Final Report of the Matchmaking Committee

Bologna Peer Group on QA: staff mobility project

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Co-funded by the
Erasmus+ Programme
of the European Union

Introduction

Bologna Peer Group on QA: staff mobility project

The Staff Mobility project was a project co-funded by Erasmus+ KA3 Support to Policy reform "Support to the implementation of EHEA reforms - 2018-2020" and related to the work of the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance. The project was led by the Ministry of Education and Training of Belgium/Flemish Community in collaboration with The National Center for Educational Quality Enhancement in Georgia and the Ministry of Education and Culture in Cyprus. The project started as a 2-year project and was later extended by 6 months, due to the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

Through a system of mobility of staff members working in the field of quality assurance in higher education within national authorities (ministries), quality assurance agencies and/or stakeholder organizations, this project facilitated peer support in the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance. All flows and directions of staff mobility between ministries, quality assurance agencies and stakeholder organizations were possible. As such, the system supported the professional development of staff by offering a work placement in another country. Each mobile peer further developed its quality assurance competencies through job shadowing, observation periods and/or training at a partner quality assurance agency/ministry/organization abroad. Every staff mobility focused on specific needs of its home country. It was expected that the individual staff mobilities would help to move further towards a full implementation of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in each country.

Matchmaking Committee

The matchmaking committee was composed of the co-chairs of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group (TPG) on QA and two external experts of related stakeholder organizations ENQA and EQAR. The role of the matchmaking committee was to guide the process of the staff mobilities around Europe by reviewing the applications and help matching the staff members based on thematic interest and geographical spread. After the exchanges of staff, the matchmaking committee also reviewed the outcome reports written by the mobile staff members and hosts[1] in order to disseminate lessons learned to all members of the Bologna Peer Support Group on Quality Assurance. The observations of the matchmaking committee are presented in this report.
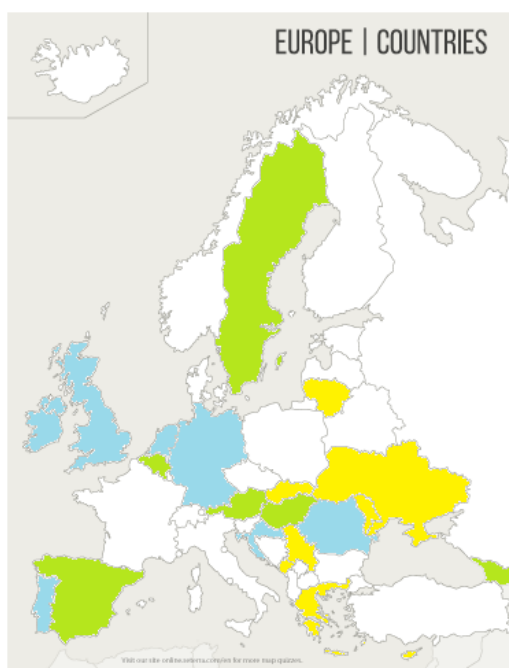
Staff Mobilities

The project could count on enthusiasm from the field: a total of 81 applications had been received for participation in the project. The matchmaking committee aimed to pair partners based on topics of interest and expertise, and tried to find a good geographical balance. As a consequence, based on the advice of the matchmaking committee, some of the applications were adapted to a different destination or to include other topics. As a result, all applicants were given approval to participate in the project.

Below
Matchmaking Committee meeting in Georgia, 2019

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1. Mobile staff members were required to submit an outcome report after their mobility. For host organisations, this was optional.

Unfortunately, the project was heavily impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. To accommodate participants, flexibility was allowed in the form of a change of destination (after approval by the matchmaking committee) or by opting for virtual mobility.

During the project period (18 May 2019 – 17 November 2021), 22 physical mobilities could take place. About half of these took place between November 2019 and March 2020, whereas another 9 mobilities were organised in July 2021, after COVID-19 restrictions in Europe eased up and travel became possible again under certain conditions. In addition, there were two virtual mobilities, plus an extra short virtual mobility that was organised at the end of the project and that was not among the original applications. Nevertheless, 57 mobilities unfortunately had to be cancelled.

Overall, the project had a good geographical balance, as can be seen in figure 1 to the right. Although the countries that only had outgoing mobility are mostly concentrated in South-Eastern Europe, the countries that had incoming mobility or both incoming and outgoing mobility are spread across the continent.

The countries that sent the most outgoing staff members were Montenegro (4), Georgia ($3+1_2$) and a third place for Greece and ENQA (2). The most popular hosts were Croatia (4), Portugal (3), and a number of countries that hosted two peers: Ireland, Germany, Hungary and Romania.

Overall, a mix of countries, in what regards the stage of development of their external Quality Assurance system (as described in Scorecard indicator n°4 in the Bologna Implementation Report 2020_3) has applied to take part in the staff mobility programme. Applicants came from a broad set of countries, ranging from countries that are still in the development phase (red/orange), to countries that have a strong track record in QA (dark green). The host countries also ranged from medium to strong QA systems (orange to dark green). The topics that were the most addressed in the mobilities were external QA (institutional & programme accreditation), stakeholder engagement and ESG & legal framework.

Figure 1: Countries participating in the project
Yellow: outgoing mobility
Blue: incoming mobility
Green: outgoing and incoming mobility

"Taking into consideration the conditions in which the mobility took place, namely the pandemic restrictions, precaution measures and also the very short time the host country colleagues had to prepare for the mobility, I would definitely say that my expectations were more than met. I got a lot of information including a number of best practices and excellent ideas that can not only improve our existing national policies but also help introducing some new ones."

Yiannis Kasoulides, exchange between the Cypriot Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth and the Hungarian Ministry for Innovation and Technology

2, Three physical mobilities and one short-term virtual mobility.
3, Euridyce - Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. (2020). The European higher education area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report. p. 73. Retrieved from: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2020-bologna-process-implementation-report_en

Good practice and challenges in the organisation of staff mobilities

During the analysis of the mobility reports from hosts and mobile individuals several good practices could be identified, related to the organisational elements of the mobilities.

Mobility models

Duo-exchange: A mobility can significantly enhance its impact when it is done as a duo-exchange, i.e. mutual visits from one agency/organisation to the other. This enables prolonged exchanges on key topics that can be followed up during the second visit and may also lead to a greater engagement of the entire organisations and their staff. It should however be noted that this type of dual-mobility is not applicable in all cases and depends on the maturity and complementarity of the partners.

Internationalisation at home: The visit of a colleague from abroad may be used as a good opportunity for internationalisation at home if the host organisation's staff are engaged in the different discussions and/or in a presentation by the mobile individual. Involvement of several people in the programme delivery at the host agency multiplies the opportunities for mutual learning and sharing, and provides non-mobile staff an opportunity for some international exposure.

Twin mobility of agency and ministry: Another model that seemed to be highly interesting, especially for systems in the development phase, was a combined mobility of staff members from the ministry and from the QA agency. Such twin mobility enabled enhanced communication between the ministry and the agency of the sending country and supported joint reflections and the creation of a joint action plan for the future. The impact of the learning experience can be much enhanced through such twin mobility.

Small group mobility: It was found interesting and beneficial to organise mobility of 2-3 people from different countries at the same time, particularly if they had an interest in the same topic(s). This enables not only mutual learning between the host and the mobile individual, but a more multidimensional exchange between people from 3-4 countries. Hosting 2-3 people at the same time is also less burdensome to the host than organising several individual visits. Participating entities should however be mindful not to organise staff mobilities with more than 3 or 4 visiting peers, so as to avoid the mobility to turn into a workshop. A personalised approach, addressing the mobile staff members' needs, should remain at the centre of the mobility.

Short online meetings: Due to COVID-19 restrictions short meetings between staff members were another way to implement staff mobility. These kind of meetings can be beneficial when there is need to focus on some very specific topic of interest. Short online meetings are usually less effective in building more solid relationships between the participating staff.

Additional good practices

- The value of a mobility can be enhanced if it is enriched by visits to other stakeholder bodies and/or a local higher education institutions, or if it can be combined with an event such as a training session, a conference, or observation of an external quality assurance site visit.
- Shared hosting (e.g. by an agency and the ministry, or other stakeholder body) can make the visit more interesting and diverse, and also decrease the burden on the host organisation.
- Leadership mobility has higher potential impact at the system and organisational level, while the benefits of mobility at the individual level are very high for junior/less experienced staff and people with lesser international exposure.

"A mobility from Serbia to Georgia was combined with 2-days annual conference on QA. It was an international event and besides offering learning experience to visiting staff, it also provided additional opportunity for international networking."

Lasha Margishvili, exchange between NEAQEHE (Serbia) and NCEQE (Georgia)

- Establishing clear topics and questions beforehand helps the host to organise a meaningful schedule for the visit and helps the mobile person to enhance the concrete impact of the visit. In addition, clarifying expectations beforehand will help to ensure a good match between the mobile person and the host.
- When creating the visit programme, it is important to build in some time for reflection, and for catching up with work at home. Also, the importance of social elements of the programme should not be neglected.

Main challenges

Beyond the key challenge for the organisation of mobilities during this project, i.e. the restrictions imposed by the COVID-pandemic, some other challenges were also identified. Some of the good practice examples listed above may be helpful in addressing those challenges in future mobilities.

- **Language issues** were often mentioned as a challenge for the organisation of the mobility, as this made e.g. attendance to some activities of the host organisation difficult. It is useful for mobile peers to have access to documents in a language he or she understands and it is highly appreciated if the host translates essential documents. At the same time, translation of documents could become overburdening for the host organisation.
- The site visit was sometimes perceived too long by the host organisation and too short by the mobile individual. It may be complicated to host someone for several days and co-hosting with another organisation could provide a good solution. It may also be challenging for the sending organisation to send out a staff member for a longer period. Agreeing on an optimal length of the mobility is necessary.
- Another challenge was related to the mismatch in expectations by the host and the mobile person. Setting clear priorities and topics and ensuring a good match of what the mobility is to achieve and what the host is able to offer can reduce this issue. One suggestion to better match expectations of QA agencies/ministries' staff and support them in finding appropriate staff mobility opportunities could be developing an online platform or tool, which would collide information about staff mobility opportunities that each participating organisation/QA agency offers.

Lessons learned from the COVID-19 pandemic

Although the COVID-19 pandemic caused a great perturbation for this project, it also allowed for the discovery of virtual mobility. Out of necessity, some of the mobilities took place online. Whereas it cannot be contested that physical mobility remains the preferred option, participants also recognised that a part of the mobility can take place online. In a blended format, the mobile staff member can already meet the hosting peer and organisation online ahead of the physical mobility, so that they can get to know each other and make agreements for the schedule and content. This way, expectations will be better met and it allows for more targeted interaction during the physical mobility. It could also be a means to include other colleagues from the organisation of the mobile staff member.

> "Even after the ease of restrictions related to COVID-19, in some non-EU countries (e.g. in Georgia) local COVID-19 restrictions on travel abroad still remained which hindered participation of the staff in mobility, even though the agencies were ready to host the staff mobility."
>
> Lasha Margishvili, NCEQE (Georgia)

Content aspects of the Staff Mobility Project

Action plan

The Staff Mobility Project was developed to offer peer support in the implementation of one of the three key commitments of the Bologna Process (in line with the work programme of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) for 2018-2020), i.e. having a fully functioning quality assurance system in operation nationwide, in which all or most higher education institutions are subject to regular external quality assurance by an agency that has successfully demonstrated compliance with the ESG through registration on the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR).

According to the 2018 Bologna Process Implementation report [4], around thirty higher education systems have met this commitment, while at least a third of the higher education systems in the EHEA were still not subject to regular external quality assurance, or the higher education institutions have not undergone an external evaluation to demonstrate compliance with the ESG. In these systems work remains to be done to develop a quality assurance system that is compliant with the ESG. While the staff mobility project primarily addressed the members of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group on QA, this was not limited to them personally, but to all relevant personnel working on quality assurance matters within the Ministry or other relevant authority such a quality assurance agency.

In the staff mobility's call, applicants (representatives of governments and QA agencies) where asked to specifically link their application to the country's action

"The visit was structured according to the list of topics and questions sent in advance and all others raised during the mobility. I have learned about different research and analyses that contributed not only to the improvement of QA in Portugal, but the HE system in general as well."

Tijana Stankovic, exchange between ACQAHE (Montenegro) and A3ES (Portugal)

plan (as set up in the framework of the TPG_5) in meeting the higher education systems commitment to ESG. The applications revealed that many representatives of QA agencies did not know what their national action plan was or how to implement it. Since the communication between some QA agencies and governments was not always ensured, this has been addressed in the individual communications with applicants i.e. encouraging further reflection and update of the national action plan on QA.

The matchmaking committee also suggested in some cases that applicants of both QA agency and Ministry, where possible, would participate together. Seven countries had successfully applied with staff members from both Ministry and a QA agency i.e. Albania, Cyprus, Croatia, Greece Italy, Moldova and Ukraine. The Committee was also pleased to see that most countries applied to send two staff members on mobility to two different host countries or institutions to ensure a wider reach.

"It was my pleasure to meet colleagues from another member state from the European Higher Education Area with whom we share the same concerns and more or less the same responsibilities regarding the transformation and improvement of Higher Education in our countries respectively and in Europe collectively. An unforgettable experience that I strongly recommend colleagues to enjoy and benefit from."

Yiannis Kasoulides, exchange between the Cypriot Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport and Youth and the Hungarian Ministry for Innovation and Technology

4, Eurydice - Education, Audiovisual and Culture Executive Agency. (2018). The European higher education area in 2018: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Retrieved from: https://eacea.ec.europa.eu/national-policies/eurydice/content/european-higher-education-area-2018-bologna-process-implementation-report_en
5, To be found on the webpage of the TPG C on QA: http://ehea.info/page-peer-group-C-QA

The applications were assessed based on whether they have demonstrated the need to gain knowledge on the chosen topic, based on the relevance and link with the national action plan, based on the choice of a host country or organisation and based on the plan for dissemination of results. Individual feedback on applications were provided to ensure a better link to the action plan and considering the possible support from peers to best assist the representative(s) of Ministry and QA agency in working towards aligning their higher education system to the ESG.

Topics

Applicants could choose from a list of pre-selected issues related to QA, that was sufficiently generic to permit applicants to specifically address the relevant issues for their national context. Depending on the nature and role of the participating organisation, topics could be addressed more broadly for Ministries, and on a more technical level for QA agencies.

When arranging their mobilities, most countries considered a combination of these topics ranging from the legal framework's alignment with the ESG, external QA (at institutional & programme level) in line with the ESG, internal QA, stakeholder engagement as well as two other wider topics referring to the openness of the higher education system to cross-border QA and use of the European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes. In both calls the principal interest was on the topic of institutional and programme level external QA and the alignment of the legal framework with ESG. Other common topics were internal QA and stakeholder engagement. These are the equal to the topics of the mobilities that effectively took place.

For countries where the alignment with the ESG has not yet been ensured, the staff mobility experience provided the means to collect relevant experience from well-established QA systems and accreditation agencies working in similar national contexts. It further offered the opportunity for staff to gain direct insight into the work of QA agencies by assisting and observing statutory meetings and be part of site-visit evaluations. For others, the staff mobility offered a learning opportunity into new ways of engaging stakeholders or into the design of the training for review panel experts.

For countries with a more well-established system of internal and external quality assurance, having already an external QA system aligned with the ESG, the engagement in the staff mobility was not only limited to hosting but also allowed for the staff to participate and improve on their current accreditation models, enhance their understanding of different accreditation systems, further work on the recognition of cross border QA and European Approach within their system and focus on innovation and enhancement.

Above
Exchange between ACQAHE (Montenegro)
and A3ES (Portugal)

"Some solutions from the Portuguese QA system are translated into the current draft of a new Montenegrin higher education law: accreditation body, validation period of accreditation for institutions, length of evaluation procedures, process of planning the evaluations for the next year, etc."

Tijana Stankovic, exchange between ACQAHE (Montenegro) and A3ES (Portugal)

"The staff mobility provided an opportunity for the NCEQE (QA agency Georgia) to learn on student experts' recruitment, trainings and interview simulation approach that was later used by the NCEQE to develop the training module for student experts. The staff mobility project also allowed the NCEQE to reshape its approach on thematic analyses and later on, in collaboration within a Twinning project a new methodology for thematic analysis has been developed. The NCEQE also benefited from the staff mobility to broaden perspective on cluster accreditation and evaluation of doctoral programmes. Building on this experience a new methodology for cluster accreditation and evaluation criteria for doctoral programmes were developed. From 2022 it will be possible to evaluate doctoral programmes according to revised evaluation criteria and programmes will be evaluated in clusters. Achieving a greater effectiveness and efficiency of the evaluation procedure, will also enable a more holistic evaluation of programmes at institutional and at national level."

Lasha Margishvili, NCEQE (Georgia)

Lessons learned

In reporting on the outcomes of their experience, the mobile staff commented on the value of the staff mobility experience and the main lessons learned. The mobile staff found that the visit facilitated their understanding of the quality assurance system, e.g. enhanced their "understanding of the link between the institutional evaluation and programmes evaluation" (Lithuania) as well as their "understanding on the complexity and functioning of the national systems" (Montenegro), gained first hand know-how into "how the agency evaluates the higher education institution, how assessors are chosen and trained and what are the duties of the ministry in the whole process" (Slovakia). Following the staff mobility exchange, the staff reported that they had now "an increased ability to address the problematic areas of the quality assurance system" (Montenegro), "gained a vision for the future work of NAQA" (Ukraine) and stated the site visit was a "great starting point for mutual learning as well as critical self-reflection" (Sweden). The mobility also offered a "unique opportunity to create international connections with colleagues from the same field, as well as the opportunity of learning from peers from Europe" (Georgia) and continue the cooperation "in the field of programme and institutional accreditation by signing a Memorandum of Understanding" (Romania, Hungary, Greece). Overall, the staff mobility gave the participating staff the opportunity to self-reflect and better understand where the organisations they represent stand in a wider context. The mobile staff members also bring the potential to facilitate a more international mindset to be rooted in the work and activities of QA agencies and organisations.

Above
Exchange between UKÄ (Sweden) and NVAO (Flanders)

"The quality culture of the Flemish Department seems strong and all staff are eager and willing to engage in critical discussions, both in formal and informal meetings. Such a seminar approach to all activities provided a great environment for peer learning. Being able to listen in on meetings and participating in a site-visit was a great starting point for mutual learning as well as critical self-reflection."

Charlotte Elam, exchange between UKÄ (Sweden) and NVAO (Flanders)

Financial aspects

The evaluation of the staff mobilities also allowed to make some reflections on the financial aspects of the project. Having learned from a first group of mobile peers, some considerations should be taken into account for a potential future follow-up project. Number of days of mobility: The participants to the staff mobility project opted for shorter mobilities than initially foreseen. The average mobility lasted for a week, whereas a maximum of 14 days were allowed. Participants indicated that a physical mobility of 5 days is enough. This allows for the mobile staff member to be able to get immersed in the host organisation, while not putting too much burden on the host. At the same time the mobility should not be too short. In a future project, a mobility period of 2-5 days (without travel days) would be optimal. Not only will this allow for a good experience by the mobile staff member and the host, it will also enable more mobilities with the same budget.

Long distance travel: Considering the geographical distances between some countries, it was difficult for some mobile staff members to cover the travel costs with the maximum travel allowance. Following the example of mobility under the Erasmus+ programme, the matchmaking committee deems it more fair to allow for a higher maximum allowance for mobilities between countries that are at a longer distance. The long distance reimbursement is expected to only be applicable to a limited number of mobilities and will therefore not have a strong impact on the project budget. It will however provide a fair reimbursement to staff members that are indeed going to a destination that is further away.

Sustainability: The matchmaking committee acknowledges that ecological considerations should be taken into account in the future. For shorter distances of under 500 km, travel by train or bus instead of airplane or car will be strongly recommended. This could be compensated by increasing the maximum travel reimbursement by a small amount if the mobile individual opts for a sustainable means of transport.

Co-funding: In the current project, it was already the case that the maximum allowed reimbursements were respected if the expenses of the mobility surpassed the maximum amount. This should be maintained in a future mobility programme. Based on past experience and taking into account the abovementioned suggestions, the maximum travel allowance of €360 for travel costs (with a potential supplement for sustainable or long distance travel) and €120 per night for accommodation (with a maximum of 5 nights) is deemed sufficient to cover for the mobile person's expenses. Any surplus should be paid for by the participating organisation as co-funding.

Mobilities taking place
over the project period
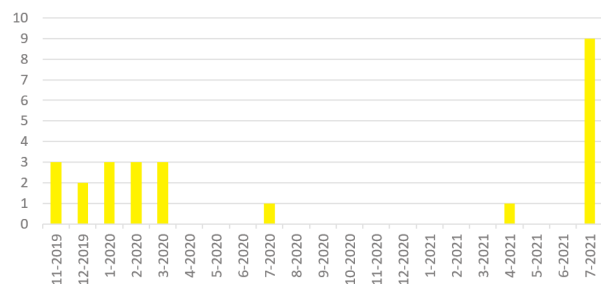
Average duration staff mobilities per month
over the project period
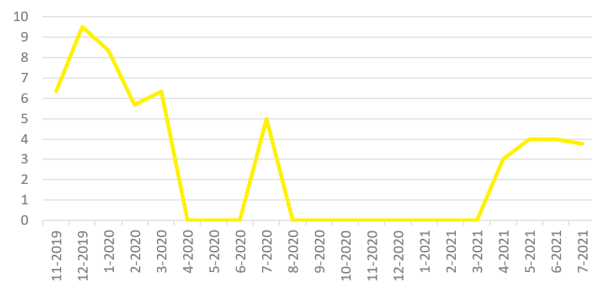
Conclusion

Over the past two years, the Bologna Peer Group on QA: staff mobility project enabled 25 mobilities (22 physical and 3 virtual mobilities) between QA agencies and ministries of education across Europe. The project has been heavily affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, causing only one third of the 81 foreseen mobilities to effectively take place. Nevertheless, even at a smaller scale, the project has proven to be a success.

The reports of those who have been in a staff mobility exchange show that the project provided a right context for mutual exchanges of ideas and practices, sharing of knowledge, mutual learning and understanding with regard to the quality assurance process (the context, the policy/policies adopted and the measures translating the key commitments at the national level).

The project was highly appreciated both by mobile staff members and hosts alike. All mobile participants rated their experience good to excellent. All host organisations on their part indicated that they would like to host a peer again.

Not only did the project provide many insights on an individual level, in some cases the partners also continued to work together on a more structural basis. In one case, three partners agreed to set up a Memorandum of Understanding to continue their cooperation.

The results from this project will be taken on board in the ongoing work of the Bologna Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance. In a potential future follow-up project, more emphasis will be given on medium and long term impact of the mobility and the wider dissemination of lessons learned among the mobile staff member's organisation. In addition, attention will be drawn to the comparison between the application and the mobility programme, to ensure the effective mobility meets the initially intended goals.

"My expectations were certainly met, but also exceeded, as I had not fully taken into account what perhaps was the most important outcome of the mobility; the opportunity to take a step back and reflect on how we do things at UKÄ."

Charlotte Elam, exchange between UKÄ (Sweden) and NVAO (Flanders)

Above
Matchmaking Committee, Cyprus, September 2021

Acknowledgements