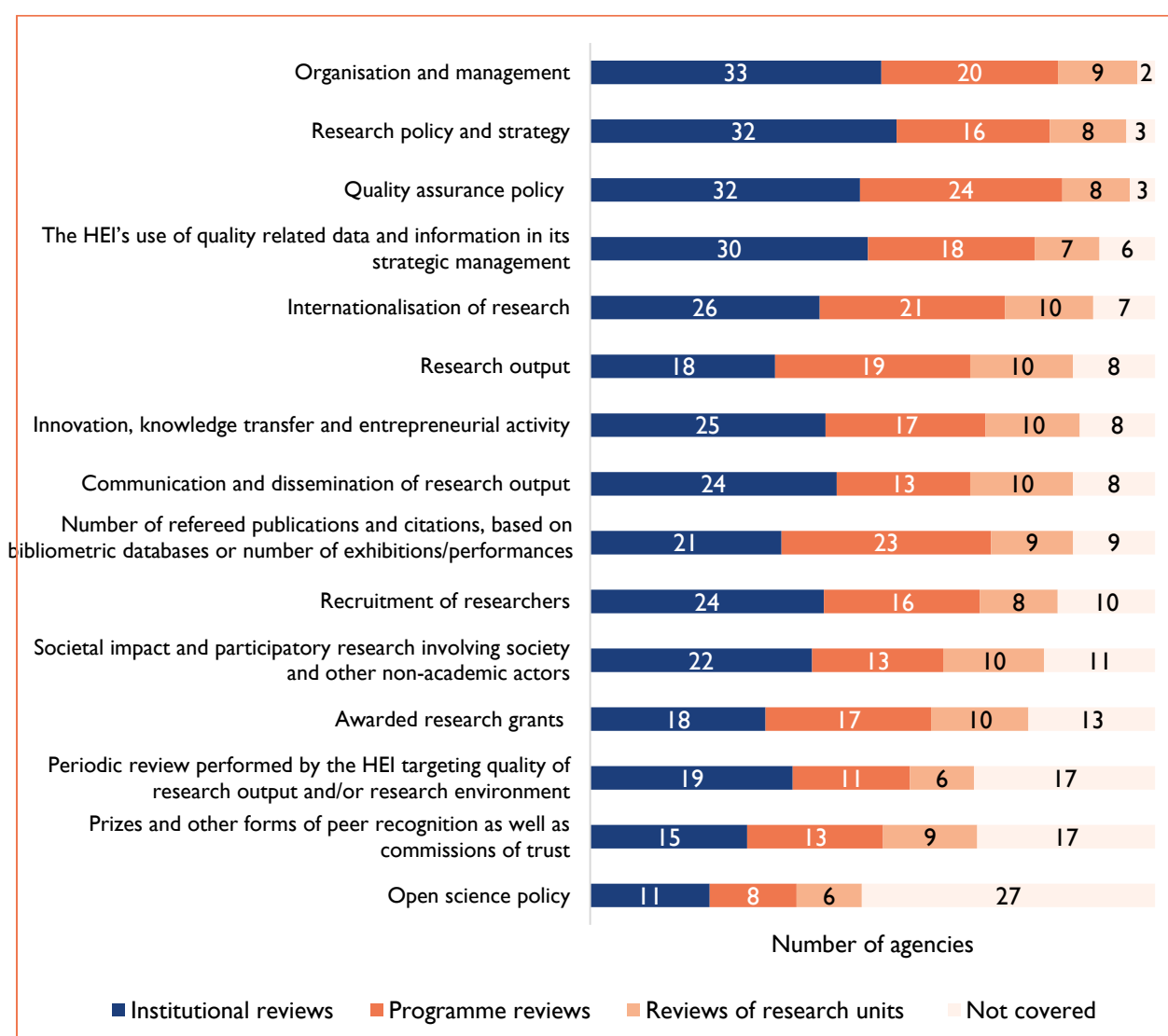
The interview with MusiQuE provided an interesting example of an agency that spread research-related aspects across its standards in response to the debate of the higher education community. This example also shows that agencies are key actors that can drive higher education policy developments.

“We decided not to include a standard specifically about research in the MusiQuE framework. In fact, having such a standard would be difficult for some institutions that are not allowed to drive research because of their national context [MusiQuE is an international agency]. That's why we decided to include many elements on research

across our standards instead. And we know that across the higher music education sector, this was also a dispute between some institutions who asked us to have a specific standard on research, and some others who were reluctant. So, we are really in the middle of the evolution of how institutions deal with research. And it is sometimes uncomfortable. This evolution will probably drive MusiQuE to reconsider its position in due time, towards including a more specific standard on research.”
[Interview with a representative of MusiQuE, 11 July 2024]

When it comes to the general aspects of research management and policy, the most common aspects covered by agencies are the organisation and management (only two agencies do not cover them), followed by the research policy and strategy and the QA policy (only three do not cover them). On the other hand, the least covered topic is the open science policy (27 agencies do not cover it). As open science is strongly supported and promoted by the ERA and the CoARA, this finding corroborates assumptions made in this report that agencies lack adequate guidance and tools to develop EQA of research. Indeed, they mostly have EHEA policies and tools as a reference point, which do not pay as much attention to research as the ERA.

Figure 7. General aspects of research management and policy covered by agencies in their EQA of research procedures (N=42)*



*The data is presented in terms of the number of agencies, not as percentages of agencies covering a particular aspect in relation to the total number of agencies carrying out the type of reviews under study. As a reminder, of the 42 responding agencies, 34 carry out EQA of research in institutional reviews, 29 in programme reviews and 17 in research unit reviews.

Box 4. The fit-for-purpose approaches: AQ Austria's and FIBAA's reviews of general aspects of research management and policy at the institutional level

Both AQ Austria and FIBAA adopt a fit-for-purpose approach by starting their institutional reviews with a focus on the HEIs' strategy. The HEIs are thus expected to explain their strategy, including in terms of research activities, and detail how they intend to achieve it. The two agencies then have a dedicated standard on research activities that aim to complement the standard on the strategy by looking at it from a research perspective.

More precisely, FIBAA's institutional accreditation requires HEIs to describe the following (FIBAA, 2020):

"I. Mission Statement, HEI's Profile and Strategic Objectives

2. Describe the HEI's profile under consideration of the following aspects: Specialisation and focus in teaching; Graduates' employability; Reasons for choice of study formats; Specialisation and focus in research."

Later in the standard on research, the following elements relating to general aspects of research management and policy are addressed:

"IV. Research

- 1. Please specify the role of research in the HEI's strategic planning. Which research strategy does the HEI pursue and what are the overall research objectives defined by the HEI?*
- 2. Please describe how the HEI organises its research activities and how competencies and responsibilities are allocated.*
- 3. Which measures and incentive systems are in place for the promotion of research (e.g. reduction of teaching duties in favour of execution of research and development projects, target agreements) and how are they applied in practice?*
- 4. Are there any guidelines for the compliance with rules of good scientific practice at the HEI? If so, what do they say, what are they based on and how is it ensured that they are adhered to by the HEI's staff?*
- 5. Which QA measures does the HEI apply in the area of research?*
- 6. Which research cooperations are in place with other HEIs and research institutions as well as in the area of applied research and development with suitable partners from the professional world?"*

In its audit of the internal quality management system for universities, AQ Austria takes a fit-for-purpose approach relying on the universities' own definition of quality (AQ Austria, 2021).

"Standard I. The university has an understanding of the concept of quality and a quality management strategy, which is part of its internal management. The quality management strategy includes the university's core responsibilities, cross-cutting tasks as well as its supporting administrative tasks."

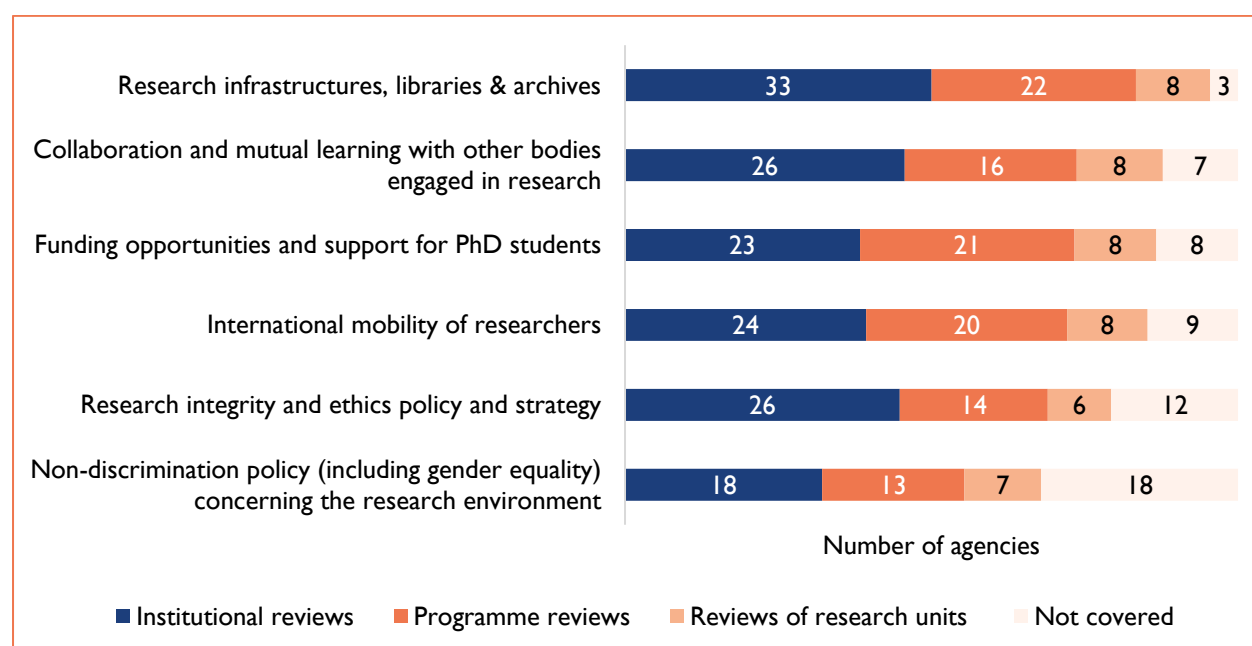
Standard 4, on EQA of research then deals with general aspects of research management and policy and includes a focus on artistic research.

“The university implements quality management measures along the targeted objectives in the fields of research or the advancement and appreciation of the arts (AAA) and the societal goals and goals of internationalisation relating thereto. It assesses their contribution to the achievement of the objectives and to the enhancement of the quality in those fields. The results of this assessment are incorporated in the systematic adaptation of the implemented measures.

In any case, the quality management supports the researchers in their activities, the assessment of the research performance or achievements in AAA, the promotion of young academics, the transfer of knowledge and/or technology, organisational and administrative tasks in the field of research or AAA.”

With regard to the research environment, the survey results show that the aspects most frequently covered by the agencies in their standards and guidelines are research infrastructures, libraries and archives (only three agencies do not cover them), whereas the least covered aspect is non-discrimination policy (18 agencies do not cover it). This latter point is surprising, given that non-discrimination is included as a component of institutional autonomy, which is one of the fundamental values of the EHEA: “In exercising their staffing autonomy, HEIs should ensure fairness, transparency and non-discrimination.” (Tirana Communiqué, 2024b). Although the definition of fundamental values was only approved by the EHEA ministers in 2024, this issue has been under discussion for some time, and one might have expected it to have been taken into account by the agencies. Similarly, the indicators and descriptors for the principles of the social dimension in the EHEA include a principle aimed at promoting an “inclusive institutional culture” (Bologna Follow-up Group, 2024).

Figure 8. Elements of the research environment covered by agencies in their EQA of research procedures (N=42)*



*The data is presented in terms of the number of agencies, not as percentages of agencies covering a particular aspect in relation to the total number of agencies carrying out the type of reviews under study. As a reminder, of the 42 responding agencies, 34 carry out EQA of research in institutional reviews, 29 in programme reviews and 17 in research unit reviews.

The Kosovar, Spanish (Castilla y León) and Swedish agencies provide us with examples of EQA procedures that look at the research environment at the level of programmes, research units and HEIs, although they focus on different topics (see Boxes 5 to 7).

Box 5. The Kosovar perspective on the research environment: KAA's programme reviews

In its standards for the evaluation and re-accreditation of study programmes, KAA examines elements related to the research environment, such as the mobility of researchers and research infrastructures. While mobility, part of Domain 3, is dedicated to academic staff, infrastructures and resources constitute a whole domain (Domain 7) (KAA, n.d.).

“3. Academic staff

Standard 3.4 The academic staff engaged in the delivery of the study programme is entitled to institutional support for professional development.

The HEI proves that all academic staff engaged in the study programme participates in international activities (such as mobility programmes, study visits at foreign HEIs, international projects, sabbatical leaves, networks, etc.), which are relevant to the study programme, and academic staff are encouraged and supported by their own HEI in these activities.

7. Infrastructure and resources

Standard 7.1. The HEI ensures adequate premises and equipment for performing education processes and research

Standard 7.2 The HEI ensures adequate library resources for study programme.”

Box 6. The Castilian-Leonese lens on the research environment: ACSUCYL reviews of research units

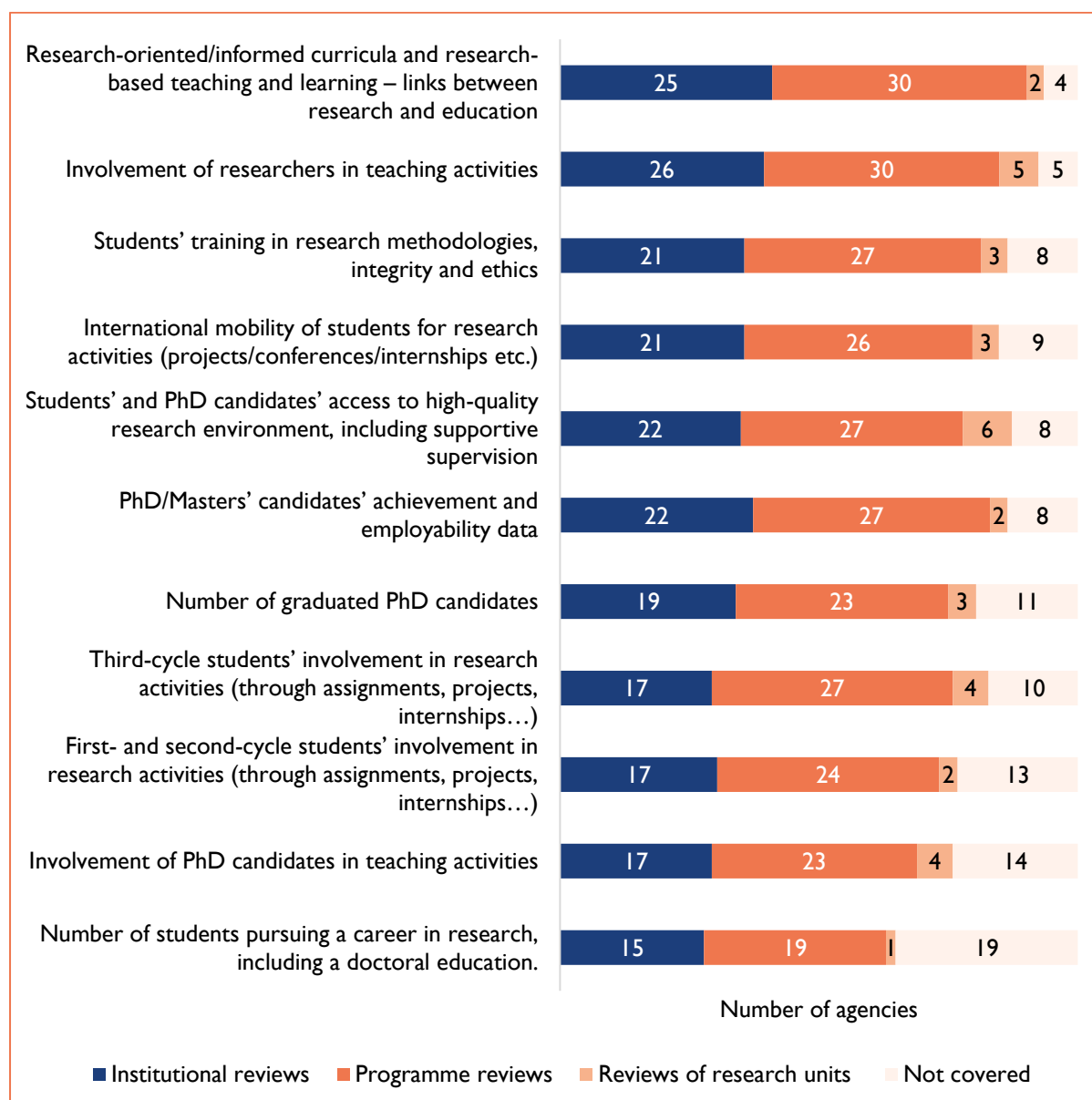
When reviewing research units, called "research institutes," ACSUCYL examines a standard dedicated to the "Infrastructures and material resources of the Institute." Research institutes are required to describe in detail their main infrastructures and assess their suitability to meet their needs and objectives. These infrastructures include laboratories, libraries and scientific equipment. Another standard relates to the "External Relations of the Institute" and asks the research institute to describe the cooperation agreements it has with other research-performing entities: alliances, exchanges, participation in research networks, etc., both at national and international levels.

ACSUCYL's review of research institutes is also linked to the evaluation of doctoral programmes. Indeed, in the guidelines for doctoral programmes, the agency checks whether it is supported by the university's research institute. Therefore, if the review of this research institute shows that the doctoral programme is sufficiently supported, the criterion related to human resources is automatically validated in the evaluation of doctoral programmes.

Box 7. Inclusion in Sweden: gender equality in UKÄ's institutional reviews

In UKÄ's previous standards and guidelines for institutional reviews (2017-2022), one of the six areas of assessment was dedicated to gender equality, which is one of the components of an effective research environment. Indeed, UKÄ has been looking more closely at gender issues since 2015, when the government announced that HEIs would be required to strengthen their work on gender mainstreaming (UKÄ, 2023b). However, this assessment area on gender was focused on education (ensuring that gender equality was embedded in the content of programmes) and not on the working environment. It also focused on women and men, rather than diversity more broadly. Since the publication of the new guidelines in 2023, this strong focus on gender has been reduced to a criterion relating to research, as the agency has also decided to review gender equality as part of a future ad hoc thematic evaluation procedure for all HEIs. Therefore, in the evaluation criteria for reviewing HEIs' QA processes for research, there is a criterion to ensure that: "the HEI works systematically to promote gender equality in the preconditions for research" (UKÄ, 2023c).

The last theme under scrutiny in the survey was the link between learning and teaching and research. Since an effective research environment facilitates knowledge transfer and fosters research impact on learning and teaching, it seems crucial to look at how agencies address this in their EQA of research procedures. The most common aspects covered by agencies in their standards and guidelines are research-informed curricula and research-based learning and teaching (only four agencies do not cover it) and the involvement of researchers in teaching activities (five agencies do not cover this). This is not surprising given that it is mentioned in the guidelines of standards 1.1, 1.5 and 1.9 of the ESG, as explained in the previous sections. On the other hand, the number of students pursuing a career in research is the least covered aspect (19 agencies do not cover this).

Figure 9. Elements of the link between learning and teaching and research covered by agencies in their EQA of research procedures (N=42)*

*The data is presented in terms of the number of agencies, not as percentages of agencies covering a particular aspect in relation to the total number of agencies carrying out the type of reviews under study. As a reminder, of the 42 responding agencies, 34 carry out EQA of research in institutional reviews, 29 in programme reviews and 17 in research unit reviews.

Research-oriented curricula and research-based learning and teaching are the most common topics covered by agencies in their EQA of research procedures, particularly in programme reviews (see Box 8).

Box 8. The Basque approach to the links between learning and teaching and research: programme reviews by Unibasq

In the Basque Country region in Spain, Unibasq requires HEIs to justify the objectives and rationale of the study programme to be accredited, based on their links with updated research:

“The study programme must be relevant, appropriate to the training or research experiences, consistent with the academic field to which it refers and/or in line with existing similar studies.

- The references used must be relevant and have a direct connection to the study programme.*
- The result of the consultation procedures must show a direct link to the study programme.*
- The professional or research relevance of the study programme must be adequately justified.” (Unibasq, 2023)*

Besides this, in its programme reviews, Unibasq also considers the research activity of the academic staff involved in the programmes, especially at Master’s level: “In the case of university Master's study programmes, it will be ensured that the teaching staff have relevant research merits and that their research activity is carried out in the specific areas of the subjects of the study programme.” (Unibasq, 2023)

Although research-based learning is mentioned in the ESG, it remains rather general and needs to be adapted and further detailed for some specific disciplines. Some of the responding agencies provided us with concrete examples of how EQA takes into account the specificities of engineering and music studies in order to review the link between learning and teaching and research in a fit-for-purpose manner (see Box 9).

Box 9. The discipline-specific foci of research-based learning and teaching: reviews by CTI and MusiQuE

The CTI (French QA agency dedicated to the engineering field) believes that “in an institutional review, it is important to ensure that research activities have added value in a broader context, while in programme reviews it is relevant to look at what research brings to education” [free text response to survey]. One of the seven domains of the CTI’s standards and guidelines for institutional reviews is specifically focused on engineering education and indicates what the link between learning and teaching and research means in an engineering school: “All engineering students are exposed to fundamental or applied research. This is carried out by the academic staff in the teaching team. It should enable engineering students to develop inductive reasoning that combines scientific rigour, creativity, the virtues of doubt and the ability to challenge themselves.” (CTI, 2024).

Through its EQA of research practices, MusiQuE seeks to inspire change in the student-centred approach to learning in music studies. The agency explains that “the shift is from one-to-one top-down teaching to bottom-up learning through teacher-driven research processes (education within classical music has traditionally been very directive with students – while in other genres, such as in pop and jazz, it is far more based on student self-learning and creativity). So, our scope is how teachers are trained, helped and supported by their institution to move from one attitude to the other. MusiQuE is trying to help the institution go through this changing relationship between student and teacher” [Interview with a representative of MusiQuE, 11 July 2024]. MusiQuE also looks at the link between teaching and research when reviewing research units in the music sector, where one of the four domains is dedicated to it: “Domain 4. The impact of the results of research activities: to what extent do the research activities carried out contribute to improving higher music education, the artistic performance practices that are unique to the professional music sector, and

to the further artistic and academic understanding of the themes that are studied?” (MusiQuE, n.d.).

These three themes related to the EQA of research that were analysed above are intersected by a transversal topic which also happens to be a hot topic in the QA debate: the third mission. Universities’ third mission, also known as “societal impact”, can be understood as the “generation, use, application and exploitation of university knowledge, capabilities and resources, outside of the academic environment” (Compagnucci and Spigarelli, 2020). This third mission therefore encompasses the transfer of research knowledge and output to society and seems to have been the subject of increasing interest in the world of QA in recent years. The societal impact of universities and how it can be reviewed by agencies has been discussed in international fora, such as the Council for Higher Education Accreditation International Quality Group (Hazelkorn, 2020) and a UNESCO study on a new generation of EQA (Uvalić-Trumbić and Martin, 2021) as well as in European events. Indeed, in 2023, the Italian agency ANVUR organised an international online workshop on social impact (ANVUR, 2023), the INQAAHE 2024 Forum was dedicated to social responsibility with a workshop questioning the impact QA agencies have on society (Guillet and Bensimon, 2024), while the European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) 2024 was organised on the theme “Enhancing education, research and societal engagement through quality assurance” (EUA, 2024b). This interest reflects the results of the QA-FIT survey, which showed that around 72% of agencies are in favour of extending the ESG to include the third mission (Cirlan and Gover, 2024).

Coming back to the working group on the EQA of research, the survey results show that 34 out of 42 agencies report that at least one of their EQA procedures for research covers “innovation, knowledge transfer and entrepreneurial activities” and “communication and dissemination of research output.” 31 agencies also review “societal impact and participatory research involving society and other non-academic actors.” Some agencies can provide us with interesting and concrete examples of how they review the third mission at the different levels of HEIs (see Box 10).

Box 10. The Icelandic, French and Swedish reviews of the third mission: examples of institutional, research unit, and thematic reviews

“Research and innovation” is one of the three main themes for institutional reviews in the latest Icelandic Quality Enhancement Framework, developed by IAQA in consultation with the higher education community. It states that: “This theme addresses the procedures used to manage and enhance the quality of research and innovation of all types and across all subjects. This includes collaboration, societal impact, stakeholder relationships and support for academic staff and research students.” (IAQA, 2024a). One of the effective statements for this theme is that “The HEI seeks to enhance the societal impact and reach of its research and innovation. It has defined goals for such enhancement and strategies for achieving them, supported by its management system.” Alongside with this framework, IAQA developed a set of questions to be used as a tool for self-evaluation. One of the indicative questions for the aforementioned statement is “Can the HEI describe its approach to setting goals for the societal impact of its research & innovation activities and for its overall societal engagement in these activities, as well as the ways in which it attempts to monitor and reach those goals?” Setting such goals seems to be a good exercise for HEIs to improve their societal impact (IAQA, 2024b).

At the level of research units, the Hcéres (France) evaluation framework has one specific domain on “the inclusion of research activities in society.” This domain is

divided into three standards, which deal with the interactions of the research unit with actors from the non-academic sector, the products of its research for socio-economic actors and its interventions in the public sphere. These include criteria that look at elements such as “The research unit is involved in participatory science activities” (Hcéres, 2022b) and “The members of the research unit, in line with their scientific skills, integrate scientific mediation. They intervene in the media, on the Internet or social networks in compliance with research integrity and ethics” (Hcéres, 2022b).

In Sweden, UKÄ also conducts thematic evaluations at HEIs including one on the collaboration with the surrounding community which is enshrined in the Higher Education Act that was amended in 2021 to state that collaboration should be for mutual exchanges, as well as ensuring that the knowledge and expertise found at HEIs bring benefits to society. This thematic evaluation was carried out with a formative approach around two assessment areas (governance and organisation; implementation and results) each consisting of two guiding questions (UKÄ, 2023b).

Finally, the review of third-cycle programmes, which is part of the EQA of research, also requires a transversal perspective, through the lens of the three themes mentioned above: general aspects of research management and policy, the research environment, and the links between learning and teaching and research. Although the ESG does not directly address the issue of quality in doctoral education, Tia Loukkola (2018) has shown that the standards can be adapted to third-cycle programmes. In addition, many agencies now go beyond the ESG and have developed specific frameworks for the EQA of doctoral programmes. As shown in Figure 3, 26 agencies claim to be involved in the EQA of research at the level of third-cycle programmes. Agencies tend to review doctoral programmes using a variety of methods and approaches, whether as part of institutional review, through a specific framework, or by reviewing the doctoral school including the PhD programmes (see Box 11).

Box 11. The Georgian, Hungarian and Serbian lens on third-cycle education: three different approaches

At the time of writing, the Georgian agency (NCEQE) was still in the process of developing a specific framework for doctoral programmes, but it had already included some criteria for doctoral education in its accreditation standards for institutional reviews (NCEQE, n.d.). These fall under a standard on research activities and focus on doctoral supervision:

| 6. Research, development and/or other creative work | | |
|---|--|--|
| Higher Education Institution, considering its type and specifics of field(s), works on the strengthening of its research function, ensures proper conditions to support research activities and improve the quality of research activities. | | |
| Description | Evaluation Criteria | Indicator/Evidence |
| 6.1. Research Activities | | |
| Ensuring the effectiveness of doctoral research supervision. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> University has clearly defined functions for the supervisors of PhD students/researchers. Workload of academic and scientific staff enables them to effectively supervise PhD works/arts-creative projects, and high-quality scientific works and projects. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Workload and functions of academic and scientific staff; Supervisor-PhD student ratio; Student survey results; Interview results. |

In Serbia, NEAQA has developed two frameworks specifically for doctoral programmes, including one for doctoral studies in the arts. Although both have a

similar structure with 12 standards and three additional ones for programmes conducted in a foreign language, for joint study programmes and for interdisciplinary, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary programmes, the framework for PhD in the arts slightly adapted the vocabulary and context to artistic research. Standard 4.1 is interesting because, while it addresses the skills that students should have acquired through a doctoral programme, it also indirectly seeks to ensure that general aspects related to research management and policy and the research environment are met (NEAQA, n.d.):

“4.1. The doctoral study program should enable students to possess knowledge, skills, developed abilities and competencies to:

- a. independently solve practical and theoretical problems in the area in which they have completed their doctorate and to organize and carry out developmental and scientific research;*
- b. engage in international scientific projects;*
- c. develop new technologies and procedures within the scope of their professions and to understand and use state-of-the-art knowledge in a given scientific field;*
- d. critically think, they act creatively and independently;*
- e. respect the principles of the ethical code of good scientific practice;*
- f. communicate at a professional level in communicating scientific and research results;*
- g. communicate scientific-research results in science conferences, publish in science journals, through patents and new technical solutions;*
- h. contribute to the development of new knowledge in a particular science discipline and science in general.”*

In Hungary, MAB has adopted a slightly different approach, focusing on the evaluation of doctoral schools including doctoral programmes, and carries out three types of reviews: the establishment of a new doctoral school, the extension of the activities of a doctoral school to another scientific field and cyclical reviews once a doctoral school has been established. The latter is conducted on a voluntary basis. In all of these procedures, MAB examines how the internal QA system is defined at the level of the doctoral school and how it relates to that of the HEI. Although the institutional reviews and the doctoral reviews are not currently interrelated, MAB plans to create a more holistic approach with an “integrated accreditation” which would include an institutional review with an extended part of the scientific activities including the accreditation of doctoral schools.

Section 5.1.2 has shown that agencies cover a wide range of research-related issues in their EQA procedures, particularly at the level of HEIs and their programmes, and to a lesser extent at the level of research units, on three main themes: general aspects of research management and policy, the research environment, and the link between learning and teaching and research. Some agencies also tailor these EQA of research procedures to the disciplines in which they specialise (e.g. arts, music and engineering education) to ensure a fit-for-purpose approach.

5.1.3. The procedures for EQA of research

After an in-depth analysis of the tools used for the EQA of research, in particular the standards and guidelines, the survey and interviews looked at how agencies carry out their reviews in terms of procedures. The results of the survey show that 13 out of 42 agencies report having specialised staff

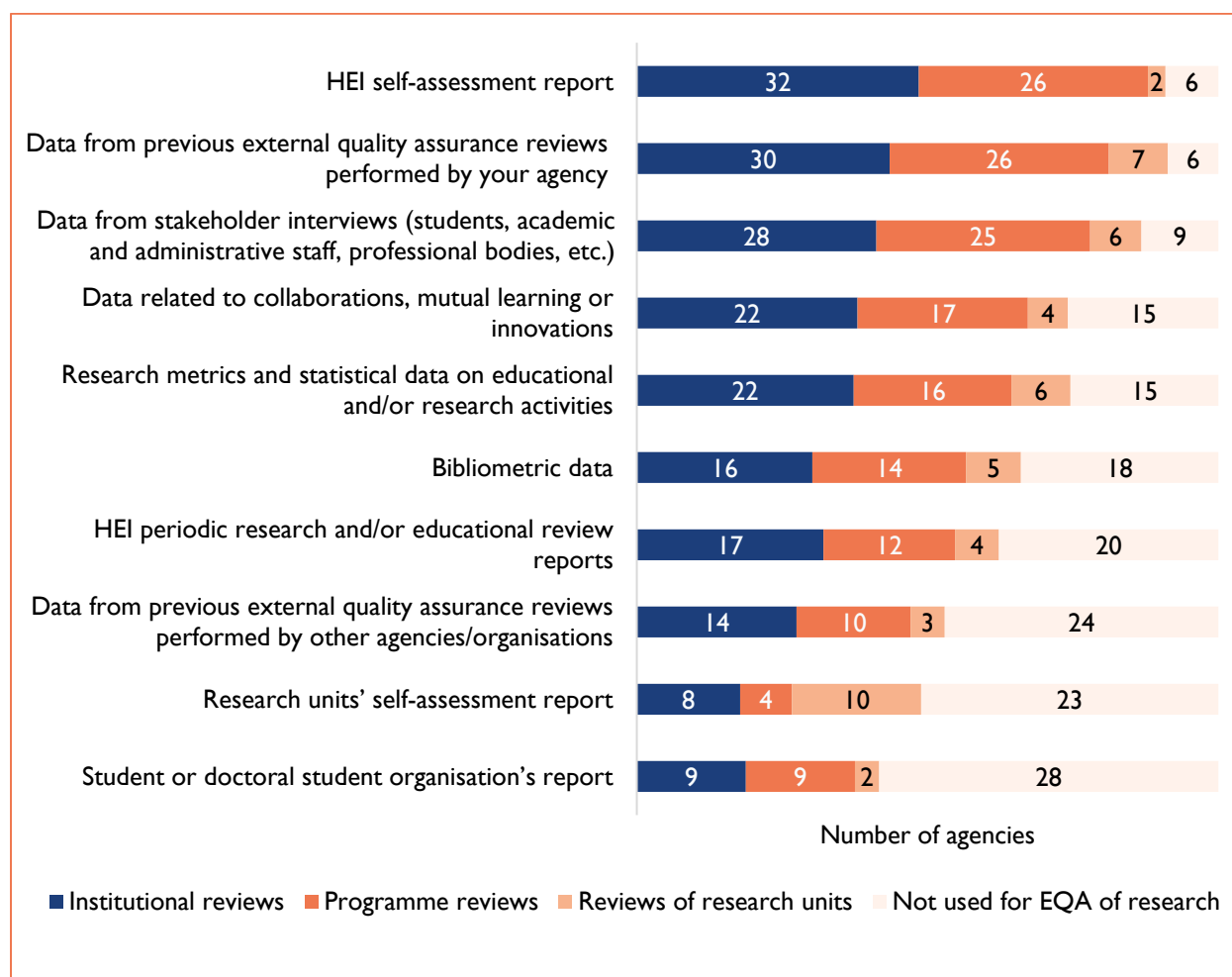
to carry out procedures related to the EQA of research. However, this question was interpreted in different ways by the agencies: some considered that they had specialised staff because they had a dedicated department for research-related reviews (ASHE, Hcéres), while others took care to recruit staff with knowledge and experience of research (FIBAA, UKÄ) or considered that the expertise in the EQA of research was based on the expert panel (AAQ, AQ Austria, CYQAA, EQ-Arts, KAA, NCEQE).

The results of the survey on the type of data collected by agencies as part of their EQA of research procedures (see Table 3) reflect recent debates on the need to move away from purely quantitative indicators in research assessment, as explained in the literature review. Indeed, most agencies (40) rely on both qualitative and quantitative data, regardless the scope considered (institutional review, programme review or review of the research units).

Table 3. Type of data collected by the agencies as part of their EQA of research procedures (N=42)

| Type of data | Only qualitative data | Only quantitative data | Both qualitative and quantitative data |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|--|
| Institutional reviews | 3 | 0 | 31 |
| Programmes reviews | 1 | 1 | 28 |
| Review of research units | 1 | 0 | 11 |
| Not collected by the agency | 39 | 41 | 2 |

A deeper analysis of the type of information sources used by agencies as part of their EQA of research procedures shows that most agencies rely on traditional EQA tools such as HEIs self-assessment reports (36) and data from previous reviews (36). It is also interesting to note that 18 out of 42 agencies use data from previous reports carried out by other bodies, demonstrating cooperation between key actors for the EQA of research at the national (or local) level. Indeed, it is common for agencies to rely on national databases. For example, the National Accreditation Bureau for Higher Education (NAB, Czech Republic) uses databases on grants awarded, public information on grants and projects, databases such as WoS, H-index of teaching staff, while MAB (Hungary) uses a national database on doctoral schools and the Hungarian register of scientific articles.

Figure 10. Type of information sources collected by agencies as part of their EQA of research procedures (N=42)

Reports from student organisations are also collected as key data by some agencies, particularly at the level of HEIs (9) and programmes (9). In Sweden, for example, student involvement in higher education is strong and enshrined in law, so that when UKÄ evaluates an institution, students' and doctoral students' unions have the opportunity to submit a short report (10 pages) specific to their activities and provide feedback on how they are involved in their HEI's QA process. This report is independent of the institution's report and, although not compulsory, most student unions do submit it.

In addition, one agency (Hcéres) reported that it requires research units to provide it with a portfolio as part of the review, which forms the basis of a qualitative approach. It contains a set of elements that the unit considers representative of its activities, mission and research environment, such as publications, evidence of public policy support activities, dissemination activities (e.g. audio-visual documents, events), artistic creations, etc. This portfolio is not used for research assessment purposes but rather to provide Hcéres and its experts with examples of the research activities carried out by research units and in particular, of the work they consider to be important for their strategy.

Throughout the analysis of the survey and the interviews, it was noted that many agencies undertake some form of “integrated review”, embedding or linking several different procedures into one, in order to take a more coherent and holistic approach and to better tackle the “QA fatigue” that many HEIs suffer from. In doing so, agencies intertwine different levels of reviews and rely on multiple types of data coming from the different activities of the agency. While Box 11 explained that MAB was

seeking to create an “integrated accreditation” procedure in the coming years, some agencies have already made the leap, such as in Estonia and France (Box 12).

Box 12. The Estonian and French integrated approaches: towards better alignment of EQA procedures

In Estonia, HAKA has developed an institutional accreditation procedure that is linked to the assessment of study groups, including on the research and development aspects (HAKA, n.d.). The 12 standards of the institutional review aim to ensure that the HEI has defined its objectives and focus on the area of research and development based on its mission, as well as on the expectations and future needs of society. It also needs to assess the societal impact of research and development and support services for research and development. In the meantime, the assessment of study programmes relies on three main areas (planning and management of studies; learning, teaching and assessment; development, cooperation and internationalisation of teaching staff), all of which include research-related criteria that feed into the institutional review. In addition, HAKA is working with the Estonian Research Council to develop a joint procedure that would combine a regular EQA procedure by the agency with a research assessment procedure by the Research Council.

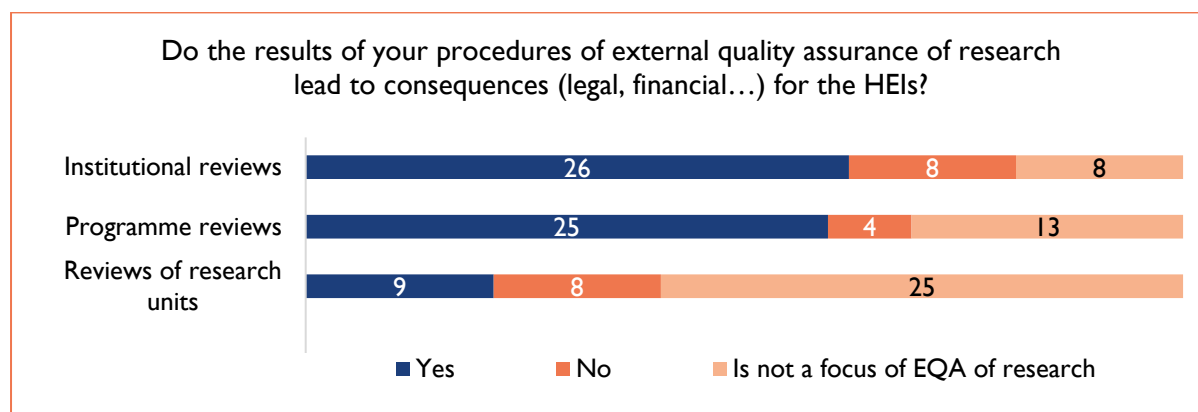
Hcéres’ so-called “integrated evaluation process” has already been described in other studies (Bensimon *et al.* 2024) but it is interesting to look at it from the perspective of the EQA of research and by looking at the data collected. In this procedure, Hcéres reviews an HEI once it has reviewed its programmes and research units. In this way, synthesis reports on each of the three cycles of education (including doctoral schools and strong links between learning and teaching and research) as well as a synthesis report of all the research units of a given HEI are used to feed into the institutional review. Hcéres’ Science and Technology Observatory, which is in charge of scientometric analyses based on databases on scientific publications, patents and European projects (e-Corda), also provides reports for the review of research units. The institutional standards and guidelines of Hcéres have been adjusted accordingly with those of the programme reviews and reviews of research units to ensure alignment of procedures. More specifically, domain 1 of the institutional standards is specifically dedicated to the governance of HEIs, while domain 2 focuses on research and innovation and is thus fed by the synthesis of research units. Domain 3 is devoted to education and campus life policy and is partly based on the result of the synthesis reports of each of the three cycles of education. In addition, the Observatory also provides some bibliometric data for the review of some research-intensive universities. Although this new procedure has proved to be more relevant for HEIs, it is still complex for the experts who have to rely on a lot of data.

After looking at the standards and guidelines as well as the procedures and data for the EQA of research, this study aimed at looking at the other end of the process: the consequences of the EQA of research. In other words, what happens to a HEI, study programme or research unit after it has been reviewed?

5.1.4. The consequences of EQA procedures for research

The survey responses show that for most agencies, the EQA of research leads to legal, financial or other consequences for all types of reviews (institutional, of programmes or of research units). In fact, 76% of agencies report that their review has an impact on HEIs, 86% on programmes and 53% on research units.

Figure 11. EQA of research procedures leading to consequences (N=42)



There are three main types of consequences of the EQA of research procedures carried out by agencies: legal, financial and reputational. For most agencies, the consequences of a review of research aspects are primarily legal and relate to the continuation of activities carried out by institutions, programmes or research units (e.g. ACSUCYL, AIC, ARACIS, ASHE, TKTA, Unibasq, UKÄ). In other words, research is an aspect that is part of the accreditation or authorisation criteria in a number of agencies and is therefore weighted in the outcome of a review. Legal consequences may also come from another body and not directly from the agency. Two agencies (ANVUR and Hcéres) reported that, after a review, their reports are sent to the Ministry of Higher Education and Research, which takes the accreditation decision and, in the case of France, establishes a contract with the HEIs on the basis of the results of the review report. Few agencies reported that their review had financial consequences. However, this is the case in Switzerland, where institutional accreditation by the agency, including research-related elements, is a condition for public HEIs to receive public funding, and in the Basque Country region in Spain, where funding for research units is at stake following a review by Unibasq. Last but not least, some agencies also claim that their EQA of research procedures is a matter of reputation (FINEEC, MAB).

Section 5.1 aimed to map the EQA of research practices of the 42 agencies that reported being engaged in such activities. Both the content of their standards and guidelines, the procedures implemented and their consequences were examined in order to provide a broad overview of their activities. The next section presents the challenges identified by the agencies in their implementation of the EQA of research and presents some success stories.

5.2. SOME CHALLENGES AND SUCCESS STORIES IDENTIFIED BY THE AGENCIES

As explained in the introduction, the working group decided that it was not its role to define what is or is not “good practice.” The findings in this section are therefore mainly based on the agencies' statements and what they identified as challenges and successes in their own context.

5.2.1. Challenges to the implementation of the EQA of research

Four of the most common challenges encountered by agencies in the EQA of research are similar to those faced in “traditional EQA” of learning and teaching. Out of 42 agencies, 28 mentioned the low quality of the self-evaluation reports as a challenge, and 26 claimed that the high workload of the agency made it difficult to carry out the EQA of research properly. Additionally, more than 50% of the agencies (22 agencies) face a challenge that is directly related to research: combining qualitative reviews with reasonable use of indicators. As explained in the literature review, this challenge is not specific to European agencies and reflects the discussions of a global trend towards a more qualitative assessment of research which also raises questions about the most appropriate approach to take in the EQA of research. Another challenge that 16 agencies mentioned was the conflict of interest between the experts and the HEIs under review as a challenge.

Three types of additional challenges were identified in the interviews: challenges related to the global environment of the EQA of research, to the national environment and to the practices of the agencies. As regards the challenges related to the global environment of the EQA of research, the lack of explicit international or European standards on the EQA of research was considered by some agencies as a hindrance to developing their own framework (e.g., ANVUR) and to seeking endorsement and agreement from the higher education community on what the EQA of research is (e.g., EQ-Arts, MusiQuE). Still in line with the lack of understanding of what the EQA of research is, some agencies (e.g., AQ Austria, UKÄ) noticed that their procedures are not always accepted by the HEIs, which may feel that they are being over-scrutinised or that they are already competent to ensure their research assessment procedures as research itself is subject to multiple evaluations (assessment of research projects, peer-reviews...). However, this reluctance to engage in the EQA of research shows the significance of the misunderstanding and association of EQA with research assessment, as explained above. It also seems that some agencies (e.g. FIBAA, EQ-Arts, MusiQuE) are struggling to get stakeholders (including their experts, the national ministry and higher education community) to recognise all types of research (e.g. applied, artistic...) and not just fundamental research, which has long been at the forefront. Artistic research is also complex to define and quality assure (e.g. AQ Austria, EQ-Arts, Hcéres, MusiQuE). Finally, some agencies (e.g. NCEQE, FIBAA) also reported that it is difficult to convince the higher education community of the importance of research-based learning and teaching in all settings, including in non-research HEIs. However, EURASHE, the European association representing the voice of professional HEIs, sees applied research as part of their mission: “Learning by acting, supported by relevant applicable theory and involving students in market-based research, is the strongest basis for graduates in an ever-changing society” (EURASHE, 2015, p6). The association has even created a community of practice specifically dedicated to research and innovation issues.

The second type of challenge identified in the interviews is related to the national environment in which agencies operate. In some countries, the lack of national databases with information on the research activities of HEIs hampers the EQA procedures (e.g. KAA). National frameworks and laws can also be seen as a hindrance when they are not clear about the division of tasks between the EQA of research and research assessment by the different national bodies, including the agencies (e.g., NCEQE, UKÄ). For international agencies (e.g., EQ-Arts, MusiQuE), compliance with all the different national frameworks of the countries in which they operate lengthens the EQA procedures.

The third main type of challenge identified in the interviews was related to the organisation and practices of the agencies. Indeed, some agencies may find it difficult to recruit competent staff to coordinate the EQA of research processes, as the focus of the review is somewhat different from an EQA process focused solely on higher education (e.g. FIBAA, UKÄ). Several agencies also mention problems related to the recruitment of good experts for the EQA of research for third-cycle programmes (e.g. NCEQE, MAB) or the recruitment of international experts who know and

understand the national higher education and research system (e.g. ACSUCYL, Hcéres). In cases of niche scientific fields, it can also be complex to avoid conflicts of interest in the selection of experts (e.g. Hcéres). Some agencies also seem to have set high standards for the EQA of research in order to improve the quality of research, but some universities find it difficult to meet these standards (e.g. KAA, MAB).

5.2.2. Success stories in implementing the EQA of research

Identifying success stories in the EQA of research seemed to be more difficult for the agencies interviewed than identifying their challenges. However, in addition to the interesting examples provided by the agencies, the testimonies collected also enabled the working group to identify common approaches between agencies that formed the basis of a success story. Firstly, in terms of the successful practices reported by the agencies on a declarative basis, close collaboration with stakeholders was at the forefront. In fact, several agencies relied on extensive consultation with the higher education community to establish EQA of research procedures, which facilitated their endorsement and ensured the relevance and fitness-for-purpose of the reviews conducted by the agencies (e.g. ANVUR, HAKA, IAQA, UKÄ). The inclusion of the stakeholders in any EQA process is not new and has already been identified as a successful practice in previous studies (ESQA: Homan et al, 2020; QAN: Bensimon et al, 2024) but as explained in section 5.1.1, some HEIs are reluctant to be reviewed on research-related elements. Consulting them is therefore a key step in ensuring endorsement of the EQA of research. It is also interesting to note that HEIs can be both a hindrance (see section 5.1.1) or a push for agencies to develop EQA of research, as in some cases it stems from a bottom-up initiative (e.g. IAQA). Iceland and Sweden provide interesting examples of close dialogue with their stakeholders, both in the preparation of an EQA of research procedure and during a cycle (see Box 13).

Box 13. The Iceland and Swedish participatory approaches: consulting the stakeholders at IAQA and UKÄ

Since it received the assignment from the government in 2017, UKÄ has been engaged in the EQA of research at the institutional level. Initially, the Association of Swedish Higher Education Institutions (SUHF) and UKÄ worked in parallel on their own framework and priorities for research within HEIs. UKÄ used the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers (European Commission, 2005) as a source of inspiration. Both proposals were then compared, fine-tuned and tested in a pilot study at four HEIs between September 2019 and October 2020. This dialogue-based approach was pursued to make adjustments to the pilot and officially include research in the institutional review in September 2021. Two and a half years on from the start of the EQA of research, this participatory approach appears to have been successful: “We have a process with a very well-established and extensive dialogue with the HEIs, both in performing the evaluations and in the method development prior to the evaluation. We feel that this gives the HEIs confidence in our agency and that we together can work towards quality enhancement” [free text response to the survey].

When preparing for the next cycle of institutional reviews (2024-2029) IAQA has developed its evaluation framework for research management in close dialogue with its main stakeholders, namely the HEIs themselves. IAQA relied on a sub-committee of its Board made up of representatives from each HEI – the Research Evaluation Advisory Committee – which worked on guidelines and templates for the self-evaluation report and commented on the framework itself during various stages of its

development. As a result, when the framework was launched, there was a general awareness on behalf of the HEIs of this evaluation theme and familiarity with the guidelines given by the agency. In addition, IAQA holds “annual quality dialogues” with lead staff (rector, quality manager, research director) of each institution going through an institutional review to discuss institution’s internal reviews, enhancement activities and its progress. Prior to the meeting, the HEIs need to send a brief follow-up report to the agency. Overall, these dialogues have been set up to provide support to the HEIs and to fulfil the agency’s role in regular monitoring and follow-up of institutional reviews.

Positive feedback from the HEI community on the EQA of research procedures is a good indicator of success for agencies. Some agencies have been told that their recommendations are valuable (e.g. Hcéres, MAB) and are sometimes even seen as “service-oriented” by the HEIs [interview with a representative of MAB, 19 June 2024].

Other agencies also reported that embedding and linking several types of reviews focusing on research-related elements was successful in making the EQA of research more coherent while avoiding overlap between the different procedures (e.g., HAKA and Hcéres – see Box 12). Similarly, and without adopting such an “integrated approach”, some agencies find it relevant and useful to have a dual focus on research and learning and teaching in their institutional reviews, looking at the impact of the former on the latter and vice versa (e.g., FIBAA, UKÄ). The impact of education on research is also under-documented and should be further explored according to these agencies. In addition, cooperation with other bodies and networks dealing with research-related topics, such as the CoARA or projects on research in the arts (see Box 2), was reported as a useful way to gain a broad overview of the state of research at the national and European levels (e.g., EQ-Arts, MAB, UKÄ).

In addition to the success stories reported in the interviews with the 12 agencies, the working group noted, when analysing their testimonies, that some elements seem to form common conditions for the successful implementation of the EQA of research. Firstly, all the national and local (i.e. sub-national) agencies interviewed had a legal framework that enabled and supported their activities. Secondly, several agencies also underlined the importance of adopting a fit-for-purpose approach, reviewing research activities against the missions and objectives set by the HEIs (e.g. AQ Austria, EQ-Arts, FIBAA, Hcéres, KAA, HAKA), and trying to take into account the specificities of artistic research in their standards (e.g. AQ Austria, EQ-Arts, Hcéres, HAKA, MAB, NCEQE).

This stocktaking exercise of EQA of research procedures carried out by the agencies, including the challenges they face and the success stories they have experienced, is a good starting point for exploring some avenues for the future of European policies and tools for the EQA of research.

6. Conclusion and avenues for future European policies and tools

Starting from scratch, with limited literature on the EQA of research, this study has done an important job of mapping agencies' practices and expectations as clearly as possible, given the limitations of the data. By focusing on the research environment, the definition of EQA of research coined in this study has been able to encompass a continuum of activities that are affected by the research environment of HEIs: learning and teaching, the general aspects of research management and policy, and the research units of HEIs.

Both the survey results and the interviews provided insights into what agencies want and need to further support their EQA of research practices. Overall, the findings confirm the statements of the Tirana Communiqué (2024): more synergies between the EHEA and the ERA are needed to help agencies move forward, especially as the EHEA, due to the historical primary focus on learning and teaching, is lacking clear guidance on the development of the EQA of research. Indeed, as explained in section 5.1.1, agencies do not have many international or European guidelines on which to base the development of their procedures for the EQA of research. This partly explains the wide variety of practices found in this study. Guidance on the EQA of research therefore seems to be the first priority identified by the agencies.

In the survey, when asked about their views on the revision of the ESG and how agencies could be better supported in carrying out the EQA of research, 16 agencies expressed a wish for stronger links between research and learning and teaching in the ESG. For example, one agency stated that “The teaching activity is inseparable from research activities, so that higher education is able to keep pace with the changing needs and requirements of society and scientific knowledge. Stronger links between research and higher education are essential to train the citizens of tomorrow that will address the challenges of the 21st century” [anonymised free text response from the survey]. 11 agencies also reported the need for better integration of the three missions of HEIs (education, research, societal impact) in the ESG, with one even mentioning: “In reality, there is only one mission for universities since the three missions are interrelated and always influence each other” [Interview with a representative of NVAO Flanders as part of the focus group, 2 July 2024]. In addition to the wish for more guidelines on research in the ESG, these agencies were also in favour of guidelines on how to monitor the third mission in the ESG. Three other agencies also stressed the importance of mentioning ethics and research integrity in the ESG. In addition, some agencies, particularly those not yet involved in the EQA of research but willing to develop it, would like to see more opportunities for peer learning or job shadowing between agencies on this topic.

In order to be effective and impactful, the discussions on the EQA of research should be widened to all the key stakeholders of the EHEA and ERA and go beyond the scope of this report which focuses on QA agencies. Addressing the current European challenges regarding the quality and role of research in educating, training, upskilling and re-skilling a new generation of citizens that is sensitive to research and integrity concerns cannot be done by agencies alone. As explained several times in this study, some HEIs are still reluctant about the EQA of research, mostly because of confusion with research assessment. It is therefore important to clarify the concepts, implications and importance of the EQA of research. Europe needs collective action and the working group on the EQA of research hopes that this study will be just the beginning of further discussions and will provide an avenue for future EHEA and ERA policy. The presentation of the preliminary results of this study at the 2024 EQAF (Guillet, 2024), where many participants were representatives of HEIs, was the first milestone in opening up the discussions.

In the meantime, and in response to the request of many agencies for more guidance on the EQA of research, the final section of this study offers some reflective questions for both agencies already engaged in the EQA of research and those that are not and gives hints on how to continuously enhance their practices. These questions can also serve as a reference for national authorities, HEIs and other stakeholders to support reflection on the development of frameworks and practices on the EQA of research.

7. Reflective questions

This last section attempts to provide some reflective questions and guidance for agencies to develop or improve their EQA of research practices, based on the findings of this study. These questions are divided into three categories: overarching questions addressed to all types of agencies, questions specifically for agencies who would like to work on the EQA of research, and agencies who already carry out the EQA of research.

7.1. QUESTIONS FOR ALL AGENCIES

What role can QA agencies play in the EQA of research?

There is no one-size-fits-all answer to this question. As described in this study, those agencies that are already involved in the EQA of research rely on and benefit from a supportive national framework that details what they are expected to review. Thus, depending on the national context, it may be up to the agency alone, or in consultation with national bodies, including ministries, associations and networks representing HEIs, and national research agencies, to define what its role should be in relation to the EQA of research. Consultation with stakeholders, including HEIs, could also clarify expectations regarding the role of agencies. From a legal point of view, it is essential to clarify the mandate and tasks of the agency, as well as its interaction with other national bodies. Indeed, the results of this study show that in some countries the agencies are the only ones in charge of the EQA of research, while in other countries it may be a shared responsibility with other national bodies or the full responsibility of these bodies. However, in the latter case, it is rather research assessment that seemed to be carried out by other bodies while the EQA of research may be entirely missing from the national landscape.

Beyond the legal aspects that may define the role of an agency as regards the EQA of research, it is possible to consider some conceptual overarching principles. As explained in this study, the EQA of research can be seen as an important concern because it can support and improve the quality of research by taking a broader perspective and complementing research assessment procedures that focus on the assessment of research output. Moreover, the links between curriculum, learning and teaching and research are the cornerstone of a relevant education that enlightens and supports students to face the challenges of the 21st century by developing cross-disciplinary and scientific and artistic skills, acquiring critical thinking skills to improve problem-solving skills, counter the rise of fake news and develop creative thinking, acquiring up-to-date knowledge and understanding the changing needs of society. As many HEIs already include research in their IQA procedures, addressing the EQA of research could also be a matter of keeping up with (new) developments of HEIs and remaining fit for purpose. In particular, EQA of research is a way of acknowledging and recognising the significance of research in European HEIs' IQA procedures – 93% of them cover research (EUA, 2023a).

The role of agencies in terms of the EQA of research is thus highly context-dependent and varies from one country to another depending on the political forces, the evolution of the higher education system and the existence of other relevant organisations. EQA of research can also take various forms depending on the needs of the countries and can be carried out at institutional level, programme level or research unit level. Although not the focus of this study, some agencies also carry out the EQA of research organisations, which can be thus considered in the scope of research-relevant activities conducted by the agencies.

What sources and tools can agencies consult to develop or improve the EQA of research procedures?

To this day, there is no official guidance on the EQA of research for agencies to rely on. However, several concrete examples of standards and guidelines and EQA procedures were presented in this

study and can serve as food for thought. In any case, these do not replace national frameworks and guidelines pertaining to research which could be a starting point for all agencies.

On top of that, although they are not directly targeting the EQA of research, the existing documents and declarations on research assessment lay the ground for responsible EQA of research practices, including sensitivity to striking the right balance between quantitative and qualitative reviews of research-related content. Although different, the EQA of research and research assessment are linked. Recommendations for research assessment such as HEIs' recruitment processes and the need to consider research activities in their own context (in line with the HEI's missions and local needs), etc, are a component of what makes up an effective research environment, which is the focus of the EQA of research. Therefore, the following documents could be helpful for agencies exploring work in this area:

- For general recommendations on research assessment: DORA (2012), Frascati Manual (OECD, 2015), Leiden Manifesto (Hicks *et al.*, 2015) and documents provided by the CoARA;
- For targeted guidelines approved by the European Commission: European Code of conduct for research integrity (ALLEA, 2023), European Charter for Researchers (Council of the European Union, 2023);
- For recommendations on research in doctoral education: Salzburg principles (EUA, 2005 and 2010);
- Form recommendations on artistic research: "Share handbook for artistic research education" (Wilson and Van Ruiten, 2013) and "Florence Principles" on the doctorate in the arts (ELIA, 2016).

Beyond this, cooperation and sharing of practice between agencies is a proven and effective tool for improvement, so opportunities for peer learning or job shadowing between agencies to share experiences on the EQA of research could be further explored. However, a smooth and effective implementation of the EQA of research requires a collective approach to the development of guiding tools at the national level, through enhanced dialogue between the stakeholders, and at the European level, through more concrete and agreements between the EHEA, QA agencies and the ERA. Funding opportunities can support such endeavours (e.g., staff exchange scheme of the Bologna Follow-Up Group; Erasmus+ calls and European Twinning projects; INQAAHE capacity building scheme...).

7.2. QUESTIONS FOR AGENCIES WISHING TO DEVELOP THE EQA OF RESEARCH

What enablers support the successful development of the EQA of research by agencies?

This study shows that there are a couple of factors supporting agencies in developing their EQA of research practices.

First and foremost, the agencies need to operate within a national framework that enables them to carry out the EQA of research. It must be possible and specified in their mandate whether agencies can cover research aspects in their reviews at the level of HEIs, study programmes, research units and/or national research organisations. If the responsibility of EQA of research is shared with other bodies, it is important to clarify the role, scope and tasks of all the parties involved.

However, this is not enough. Although they may be entitled to do so, agencies may find it difficult to carry out the EQA of research without the support of their HEI community. It is therefore important to work closely with HEIs to raise awareness of the importance and benefits of the EQA of research, and not to impose such reviews on HEIs that might be reluctant to undertake them. Starting with a pilot process with voluntary HEIs could help others to support this type of review after seeing its

benefits. In this case, cooperation between HEIs at national level may also be useful to support the activities of the agencies, as some HEIs may act as advocates of the EQA of research. It is also important to ensure that the higher education community makes a clear distinction between the EQA of research and research assessment, as in most cases it is the latter that causes reluctance.

To what extent might existing EQA procedures be adjusted to better take research and societal impact into account?

This question can be approached through two lenses: firstly, by looking at the European documents already available and, secondly, by looking at the standards and guidelines and procedures that agencies have already put in place to carry out their activities.

As explained in this study, most agencies have used the ESG to develop their frameworks and procedures, as there is little other guidance available on the EQA of research. Indeed, the ESG provide a baseline for all EQA activities that can be adapted to research and already address the links between learning and teaching and research. It remains to be seen whether the next version of the ESG, to be tabled for adoption at the EHEA Ministerial Conference in 2027, may include more references to research and further support for agencies in conducting the EQA of research. However, as has been shown in this study, agencies do not seem to consider the lack of reference to research in the ESG as a barrier to EQA of research and, instead, rely on other existing standards and guidelines. Indeed, parts 2 and 3 of the ESG, which deal respectively with EQA procedures and internal agency procedures, can be adapted to the EQA of research. Agencies may wish to give further consideration to:

- the way in which they address research-related issues in their own standards and guidelines in a fit-for-purpose manner (ESG 2.2);
- the information and data on research activities they require from HEIs in the self-evaluation report and from stakeholders they meet during the on-site or online visit to the institution (ESG 2.3);
- the selection and training of relevant experts in research management and policy (ESG 2.4).

Second, in terms of the standards and procedures that agencies can use for the EQA of research, they are not obliged to develop new frameworks from scratch and can build on their existing documents while adding more references to research and societal impact. For those agencies that focus only on EQA of learning and teaching and may wish to engage in the EQA of research, the starting point could be to prioritise which aspects of research they wish to cover and discuss this with their higher education community. As this study has shown, consultation with stakeholders is key to developing the EQA of research practices that meet their needs and do not set the bar too high. Agencies might therefore consider expanding the scope of their standards and guidelines in a step-by-step manner and in a prioritised order, depending on their national culture and context. Is it relevant to address research integrity, open science or non-discrimination policies in the university research environment at this stage? Or is it more relevant to focus first on the implementation and functioning of general aspects related to research management and policy, such as the research strategy and internal QA system of HEIs? Should the EQA of research be carried out at institutional, programme or research unit level? Such considerations could also take into account the degree of autonomy enjoyed by HEIs in a given country. Section 5.1.2 of this report also gives examples of key areas that agencies could cover as part of the EQA of research. Agencies could also consider linking their different EQA procedures (at institutional, programme and research unit level), for example to avoid overlap when developing their frameworks based on existing methodologies.

Where necessary, agencies could also consider recruiting staff with specific knowledge of the research sector or training their current staff. This report shows that such staff occupy different positions,

depending on the organisation of the agency. For example, they are directly responsible for carrying out the external review of the agency, sit on its governing board or are part of its expert panel.

7.3. QUESTIONS FOR AGENCIES ALREADY ENGAGED IN THE EQA OF RESEARCH

How can agencies ensure efficient procedures for EQA of research and their smooth implementation?

HEIs that have undergone several external reviews often tire of them, as they require significant human and financial resources and can become burdensome, complex and bureaucratic. They suffer from what has recently been termed “QA fatigue” or “evaluation fatigue”, which can be exacerbated when EQA processes overlap and agencies ask for the same information and data in different processes, or when EQA processes are lengthy. Broad agency mandates, including the EQA of research, can therefore lead to such overlaps, while also responding to universities’ calls for simplification.

A simple solution mentioned by the agencies consulted in this study is to include references to research directly in their institutional standards and guidelines. Institutional reviews have a broad scope that easily enables the inclusion of standards on the research management and policy, the research infrastructures and units, etc., without multiplying the EQA procedures and site visits to the HEIs.

Another possible solution is for agencies to better link the different EQA processes they undertake and build bridges between the standards of their different frameworks. For example, some agencies have linked their institutional reviews to their programme reviews, including at the doctoral level. Others include the review of research units in such “integrated EQA approaches.” Such approaches require a thorough mapping of the standards and guidelines of each procedure in order to identify the overlaps and relevant links between the institutional, programme and research unit levels. Data collection should also be streamlined to avoid asking HEIs for the same information more than once. The agencies surveyed and interviewed in this study, indicated that, where possible, they used publicly available information on research in national databases to inform their reviews. Moreover, in some countries, positive results in one type of external review (e.g. research units) may waive some standards in other related external reviews (e.g. doctoral programmes). Such links help to simplify procedures and combat the QA fatigue.

How can agencies strike a good balance between the use of qualitative and quantitative indicators for EQA of research?

With the growing importance attached to the reform of research assessment with several important movements in the last decade (DORA, Leiden Manifesto, Frascati Manual, CoARA, etc...), discussions on the balance between quantitative and qualitative use of indicators are now frequent. Over-reliance on quantitative indicators tends to favour reductionist approaches to the quality of research output and to privilege quantity over quality, while marginalising non-traditional forms of research. Such intensive use of quantitative indicators can lead to a “publish or perish” culture that also threatens research integrity. These movements to reform research assessment therefore tend to favour a more responsible use of quantitative indicators, which can be used alongside qualitative indicators.

Agencies alone cannot be responsible for a more responsible use of quantitative indicators in their national context; they must seek the support of their stakeholders. It is therefore important that their vision trickles down to the experts through training and to the HEIs when they are informed about the aims and the process of their next review. Support from the relevant ministry and research funding agency could also be a great asset.

In order to contribute to such movements, agencies could start by using a broad and inclusive definition of research activities in their EQA procedures, meaning that they could value all types of

research (e.g., fundamental, applied, artistic) and thus research output. Indeed, research does not only lead to scholarly literature, but can also be used to develop software, databases, documentaries, exhibitions and grey literature, including policy reports, etc. In this way, agencies can be sure that they are supporting and accounting for qualitative indicators of research. Some agencies invite HEIs to provide them with a portfolio of research output which they consider representative of their research strategy and activities, and which may include all types of research output. The research output in such portfolios is not intended to be evaluated as such, but rather to provide examples of the work of the HEIs. Such documents can provide agencies and their experts with a broad overview of the type of research carried out by HEIs through a qualitative approach.

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9. Abbreviations

| | |
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| A3ES | Agency for Evaluation and Accreditation of Higher Education (Portugal) |
| ACSUCYL | Quality Assurance Agency for the University System in Castilla y León (Spain) |
| AHPGS | Accreditation Agency in Health and Social Sciences (Germany) |
| AIC | Academic Information Centre (Latvia) |
| ANECA | National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain |
| ANQA | National Centre for Professional Education Quality Assurance Foundation (Armenia) |
| ANVUR | National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes (Italy) |
| AQ Austria | Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria |
| AQAS | Agency for Quality Assurance through Accreditation of Study Programmes (Germany) |
| AQUA | Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education in Andorra |
| AQUIB | Balearic Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (Spain) |
| ASG-QA | African Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education |
| ASHE | Agency for Science and Higher Education (Croatia) |
| CoARA | Coalition on Advancing Research Assessment |
| CTI | Commission des Titres d'Ingénieur (CTI) |
| DORA | San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment |
| EHEA | European Higher Education Area |
| ENQA | European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education |
| EQA | External quality assurance |
| EQ-Arts | Enhancing Quality in the Arts |
| ERA | European Research Area |
| ESG | Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area |
| EUA | European University Association |
| evalag | Evaluation Agency of Baden-Württemberg (Germany) |
| FIBAA | Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (Germany) |
| FINEEC | Finnish Education Evaluation Centre |
| HAKA | Estonian Quality Agency for Education |
| Hcéres | High Council for the Evaluation of Research and Higher Education (France) |
| HEI | Higher education institution |
| IAQA | Icelandic Agency for Quality Assurance |

| | |
|---------|--|
| IQA | Internal quality assurance |
| KAA | Kosovo Accreditation Agency |
| MAB | Hungarian Accreditation Committee |
| NCEQE | National Centre for Educational Quality Enhancement (Georgia) |
| NVAO | Accreditation Organisation of the Netherlands and Flanders |
| PKA | Polish Accreditation Committee |
| QA | Quality assurance |
| QA-FIT | Quality Assurance Fit for the Future |
| SAAHE | Slovak Accreditation Agency for Higher Education |
| SKVC | Centre for Quality Assessment in Higher Education (Lithuania) |
| THEQC | Turkish Higher Education Quality Council |
| TKTA | Education Quality Assurance Agency (Azerbaijan) |
| UKÄ | Swedish Higher Education Authority |
| Unibasq | Agency for the Quality of the Basque University System (Spain) |

Appendix: documentation on research assessment useful for the EQA of research

CoARA, Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment, 2022

CoARA is a coalition of research funding organisations, research performing associations, national/regional assessment authorities and agencies, as well as associations of the above organisations, learned societies and other relevant organisations. Their vision is that the assessment of research, researchers and research organisations recognises the diverse outputs, practices and activities that maximise the quality and impact of research. This requires basing assessment primarily on qualitative judgement, for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators. They drafted an agreement in 2022, which is signed by some quality assurance agencies.

DORA, Declaration on Research Assessment, 2012

DORA's mission is to advance practical and robust approaches to research assessment globally and across all scholarly disciplines. Its objective is to call attention to new tools and processes in research assessment and the responsible use of metrics that align with core academic values and promote consistency and transparency in decision-making.

Frascati Manual, 2015

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Frascati Manual is an essential tool for statisticians and science and innovation policy-makers worldwide. It includes definitions of basic concepts, guidelines for data collection and classifications for the compilation of research and development statistics.

Leiden Manifesto, 2015

The Leiden Manifesto for Research Metrics proposes 10 principles for the measurement of research performance. Published as a commentary in *Nature*, it states that “the best decisions are taken by combining robust statistics with sensitivity to the aim and nature of the research that is evaluated. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence are needed; each is objective in its own way.”

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