

# The Quality Assurance Framework in the European Higher Education Area 2030: From Integration to Innovation

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## | Abstract

The paper addresses the issue of quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area in alignment with excellence priorities and trends highlighted in the modern higher education landscape and the revised organizational excellence models. While the European framework for quality assurance rests upon institutional consolidation, an acquis of clearly defined processes and methodologies, criteria and tools, it seems that the characteristics of the economic and social context necessitate a fresh look amid higher education developments, the quest for sustainable pathways, technological omnipresence and disruptions. Hence, the study at hand attempts to identify those priorities that will rejuvenate quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and build the foundations for global innovation.

**Keywords:** Quality Assurance, Europe, Excellence, Innovation, Higher Education

## 1. Introduction and Paper Objectives

The higher education sector has been one of the most dynamic in terms of growth globally. The global higher education market is estimated to reach 1.6 trillion USD by 2030<sup>2</sup> (in comparison to nearly 800 billion USD of 2024) driven by greater technology and AI (Artificial Intelligence) integration, lifelong learning and upskilling demand, and the growth of private higher education (mainly due to its flexibility in admission policies and career-oriented study programmes). The growth surge is marked by global enrollments, which, in 2023 reached 264 million students (most of whom study in Asia) and almost 7 million international students. Among the reasons for growth are population increases in various parts of the world, the high demand for advanced skills and (sustainable) economic development.

<sup>1</sup> Disclaimer: The views expressed in this paper are of the author only and do not by any means reflect the views of HAHE.

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Market Size, Share & Trends Report, (2024-2030), available at: <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/higher-education-market> [last accessed 10 February 2026].

The study at hand revolves around the notion that higher education institutions and the system of higher education at the national level need a professional way of management. That kind of management would not focus only on control and efficiency, but it would match the peculiar character of universities and their quality orientation. This need comes from the fact that universities differ in size, scope of activities, ambitions for global competitiveness and complexity in comparison to the past.

The operation of modern universities and higher education systems involves thousands of people, expensive infrastructure and sophisticated IT systems and interacting networks of producing value (e.g. innovation ecosystems). So, they cannot rely on informal methods or collegial governance, practices that might have worked in the past. Their coordination today demands specialized managerial knowledge. In addition, universities navigate among paradoxes. The shrinking of public funding pushes HEIs to operate efficiently and effectively, while they strive to attract high caliber academic staff and students, which requires knowledge of strategic marketing. Balancing these two conflicting factors requires an internal coordinating mechanism, which is management. Moreover, the responsible higher education policy bodies and society care for transparency and excellent performance that can be monitored through managerial tools and relevant metrics. Then, any decisions would be grounded on evidence.

For the last few years, higher education institutions have been in a state of profound transformation. This transformation is driven by challenges, such as technology and its most advanced conceptualization (Artificial Intelligence-AI) (e.g. integration in the academic and administrative processes of universities, curricula redesign for strengthening graduates' employability, digital learning), demographic (declining student populations in several countries) and financial pressures (declining state funding), discussions on the value of higher education (need for demonstrating outcomes, program life cycle management, collaborations with stakeholders), the quest for sustainability (sustainability courses, sustainability perspectives in research, responsible management frameworks and relevant Key Performance Indicators-KPIs), the need for building resilience (ability to navigate and maintain operation in erratic conditions, such as escalating conflicts, political shifts and interventions), responsible citizenship and democratic preservation (enhance and maintain the democratic profile of societies, steer a culture of fairness, meritocracy and equal opportunities for all)<sup>3</sup>. As a result of these challenges, universities have been reflecting on their mission and adjusting their governance systems, structure and academic functions with reference to the provision for high quality education, research and social contribution.

The question that arises at this point is why we specifically need quality management. Simply because higher education is a quality-centered system and thus, quality management (apart from the technical/hard requirements) offers the necessary cultural/soft elements needed to support its operation. Total Quality Management (TQM) constitutes a management philosophy that does not threaten education and aims not to contrast traditional academic values. It aims to steer university operations in a complex global setting. TQM is not to be confused with complexity and an over emphasis on regulations and procedures. If this happens, then quality has failed and those responsible would have to investigate why this happened. The essence of TQM is organizational transformation built on personal change. Personal change will come from the profound understanding of TQM through education, training, experience and a lot of reflection. Then, quality becomes an everyday way of thinking and acting, thus behaving.

<sup>3</sup> Karakhanyan, S., Kinser, K., *Global Trends in Tertiary Education QA: Challenges and Opportunities in Internal and External QA*, Brill, Leiden, 2025.

Great management scholars, like Deming, Juran, Crosby, Schein and Senge agree that quality is a mindset, it is primarily human behavior and then, managerial philosophy and technical methodology. It is only when quality becomes a part of personal identity that it is not a tool but a value that drives behaviors, decisions and relationships. High performance follows as a natural outcome of a properly cultivated culture.

Again, someone could argue that adopting TQM in higher education is controversial, because it imposes a business model logic into an academic setting. This reflects a simplistic and a very narrow knowledge of TQM often combined with “hidden” organizational immaturity to embrace the quality mindset. This immaturity may take the form of identified concerns, such as:

- a)** the perception of the threatened academic freedom because of the standardization of processes (however, quality management focuses on standardizing the steps of processes and not academic choices or learning content or student outcomes). A quality-oriented institution pursues a teaching process with clear steps that guarantees the achievement of learning outcomes for its students. The teaching staff does not have any constraints in crafting personalized learning paths and selecting content for students.
- b)** the over-emphasis on data (however, it is evidence-based thinking that protects universities from individually motivated decisions or other interventions and allows for a concrete continuous improvement plan with clear goals, time frames and responsibilities),
- c)** the role of student as a customer (TQM views students as primary receivers and co-producers of educational services, thus there is a shared responsibility for quality and the overall educational experience).
- d)** increased disappointment caused by the need for quick results (quality management as a quality philosophy does not produce quick fixes or offer shortcuts for excellence, it takes time to bear fruit). Overall, quality is the path for excellence. TQM offers a cultural framework for institutional transformation (kaizen), and its results are maximized when it is used in combination with modern agile practices, biology informed management and technological applications<sup>4</sup>.

The developments in the higher education context underline the strong need for quality assurance systems to continue securing relevance, comparability and trust and be safe navigators for universities in their quest for excellence. For instance, the expansion of higher education in the form of new universities and higher enrollment numbers is not translated automatically to similar governance systems, resources and academic quality among them. This means that a mechanism is needed to assure some (at least) minimum quality criteria and fundamental characteristics for efficient and effective academic and organizational operation. The same applies for the case of various higher education institutional types (e.g. private, microcredential providers, alliances) in which quality assurance is entrusted with

<sup>4</sup> Anninos, L. N., Dahlgaard-Park S. M., Dahlgaard J. J., *Leveraging AI and Neuroscience: a Transformative Leadership Paradigm for achieving Sustainable Excellence*, KSQM-QMOD-ICQSS 2025 Joint International Conference, Seoul, Korea, 26/9/2025-28/9/2025.

Anninos, L. N., *Towards the “Homo Deus” excellence perspective: Investigating the potential use of neuroscientific findings and technology for smart services*, “International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences”, Vol. 11, no. 4 2019, pp. 542-558.

the responsibility of safeguarding consumer protection and accountability. However, the value of a comprehensive quality assurance approach would be higher if it transcended the narrow scope of a compliance exercise.

Quality assurance systems provide solid proof that academic qualifications meet certain standards and contribute to internationalization through student mobility and partnerships among institutions and other economic and social entities in the form of alliances that expand the horizon of higher education and offer greater possibilities to students<sup>5</sup>. Further on, as online and hybrid modes of higher education are growing, it is crucial that quality assurance frameworks set certain requirements, for example, in AI teaching and learning. This is also related to the transition towards skill-based economies in which the possession of specific hard and soft skills becomes more important than the traditional degrees for employment.

Quality assurance, in general, is expected to become more focused on results (e.g. learning outcomes, employability, institutional impact), integrate technology (data collection and analysis in real time, performance monitoring boards), align itself with global goals (e.g. SDG) and the need for mutual recognition in a globalized context (e.g. European Standards and Guidelines-ESG) but it should also steer evidence based decision-making (e.g. KPI dashboards, analytical learning) and ensure university transformation (e.g. quality culture, stakeholder engagement, innovation in academic and administrative functions) as compliance is not enough for achieving excellence in the long term.

Taking into account the aforementioned developments in the field of higher education, the study at hand presents the European approach for quality assurance in higher education and discusses how it could evolve from a compliance exercise into a quality framework for the pursuit of excellence, by utilizing critical features from business excellence frameworks, such as the European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) model that provide the managerial infrastructure for implementing TQM.

## 2. Quality assurance in the European higher education

Quality in higher education is a transformative, human-centered mindset and a set of behaviors – both scientific and administrative – that, when combined with appropriate systems, aim for the optimal performance of an institution's academic and organizational pillars. Quality is realized through the convergence of specific intellectual values, administrative practices, and technical procedures<sup>6</sup>. The process of quality assurance involves continuous internal and external evaluations designed to foster constant improvement and accountability.

Central to the success of building quality are managerial knowledge and leadership, which are critical factors in advancing an institution's "quality maturity" and ensuring that its processes align with a

<sup>5</sup> Council of the European Union. *Council Recommendation of 12 May 2025 on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education (C/2025/3006)*, "Official Journal of the European Union", 28 May 2025 <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/3006/oj/eng> [last accessed 10 February 2026]

<sup>6</sup> Anninos, L. N., Kostopoulou, G., *Towards a new identity of Greek higher education*, in Gavrilidou, Z., Marsidou, S., Gavaki, S., (eds.), *2005-2021 Quality Assurance in Greek HEIs: From institutional evaluation to planning agreements: Challenges and Perspectives*, Quality Assurance Unit, Democritus University of Thrace, Komotini 2022, pp. 26-51.

genuine quality culture<sup>7</sup>. The higher the quality maturity is, the higher the alignment of processes and mechanisms with quality culture. Furthermore, the sincere adoption of quality as a core value by both leadership and the academic community is considered the most vital step toward a structured quality assurance process. Ultimately, effective quality assurance serves as a prerequisite for accreditation, which determines an institution's eligibility for legal operation and public funding<sup>8</sup>.

In Europe, quality transformation of higher education has been officially supported by the Bologna declaration and a noteworthy number of European countries. Since then, the European framework for internal and external quality assurance in higher education has been the result of gradual development. The European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education were presented in 2005, and since then (currently in their 2015 revised edition) they provide the reference point for internal and external quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

According to the core principles of ESG, quality assurance is a primary responsibility of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). ESGs are suitable for diverse higher education systems, institutions, study programmes and students, the cultivation of a quality culture, and they consider the needs and expectations of students and other stakeholders. They focus on teaching and learning, they are oriented towards the improvement of quality of higher education in the EHEA and support trust, a basic precondition for recognition and mobility, and they also provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA. The ESGs are organized into three modules that form a comprehensive cycle of quality<sup>9</sup> (Table 1):

Table 1 - The ESG 2015 modules

| Internal quality assurance:<br>how quality should be managed internally | External quality assurance:<br>how external agencies evaluate the internal processes of HEIs | Quality Assurance agencies:<br>standards for systematically demonstrating compliance with ESG |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.1 Policy for quality assurance                                        | 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance                                              | 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance                                    |
| 1.2 Design and approval of programmes                                   | 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose                                                  | 3.2 Official status                                                                           |
| 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment                   | 2.3 Implementing processes                                                                   | 3.3 Independence                                                                              |
| 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification       | 2.4 Peer-review experts                                                                      | 3.4 Thematic analysis                                                                         |
| 1.5 Teaching staff                                                      | 2.5 Criteria for outcomes                                                                    | 3.5 Resources                                                                                 |
| 1.6 Learning resources and student support                              | 2.6 Reporting                                                                                | 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct                                       |
| 1.7 Information management                                              | 2.7 Complaints and appeals                                                                   | 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies                                                      |

<sup>7</sup> Anninos, L., N., *Overcoming complacency through quality intelligence in Greek higher education: The critical role of academic leadership*, in Baporikar, N., and Sony, M., (eds.) *Quality management principles and policies in higher education*, IGI Global, Hershey, PA 2020, pp.121-140.

Philip, B. Crosby, *Quality is free: The art of making quality certain*, McGraw-Hill, New York 1979.

<sup>8</sup> Vlasceanu, L., Grünberg, L., Pârlea, D., *Quality Assurance and Accreditation: A Glossary of Basic Terms and Definitions*, UNESCO, Bucharest, 2007.

<sup>9</sup> ENQA, *European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)*, 2015.

[https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf) [last accessed 10 February 2026].

| Internal quality assurance:<br>how quality should be managed internally | External quality assurance:<br>how external agencies evaluate the internal processes of HEIs | Quality Assurance agencies:<br>standards for systematically demonstrating compliance with ESG |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1.8 Public information                                                  |                                                                                              |                                                                                               |
| 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes               |                                                                                              |                                                                                               |
| 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance                                |                                                                                              |                                                                                               |

While it is pertinent to reiterate that ESGs are not a static but a dynamic tool for quality assurance that transforms itself to better serve the changing requirements for excellence in higher education, several points constitute areas for further discussion despite their popularity and influence.

First, ESGs *focus* on universities` academic pillar. A comprehensive quality assurance framework means that universities are expected to design, implement and sustain a comprehensive quality management system permeating both pillars (academic and organizational). The key point here to understand is that those two pillars interact, define outcomes and produce value. Thus, if university excellence is sought, then a quality assurance approach that focuses on the one over the other pillar seems unsuitable and inadequate. For instance, suppose that the academic staff of a university department identifies a need for offering a study program on “HR analytics for public organizations” because an increasing number of public sector entities seek to employ graduates with relevant skills and a critical mass of students is interested in attending such a program. The academic staff would engage in the design of the program, they would discuss teaching methods and assessment, the course content, they would benchmark against similar study programs from abroad, and would be responsible for teaching, supervising and supporting students once the program has started. Following the formation of the idea about a new study program, several organizational tasks would also have to be conducted to allow for the smooth operation of the program. These tasks would include financial and human resources planning, preparations for quality assurance and accreditation, infrastructure support, governance and decision-making procedures, which all of them fall into the organizational pillar of the university. Hence, it is the interaction of both pillars that transforms an academic endeavor into a quality study program aligned with the needs of the labor market that enhances student learning, which further strengthens university reputation. So, the question that arises at this point is whether a university would benefit from a broader quality management framework for excellence (with guidelines and support) handling managerial issues. This need not be prescriptive (like a checklist) and dictate one proper way to manage a university but allow each university to determine its own path for excellence. Then, the added value of ESGs in university quality assurance would be higher, because it would act as an antidote to managerial ignorance and experimentation which impact academic operation and sometimes produce superficial quality results.

The next area of concern is the *superficial compliance* of higher education institutions with quality requirements and not their actual integration into the institutional internal quality assurance system. Superficial compliance may include the production of quality assurance policies (from usually copied templates) not implemented in daily academic practice and other quality assurance reports for external evaluation, minimum staff engagement in quality assurance processes (last-minute mentality)

focusing on data collection only, etc. This issue may have an even larger impact in those cases in which quality accreditation is used as a political tool to affirm a “fake” orientation to excellence and quality improvement.

In addition, HEIs generally complain about *bureaucracy* and an *additional administrative burden* that takes resources away from their academic operation<sup>10</sup>. This is not only related to ESGs but to quality assurance in general and it happens because institutions need to collect data, documents, reports and prove that they have aligned quality procedures and processes. However, collecting papers is not synonymous with improvement and the process of adding more controls does not mean that the root causes of problems are identified and cured. Complicated processes denote low quality because quality aims to process simplification and as such, bureaucracy indicates errors and failures. Also, ESGs are sometimes seen as a strict control mechanism to assure compliance, something that creates the impression of imposing limitations on university autonomy. Again, this has to do with how universities perceive quality and how they choose to implement it. If they impose more rules, focus on avoiding mistakes instead of improvement and create a poorly designed quality mechanism with greater complexity, then quality is misinterpreted as a burden.

Another remark is the fact that ESGs are made to be used by all *types of higher education institutions*, which may raise complexities in the case of small or specialized institutions (vocational or on-line universities). While the universal character of ESGs is a positive feature, their scope would have to be interpreted within specific contexts (e.g. vocational, digital). In addition, it is questionable whether all institutions have the organizational capacity to operationalize ESGs (e.g. availability of quality assurance units) and certainly ESGs are more suitable for the “traditional” university type. ESGs could include, for example, specific guidelines and metrics particularly for small or vocational or on-line universities.

*Student-centered learning* may well be a priority of ESGs, but since they are not prescriptive and do not include specific indicators to assess learning quality, it leaves enough space for variation and interpretation of results not only of learning quality but also the actual outcomes of quality assurance in universities. Variation exists also in *student engagement* in quality assurance activities even though ESG emphasizes student participation<sup>11</sup>. There may be universities that take quality assurance seriously and may have training mechanisms for students, processes for student evaluation of courses that are systematically applied as well as other systematic surveys (e.g. student satisfaction) and learning loops to utilize quality assurance results. On the contrary other institutions may disregard the students` role in quality assurance, apply fragmented student evaluation processes and withhold useful information for fear of changes.

Finally, the pace of changes in the higher education landscape seems to surpass the pace of ESGs adaptation (e.g. AI integration in higher education, sustainability, resilience, micro credentials)<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>10</sup> Harvey, L., Newton, J., *Transforming quality evaluation*, “Quality in Higher Education”, Vol. 10, no. 2, 2004, pp.149-165.

<sup>11</sup> E4 Group, *The ESG in the Changing Landscape of Higher Education*, 2020. [https://www.eua.eu/downloads/publications/e4\\_statement\\_the\\_esg\\_in\\_the\\_changing\\_landscape\\_of\\_higher\\_education.pdf](https://www.eua.eu/downloads/publications/e4_statement_the_esg_in_the_changing_landscape_of_higher_education.pdf) [last accessed 10 February 2026].

<sup>12</sup> European Commission, *A European Approach to Micro-Credentials*, 2022. <https://education.ec.europa.eu/sites/default/files/document-library-docs/european-approach-micro-credentials-higher-education-consultation-group-output-final-report.pdf> [last accessed 10 February 2026]. E4 Group, *The ESG in the Changing ...*, cit.

Despite these areas for concern, certain strategic priorities for enhancing quality assurance in higher education have been included in the 2025 Council recommendation on European quality assurance<sup>13</sup>. These refer to the need for supporting transformation of higher education (green and digital transition, demographic pressures), strengthening graduate tracking mechanisms, facilitating transnational collaboration (joint programmes, European Degree), and streamlining quality assurance procedures for reducing administrative burden. In this context, a revised version of ESGs is expected to appear in 2027 that would provide higher education with an updated framework for quality assurance<sup>14</sup>. Based on the key areas (digital and flexible learning, societal impact of higher education and inclusivity) for the 2027 revision, it is underlined that ESGs are being restructured and updated to ensure better alignment with the modern higher education context while their scope and implementation suitability remain the same. In addition, quality assurance is now emphasized as part of a larger frame that sets the circumstances for the promotion of social dimension and fundamental values for higher education. The ESGs also have an additional purpose, as they support various stakeholders' groups to continuously monitor and improve the education provided. Also, quality assurance continues to steer and allow for trust-based international collaboration.

The value of ESGs would be further maximized if they focused on the organizational university pillar as well and offered greater support for building and strengthening quality culture. Regarding this value maximization, the next section investigates how the evolution of business excellence models could offer ideas to further develop the European approach for quality assurance and create a comprehensive framework for university excellence.

### 3. Elevating Quality Assurance in Higher Education Towards TQM

The principles and theories of TQM, which originated in the USA and Japan, offer a framework for the organizational transformation of universities and a way to provide tangible evidence of excellence. This transformation is contingent upon the sincere adoption of quality as a core value by both institutional management and the academic community, ensuring it is reflected in daily practices and systems. To achieve that, a genuine shared commitment to purpose is needed. Furthermore, the challenges universities face in their pursuit of excellence should act as motivation for innovative thinking rather than obstacles. The conceptualization of universities as organizations and the development of TQM as a scientific field have contributed to making institutional evaluation a standard practice.

Since the 1990s, many global institutions have implemented TQM, though they have reported mixed results. For instance, Fox Valley College<sup>15</sup> in the USA saw encouraging outcomes, including improved graduate absorption into the labor market, higher employer satisfaction, and enhancements to the

<sup>13</sup> Council of the European Union, *Council Recommendation of 12 May 2025 on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education (C/2025/3006)*. "Official Journal of the European Union", 28 May 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/eli/C/2025/3006/oj/eng> [last accessed 10 February 2026].

<sup>14</sup> Biaggi, C., *What do higher education institutions want from quality assurance tools?* European University Association, Expert Voices, 2024. <https://www.eua.eu/our-work/expert-voices/what-do-higher-education-institutions-want-from-quality-assurance-tools.html> [last accessed 10 February 2026].

<sup>15</sup> Narasimhan, K., *Organizational climate at the University of Branton in 1996*, "Total Quality Management", Vol. 8, no. 2-3, 1997, pp. 233-237.

learning environment<sup>16</sup>. Research involving 34 countries indicated that while adopting business-oriented quality models often led to improvements in non-academic processes, this practice was less effective in the areas of teaching and learning<sup>17</sup>. Nevertheless, when properly implemented, TQM serves as a powerful enabler for quality improvement, specifically regarding student performance and overall satisfaction<sup>18</sup>. Effective implementation requires the interaction of leadership, strategic planning, and a focus on the service receiver, as well as a reliance on universal participation, evidence-based management, and a commitment to continuous improvement<sup>19</sup>. Consequently, a question that arises at this point is whether quality assurance alone is adequate to steer universities' attempts towards excellence.

Quality assurance is the first step towards excellence (as it emphasizes the stability of processes) and reaches its full potential only when it is applied within a TQM framework. TQM rests upon soft and hard enablers, whose interaction produces outcomes<sup>20</sup>. This is reflected in how the European University Association defines quality culture in which cultural/psychological elements and structural/managerial elements enhance quality and steer individual efforts towards excellence<sup>21</sup>. Thus, relying on quality assurance alone (especially only on the academic pillar) is not enough for universities pursuing excellence, as it may well certify that a university meets certain (usually minimum) standards, but it cannot drive cultural transformation and achieve excellence. To do that universities need a structured quality framework, such as a Business Excellence Model to support them as they proceed towards the full implementation of TQM.

Business Excellence Models (BEMs) are holistic frameworks that include a set of factors (enablers, results) often underpinned by specific values to provide a guide to organizations that aspire to implement quality. In addition, they may be complemented by diagnostic tools and self-assessment methodologies to help organizations through insight and foresight (analysis of results) in their journey towards excellence<sup>22</sup>. A BEM aims to guide an organization towards excellence and provide a structured path for self-assessment. The general idea of any business excellence framework is that any organization with fully committed leadership to the ideals and principles of quality, which formulates strategies, policies, practices and culture may achieve outstanding people, customer and societal results<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Kanji, G. K., Malek, A., Tambi, Bin A. *Total Quality Management in UK higher education institutions*, "Total Quality Management", Vol. 10, no. 1, 1999, pp. 129-153.

<sup>17</sup> Brookes, M., Becket, N., *Quality management in higher education: A review of international issues and practice*, "International Journal of Quality Standards", Vol. 1, 2007, pp. 1-37.

<sup>18</sup> Vamsi Krishna Jasti, N., Venkateswaran, V., Kota, S., *Total Quality Management in higher education: A literature review on barriers, customers and accreditation*, "The TQM Journal", Vol. 34, no. 5, 2022, pp. 1250-1272. Sakthivel, P.B., Rajendran, Raju, G., R., *TQM implementation and students' satisfaction of academic performance*, "The TQM Magazine", Vol. 17, no. 6, 2005, pp. 573-589.

<sup>19</sup> Fotopoulos C. B., Psomas, E. L., *The Impact of 'Soft' and 'Hard' TQM Elements on Quality Management Results*, "International Journal of Quality & Reliability Management", Vol. 26 no. 2, 2009, pp.150-163.

Lagrosen, Y., Lagrosen, S., *The Effects of Quality Management - A Survey of Swedish Quality Professionals*, "International Journal of Operations & Production Management", Vol. 25 no.10, 2005, pp. 940-952.

<sup>20</sup> Sahney, S., *Use of multiple methodologies for developing a customer-oriented model of total quality management in higher education*, "International Journal of Educational Management", Vol. 30, no. 3, pp. 326-353.

<sup>21</sup> European University Association, *Quality culture in European Universities: A bottom-up approach*, European University Association, Brussels 2006.

<sup>22</sup> Edgeman, R., Eskildsen, J., *International quality award models: Innovation enablers or inhibitors?* Proceedings of the 18th European Conference on Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Part 1, 2003, pp. 21-22.

<sup>23</sup> Anninos L. N., *The archetype of excellence in universities and TQM*, "Journal of Management History", Vol. 3 no. 4, 2007, pp. 307-321.

Hermel, P., Ramis-Pujol, J., *An evolution of excellence: some main trends*, "The TQM Magazine", Vol. 15, no. 4, 2003, pp. 230-243

Business excellence models provide the tools for measuring progress and outcomes of TQM implementation, they translate TQM values into criteria, they offer self-assessment guides, they help in unifying quality initiatives in a common strategic framework, they focus on achieving multiple results for all stakeholders and they relate quality practices to goals while they can also unveil gaps in quality processes that quality assurance criteria cannot point out. Applying a BEM is the basis for the full adoption of TQM and the acquisition of competitive advantage. Overall, quality assurance has a narrower focus and refers to processes and their stability while a BEM goes beyond compliance, supporting organizations towards strategic improvement and excellence.

The European approach for quality assurance in higher education may further evolve through the integration of certain elements from business excellence models. Business excellence models have a broader scope when adopted for higher education institutions and possess a stronger orientation towards continuous improvement and innovation in contrast with the ESG criteria.

While universities are quite different from businesses, they do constitute complex organizations that need to be managed. A university quality assurance framework that refers to both pillars would mean that university leaders would have a more profound and broader understanding of university strategy. This does not mean that a new approach for quality assurance would contradict university autonomy, namely a university's right to determine its management and governance, but it would provide a structured reference path for self-assessment and learning. The European approach does include a self-assessment phase but not in a structured and uniform way for all universities, some of which do not even have a comprehensive quality assurance framework aligned with their strategy. This has catastrophic consequences for the internal quality assurance system, because it does not have/develop the ability to learn from failure or provide robust methodologies for curing weaknesses. Contrary to the traditional quality assurance process which has a reactive character examining compliance to standards, BEMs promote proactive self-assessment as a tool for continuous improvement and strategic learning. This leads to the gradual development of universities' internal quality assurance system and overall quality maturity. Moreover, the revised versions of popular BEMs emphasize certain (new) organizational priorities for sustainable excellence, namely sustainability, agility and resilience and technology-mediated quality intelligence.

The first one, sustainability, refers to a more conscious growth that takes into consideration the rights and interests of future generations by adopting a balanced focus on the economy, society and environment<sup>24</sup>. As with business organizations, nowadays there can be no excellent universities, if they neglect sustainability, simply because excellence and sustainability are interrelated<sup>25</sup>.

A significant number of higher education institutions have already expressed their eagerness to align with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, several initiatives have been undertaken focusing on integrating sustainability aspects in the academic and organizational university pillars (such as the Principles for Responsible Management and Education-PRME), while relevant criteria have been included in some accreditation models (e.g. AACSB, AMBA) and ranking systems (e.g. Times Higher

<sup>24</sup> World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our common future* (Oxford Paperbacks), Oxford University Press, Oxford, New York, 1987.

<sup>25</sup> Anninos, L. N., Chytiris, L., *The sustainable management vision for excellence: Implications for business education*, "International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences", Vol. 4, no. 1, 2012, pp. 61-75.

Education Impact). Steady progress has been documented but further improvements can be achieved in three fronts, namely university operations, academic activities, management and governance. Hence, the interest of HEIs for sustainable development and the alignment of their operation with specific goals remains a challenge and a proof of pursuing excellence. This presupposes strategic intelligence and systemic awareness from institutional leadership. Leaders can contribute to sustainable development through the development of a suitable governance system (culture and commitment), the monitoring of the impact of their institutional activities on the environment, the cultivation of students' abilities to deal with changes and promote the implementation of sustainable development goals and collaborations with other stakeholders to improve social welfare<sup>26</sup>.

Another key priority for sustainable excellence is agility and resilience. Agility is also highlighted in BEMs as a key organizational feature that helps in achieving resilience from shocks and disruptive circumstances. Resilience is a valuable organizational feature that allows HEIs to navigate and maintain their operation in erratic conditions. A resilient university would be recognized by its capacity to productively respond to the changes that disrupt the expected pattern of events (for instance the onset of COVID19), while developing new capabilities to keep pace with changes and creating new opportunities. It is the combination of financial, technical, and social resources that lead an organization to success and competitiveness through the creation of value for customers and interested parties<sup>27</sup>. Resilience appears in BEMs as a priority (need for a future-focused strategy, agile processes and innovation, sustainable performance) reminding that organizations should not focus solely on becoming best for the present, but also for the future.

Finally, quality intelligence refers to the level of personal excellence and its ripple effects within an organization. It blends values, attitudes, knowledge, and a holistic or universal outlook that inspires individuals to pursue continuous and structured improvement. Quality-intelligent leaders transform quality culture into tangible elements – such as systems, processes, knowledge, and skills (the “what”) – and into intangible dimensions like behaviors, attitudes, and mindset (the “how”) that ensure the delivery of quality services. If quality intelligence is combined with technology, its effects are maximized, because it responds to the need for transformation that universities need. It also shapes the overall study experience, which is ultimately evaluated by students against their expectations – formed through reputation, feedback, and personal needs – before the service is even delivered. Consequently, technology-mediated quality intelligence impacts a university's culture, operation and attained results<sup>28</sup> and acts as the accelerator that enables a university to achieve excellence faster, more consistently, and more sustainably.

So, the next question that arises at this point is whether and what can the European Approach for Quality Assurance in higher education learn from the evolution of BEMs and their revised versions. To answer that, we take the EFQM model as a representative BEM example (due to its wide acceptance and use), but first, it has to be pointed out that the implementation of any BEM can certainly heighten

<sup>26</sup> Besta, Ch., Anninos, L. N., *Sustainable development in higher education: Aligning ESG standards with the requirements of sustainable development – Trends and Challenges for Greek Higher Education*, Hellenic Authority for Higher Education, Athens, 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Tengblad, S., Oudhuis, M., (eds.), *The resilience framework – Organizing for sustained viability*, Springer, Singapore, 2018.

<sup>28</sup> Anninos, L. N., *Overcoming complacency through quality intelligence in Greek higher education: The critical role of academic leadership*, in Baporikar, N., Sony, M., (eds.) *Quality management principles and policies in higher education*, IGI Global, Hershey, PA 2020, pp.121-140.

quality awareness in an organization; there may be barriers (e.g. insufficient managerial commitment and resources, absence of comprehensive quality training and staff involvement) in their adoption, and finally, BEMs should not be considered as substitutes for addressing fundamental organizational and behavioral shortcomings.

Having said that, the EFQM model puts purpose, vision and the production of sustainable value at its core, something that highlights a clear link between organizational vision, mission, quality practices and the production of sustainable value for students and university stakeholders. Thus, the model provides a comprehensive management framework outlining the relation of vision to measurable outcomes (both academic and managerial), the significance of partnerships and resource management and a wider frame for integrating other institutional missions (e.g. research, social role) into the quality loop.

In addition, the model highlights the role of stakeholders to produce value. The new version of ESG puts particular importance on assuring stakeholder engagement in the continuous improvement cycle of organizations. However, ESG place strong focus on the role of students, while BEMs include a wider array of stakeholders, thus highlighting the social dimension of higher education and its impact as well, in alignment with the Environment Social Governance (ESG) framework.

Regarding improvement, the EFQM model emphasizes performance measurement, KPIs and evidence-based decision making in contrast with ESGs that do not prescribe any robust measurement framework. ESGs could offer clearer guidance of critical university KPIs (e.g. teaching quality, student satisfaction, graduation pace) and allow for benchmarking against peer institutions. Moreover, a major feature of the EFQM model is the RADAR logic (Results, Approach, Deployment, Assessment and Refinement) which offers a structured self-assessment and refinement tool meaning that each strategic decision would be based on data. ESGs on the other hand do not include any self-assessment tool.

The EFQM model pays particular attention to the assessment of leadership, culture and staff empowerment, whereas ESG refers only to staff qualifications but not organizational culture. Thus, ESG could benefit from evaluating leadership commitment to quality, staff recognition, well-being (staff engagement and development is tied to academic excellence), the encouragement of distributed leadership and shared responsibility for quality.

Moreover, improvement is also related to transformation and innovation. The EFQM model can support the technological transformation of universities and improve their innovation capacity because it supports the integration of technology with strategy, facilitates the evaluation of leadership commitment to innovation and can help universities locate the areas in which they can use technology to streamline their processes. Hence, ESGs could be enriched by focusing on assessing the potential for new ideas and innovation and the participation of universities in innovation ecosystems while placing a greater emphasis on the digital transformation of governance and their academic functions.

In addition, ESGs are more concerned with outcomes and policies, while EFQM focuses on how organizations design, manage, and improve their processes. So, by adopting a process perspective, HEIs would proceed in process mapping and optimizing, ensuring consistency among departments, reducing bureaucracy and improving student experience.

Finally, the new EFQM model integrates sustainability and societal contribution as core elements. ESGs could benefit by embedding sustainability aspects, the evaluation of institutional social impact and community engagement and the encouragement of responsible governance and ethical practices, into the quality assurance criteria. By doing so, universities would have even greater potential on aligning with the Environment, Society and Governance framework.

## 4. Conclusions

The European approach for quality assurance in higher education is at a crossroad. It will either evolve through the integration of critical organizational priorities, modern quality practices and a greater conceptual approach on the teachings of TQM or gradually lose its appeal if it maintains its narrow scope and does not provide a comprehensive framework for university excellence. That would happen because European higher education needs to proceed from quality assurance to continuous quality improvement, become more strategic, data-driven, stakeholder-centered, and future-oriented. So, it is not about meeting minimum standards but also thriving in a rapidly changing educational landscape.

By learning from the evolution of BEMs, results become more important than compliance and continuous assessment and improvement cycles replace excessive paperwork (uses already available data, KPIs drawn from daily practice) and contribute to making quality a habit. Quality becomes intertwined with strategy and is assessed based on how well it supports the strategic goals of universities. The emphasis shifts from administrative control to shared responsibility as BEMs assess the effectiveness of cross-departmental processes, team collaboration, information sharing and collective decision making because quality is everybody's responsibility (Deming) and it is not a department but a process that crosses departmental boundaries.

The greater focus on culture, leadership behaviors, staff empowerment and learning reduces the need for excessive rules and highlights that simplification is an enabler for quality. A BEM can unify all university initiatives for quality (i.e. ISO for administrative processes, ESGs for academic processes) into a single framework because all organizations must be understood as systems. After all, quality is produced by a system, and an organization must understand and manage all those that affect and are affected by it (namely its stakeholders and not just its customers). Finally, quality does not happen by accident, but it is always the result of a conscious and intelligent endeavor. This endeavor is the combination of personal excellence and technology, and this duality provides organizations with the intelligence to experience quality principles in evolutionary ways often expressed through future oriented strategies.

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