

European Union Policies for the Evaluation of Universities

Paolo Cherubini *

Abstract

EU universities play a crucial role in addressing challenges by fostering innovation, competitiveness, and societal progress. To ensure the quality of higher education institutions, the EU has refined its university evaluation policies, particularly in the areas of quality assurance (QA) and accreditation.

Research assessment in EU universities has also been under scrutiny, with concerns about the inappropriate use of bibliometric indices and rankings. The EU has made efforts to promote Open Science and establish a new European Research Area, focusing on qualitative evaluation and responsible use of quantitative indicators. The Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) has presented an agreement to reform research assessment, emphasizing peer review and discouraging the use of rankings.

International university rankings continue to influence perceptions of university quality. In response, the European Commission introduced U-Multirank as a multidimensional alternative that considers teaching, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation, and regional engagement. However, U-Multirank is relatively unknown and lacks media resonance.

The impact of initiatives like CoARA and U-Multirank remains uncertain. EU universities must continue to adapt to these evolving evaluation mechanisms as they strive to meet the diverse challenges facing the region.

Keywords: Quality Assurance, Accreditation, Research, Assessment for EU Universities, National/Regional QA Agencies, International Rankings, U-Multirank

1. EU's Universities Challenges

The European Union (EU) is grappling with substantial challenges. Balancing ecological, economic, and social concerns, navigating the digital transformation, and responding to significant political developments are among the pivotal drivers of

* Full Professor of Psychology University of Pavia, ENQA Agency Reviewer, Former Member of EUA learning and teaching Steering committee (paolo.cherubini@unipv.it)



change. The climate crisis, in particular, and broader sustainability issues demand immediate attention. Technological advancements are reshaping lives and labour markets, rendering much of the traditional workforce obsolete and posing a significant risk of widespread underemployment. Persisting social disparities and demographic changes in many European countries put social systems under pressure. Democracy and political systems face varying degrees of challenge across European countries. There is an erosion of the public debate through misinformation, as the spread of false information, fabricated evidence and “alternative truths” undermine the value of evidence and the role of science and education in society. The world order is changing, and EU’s universities must operate on a global scale against a backdrop of foreign interference, security threats and political worries about EU’s technological and strategic autonomy.

EU's universities must rise to these challenges. These venerable institutions have endured for centuries, advancing the frontiers of knowledge, educating citizens, and catalysing societal change. The coming years represent a critical juncture in their long history, given the formidable challenges ahead. Universities play a pivotal role in the EU's aspirations for fostering innovation, competitiveness, and societal progress. Consequently, the evaluation of universities holds paramount importance. To ensure the quality and effectiveness of its higher education institutions, the EU has continuously refined its university evaluation policies. Quality assurance (QA) and accreditation stand as critical components of EU policies for assessing universities. These mechanisms guarantee that universities maintain high standards of quality and excellence in their programs and operations.

The distinctive blend of the learning and teaching, research and innovation, and societal impact missions, along with their symbiotic relationships, defines EU's universities. This sets them apart from a global landscape where teaching-only institutions predominate. In the EU, all three missions are equally vital and mutually reinforcing. Through these missions, universities can bolster EU's open, pluralistic, and democratic societies. The evaluation of universities has seen varying levels of development for the three missions.

2. The Quality Assurance and Accreditation of EU Universities for Learning and Teaching

The EU is increasingly stressing the significance of robust QA and accreditation mechanisms for the learning and teaching mission of its universities. The twin challenge lies in harmonizing quality amid diverse national regulations while preserving institutional independence, autonomy, and diversity, all while ensuring learners' qualifications and achievements are recognized and transferable throughout the EU. Creating a common European framework for evaluating and harmonising learning and teaching has been a monumental endeavour. The seeds were planted in 1987 with the establishment of ERASMUS (European Community Action Scheme for the Mobility of University Students) in a vastly different Europe, two years prior

to the dissolution of the Soviet-led eastern bloc and six years before the formal establishment of the EU via the Maastricht Treaty.

ERASMUS, initially launched as a pilot program, became so successful that it evolved into ERASMUS+ in 2014, securing European Parliament and European Council support until at least 2027. Over 13 million European students have benefited from ERASMUS since its inception. The large influx of students from different nationalities soon required that the EU universities adopted a common framework for describing educational attainment and qualifications. The search for a common framework was put in motion by the Bologna Process, a series of ministerial meetings and agreements between European countries to ensure comparability in the quality standards of higher-education qualifications. The Bologna declaration was signed by education ministers from 29 European countries in 1999, one year after the signature of the Sorbonne declaration by ministers Claude Allègre (France), Jürgen Rüttgers (Germany), Luigi Berlinguer (Italy) and Tessa Blackstone (UK), committing themselves to "harmonising the architecture of the European Higher Education system". The process was opened to other countries in the European Cultural Convention of the Council of Europe, creating the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) under the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Today the Bologna Process has 49 participating countries.

The Bologna Process established a common three-layered structure for learning outcomes relevant to higher education qualifications: European Qualification Framework (EQF) levels 6 (e.g., bachelor), 7 (e.g., master's degree), and 8 (e.g., doctoral degree). The process also introduced the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), a standardized means for measuring and comparing academic credits. Moreover, it led to the development of a common framework for QA and institutional accreditation. In 2003 the Ministers of the Bologna Process asked the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to elaborate "an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines" for the QA of higher education. The resulting European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG) was adopted in 2005. ENQA – joining forces with the European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and European Student Union (ESU; the four Associations are commonly referred to as "E4") – revised the standards in 2015. Currently, the ESG-2015 are the established framework for QA of higher education learning and teaching throughout the EHEA. They are a set of principles, flexible enough to be adaptable to different national regulations. The ESG comprises three parts:

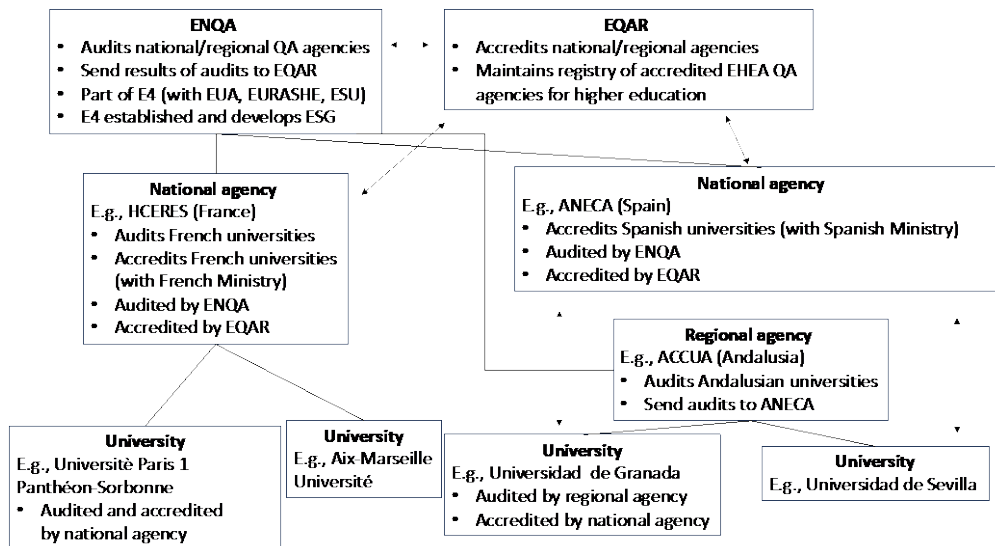
1. Ten standards for Internal QA of higher education institutions.
2. Seven standards for external QA.
3. Seven standards for national and regional QA agencies.

The third part is critical for the harmonisation of QA in Europe, because national and regional QA agencies run external QA for higher education institutions and foster their accreditation. The agencies need to comply with the third part of ESG standards for becoming members of ENQA, which in turn is a necessary condition to be

accredited in the official European Quality Assurance Registry for Higher Education (EQAR): registration in EQAR is the final step, after which a QA Agency is in all respects EU-accredited, and can accredit EU universities.

The structure is pyramidal, with ENQA auditing national agencies before they can ask accreditation and admission to EQAR, and – once they are admitted to EQAR – agencies auditing universities and accrediting them as compliant to ESG 2015 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. *The structure of QA and accreditation for learning and teaching in higher education in EU. The final, formal steps for the accreditation of universities, in most countries, do not rest on QA agencies, but on Ministries/Councils of Universities. However, the conclusions of the audits run by QA agencies are the fundamental inputs to those decisions.*



The landscape of national regulations is varied, and so is the distribution and structure of national/regional QA agencies. Currently, there are 55 agencies registered in EQAR. They are distributed as follows: Armenia (1), Austria (2), Belgium (3), Bulgaria (1), Croatia (1), Cyprus (1), Denmark (1), Estonia (1), Finland (1), France (2), Georgia (1), Germany (10), Greece (1), Hungary (1), Ireland (1), Kazakhstan (3), Lithuania (1), Netherlands (1), Norway (1), Poland (1), Portugal (1), Romania (1), Slovakia (1), Slovenia (1), Spain (10), Sweden (1), Switzerland (2), Turkey (1), United Kingdom (2). Notably, some European countries, such as Albania and Italy, still do not have an EQAR-accredited QA agency for higher education: the process of harmonisation of EU and EHEA higher education is far from complete, but steadily ongoing. Accrediting and cyclically auditing tens of agencies in countries with different regulations, that in their turn must audit and accredit hundreds of universities, is an impressive endeavour and a monument to what EU can accomplish

to increase internal cohesion, cultural integration, and international mobility of students, teachers, and ideas. It was a daring and visionary plan twenty years ago: many thought it was doomed to bog down in a bureaucratic quagmire. They have been proven wrong: the Bologna Process vision of common quality standards in learning and teaching has turned into solid reality, it is growing and extending far beyond the borders of the Union, and it has allowed for the launch of new projects that – following the lead of ERASMUS – will bring EU universities closer together, such as the European University Alliances initiative. Let us hope that this process will help EU to resist to some of the challenges of our time, most notably the erosion of democracy, the spread of disinformation, the widening of economic disparities, and the disruption of the labour market.

3. Research Assessment for EU Universities

Research assessment encompasses several facets: the evaluation of research output, research projects, and individual researchers or research teams. Unlike learning and teaching, there is no equivalent to ESG 2015 for research assessment. Ministries and QA agencies often employ a patchwork of methods, oftentimes relying on inappropriate bibliometric indices and partial counts of research outputs. Recognizing the inadequacy of these approaches, the European Council, inspired by initiatives like the San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment (DORA) and the Leiden Manifesto, began promoting Open Science and the establishment of a new European Research Area.

The progress to this goal has been slow, and is documented by a series of EU declarations, including, but not limited to:

1. “The transition towards an Open Science system” – council conclusions (27 May 2016)
2. “Council conclusions on the new European Research Area” (1 December 2020)
3. “Deepening the European Research Area” (28 May 2021)
4. Council recommendation “Pact for research and innovation in Europe” (26 November 2021)
5. “Future governance of European Research Area”, Council conclusions (26 November 2021)
6. “Research assessment and implementation of open science”, Council conclusions (10 June 2022)

The EUA strongly supported the Open Science system proposal, and replied to the Council with the following position statements:

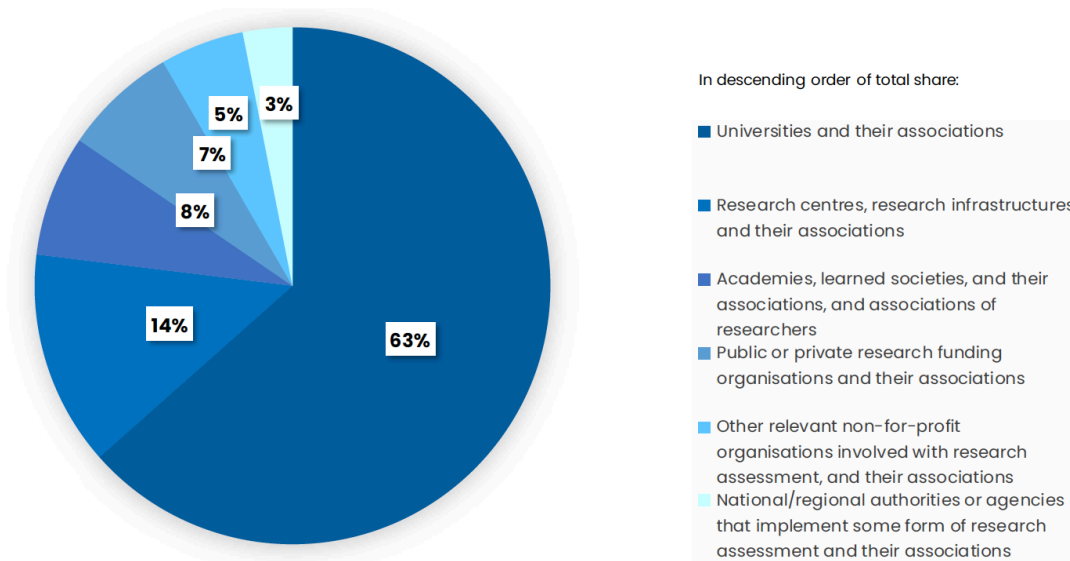
1. “Universities without walls”: providing an open, transformative space for common knowledge production through research, education, innovation and culture (4 February 2021)

2. “EUA Open Science Agenda” (February 2022), for a just scholarly publishing ecosystem that is transparent, diverse, economically affordable and sustainable, technically interoperable, and steered by the research community
3. “EUA welcomes EU council conclusions on research assessment” (22 June 2022), that proposes a renewed approach to research assessment, a regulatory frameworks enabling Open Access, and multilingualism as a key tool to increase the dissemination and impact of research outputs.

Eventually, a Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) was formed to address these issues. The CoARA “Agreement on reforming research assessment” was launched for open discussion in January 2022. In July a final version of the agreement was presented at a Stakeholder Assembly bringing together more than 350 organisations from more than 40 countries. The Agreement was opened for signatures at the European Research and Innovation Days, in September 2022, and as of 11 June 2024 768 organisations have signed the agreement, 646 of which are member organisations (including 14 non-European ones) distributed as per Figure 2. All the signatories of the Agreement committed their institutions to the following ten actions:

1. Recognise the diversity of contributions to – and careers in – research in accordance with the needs and nature of the research
2. Base research assessment primarily on qualitative evaluation for which peer review is central, supported by responsible use of quantitative indicators
3. Abandon inappropriate uses in research assessment of journal- and publication-based metrics, in particular inappropriate uses of Journal Impact Factor (JIF) and H-index
4. Avoid the use of rankings of research organisations in research assessment
5. Commit resources to reforming research assessment as is needed to achieve the organisational changes committed to
6. Review and develop research assessment criteria, tools and processes
7. Raise awareness of research assessment reform and provide transparent communication, guidance, and training on assessment criteria and processes as well as their use
8. Exchange practices and experiences to enable mutual learning within and beyond the Coalition
9. Communicate progress made on adherence to the Principles and implementation of the Commitments
10. Evaluate practices, criteria and tools based on solid evidence and the state-of-the-art in research on research, and make data openly available for evidence gathering and research

Figure 2. Distributions of the 646 member organisations of CoARA as of 11 June 2024.



All commitments are important, but commitments 3 and 4 are striking: they ask for abandoning practices that, up to this day, are the primary means of research assessment in European universities. The monitoring of the actions implemented by each signatory institution is annual, and the first one should have taken place by the end of 2023. Actually, as per the first CoARA general assembly held in June 2024, the collection of the member organisations action plans was almost complete, all 13 CoARA working groups were installed, but the check on the implementation of the member commitments was in progress.

4. The Plague of International Rankings and U-Multirank

International university rankings, compiled by private companies such as the Shanghai Academic Ranking of World Universities (ARWU), QS World University Ranking, Times Higher Education World University Ranking, and others, present a significant challenge in assessing EU universities' quality. These rankings have been criticized extensively for their methodological flaws, including inappropriate indicators and favouritism toward older, wealthier institutions. Despite these criticisms, rankings have become ingrained in higher education. As with the journal impact factor or the researcher's H-index, students, faculty members and funders turn to rankings as a lazy proxy for quality, no matter the flaws.

CoARA's commitment 4 explicitly discourages the use of rankings for assessing research. ESG 2015 do not mention rankings, and they are not considered in the accreditation of European universities for learning and teaching. But rankings are

published regularly, and each time a well-known ranking is published it gains improper attention in the media and among university leadership. In response, the European Commission introduced U-Multirank as a more methodologically appropriate alternative to traditional rankings.

U-Multirank, initiated by the European Commission in 2014, offers a multidimensional approach to ranking higher education institutions, considering five dimensions: teaching and learning, research, knowledge transfer, international orientation, and regional engagement. Based on empirical data provided by the universities themselves (when not publicly available), U-Multirank compares institutions with similar institutional profiles ('like-with-like') and allows users to develop their own personalised rankings by selecting indicators in terms of their own preferences. Unlike traditional rankings, U-Multirank never produces composite scores, because there is no sound methodological justification for 'adding up' the scores of diverse individual measures, or for weighting them to produce a single composite score as used in league tables. Unlike traditional rankings, U-Multirank's methodology is more robust and reflects universities' specific missions and societal impact. Possibly for this reason, that takes away the "competition thrill" from rankings, U-Multirank is relatively unknown to the public and to academic governance members alike and does not have resonance on the media, limiting its potential impact on the development of EU university quality: in fact, many universities do not invest the few hours per year of their statistical staff (the only cost of the service, for the universities) needed to send to U-Multirank updates of their data, flawing the potential usefulness of the platform as a transparent, flexible and synthetic dashboard for monitoring EU university quality.

In conclusion, there are lights and shadows in the evolving landscape of EU university evaluation. The European QA of learning and teaching is a worldwide good-practice of reference, with more and more universities and QA agencies external to EU requiring accreditation as ESG-compliant. By contrast, the badly needed reform of research assessment and the mitigation of the influence of traditional rankings are in their cradle. We still do not know whether the CoARA Agreement will effectively help EU universities to more appropriate assessments of research and societal impact.

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