Improved operation efficiency strengthens organizational quality in higher education

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This paper examines quality assurance as an effective tool for organizational development, reviewing the theories and history of quality management. After describing the theoretical foundations used in the USA, focusing on heavy industries, it discusses European models such as TQM, ISO and EFQM systems in more detail, then moves on to critical approaches, especially with regard to the applicability and effectiveness of quality assurance in education and higher education. The second half of this paper focuses specifically on quality assurance in higher education, in particular European standards, approaching it from the perspective of internationalisation. In this context, this paper addresses the issues of brain drain, digital campus, stakeholder involvement and student-centeredness. Finally, the paper concludes that quality assurance in higher education is not only an essential but a necessary process as well, and can function as the most effective tool for organizational development.
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"The 20th century has been the Century of Productivity, but the 21st century will be the century of quality."

Joseph Moses Juran (2001, p. 91)

1. Introduction

The observation of Joseph Moses Juran is often cited by quality assurance specialists: this observation highlights the difference between the 20th and the 21st centuries and refers to the 20th century as the century of productivity, and to the 21st

century as the century of quality (Juran, 1995). The statement was defined in 1995, which means that while it was originally a prediction, based on the developments of the last few years, the prediction is coming true in the 21st century. Apparently, if we reach a certain level of development, further development requires factors which are related to quality, for example, developing and improving the efficiency and the quality of human resources, encouraging innovation, inspiring creativity and generating higher value added. Although this statement is not globally valid, there are characteristics which determine if it can be considered true or not for a given country. Dani Rodrik highlights that there are different characteristics which determine the appropriate economic policy for a country in question, for example, its social, economic and regional situation. In other words, a particular context is an important influencing factor (Rodrik, 2015). Based on Rodrik's explanation, the observation of Juran can be applied to developed regions and countries, for example, European countries.

As quality is complex, it cannot be investigated and explained only from a single perspective. Several physical dimensions describe quality, i.e. performance, reliability, durability, and material properties. Quality is also measurable. The applicable methods differ by field, for example, ranking can be used for measuring universities. Ranking considers different characteristics, which is why it is a complex indicator system. We can measure the perception of quality from different perspectives, for example, from those of the service user, the client and even from customer perspectives. However, the aspect which is represented by quality assurance and its efficiency is essential and separate. This study examines the effects of quality on organizational efficiency, focusing on higher education. For the European academic community, there is a major concern in relation to quality in higher education. Indeed, two perspectives are considered significant: the labour market and competitiveness.

The presentation of critical approaches to quality is also an important part of this paper. In addition, the most important trends in Europe will be presented. For this article, both academic literature and grey literature, including standards, reports and databases, will be applied. The identification and collection of the relevant literature was done using the Web of Science and Google Scholar. The research question of the current paper is how quality assurance in the 21st century influences organisational development, focusing on the field of higher education in Europe. More specifically, it aims to identify the main trends which influence our thoughts regarding quality in all cases where quality assurance has an influence.

2. Theoretical foundations of quality management

In relation to business enterprises, the history of quality management started with the guilds in the Middle Ages. Frederick Winslow Taylor was the first author who examined the area of quality assurance, and his work is still linked to this issue in the literature. Taylor lived at the turn of the century, and his research area was standardization and quality control (Taylor, 1997). Besides Taylor, Walter Andre Shewhart has to be mentioned as well. His work focused on the manufacturing industry, and he investigated the quality control of products (Shewhart, 2015). Among the prominent figures of early quality management, William Edwards Deming is often referred to as the father of Total Quality Management (TQM) (Kövesi & Topár, 2006). Joseph Moses Juran, who shared his observation regarding the difference between the 20th and the 21st centuries, focused on quality management processes, investigating especially the areas of production integration, the improvement of manufacturing technology and even the exploration of customer needs (Juran, 1995).

The basis of theoretical concepts is that quality assurance would not be necessary if the market functioned perfectly. This means that we can consider customers to be rational agents who make all their decisions based on rational reasons. Thus, eventualities are identified and analysed by them, and they are capable of exclude all producers and products which do not meet their quality expectations (Taylor, 1997). On the contrary, if we investigate a real market, we can see that the significance of consumer protection and quality assurance mechanisms increases if the product or the service is complex, or even if the position of a given producer is rather monopolistic. Due to the nature of services, quality assurance becomes more complex as the quality of the service is determined not only based on the quality of the final product (which can be examined through quality control) but even on the entire process, from the beginning to the end of the relationship (Chikán and Demeter, 1999).

In relation to commercial quality, many well-defined quality concepts have to be considered as commercial quality is referred to as their combination. Based on this perspective, we can define quality as the set of attributes of a product or a service which meet both specified and reasonably expectable needs. Regarding quality management, diverse tools, methods and procedures have to be examined, and their application supports a predefined quality criteria, which also means that it encourages consumer satisfaction. The various activities which constitute quality management aim to manage and control the organisation from a quality point of view, especially focusing on the processes which support the given company to reach its goals, and even which ensure the resources that are required for reaching these goals. In the case of a quality control audit, the auditor always applies different measurements and tests which support the determination of the relevant char-

acteristics. Once these characteristics have been determined, the auditor compares them with the pre-specified requirements, and based on this comparison, compliance will be assessed accordingly. Quality assurance is a set of systematic activities which are planned and applied in order to create or increase confidence in both the consumer and management that the quality of a certain product or service meet certain criteria (Polónyi, 2008).

Finally, this subchapter presents three models: the Total Quality Management, ISO 9000/9001 and the EFQM model. It is important to understand the basics of these concepts as they were used as starting point in relation to evaluating and improving quality in case of higher education institutions. The TQM model is both a corporate practice and a management philosophy which supports companies to use their available human and financial resources as efficiently as possible, and through this high level of efficiency, assists companies to achieve their objectives. The model is organised top-down, from the management level to the lower levels of the hierarchy. Thus, the model covers all processes and resources within an organisation. Based on its aims and structure, the model is quality-focused, and it is considered both a management philosophy and a corporate methodology (Tenner and DeToro, 1994). The system involves not only all employees of a given organisation but even all its stakeholders, aiming to achieve long-term successes which are supported by its employees and even by its customers. Moreover, society at large also supports this system due to their increased satisfaction as they also gain the advantages of the improved quality (Kövesi and Topár 2006).

ISO is a non-governmental organisation located in Switzerland, and it is the abbreviation of International Organization for Standardization. The organisation has several sub-units which are different technical committees. One of these committees is responsible for quality management and for the harmonisation of quality assurance standards. There is a working group within this committee which deals with the extension and revision of the ISO 9000, which is the well-known set of standards. There is a committee even within the European Union which is responsible for standardisation; this is the European Committee for Standardisation (CEN). Since the 1991 Vienna Agreement, there is an agreement between the CEN and the ISO, that the CEN adopts the standards which are part of the 9000 family, and it applies the same format and technical content. The ISO 9000 standards can be also used as guidelines and models which supports organisations to develop their quality systems. Nowadays, many national standardisation organisations apply the ISO 9000 worldwide. This set of standards refers to the specifications in case of products and services, covering the production system and the service system too (Kövesi and Topár, 2006). Within the 9000 family, ISO 9001 is an important part as it determines what kind of requirements have to be applied in relation to quality management systems (QM). It is a certification standard which means that ISO 9001 certifies that a certain quality management system is

compliant. If there is an ISO 9001 audit at an organization and all requirements of this standard is covered there, a certificate is issued which states that the ISO 9001 requirements are secured by the investigated organisation.[1] This standard determines general requirements which means that all organisations and institutions are able to apply them. The quality management is responsible for finding the right solutions in accordance with the needs of the given organisation, and it has to create a customized system which is based on the profile, the sector, the size traditions, the corporate culture of the organisation (Topár, 2008).

The European Foundation for Quality Management (EFQM) aims to promote and implement TQM widely in the EU. The EFQM Model itself is a globally recognised framework that primarily helps companies improve their productivity and manage change. This model focuses on the relationship between the purpose of the organization and the strategy, as well as on how this relationship supports the organisation to deliver outstanding results and sustainable value for key stakeholders.[2] EFQM business excellence model (quality improvement) is the most widely used model in Europe. The full implementation of this model is recognised by the European Quality Award.

At this point, also the criticism surrounding quality assurance, in particular its implementation for education, has to be addressed. For example, according to Setényi: "[…] as far as education is concerned, as in other sectors, government initiatives to encourage institutions to introduce a general quality model are rather controversial. The promotion of TQM in the United States has often resulted in educational solutions that have been watered down beyond recognition, and which could have been achieved by public education actors simply promoting teamwork. The push for ISO in Finland has fizzled out, not in the least because of general resistance against consultants." (Setényi, 2001, p. 9).

Some critics are even more damning. Csoma questions the very applicability of quality assurance to education. According to him, "it is safe to assume that quality assurance is achieved through quality assurance documents since it constitutes little more than well-organised, mandatory paperwork […] it diverts attention, energy and action from other tasks […] most importantly from teaching" (Csoma, 2003, p. 22). In Csoma's view, the philosophy of quality assurance is based on economism (imperialism), and he concludes that "it is best to forget that the economic construct called quality assurance is really the same as the assurance of quality in education […] It cannot be ruled out that quality assurance is inher-

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[1] Higher education institutions also operate an ISO 9001 QM system, but since ISO is essentially designed for industry, it can complement, but not replace, standards tailored to higher education.

[2] EFQM has eight fundamental concepts: results orientation, customer focus, leadership and constancy of purpose, management by processes and facts, people development and involvement, continuous learning, improvement and innovation, partnership development, and corporate social responsibility.

ently incapable of addressing education and training issues both in theory and practice. […] Quality assurance creates a kind of tunnel vision, and the tasks it imposes impoverish education and training […] When it comes to education and training – both for the institution and the state – quality assurance has become a replacement activity" (Csoma, 2003, p. 22).

Although the author is undoubtedly right in stating that quality assurance in education should not become mechanic and that personalization is an important aspect of learning, teaching and assessment, he ignores that these methodological directions are, in fact, supported by modern quality assurance standards in higher education. Subjectivity, intellectual inbreeding, politicisation and an academic mentality are also frequently criticised with regard to quality assurance in higher education. These are real issues for some countries/agencies and subjectivity cannot be 100% ruled out despite all efforts. Nevertheless, modern standards contain components designed to counteract these problems. In my view, the various interpretations of quality assurance should be treated within their proper context. Quality management in the corporate and industrial spheres can be useful in identifying and modelling basic concepts, basic quality goals and processes, but it can (and should) only be applied to education in a flexible way. It is also important to stress the significance of quality assurance in making all actors aware of their responsibility for ensuring quality. Furthermore, quality assurance also makes services comparable. In the case of higher education, this is first and foremost reflected in the fact that students (and, of course, lecturers) can find out more about the quality of a particular institution or programme through publicly available information.

In relation to quality assurance, Prague played an important role in 2001, where lifelong learning, making European higher education attractive, and the need for increased involvement in the process were emphasized. An important element is the involvement of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) in the process. The task of ENQA at this point was to contribute to the creation of the common quality assurance reference framework (Mishra, 2007). The second "Bologna" ministerial meeting took place in Berlin in 2003, where the participants highlighted the important of the introduction of the two-level training system which was planned to implement in 2005. This is also where the shift in emphasis from general goals to actual content began. Quality assurance appears as an extremely important issue in the Bologna process from the very beginning, which is also reflected in the fact that it is also one of the main points of the Bologna Declaration. It has two main reasons: from one side, it guarantees high-quality higher education, and on the other hand, it plays an extremely important role in building trust between various higher education systems, and has an essential function in the mobility of professors and students and even the mutual recognition of diplomas (Filippakou, 2017).

3. European focal points for quality assurance in higher education resulting from internationalisation

My position is that a key element in the creation and functioning of quality assurance systems and principles in higher education, and in their operation and development, is the internationalisation of higher education, i.e. the competitiveness-enhancing reforms that have been initiated since the 1960s, driven by economic underperformance in comparison with the USA, which the Bologna process as a related effort tried to address. Accordingly, this paper reviews the internationalisation of quality assurance in higher education, its main trends, aspirations and focal points.

In recent decades, global competition in manufacturing has increased the value of knowledge, and comprehensive and extensive education has become essential to successfully adapt to environmental changes in many areas (Juran, 2001). The trend in the western world to attract skilled labour from other parts of the world seems to be reversing, with the economies of Southeast Asia in particular, and even some South American regions, actively seeking the high level of skills that higher education can provide, thereby creating increasing competition for skilled labour. In this race, many countries are taking action to attract and retain young talent. These measures include relaxing visa rules, scholarship schemes, offering price-reduced or even free education, or supporting post-graduation residency rights and employment. This is because it is more likely that young people can be persuaded to stay in a host country before they graduate than after they have already graduated (Polónyi, 2008). The regions that brain drain or human capital flight traditionally affected have also developed different strategies to combat this trend. These efforts include developing higher education systems to compete with their Western counterparts, thereby creating regional systems to attract young professionals through establishing excellence hubs via infrastructure projects and regulation, with the participation of the world's leading universities (Csoma, 2003).[3] These countermeasures will also cause a shift in traditional mobility patterns, with the OECD estimating that the centre of gravity will move eastwards (OECD, 2015).

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[3] These universities can then offer training and research locally through various forms of cooperation. For example, a HUB of nearly 30,000 students has been set up in recent years in the United Arab Emirates, with 23 higher education institutions and other higher education organisations from ten countries participating.

Figure 1.: Proportion of 25–34-year-olds with tertiary education in OECD and G20 countries (2013, 2030 (projection))
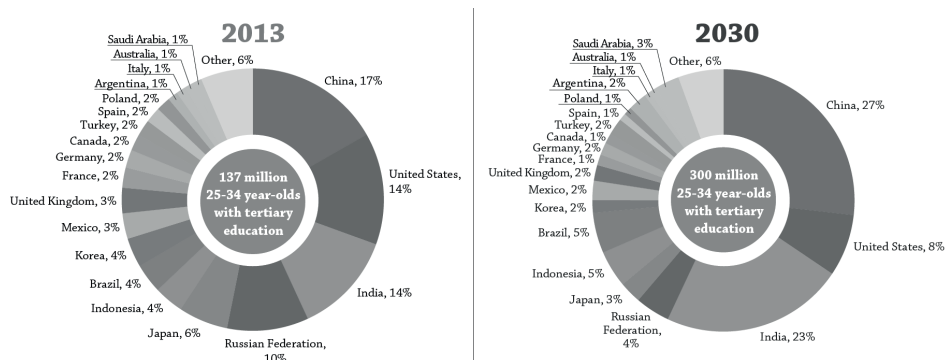
Source: OECD Education Indicators in Focus 2015

The figure above may be disappointing in terms of how small a slice of the over-all picture European higher education represents, but quality assurance systems, standards and guidelines are very similar across the globe, and European quality culture has an indirect impact on quality systems in higher education around the world through global organisations. On a related note, it is worth mentioning that the development of quality assurance systems and organisations in the Asia is experiencing an explosive growth period. This phenomenon is described in the 2017 book The Rise of Quality Assurance in Asian Higher Education, edited by Mahsood Shah and Quyen TN Do, which analyses developments and their causes on a country-by-country basis (Shah and Quyen, 2017).

In addition to the exporting of campuses and courses, the internationalisation of higher education is characterised by joint courses with foreign partners, which offer an opportunity to incorporate local values into training programmes. The extra income from tuition fees can be an undisguised bonus of attracting foreign students. However, some countries also provide substantial grants to foreign stu-dents, with the strategic aim of building long-term economic and cultural ties. The idea behind this is that these internationally experienced experts upon their re-turn home can later make use of the economic, cultural and other kinds of knowl-edge and experience gained abroad concerning the operations and relations of the country in question (Streitwieser, 2014). Internationalisation has also led to the development of English-language training, technical literature, regulations and other infrastructures, which have contributed to English becoming more widely used as a world language than ever before. Today, gaining additional skills from studying abroad, seeing the world and learning about other cultures is essential in

higher education, which is why thousands of universities feature recommended or compulsory study abroad semesters in their curricula.[4]

The internationalisation of higher education and, consequently, the cross-border nature of quality assurance in higher education are a global trend, which is reflected in the increasing number of publications on the subject (Carvalho, Rosa and Amaral, 2022). The figure below shows the findings of 79 meta-analyses of scientific publications published between 1998 and 2019, indexed by Scopus and Web of Science.

Figure 2.: Number of publications on quality assurance in higher education and cross-border QA between 1998 and 2019
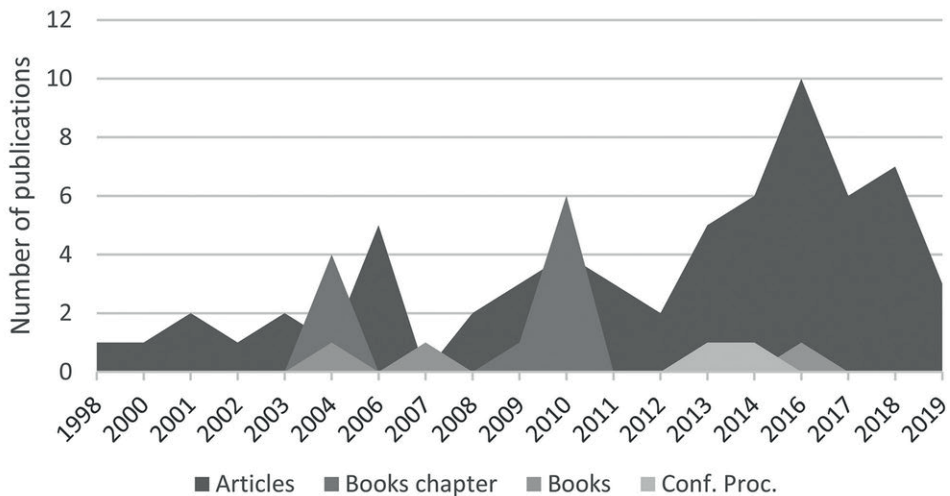
Source: Carvalho et al. 2022. p. 5.

The goal of the European Union is to continue strengthening the trend towards internationalisation in order to achieve automatic mutual recognition of qualifications. Although, the European Union has to face some quality assurance related challenges as internationalisations has some general features and characteristics. These challenges are for example, the accreditation of campuses located abroad, the availability and regulation of knowledge to be acquired in the host institution, the organization of distance learning and even the accreditation practices in case

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[4] In Europe (including Hungary), a mobility window is a compulsory element of training programmes, i.e. the possibility of part-time study at foreign universities must be provided. Under the ECTS credit system, as an outcome of the Bologna process, there should be no obstacle to the mutual recognition of foreign credits at higher education institutions. However, these barriers have not yet been fully eradicated everywhere.

of joint training programs.[5] The challenges which come from the characteristics and the features of internationalisations, highlight the increasing significance of cross-border quality assurance. In order to face these challenges successfully, the collaboration of all national organisations is required, and these organisations have to accept the accreditation assessment practices which are applied by other institutions and agencies.[6] In the European trends, two of the aspects and requirements emphasised in the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) (that focus in particular on structures, systems, processes, teaching conditions and conditions) have become prominent in recent years that have an impact on both internal (internal system of an institution) and external quality assurance (third party evaluation) and also illustrate well the current approach to quality assurance in higher education (ENQA, 2015).

One significant trend is the so-called stakeholder involvement, i.e. the involvement of external stakeholders and their role in both quality assurance and quality assessment processes, as well as in the expertise of individual agencies. A study and guidelines on the subject have also been produced within the framework of the ESQA (Effective involvement of stakeholders in external quality assurance activities) project coordinated by the Romanian Ministry of National Education. An important quality assurance principle is that everyone should be involved in the given processes from top to bottom, from the cleaner to the chancellor, so to speak. Moreover, students, as the primary stakeholders, i.e. the primary actors and users of higher education as a service, should be active participants in the development of higher education organisations. According to the latest country report of the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG), which is responsible for monitoring the Bologna Process, in almost half[7] of the quality assurance agencies in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), students have been extensively involved, as have foreign experts and employers, while in the other EHEA countries, this involvement has been limited (e.g. only in some committees) or even non-existent (Eurydice, 2022).

Another focal point closely related to this is the rise of a more learning- and student-centred approach (ESG 1.3) which emphasises the importance of what and how students learn, the effectiveness, efficiency and quality of their learning, and how to provide them with more and more flexible learning opportunities. The emergence of a more learning-outcomes-oriented approach calls for a change in

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[5] These evaluations are based on the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, which is also used to evaluate joint programmes of consortia under the European Universities Initiative.

[6] Formally, there are fewer and fewer obstacles to this (Hungarian law allows it), but in practice, it is still relatively rare.

[7] These are primarily Western European countries.

priorities (Kennedy, 2006). It provides an outcome-oriented perspective and can be used flexibly at both abstract and concrete levels.[8] Using learning outcomes to highlight the key competences a learner can acquire, represents a major shift in the mind-set regarding qualifications, as well as the various teaching, learning and motivational processes that are necessary to acquire these skills. This requires the development of quality systems in higher education institutions. This approach was endorsed by ministers of higher education in the Bucharest Communiqué (2012), in which they reaffirmed their commitment to student-centeredness and characterised it as a set of innovative teaching methods that involve students as active participants in their own learning. This is based on the psychological observation that you know something better if you do it yourself. In a student- and teaching-centred approach, this is reflected in the active involvement of students (e.g. active participation in research projects: own discovery, achievement of results, etc.). Another key issue is the philosophy of teaching and learning, which has been the subject of a separate report for the European Commission (High Level Group on the Modernisation of Higher Education, 2013) and was also a priority in the EUA's 2015 report (Sursock, 2015). These efforts are aimed in the first place at increasing the importance of learning-teaching roles in the institutions. This includes, for example, setting up centres for pedagogical development, developing learning and teaching strategies, or carrying out internal research or other development programmes on this topic. Nevertheless, this cannot be achieved without close collaboration with students and the development of communities of practice. The centrality of learning does not mean that the quality of teaching is irrelevant, in fact, the opposite is true. The pedagogical competence and culture of teachers contribute greatly to the transformation of the previously prevailing attitudes. The report, sent to the European Commission, states that "quality teaching is the sine qua non of a quality culture" (ENQA, 2015) and sets a target for all higher education teaching staff to receive pedagogical training by 2020. It is also suggested that pedagogical skills should be given greater weight in performance assessment procedures. However, one of the obstacles in terms of evaluating education is that the rankings are less sensitive to the learning and teaching outcomes of institutions, which is of course linked to the fact that measuring or even quantifying these is rather difficult, and some authors argue that it is impossible, but the need for it is hardly controversial (Kováts, 2016).

The increasing importance of quality assurance in higher education and the spread of quality assurance agencies and procedures in Europe is perfectly illustrated by the growth rate in the number of agencies listed and registered in the

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[8] Abstract, for example, is a general, national or even international framework that encompasses a number of qualifications, while concrete is the specification of the outcome characteristics of a particular course or even a class.

European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and the number of publicly available external quality assurance (accreditation) decisions and reports uploaded by agencies to the EQAR database (DEQAR, Database of External Quality Assurance Results) over the past decade and a half (Lakatos, 2022). The mission of EQAR is "to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education".

Figure 3.: Change in the number of decisions taken on applications for registration and renewal in EQAR and the number of agencies registered based on these decisions (based on ESG 2005 applications between 2008 and 2015, ESG 2015 applications after 2015)
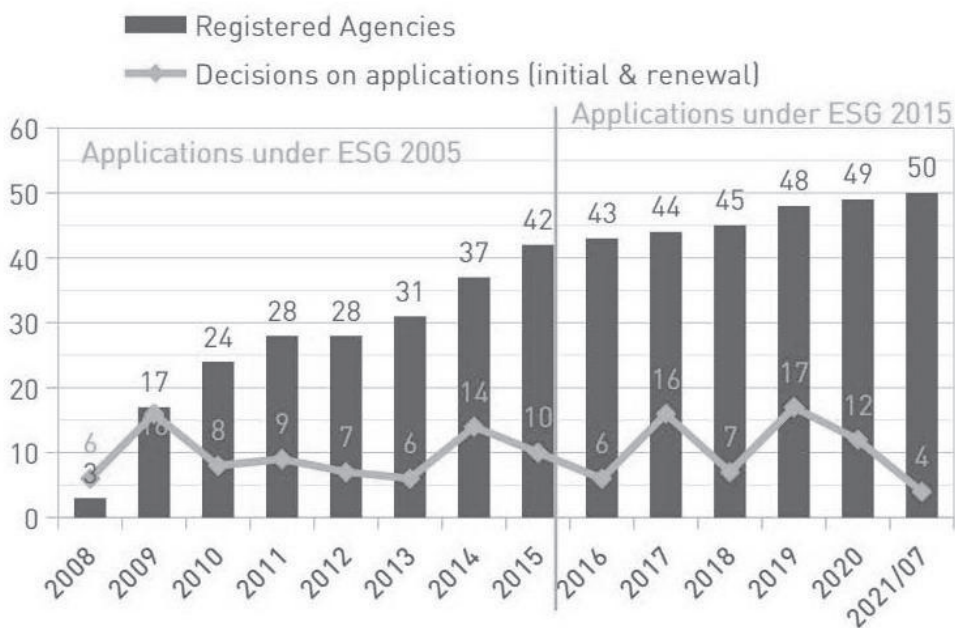
Source: Szabó and Zhivkovikj 2021

Figure 4.: Trends of external quality assurance reports uploaded to DEQAR (in percentage)
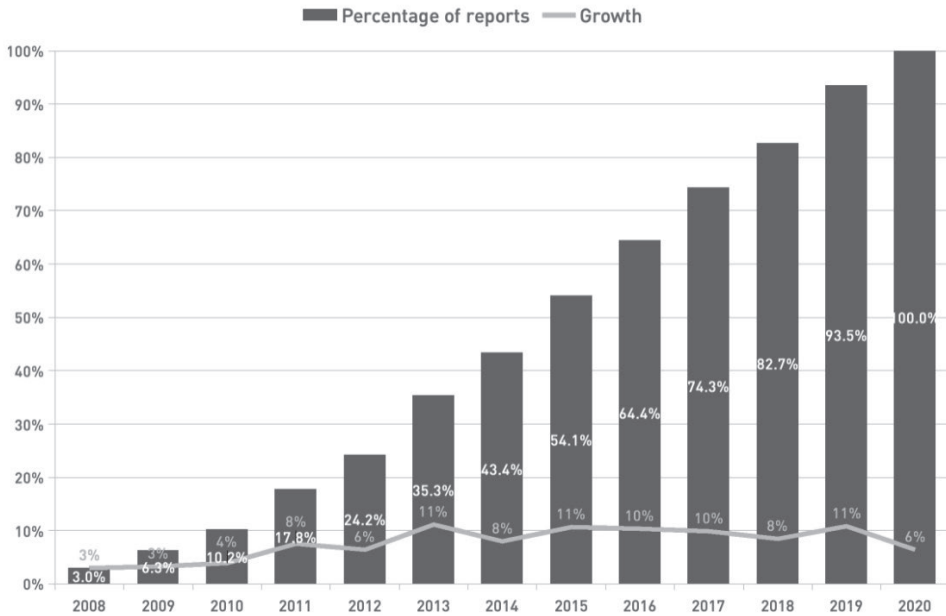
Source: Szabó (2022)

In relation to quality assurance in higher education, there is a project which has to be mentioned as well, this is the so-called QA-FIT which is the abbreviation of Quality Assurance Fit for the Future. The goal of the QA-FIT project is to investigate whether the ESG are ready for the future from the perspective of quality assurance, and if not, the project has to support them to be prepared. The motives of this project come from the expectations of the stakeholders that ESG need to be monitored in order to reflect the innovations in the higher education, in addition, to support the innovations and the application of quality assurance as it highly facilitates that the common standards are applied in a more flexible way (EQAR, no date).

4. Summary, conclusions, suggestions

Quality assurance has evolved enormously over the past centuries. Competition and demand for services of ever higher quality have inevitably been stimulated by thinking about quality management and quality improvement. The focus has shifted from quality control, which is essentially focused on the product, to

quality improvement and quality assurance as processes that fundamentally "revolutionise" the entire organisational culture. As a result of this paradigm shift, a number of approaches and systems have emerged of which we have highlighted the most significant and relevant ones (TQM, ISO, EFQM), whose history and basic principles were described in this paper. There can hardly be any doubt whether a well-functioning quality system can enhance the efficiency of operations.

The question remains, however, whether this is the case for all sectors, and whether quality assurance can be effectively applied, for example, in the case of education, including higher education. The conclusion of this paper is that it can. This is evidenced by the internationalisation of higher education, and, in particular, by the need for increasing the involvement of both the users of higher education as a service (students), as well as the labour market (employers and other stakeholders), which is not only supported but also strongly encouraged by quality assurance standards and trends. Rather, the question is whether adequate external and internal quality assurance can in itself lead to effective organisational development. The answer to this question is far from clear, but it can be generally said that organic and intensive cooperation between external quality assurance organisations, i.e. quality assurance agencies, universities as the institutions primarily responsible for internal quality assurance, and the relevant ministries under the ESG is essential. Meaningful organisational development can only be the result of collaborative work.

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