

External Quality Assurance of European Universities Alliances - an external evaluation conducted by ARACIS (Romania)

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Earlier in 2023, the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance of Higher Education (ARACIS) has conducted an **external evaluation of the [UNITA universities alliance](#)**, following the [European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities](#), which was developed within the [EUNiQ](#) project funded by the Erasmus+ program.

The [European Universities initiative](#) of the European Commission is aimed to support the creation of transnational alliances of higher education institutions, together with partners from academia, national and regional authorities, civil society, as well as the economic environment. As of now, there are 50 active European University alliances, funded through the Erasmus+ programme of the European Commission, while also able to apply for local, national and international funding. While following the main scopes of the Bologna Process, the European Universities alliances aim at strengthening cooperation between higher education institutions and the society, thus enhancing opportunities for students and staff, especially with the establishment of several initiatives such as micro-credentials, joint programmes and the creation of inter-university campuses.

The European Framework for the Comprehensive Quality Assurance of European Universities aims to focus on the distinct organisational features of the European alliances as “multi-campus” with comprehensive missions. The main focus of the external evaluation methodology is to explore the joint provision of the alliance as a whole inter-university campus. It is noted that, besides the pilot reviews that were conducted as part of the EUNiQ project from 2019 to 2021, the external evaluation of UNITA would be the first one performed among European universities alliances by an EQAR-registered quality assurance agency.

The evaluation criteria proposed by the European Framework are divided into:

1. Strategy and Policies;
2. Policy implementation;
3. Evaluation and Monitoring;
4. Improvement Policy.

Given that UNITA is an alliance within its first three years of existence, finalising the implementation of the pilot phase by the end of 2023, only the first three criteria were considered in the intermediary evaluation. The latter one will be considered in a subsequent evaluation, which is due by the middle of implementation of phase II.

In this regard, the evaluation panel was able to analyse several statutory and working documents of the alliance, in order to better understand its aim, objectives and the proposed means to achieve them. Some examples consist of Mission Statement, Management Guide, Work Packages Gantt Chart, other strategic documents and action plans for several fields such as Quality Assurance of the alliance, research, teaching and learning processes. As self-evaluation documents, the project progress reports submitted to the European Commission were also available to the ARACIS evaluation panel. Therefore,

the panel was able to understand better how the alliance, as a coherent structure, can integrate all partners and stakeholders, and how it contributes to the development of teaching and learning, research and enhancement of students' lives and staff careers.

The evaluation panel was composed of a national expert coming from academia, an international expert and a student, who were coordinated by the ARACIS General Director, whose responsibility was to ensure that the evaluation was conducted in accordance with the European Framework and the aims of the evaluation are thoroughly followed. All panel members have previously had both national and international experience in the field of quality assurance of higher education, internationalisation, intercultural communication, as well as solid knowledge about learning, teaching and research practices. The evaluation procedure consisted of analysing the available documents, preparatory meetings with UNITA's representatives, and an on-site visit held at University of Torino (Italy), as the coordinator of the European universities alliance. Given the analysed documentation and the meetings held with various internal and external stakeholders (alliance management representatives, students, teachers, researchers, administrative staff and external partners representatives), the external evaluation panel was able to outline an opinion about the general functioning of the alliance with respect to its own set objectives, as well as the current stage of development. Therefore, several recommendations were drawn, which would contribute to the development of the alliance and to ensuring the reach of its objectives.

Several general conclusions are outlined below:

- Evaluation panels should acknowledge that each alliance has its own aim and objectives, therefore the external reviews should be conducted in accordance with each individual context;
- Comprehensiveness of the alliance is the main asset of such structure therefore the focus should be on assessing how partners (universities and other institutions) managed to create the inter-connected campuses and to reach their comprehensive missions;
- Stakeholders should, first and foremost, be aware of the opportunities created through the apprenticeship to an alliance and, therefore, a coordinated external communication is the key to raising awareness and promoting this kind of collaboration;
- Involving internal stakeholders from the very beginning of the alliance creation and actively consulting them when designing the inter-university campus – with a focus on the strategic goals and action plan development – is the key to successful transnational cooperation;
- There is a wide range of directly involved external stakeholders, from socio-economic market representatives to local, regional and national authorities, which should be constantly engaged in the alliance's activities in order to ensure societal engagement as one general objective of the alliances.

Moreover, European universities alliances should be perceived as sole institutions formed around an inter-university campus. Therefore, partner institutions should act for the common goal and in line with their comprehensive mission, thus thriving for enhancing the life of university communities and society as a whole, while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the alliance.

References

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