EQUAMBI

Enhancing Quality Assurance Management and Benchmarking Strategies in Indian Universities

574023-EPP-1-2016-1-ES-EPPKA2-CBHE-JP

A Toolkit for the
Internal Quality Assurance Management Processes of the Indian Universities

Version, 15th January 2020

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1. Background and introduction[1]

The EQUAM-BI model developed by the Erasmus+ Project coordinated by the University of Barcelona and in collaboration with the National Assessment and Accreditation Council (NAAC) and 7 Indian universities, as well as 4 European universities and the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), takes up the initiative of the eponymous EQUAM-Jordan project developed between 2012 and 2015 under the TEMPUS programme call for the implementation of improvement mechanisms to create and strengthen structures to direct quality assurance processes in Jordanian universities (Patrici et al., 2014) and also coordinated by the University of. In the design of the EQUAM model and in its first implementation, the work done by Nick Harris, then international advisor to ANECA and until his retirement in 2009 Director for Enhancement and Development of QAA, the UK's quality agency, must be highlighted as essential and from this document we want to pay a well-deserved tribute to him.

The success of the project and the conviction that these processes can only be done by taking as a reference the higher education frameworks and the academic and institutional traditions in each territory, led to testing, this time with the support of the Erasmus+ programme, the model of analysis to other very different geographical and university contexts such as Morocco (Erasmus+ EQUAM-M project, 2017-2020), India (Erasmus+ EQUAM-BI project, 2017-2020) and even covering an entire region such as Latin America (Erasmus+ EQUAM-LAC project, 2020-2023).

The existence of different quality assurance regimes in different countries allows us to contrast that the internal quality assurance systems (hereinafter IQAS) of universities must go beyond the necessary compliance with the criteria or standards established by governments and/or accreditation agencies to respond to their own challenges defined in their mission and vision.

Thus, the internal quality assurance systems become true drivers for the achievement of strategic objectives as important for the universities of the 21st century as the effective management of information for decision making or the internationalization through the recognition of their reputation.

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[1] This version has been enriched with the contributions of the representatives of the Indian HE institutions of the EQuAM-BI Project in the consortium meeting held in Barcelona on 7 and 8 January 2020 and particularly by the representative of NAAC, Dr. Hasan Wahidul.

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The design of a toolkit to support universities in defining and implementing their IQAS has a dual value. Firstly, it underlines the importance that each IQAS should be thought and developed in each university closely linked to its mission, vision and strategic planning and within the framework of its own institutional governance architecture.

Secondly, the concept of the "Toolkit" refers to a methodological instrument that is easy to implement and facilitates the full autonomy of action of the body responsible for IQAS in each university, but gives the greatest importance to the national and international quality benchmark against which each university places its specific practice of internal quality assurance management. In other words, each university can "measure itself" continuously against the external benchmark according to its aspirations and the implementation schedule it has established in accordance with its strategic planning.

In this way, the benchmarking exercise adds value to the measurement against external quality references and the location of the university in the set of institutions at state level (in the case of India), country or region if it is done in an international or even global context. The university can be "ranked", placed in a classification, knowing that the comparison is made on shared quality criteria agreed by the universities with NAAC referenced in turn with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and not like the classic rankings that highlight indicators that privilege a specific international university profile. In this way the advantages of the quality assurance approach are reinforced with those of the rankings approach. Or, to put it another way, the weaknesses of both approaches complement each other in a positive way: "quality assurance is largely context blind, rankings are context biased" (Harris, 2017).

Thus, the principles on which the Toolkit is based are the criteria defined in the Indian Higher Education Accreditation Framework and the ESGs agreed by the networks of quality assurance agencies (hereinafter referred to as agencies). Therefore, the Toolkit does not reinvent the wheel, but connects the Indian national framework that binds the universities participating in the project, with the framework of standards relating to European IQAS in force since 2005 in the 47 countries that make up the EHEA.

The fruitful dialogue between the two frameworks, combined with the organisation, strategy and level of self-imposed requirements of each university, will enable them to work on the same level of understanding and compliance without compromising the rich institutional diversity that exists in the Indian higher education system. The Toolkit of the EQUAM-BI project thus reflects the spirit of support and reinforcement of the institutional strategy of the Indian universities of the EQUAM label, contributing to the generation of the necessary confidence for the sustainability of the regional areas of higher education.

The scope of the management of the internal quality assurance of the university, associated with the governance model of the institution, is thus transformed into a key element to support strategic areas such as the quality of teaching, research, or internationalisation by using in an innovative way the information extracted in the data collection processes.

The IQAS will be what university management wants it to be by ensuring that its implementation will contribute to the achievement of its strategic objectives beyond mere compliance with accreditation standards or the mere "checklist" of functional quality control that must be taken for granted as a basic condition.

That's the EQuAM model. Internal quality management linked to the institutional strategy inserted not only in institutional processes but also in teaching and learning, research, innovation and internationalization policies (Llavori et al., 2019: 25).

This statement obviously impacts on its external QA counterpart as follows: any improvement reform or exercise towards a more efficient external QA paradigm. This paradigm should be based on a collaborative and risk-based approach at the institutional level, where the university will take care of its internal quality assurance arrangements, regardless of national/regional/discipline-oriented requirements and expectations, measured against a shared quality assurance benchmark.

This model must refer to a particular "quality assurance architecture" deployed on three levels:

-   High level management
-   Structure behind IQA: department, unit, office, bureau, etc.
-   Procedure based on the ANECA AUDIT for the evaluation of IQAS and adapted for the EQuAM-BI project through the "Toolkit" for the Indian universities involved

t this point in the evolution of quality assurance in higher education practices around the world, it is time for external quality assurance agents to devolve some of their internal quality management responsibilities to universities, closely linked to the particular mission, vision and strategic planning of each institution. Thus, accreditation agencies can reorient their efforts and their external quality assurance tools towards those areas of the institutions that need more particular scrutiny for improvement, promoting and strengthening a quality culture within the university.

This approach, which allows agencies to pay different attention to each individual university, sends a very clear message of an external quality assurance mechanism aimed at value-added institutions and distances itself from the previous paradigm of a "one size fits all" external quality threshold or minimum compliance standard. Finally, this approach emerges with the current debate on internal versus external quality assurance practices, which is taking place at the global level, as shown by the latest agendas of international networks of agencies in Europe, Asia-Pacific and Africa (Llavori et al., 2019: 26).

2. The Toolkit

The Toolkit is the result of a project co-financed by the European Commission's Erasmus+ Programme coordinated by the University of Barcelona. The EQuAM-BI project, an acronym for "Enhancing Quality Assurance Management and Benchmarking Strategies in Indian Universities". The project aims to generate instruments that allow the introduction of the culture of "benchmarking" or measurement by international references in Indian universities, as a factor to promote a more efficient institutional governance based on proper information management for strategic decision-making.

The consortium that forms part of the project is made up of the following European partners: la University of Barcelona, the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), the KTH Royal Institute of Technology) of Sweden, Sapienza University of Rome (Italy), the University of Montpellier (UM) in France and the University of Nicosia (UN) in Cyprus. The Indian partner are: the National Assessment and Accreditation Council of India (NAAC), Jadavpur University (JU) Symbiosis International University (SIU), Indian Institute of Technology Madras (IITM), University of Mysore (UOM), Shivaji University, Kolhapur (SUK), Asian Institute of Gaming and Animation-Edulink Private Limited (EDULINK) and Mangalore University (MU).

The EQUAM-BI Project Toolkit should help the higher education institution (HEI) or university to define a strategic approach to quality management that will lead to the development of an explicit quality culture in that higher education institution. Such an approach should be assumed and supported by the HEI's decision-making body to ensure that it promotes and sustains a culture of institutional quality

To develop the Culture of Quality in the HEI it is essential that it works through its "five focus areas" identified in the "Survey" carried out in the framework of the EQUAM-BI project among Indian HEI coordinated by Symbiosis International (Deemed) University and which are the following:

    a) Teaching.

    b) Student Learning.

    c) Research.

    d) Innovation.

    e) Internationalization, services and community engagement.

The HEI must recognise the need to incorporate a quality policy with mechanisms for quality assurance and continuous quality improvement in all its major activities, so that it can function efficiently and effectively, carry out its mission and meet the needs of its various stakeholders in accordance with the governance model that governs its management and decision-making.

The HEI should commit itself to benchmarking its activities with appropriate national and international higher education institutions, and to identifying opportunities for improvement through extensive self-assessment, as well as to implementing these opportunities in a planned and monitored manner.

The university's Quality Policy should provide the framework and principles for establishing an operational Quality Management System to review the quality of the main activities in the university and ensure that they are aligned with the objectives and strategic plan that guides it.

2.1. The Toolkit: operating instructions.

Each university must define its own approach to creating a Quality Culture by taking stock of the elements that make up its "academic brand of prestige" and make it unique in the Indian higher

education landscape. This "stocktaking" should include the following elements that represent such an approach to a Quality Culture adapted to each university:

1. University's Mission, Vision and Values
2. its staff and students, and their commitment to meeting the expectations of all, including a recognition of individual's roles and responsibilities, and their achievements
3. noting the primary importance of internal quality assurance, designed to supplement quality enhancement and support a Quality Culture
4. an integrated "top down/bottom up" approach to quality management
5. a defined Goal
6. an achievable paradigm shift in the approach to 'quality'.

1. Mission, Vision and Values. Those defined by the university and made public by it.

2. 'Quality activities' are thus undertaken primarily to support the College's staff and students and secondarily, although essentially of course, to meet the necessary requirements of external bodies.

3. there is no single agreed international definition, but within the context of a Quality Culture includes: the integration of thinking and planning processes, communication, action, and decision-making, that result in the most effective and meaningful ways that quality assurance mechanisms can ensure and improve quality levels and support the dynamic ambitions of the College, including all of its staff and students.

4. The development of an explicit Quality Culture within a university is both a reflection of, and dependent upon, the commitment of individuals and groups of staff and students and continuing support of senior management. Whilst on-going, daily actions are the basis of the 'bottom-up' it is crucial that senior management provides 'top down' support particularly through a clear quality-related, communications policy.

Without claiming to exhaust all possibilities, a summary of the kind of questions that might be raised at this point could be as follows:

- the locus of primary responsibility for academic standards and the quality of teaching and learning
- the essential nature of reflecting on and integrating QA in all university activities

- the commitment to on-going internal quality review
- the aim of responding to external cyclical QA requirements largely through the outcomes of on-going internal quality review (as opposed to regarding these as additional 'burdens')
- the need for collection and collation of only essential data to provide evidence for QA decision making – with a shifting emphasis from 'how well have we done?" to "this shows how much we have improved".

5. The Goal, which necessarily will be integrated in the university management to be embedded within the 2020 Strategy – is to have a quality (management) system, in which meetings (at unit, programme, school, college levels) will be concerned not with reporting data merely to show that 'standards' have been achieved (though such data still needs to be recorded) but rather discussing how any problems were addressed and how 'quality' has been demonstrably 'enhanced', where the title of the QAuAM Project happily meet.

The process towards a Quality Culture is based largely on what the institution is currently doing and achieving, but doing it with greater clarity, focus, efficiency and effectiveness. In particular Staff will more easily see the beneficial impacts of their contributions, and that none of their efforts is 'wasted'. Students and stakeholders will more readily see how their contributions help in enhancing the university's reputation and the benefits they gain from this.

6. A paradigm shift is essential for a Quality Culture to develop. 'Quality' becomes integral to all aspects of the university work, not as an 'add-on' to meet external demands but as a means of being able to show, individually and collectively, that 'we are doing the very good, perhaps even the very best, job we think we are doing'. The key is in the difference between 'having to show' and 'being able to show' – and the prevailing ethos. Quality assurance often appears to be driven by usually cyclical, 'external demands', with the recently added 'burden' of also having to 'show enhancement'; activities are predominantly reactive and often 'closed'.

By contrast, with a Quality Culture activities are proactive and open, the focus is not on gathering (lots of) data but on identifying (just sufficient) information to best show how well (or not) activities achieve their aims. The emphasis shifts from 'process' to 'outcomes'.

The relationships between trust and making decisions determine, or are determined by, the nature of a family or an organisation (whether collegiate or hierarchical). Clear communication (policy) is

perhaps the most important aspect in the development and determination of that relationship, and essential to managing achievement of the university's goal of a Quality Culture and celebrating its success.

In order not to take its nature for granted, it is worth recalling the following elements that make up a Quality Culture:

1. Closely linked to institutional strategy
2. 'Grounded' in effective internal decision making processes/structures (not add on)
3. Context-sensitive (not 'copied' from somewhere different !)
4. Based on an ongoing development – but not punitive
5. Reflects institutional 'self confidence'
6. Reflects commitment by institution and staff
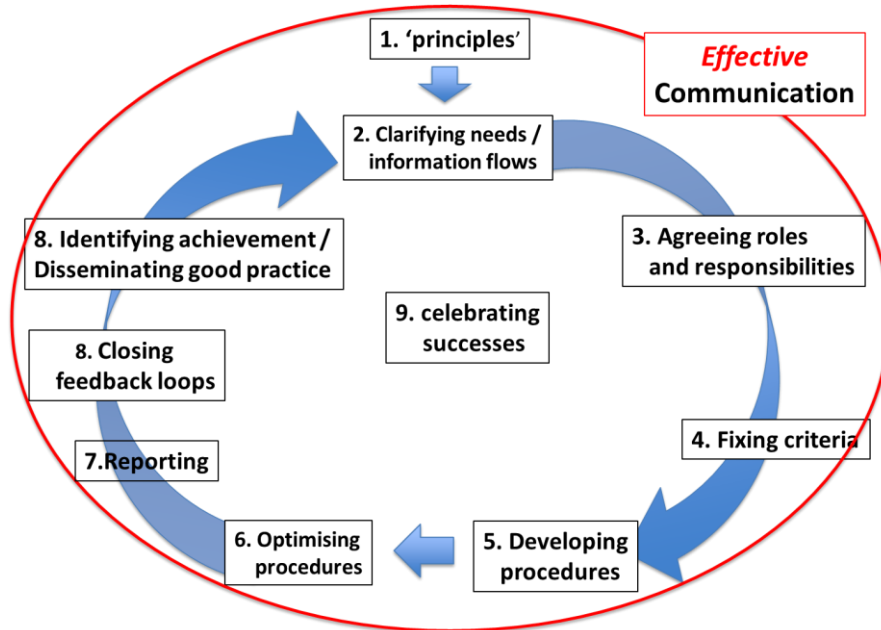
Key 'actors' in a Quality Culture:

1. Leadership . It is essential that they demonstrates 'belief, commitment and trust with the Project.
2. Staff. Clearly identified roles for teaching and administrative processes, both for responsibilities and expectations.
3. Students. They are involved and the university is committed to 'listening' and 'acting' (specific roles in formal management structures)
4. QA office(rs). They provide supportive expertise and co-ordination . They also act as the 'interpreters'
5. External stakeholders. They are a general and specific real inputs. They link to the community.

Quality Culture has a focus on QA governance:

1. The "results" are expressed as "evidence
2. The results are "used" (whenever possible)
3. The non-use of "results" must be explained
4. The use of 'results' and their 'consequences' is public
5. Responsibilities/expectations are explicit
6. Coordination of the CA involves:
   a. staff development

b. b. collection, collation and analysis of "data".

7. The feedback loop must be completely closed (see Figure 1)

Figura 1. Feedback loop (Harris, 2016)

2.2. The Toolkit: What is in?

Once the University Approach to Quality Culture has been defined, the next objective that the Toolkit should support is the definition of the University Approach to Quality Management which should be based on the following elements applied and understood according to the context of each university:

- trust, that all in the university are committed to doing the best they can.
- sound academic principles in the design, delivery and support of Teaching and Learning (including research and external engagements).
- integrated management and communications policies that ensure that (only) relevant data is collected, collated and communicated (in efficient and effective ways) to underpin evidence-based decision making, and provide feedback on the outcomes of those processes.

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- the continuous integration of 'quality' within all university activities – as opposed to cyclical 'reactions', primarily to external demands.

- structured opportunities to encourage reflection on and input to the continuous improvement of quality management activities.

- the importance of self-evaluation and of peer review – involving those within and external to the university (and thus meeting any external QA requirements).

The Quality Management System establishes the conditions for assuring and improving the quality of the university core activities, by focusing on:

- the establishment and development of a Quality Culture in both the academic and support services domains.

- Ensuring that all governing documents remain current, are easily available for use and are well understood

- Having formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic monitoring and review of programmes and awards.

- Ensuring that the resources available for student learning support are adequate and appropriate for each programme offered.

- Fostering research and innovation and nurturing intercultural engagement.

- Promoting QA / Quality Enhancement (QE) at departmental and institutional levels.

- Empowering staff in the implementation of QA / QE systems, processes and procedures.

- Undertaking internal QA / QE reviews (of core activities) on a cyclical basis, with every activity being reviewed at least once in every two years (using a review schedule and procedures that are clearly defined and published well in advance).

- Actively participating in External QA reviews of core activities on a cyclical basis (within the review schedules and procedures as prescribed by relevant external agencies).

- Supporting continuous quality monitoring and QE following the cyclical ADRI model (A – Approach [thinking and planning]; D – Deployment [implementing and doing]; R – Results [monitoring and evaluation]; I – Improvement i[earning and adapting]

- Establishing systems that ensure timely collection and analysis of sufficient data to provide relevant information in support of effective and efficient management and decision making (particularly where links to the Core Activities).

- Clarifying where quality documents and outcomes are confidential in nature (and how and where these are maintained) but also how identified enhancement benefits may be disseminated across the university and externally.

An integral aspect of the Strategic Approach to Quality Management within a Quality Culture is the celebration of 'success' – in all aspects of the university's activities. Such success should be understood as a common achievement achieved through the commitment of all parties to the activities and tasks defined in the quality policy documents and processes.

2.3. The Toolkit: academic principles.

The seven academic principles defined by the EQuAM project are shown below at this point and are the ones that should be contrasted for the case of EQuAM-BI in the context of Indian universities through the implementation exercises and pilot projects to be developed in the first quarter of 2020.

Such academic principles are as follows:

1. ***On the establishment of internal Quality Assurance (QA) arrangements within the HEI - concerning the roles and responsibilities of the institution as a whole.***

The quality assurance arrangements should, <u>at institutional level</u>:

a. be based on a university policy and associated strategies that have a formal status, are publicly available, and implemented through procedures that include roles for students and other stakeholders;

b. ensure that programs lead to and meet the academic and/or professional standards required for the award of the relevant qualifications;

c. include suitable student support mechanisms, at either institutional and / or program level(s), to ensure that students have a reasonable opportunity to complete their programme

2. ***On the maintenance of internal QA arrangements within the HEI - concerning the roles and responsibilities of the HEI as a whole.***

The quality assurance arrangements should, <u>at institutional level</u>:

a. be subject to on-going monitoring AND period and rigorous review, and where necessary, revision;

b. include elements of 'externality', to ensure that they continue to reach and reflect local, national and, where relevant, international expectations;

c. ensure that there is clear and explicit identification and allocation of roles and responsibilities concerning the proper and effective implementation of internal QA, including the recording of results and instigation of any remedial actions when/where required

3. **On the monitoring and coordination of the institutional internal QA activities - that are required as evidence for periodic external evaluation of the HEI as a whole.**

The quality assurance arrangements should, at institutional level:

a. ensure that there are appropriate mechanisms for demonstrating the implementation and effectiveness of the institution's QA policy and associated strategies and procedures;

b. ensure the implementation and effectiveness of monitoring, reporting and storing of information relevant to demonstrating the implementation and the effectiveness of internal QA procedures;

c. ensure that the institution has mechanisms to respond effectively to problems identified by the QA procedures;

d. ensure that the institution has, as part of its improvement/enhancement policy, mechanisms that can recognize and disseminate examples of good practices.

4. **On the establishment of internal QA arrangements for the programs offered by the HEI.**

The university should ensure -at the institutional level- that QA arrangements take into consideration -also at the program level- that:

a. formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of its programs and awards that are aligned with external requirements and expectations;

b. mechanisms to ensure that student assessment will be valid, relevant and proportionate, and conducted consistently

5. **On the continued monitoring of internal QA arrangements for the programs offered by the HEI.**

The HEI should ensure -at the institutional level- that QA arrangements include mechanisms that both at the institutional and the program level:

a. monitor the effectiveness of program delivery, with periodic reporting (at least annually) to the relevant and responsible institutional body/bodies;

b. can identify problems and, where appropriate, deal with them, and ensure reporting of any remedial actions to the relevant and responsible institutional body/bodies;

c. can identify examples of good practice and ensure that they are used for improvement /enhancement purposes, including reporting to the relevant and responsible institutional body/bodies;

d. collate evidence to demonstrate that student assessment has been valid, relevant and proportionate, and conducted consistently

6. *On the analysis of internal QA outcomes to support improvement and enhancement.*

The quality assurance arrangements should, <u>at institutional level</u>:

a. encourage the identification and reporting (to a nominated individual or body) of data / examples identified as 'good practice' to an identified individual/body;

b. include mechanisms for the further evaluation of examples of good practice so that these might be, where appropriate, included within the implementation of the institution's enhancement policy and strategies

7. *On monitoring (and co-ordination) of program proposals submitted from the HEI for external evaluation/accreditation.*

Where relevant to the institution's central management and co-ordination, those responsible <u>at the institutional level</u> for quality assurance should:

a. be informed of (and collate) program proposals that are to be submitted from the university to external evaluation / accreditation bodies;

b. maintain a record of external applications including the outcomes, with any appropriate commentary on the reasons for success/failure.

3. Conclusions

At this point in the development of the EQUAM-BI project, the partners have identified a number of challenges:

- the need to establish robust information technology systems to increase the flow of data across the organizational structure of the higher education institution and to promote a data-based culture across higher education institutions

- the development of a quality assurance model - which clearly identifies the information flows needed for effective and efficient management, and which is adaptable to the different contexts and priorities of different higher education institutions

- to develop a model for evaluating university IQAS that will make it possible to define a threshold for compliance with standards at the national level, while at the same time ensuring that the institutional diversity and academic wealth that this entails is maintained

- the need to design a methodology that promotes the participation in its design of all the agents of interest of each university and of the community in which it is inserted, laying the foundations of a quality culture that is proper and distinctive of the institution in the implementation process (in the form of a "Toolkit")

- define general principles with recommendations "to guide rather than to prescribe" (OECD, 2017: 56), which can be used by universities in the development of their IQAS

- to design an agile procedure so that the quality assurance agencies can implement it with the universities, promoting a focus on continuous improvement in the context of each university as opposed to a model of compliance or mere achievement of a threshold

- to pilot the model within the framework of the EQUAM-BI project in order to be able to present conclusions and propose its gradual extension, on a voluntary basis, to interested Indian universities in the medium and long term

- to create a monitoring committee to monitor the implementation of the model in the pilot universities of the project and those that may be incorporated into the model after the end of the project, ensuring its proper development

4. Next steps[2]

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[2] This point has been included after the fruitful discussion emerged in the consortium meeting held at the University of Barcelona on 7 and 8 January 2020.

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1. Beyond a first-reaction discussion in Barcelona, each Indian partner-institution should conduct a three-fold practical analysis, to present & discuss their results in Pune meeting (March, 2020):

    a. To read their respective implementation plan from the perspective of the Toolkit and its content, principles and specifications (difficulties to implement them and how to solve these difficulties).

    b. To accomplish a benchmarking analysis report on the current situation of their institution concerning how close/far it is to meeting each of the principles (and their specification items) of the Toolkit.

    c. To include an improvement plan and a schedule to develop it (as part of their implementation plan) with the measures to be undertaken to meet the principles (and their specifications).

2. In a shared exercise, the partners should discuss on how to implement the EQuAM-BI Toolkit within the context of their HEI (difficulties and problems they faced when trying to implement it in their HEI): A document on the discussion and comments should be written to further facilitate and clarify the implementation of the EQuAM Toolkit within the Indian HE context. (Pune Meeting, March 2020).

3. The Toolkit implementation in each Indian partner university will be piloted and completed through the one-to-one coaching sessions of EQuAM-BI project, pilot sessions followed by a report prepared by each partner focused on its own experience in the implementation process.

4. These reports will be submitted and discussed in the next meeting of the consortium to be held at Kolkata, in June/July 2020. The focus of the discussion in the meeting will be to gather recommendations derived from the experiences for the future implementation of the model.

5. The final version of the Toolkit will be presented at the final EQuAM-BI Conference, for its dissemination (September/October, 2020).

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