



# EQUAMBI

Enhancing Quality Assurance Management and  
Benchmarking Strategies in Indian Universities

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

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## 1. Background and introduction<sup>1</sup>

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 6 European universities and the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA). It 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). The work done by Nick Harris<sup>2</sup> in the design of the EQuAM model and in its first implementation 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 specific and diverse 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 national and international recognition of their reputation.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Harris was at that time international advisor to ANECA and until his retirement in 2009 Director for Enhancement and Development of QAA, the UK's quality agency.

The design of a toolkit to support universities in defining and implementing their IQAS has a twofold 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, mission and vision.

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 "assessed" and placed in a classification, knowing that the comparison is made on shared quality criteria agreed by the universities with NAAC and referenced in turn with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and not like the classic rankings that highlight indicators that privilege a specific international university profile or a certain set of criteria. This way, the advantages of the quality assurance and benchmarking 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 organization, 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 and cultural 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 adopted by the Indian universities of the EQUAM label, contributing to the generation of the necessary confidence for the development and 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, community outreach, or internationalization 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 mission and 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 is the EQUAM model. Internal quality management linked to the institutional strategy and benchmarks, inserted not only in institutional processes but also in teaching and learning, research, innovation and internationalization policies and coherent with international criteria, standards and guidelines (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 model. This model should be based on a collaborative and risk-based approach at the institutional level, where the university/HEI will take care of its internal quality assurance arrangements, regardless of national/regional/discipline-oriented requirements and expectations, and 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's AUDIT for the evaluation of IQAS and adapted for the EQUAM-BI project through the "Toolkit" for the Indian universities involved in the project.

At 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, in close linkage 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 and support 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 quality assurance with "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: University of Barcelona (Spain), the Spanish National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), KTH Royal Institute of Technology (Sweden), Sapienza University of Rome (Italy), the University of Montpellier (France), and the University of Nicosia (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.*

## **2.1. The Toolkit: focus areas of analysis**

To develop the Culture of Quality in the HEI it is essential that it works through its "11 focus areas" identified both in the "Survey" carried out in the framework of the EQuAM-BI project among Indian HEIs (coordinated by Symbiosis International -Deemed- University) and in the discussions held by the Consortium partners in different meetings, and that are to be considered in accordance to the university's or HEI's mission, vision and values (and, therefore, its policy, strategy, objectives, and drivers concerning quality assurance management in the context of the specific HEI). The 11 focus areas or items are the following ones:

0. Higher Education Institution mission, vision and values. (Strategic drivers concerning quality management in the context of the specific HEI)
1. Proposed structure of the quality management and benchmarking department/unit: links with the governing bodies of the university.
2. Quality policy and objectives.
3. How the university ensures the quality of its programmes.
4. Development of teaching and other actions aimed at students.
5. How the university ensures and enhances the quality of its academic staff.
6. Management and improvement of material resources and services.
7. Research development.
8. Community engagement.
9. Internationalization strategy.
10. Analysis and application of the outcomes to/by the decision-making process of the university.
11. Transparency, equity and ethics.

The HEI must recognise the need to incorporate a quality policy with mechanisms for quality assurance and continuous quality improvement in all its major areas and activities, so that it can function

efficiently and effectively, carry out its mission and meet the needs of its various stakeholders in accordance and strong linkage 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.

## **2.2. The Toolkit: What is in it?**

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:

For each of the above-mentioned 11 items (except for the first one), each University or HEI's Implementation plan should specify (in accordance with their context and mission) the following statements that will allow describing the detailed contents and providing evidence on the development of an institutional QA policy:

- a. Objectives of the Quality Policy regarding the specific item.
- b. Strategies (plan embracing the chain of activities and procedures) to reach these quality assessment objectives.
- c. Procedures and activities to properly develop such activity regarding the specific item.
- d. Indicators, used to measure and assess the quality in that specific item.
- e. Benchmark used to assess the degree of fulfilment of the quality policy
- f. Statistics and data used as evidences of the degree of fulfilment of the standard/criteria that will let us judge where the institution is regarding the approved benchmark.
- g. Recommendations, in the event the benchmark is not reached and new benchmarks in case it was reached.

- h. The quality system should include a cyclical quality system-assessment of the appropriateness of its objectives, strategies, procedures, and indicators.

Once the above mentioned statements have been properly approached, the Quality Management System establishes the conditions for ensuring 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 [learning 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.

### 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.

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