UNIQUE
University Quality Exchange

Knowledge Pool

European Quality Assurance Practices in Higher Education

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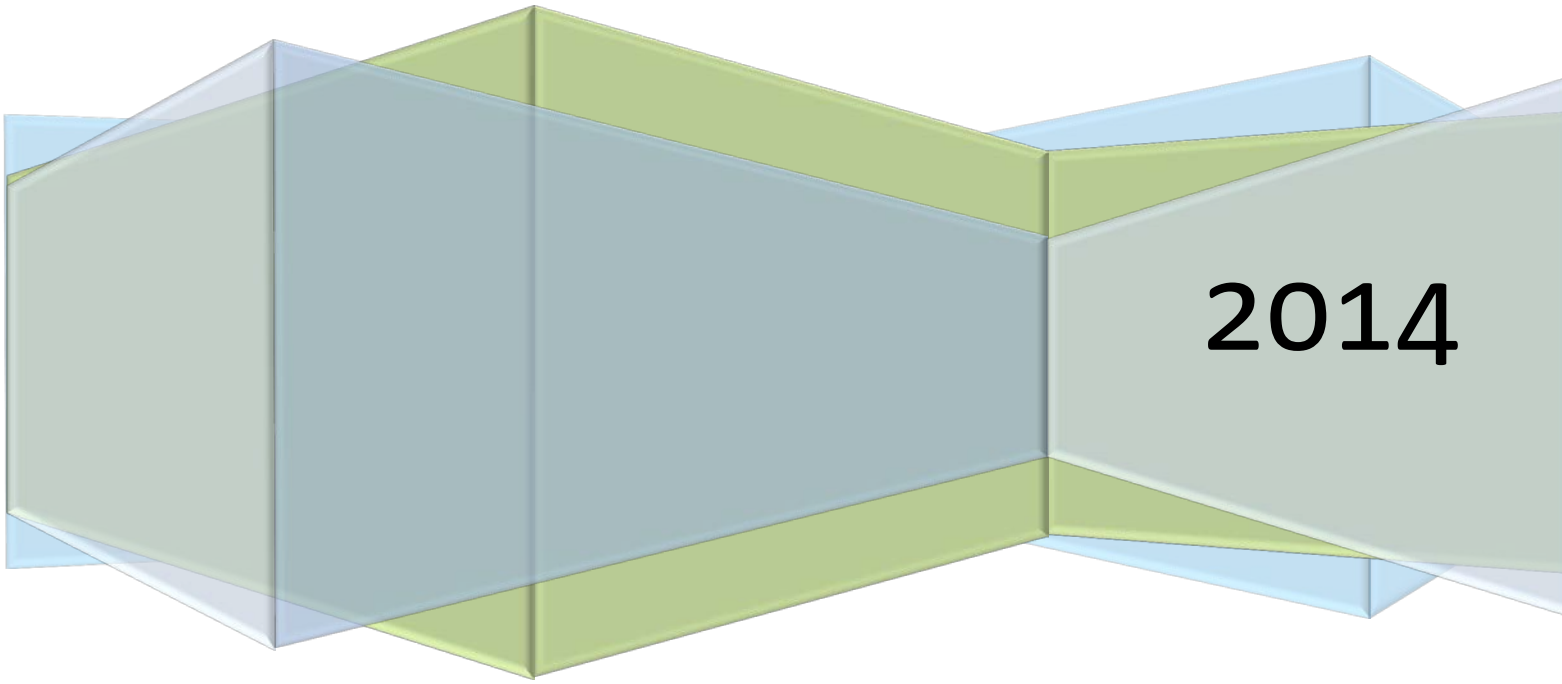

Preface

UNIQUE was launched in 2013 by the European Commission to promote and develop an information exchange mechanism and share examples of good practice in the area of quality assurance in higher education. The project seeks to provide information in both the international and European context, and this document (The Knowledge Pool) reviews the development and current trends of Quality Assurance practices in Europe.

The Knowledge Pool provides intelligence into the current practices for higher education in Europe and the key areas and organisations which ensure quality assurance. The pool also addresses the challenges faced by the European Higher Education Area, whilst endeavouring to increase international collaboration. This document supports the work conducted by the UNIQUE project partners and also informs other interested parties (i.e. lecturers, university staff, government officials, parents; policy makers and current and prospective students) of current practices and future development in Quality Assurance in Higher Education.

The UNIQUE project seeks further to encourage international collaboration and exchange with centres in Russia, India, China, Mexico and Namibia. Further information and contact details can be found at the website (www.unique.fh-joanneum.at).

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Glossary

QA	Quality Assurance
HE	Higher Education
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
UNESCO	The UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), is a specialised agency of the United Nations (UN). Its purpose is to contribute to peace and security by promoting international collaboration through education, science, and culture in order to further universal respect for justice, the rule of law, and human rights along with fundamental freedom proclaimed in the UN Charter. It is the heir of the League of Nations' International Commission on Intellectual Cooperation. UNESCO has 196 member states and nine associate members. Most of the field offices are "cluster" offices covering three or more countries; there are also national and regional offices. UNESCO pursue its objectives through five major programs: education, natural sciences, social and human sciences, culture, and communication and information. Projects sponsored by UNESCO include literacy, technical, and teacher-training programmes; international science programmes; the promotion of independent media and freedom of the press; regional and cultural history projects; the promotion of cultural diversity; translations of world literature; international cooperation agreements to secure the world cultural and natural heritage (World Heritage Sites) and to preserve human rights, and attempts to bridge the worldwide digital divide. It is also a member of the United Nations Development Group.
EUA	The European University Association (EUA) is the main voice of the higher education community in Europe. EUA membership is open to individual universities and national rectors' conferences, as well as associations and networks of higher education institutions. With approximately 850 members in 47 countries, EUA is building strong universities for Europe through targeted activities aimed at supporting their development. These activities include policy dialogue, conferences, workshops, projects, and more targeted services such as the Institutional Evaluation Programme, and an independent service dedicated to doctoral education.
ESU	The European Students' Union (ESU) is the umbrella organisation of 47 National Unions of Students (NUS) from 39 countries (December 2012). The aim of ESU is to represent and promote the educational, social, economic and cultural interests of students at the European level towards all relevant bodies and in particular the European Union, Bologna Follow Up Group, Council of Europe and UNESCO. Through its members, ESU represents over 11 million students in Europe.
EURASHE	EURASHE is the European association of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) that offer professionally oriented programmes and are engaged in applied and profession-related research within the Bologna cycles. Currently, more than 1,400 higher education institutions in 40 countries within and outside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are affiliated to EURASHE. The Association is present mostly through National Associations of Higher Education Institutions and individual institutions, such as Universities, (University) Colleges and Universities of Applied Sciences, as well as through other professional associations and stakeholder organisations active in the

	field of higher education.
ENQA	ENQA is a membership association which represents its members at the European level and internationally. ENQA members are quality assurance organisations from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) that operate in the field of higher education. The membership criteria of ENQA encompass Part III of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) and some additional requirements and guidelines. Bodies that do not wish to, or for whatever reason are unable to, apply to become members of ENQA may request affiliate status within ENQA. Affiliates are bona fide organisations or agencies with a demonstrable interest in the quality assurance of higher education.
Education International	Education International is the voice of teachers and other education employees across the globe. A federation of 401 associations and unions in 171 countries and territories, it represents some 30 million educators in education institutions from early childhood to university.
BUSINESSEUROPE	BUSINESSEUROPE is the leading advocate for growth and competitiveness at European level, standing up for companies across the continent and campaigning on the issues that most influence their performance. A recognized social partner, we speak for all-sized enterprises in 35 European countries whose national business federations are our direct members.

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Quality assurance (QA) practices in Higher Education (HE) ensure standards in the products being delivered to students at each institution, which requires a standardised recognition of the level of achievement to obtain a degree, allowing comparability. Burquel (2012, pp.6) from the European Centre for the Strategic Management of Universities stresses that the "purpose of quality assurance is to ensure accountability, yet it must also enhance the quality of higher education itself". The level of quality achieved by each institution (learning, teaching, support, assessment, resources) enables students to decipher the level of support they can expect to gain from each institution. This enables students, employers, and the wider society, to have confidence in the education system and in the ability of the participants (students, support staff and lecturers).

Across Europe there are various independent bodies responsible for ensuring that universities and colleges are adhering to the minimum quality practices and standards which are expected in HE. In the United Kingdom (UK), the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) produce a UK Quality Code for Higher Education which they use when assuring the standards across all UK institutions (QAA, 2011a). Figure 1.1 illustrates the focus on the student's involvement in the QA process in order to ensure that there is a "better learning experience".

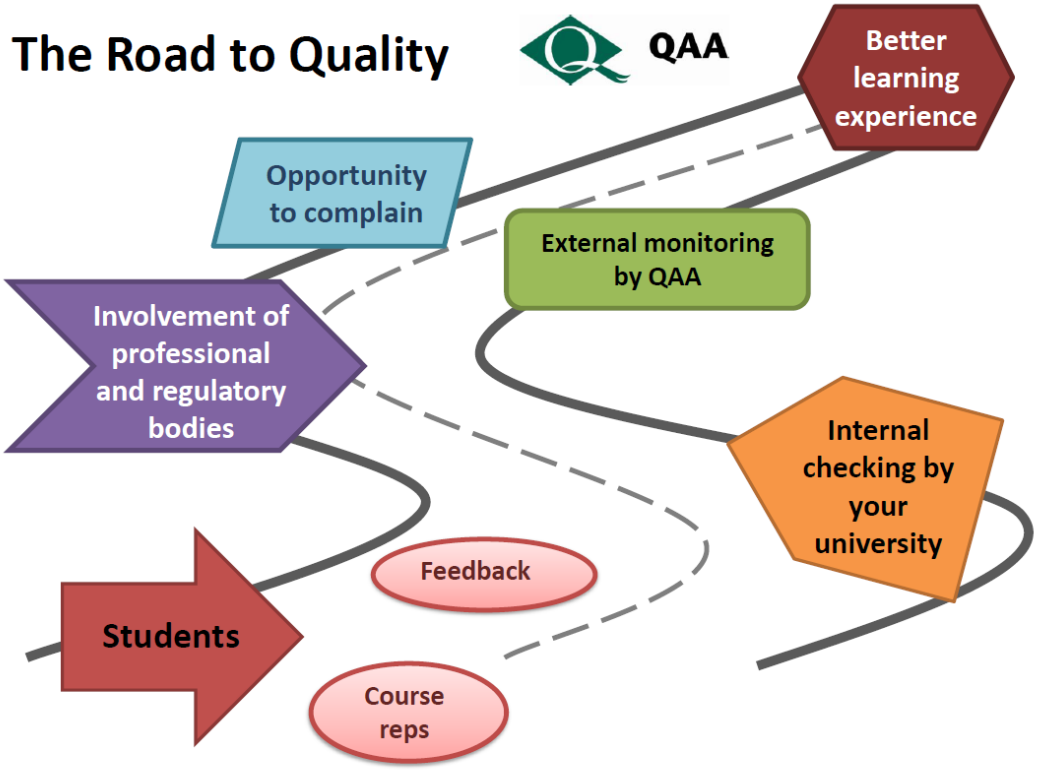

Figure 1.1 The Road to Quality (QAA, 2014a).

1.2 Challenges of Quality Assurance in Higher Education

The ENQA, (2009, pp.10) (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) asserts that the fundamental principles of QA development within Europe are:

- "the interests of students as well as employers and the society more generally in good quality higher education;
- the central importance of institutional autonomy, tempered by a recognition that this brings with it heavy responsibilities;
- the need for external quality assurance to be fit for its purpose and to place only an appropriate and necessary burden on institutions for the achievement of its objectives".

To enable these principles and to create comparable and coherent higher education systems throughout Europe, the EU developed the Bologna process (1999-2010), which culminated in the creation of the EHEA. The challenge of creating a single approach to QA in HE in the EHEA is, however, vast due to "its 40 states characterised by its diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations" (ENQA, 2009, pp.11). Therefore, institutional autonomy is a key concept as responsibility falls to each individual institute across Europe who are bound to adhere to national standards.

QA in HE is further challenging when considered from an international perspective, particularly as further work is required in benchmarking and exchanging good practice in order to overcome the challenges of standardisation and comparability of HE systems (Blackstock et. al.,2012; Blomqvist et. al., 2012). Work conducted by the ENQA highlights the need for further areas of development in international benchmarking and international recognition of national QA agencies as illustrated in Figure 1.2 (Grifoll et. al., 2012). Other challenging areas in the internationalisation of QA are metrics, ranking systems and the level of student involvement, which is discussed in further detail by the European University Association (2009).

The EHEA now seeks to develop a robust HE system which is comparable on an international level and create a highly competitive area. As globalisation continues, the internationalisation of HE becomes essential in order to maintain the competitiveness of the EHEA.

Figure 1.2 Illustration of the areas required for development within European Quality Assurance practices (Grifoll et. al., 2012, pp. 6)

1.3 University Quality Exchange (UNIQUE)

UNIQUE is a 30 month collaborative project funded by the Erasmus Mundus programme of the European Union. The project was launched in 2013 and it explores quality assurance practices in higher education both in the EU and in international communities.

1.3.1 Project Partners

The project is live in 8 countries across the world which include Mexico, Namibia, China, India, Russia, UK, Spain and Austria. The institutions involved in the project are listed below and illustrated in Figure 1.3:

- **FHJ** – FH Joanneum, Austria (COORDINATOR)
- **WUS** – World University Service Graz, Austria
- **UA** – University of Alicante, Spain
- **ASTON** - Aston University, UK
- **VSU** – Voronezh State University, Russia
- **BIMTECH** – Birla Institute of Management Technology, India
- **UIBE** – University of International Business and Economics, China
- **ITESM** – Instituto Tecnologico y de Estudios Superiores de Monterrey, Mexico
- **PoN** – Polytechnic of Namibia, Namibia

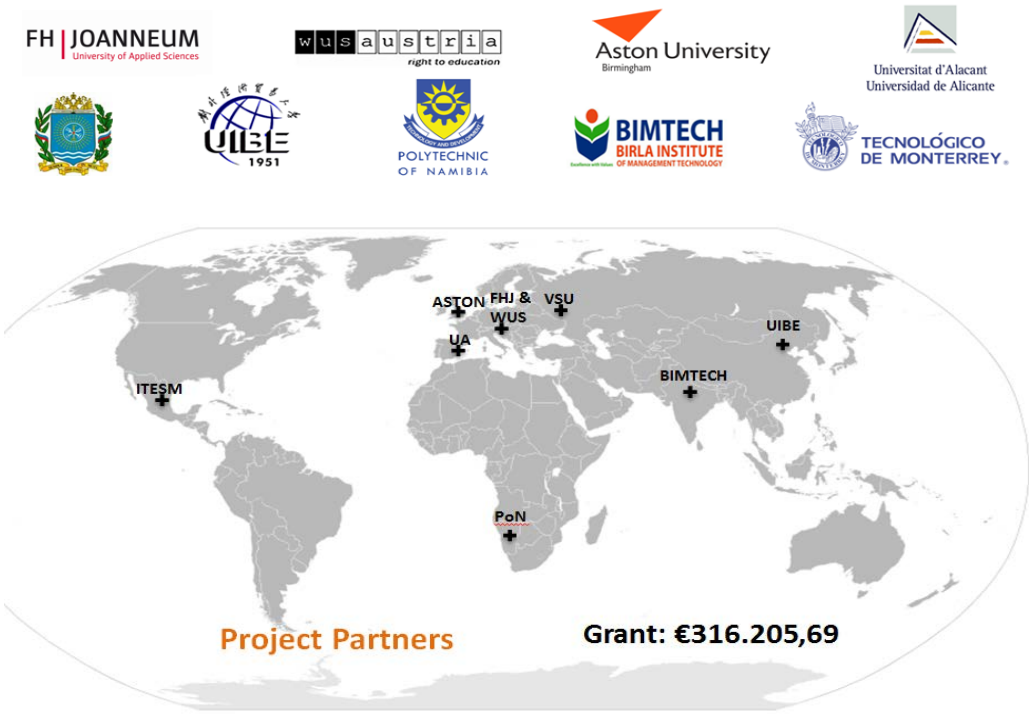

Figure 1.3 A map illustrating the project partners for the UNIQUE project

1.3.2 Project Objectives

Addressing the challenges in the internationalisation of quality assurance in higher education, the project aims are:

- Promoting the idea of *international collaboration and exchange;*
- Promoting *quality in higher education* in the beneficiary countries´ in order to be directly comparable with European standards and support the university management in its introduction or adaptation;
- *Defining, collecting and analysing key performance indicators* (KPI) which are comparable to those from European universities;
- *Counselling the home university concerning recognition of European courses, grades and admission* of incoming European students;
- *Counselling international offices and outgoing students in selecting high quality European institutions* for their studies;
- *Screen the European higher education area* for new developments.

1.3.3 Project Target Groups

Development in quality assurance will be achieved by reaching key people and target groups:

- **Direct beneficiaries** of **project results**
    - University staff, especially in quality assurance and international exchange offices
    - Incoming and outgoing students
    - Academic staff interested in exchange programmes
    - Partner institute which benefits from UNIQUE as their quality standard is improved
- **Target groups** for **dissemination**
    - Academic community
    - Students
    - Alumni and potential employers

1.3.4 Main Activities and Outputs of the Project

There are various outputs within the project as illustrated in Figure 1.4. One of the contributions of the project is this document, the Knowledge Pool.

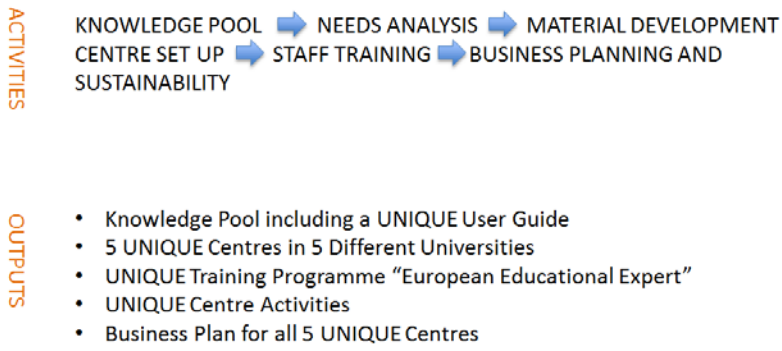

Figure 1.4 The Main activities and Outputs of the Project

1.4 Knowledge Pool

The Knowledge Pool provides information for current practices in higher education throughout Europe, in addition to the challenges faced when developing international systems. It provides knowledge for partners of the project, academics, current and prospective students and policy makers. In addition, the knowledge pool identifies key areas and organisations, which ensure quality assurance, and includes a discussion on the impact of the Bologna process.

1.4.1 Knowledge Pool Content

The first section introduces the concept of quality assurance and its significance in higher education. This is followed by a discussion of the challenges, particularly in the internationalisation of QA in HE and how UNIQUE addresses such issues. The section concludes with an introduction to the knowledge pool and a user guide.

Section 2 describes the development of quality assurance in higher education in Europe with description of: European Higher Education Area (EHEA), the Bologna Process, the Competence Based Teaching Approach, ECTS Points and the QA practices by country and subject.

In section 3, the area of key performance indicators and rankings is explored and is followed by a section on studying abroad (section 4), which investigates the Erasmus programme and the importance of placements and language development.

Section 5 describes the quality assurance framework development by addressing: European Qualifications Framework; Europass; European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training and European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training.

1.4.2 User Guide

Throughout the knowledge pool there are links to external websites and documents, which provide further insight and discussion on the matters addressed in this document. By pressing "CTRL" on the keyboard and clicking links, which are hyperlinked, it will take the user directly to the document/website.

2 QUALITY ASSURANCE DEVELOPMENT

The development of QA in HE was one of the key reasons for the formation of the EHEA which began in 1998 as illustrated in the timeline in Figure 2.1. Initially there were four countries who agreed to the declaration, however by 2003, at the Berlin Communique, this had risen to 40 Country members. At the Conference in Berlin it was asserted that *"the quality of higher education has proven to be at the heart of the setting up of a European Higher Education Area. Ministers commit themselves to supporting further development of quality assurance at institutional, national and European level.* ***They stress the need to develop mutually shared criteria and methodologies on quality assurance.*** *They also stress that consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework"* (Berlin, 2003, pp.3). During the conference the main objectives set were:

•"A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.

• Evaluation of programmes or institutions, including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.

• A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.

• **International participation, co-operation and networking**. "

Increasing international participation is the main objective of the UNIQUE project. The project seeks to achieve this by creating an information exchange between institutions in Europe and across the globe. In addition, UNIQUE centres will be placed in institutions in India, China, Mexico, Namibia and Russia in order to ensure that the knowledge exchange of QA in HE continues into the future, creating a hub of knowledge within each partner country. One of the key requirements within the knowledge exchange is to describe the development of Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Europe of which, a key cornerstone, is the development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), which is described in the timeline illustrated in Figure 2.1. The next section explores the EHEA and its role in further detail.

2.1 European Higher Education Area

"The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) was launched along with the Bologna Process' decade anniversary, in March 2010, during the Budapest-Vienna Ministerial Conference" as illustrated in Figure 2.1 (EHEA, 2009; EHEA, 2014b, pp.1). "As the main objective of the Bologna Process since its inception in 1999, the EHEA was meant to ensure more comparable, compatible and coherent systems of higher education in Europe. Between 1999 - 2010, all the efforts of the Bologna Process members were targeted to creating the European Higher Education Area, that became reality with the Budapest-Vienna Declaration of March, 2010" (EHEA, 2014a, pp.1).

Figure 2.1 Timeline of Quality Assurance Development in HE in Europe

2.2 Bologna Process

The **Bologna Declaration** (in full, "Joint declaration of the European Ministers of Education convened in Bologna on 19 June 1999") is the main guiding document of the Bologna process. It was adopted by ministers of education of 29 European countries at their meeting in Bologna, Italy in 1999.

The Bologna Declaration has the following main goals:

- Competitiveness of the European system of Higher Education;
- Mobility and employability in the European Space;
- Enhancement of academic quality.

To reach these goals, some objectives were defined:

- a system of comparable degrees, including the implementation of the Diploma Supplement;
- a system essentially based on two main cycles:
    - a first cycle relevant to the labour market;
    - a second cycle requiring the completion of the first cycle;
- a system of accumulation and transfer of credits;
- the mobility of students, teachers, researchers, etc;
- the co-operation in quality assurance.

The declaration calls for intergovernmental co-operation and for the contribution of the institutions of higher education to the process. To achieve the main goals of the Bologna Declaration, changes are required. These include national reforms, but also implementation of the reforms at institutional level.

The **Bologna Process**, launched with the Bologna Declaration, of 1999, is one of the main processes at European level, as it is nowadays implemented in 47 states, which define the **European Higher Education Area (EHEA)**.

Members of the Bologna Process are the 47 countries, together with the European Commission, and the **consultative members**, namely the Council of Europe, UNESCO, EUA, ESU, EURASHE, ENQA, Education International and BUSINESSEUROPE (please refer to glossary for further information).

The three overarching objectives of the Bologna process have been from the start: introduction of the three cycle system (bachelor/master/doctorate), quality assurance and recognition of qualifications and periods of study.

2.3 The Competence Based Teaching Approach

"During the development of the priorities for the EHEA in 2009 in BeNeLux it was stressed that "with labour markets increasingly relying on higher skill levels and transversal competences, higher education should equip students with the advanced knowledge, skills and competences they need through their professional lives"(Benelux, 2009, pp.3).

An EU Project titled "Competence" addressed the lack knowledge between which competencies are developed in institutes and what is required in the labour markets by conducting studies and publishing manuals (Petković, 2009). In manual 1, Frech defines a competency as including "both a means and an end. The means are a combination of knowledge, skills, or abilities and the end is to perform effectively, the activities of a given occupation or function, to the standards expected in employment" (Beinhauer and Frech, 2009, pp.9). The second manual provides methodologies in order to assess if a student's competencies matches what is required by the market (Frech et al., 2010). (Frech et al., 2011) describes the development of competence catalogues and Besirevic et al., (2011) discusses the strategy and curricula development.

2.4 Quality Assurance Autonomy

In the communique presented after the conference in Berlin in 2003, it was stressed that *"consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework".* This has manifested in QA practices at both country level and by subject.

2.4.1 Country Level

The implementation of quality agencies differs by country across Europe from one agency to multiple and is often characterised by local culture and each country's demographics. The examples below (UK, France and Spain) illustrate the difference between one agency (UK) to multiple agencies based in different regions (Spain) to quality agencies based on subject matter (France).

UK

Each institute has to adhere to its national QA processes, which in the UK is set by the QAA through their quality code (QAA, 2014b; QAA, 2011b). It is challenging to develop EU level coherency in QA practice as each territory effectively has a different QA code, and therefore comparability between different member states is difficult. However, institutional autonomy is more favourable than developing a generic EU QA system in HE which would fail to capture all cultural and nation specific requirements.

Spain

Within Spain there is a national quality assurance organisation called ANECA - National Agency for the Quality Assessment and Accreditation of Spain which aims "To promote quality assurance (QA) in the system of higher education in Spain together with its continuous improvement and enhancement, through guidance and orientation, evaluation, certification and accreditation, thereby contributing to the consolidation of the European Higher Education Area and accountability to society" (ANECA, 2014, pp. 11). Further to this there are dedicated agencies for specific regions:

- AAC-DEVA - Andalusian Agency of Knowledge, Department of Evaluation and Accreditation;
- ACSUCYL - Quality Assurance Agency for the University System of Castilla y León;
- ACSUG - Agency for Quality Assurance in the Galician University System;
- AQU - Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency.

France

Within France there is the AERES which is "an independent administrative authority set up in 2007, the AERES is tasked with evaluating research and higher education institutions, research organisations, research units, higher education programmes and degrees and with approving their staff evaluation procedure" (AERES, 2014) . However, an additional institution, the CTI (2014), oversees the fields of engineering, computer science and applied mathematics amongst other subjects.

2.4.2 Subject Level

In addition to quality assurance within countries, there is also development of quality assurance by subject. For example the EFMD Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) is the "leading international system of Quality Assessment, Quality Improvement and Accreditation of business and management institutions/schools"(EFMD, 2014, pp.2).

3 KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATORS AND RANKINGS

Key performance indicators provide vital data in the performance of institutions in order to allow for accountability, comparability and inform stakeholders such as students, government, and the public, the level of quality at each institute. On a European level, KPIs give valuable insight into the overall trends across Europe for matters such as groups, which may be more inclined to leave education earlier or certain regions which have poor employability. A vast number of KPIs are monitored by Eurostat and the information is populated under the section "Education and Training" (Eurostat, 2014). It is asserted that data on the mobility of students in EHEA is crucial as this is a key objective of the Bologna 2020 where at least 20% of students should have completed a placement abroad (Bologna Process, 2014).

On a national level, KPIs are used for a number of purposes. In the UK, KPIs are published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2014). The Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2014) asserts that the data provides:

- "reliable information on the nature and performance of the UK HE sector
- the basis for comparisons between individual institutions of a similar nature, where appropriate
- benchmarks for use in institutions' consideration of their own performance
- evidence to inform policy developments
- information that contributes to the public accountability of the HE sector".

Key performance indicators are important in order to understand the development and improvements in QA. However, the challenge arises when trying to decipher which indicators to use in order to understand, monitor, manage and improve the QA process.

As the primary responsibility for quality assurance in HE lies with each institution itself due the principle of institutional autonomy, there is a need to have measurements of the learning outcomes and the competency of each graduate. Various KPIs are used by universities in order to measure their levels such as: retention; student survey ratings; employability, research income etc.

Rankings are used as a key indicator by many stakeholders in order to assess the standard of an institution and the students' ability, and therefore become an essential tool when identifying appropriate institutions. However, comparability between national KPI and ranking systems is challenging as they have different criteria and can also be subject to local cultural environments. Despite the difficulties in achieving comparability, there are global ranking systems for institutions available such as the Times Higher Education World University Rankings in order to offer a global comparative system (THE, 2014).

4 STUDYING ABROAD

4.1 Erasmus+

Erasmus enables higher education students to study or work abroad as part of their degree and staff to teach or train in 33 European Countries. The purpose is to enable students to stand out in the job market and provide cultural skills, something highly valued by employers (Erasmus, 2013).

"Erasmus+ is the new EU programme for education, training, youth and sport. Erasmus+ started on 1 January 2014 and replaces current funding programmes run by the European Commission in the area of education, training, youth and sport, including the Lifelong Learning Programme (Erasmus, Comenius, Leonardo, Grundtvig and Transversal), Youth in Action and other international programmes including Jean Monnet and Erasmus Mundus. The Erasmus+ programme will run from 2014-2020 and supports activities in education, training, youth and sport across all sectors of lifelong learning including Higher Education, Further Education, adult education, schools and youth activities.

Erasmus+ aims to boost skills and employability as well as modernise education, training, and youth work across Europe. It has a budget of approximately 14.7 billion euros across Europe and will, over the next seven years, provide opportunities for over 4 million Europeans to study, train, gain work experience and volunteer abroad and will also support transnational partnerships between education, training and youth organisations, as well as support grassroots sport projects (Budget, 2014).

A new structure has been proposed for the Erasmus+ programme to reflect a need for greater simplification and streamlining. By bringing together a range of different programmes and initiatives the European Commission hopes to make their funding opportunities more efficient and more accessible (Funding, 2014).

Erasmus+ will be an integrated programme which means that it will be based around Actions. Some activities funded under the Lifelong Learning and Youth in Action Programmes will disappear; others will be translated into the new Erasmus+ structure".

"Member States of the European Union plus some non-EU Programme Countries can apply for Erasmus+ funding and can fully take part in all Erasmus+ funded project or activity. Other countries, known as Partner Countries, can participate in some Erasmus+ actions as partners" (Erasmus+ Programme, 2014; Erasmus+ Guide, 2014).

A new piece of research by the British Council, Ipsos and management consultants Booz Allen Hamilton shows that "not only do employers around the world value the ability to work with people from other cultures as highly as they value formal qualifications - but they also say a lack of these skills in the workforce can open them up to serious risks including losing clients" (British Council, 2013).

The Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE now called NCUB) released a report: Global Graduates into Global Leaders, which urges graduates seeking work to develop 'global employability skills' to help them succeed in an increasingly competitive international marketplace. It is stressed that multinational employers are looking for graduates who can bring something 'over and above' core graduate skills" (Diamond et. al., 2011).

According to the report produced by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE, 2009), Erasmus students achieve better degrees and earn higher salaries. The EHEA increases competiveness by offering placements and language support.

4.1.1 Student Mobility: Placements

Both industrial work experience and international experience are considered vastly important in the development of students. Universities utilise placements as a tool to enable students to try out jobs within their industry and improve their employability. One of the key opportunities that the Erasmus programmes offer is study mobility which enables students to access opportunities in order to increase their mobility (Study Mobility, 2014).

"Erasmus+ helps universities and enterprises to work together through various activities, including teaching, training, traineeships and joint projects. With the European economy reliant on the creation and application of knowledge, strong links between the business sector and higher education are essential. Enterprises have become increasingly involved in European education and training programmes, with positive results for both sides, leading to long-lasting partnerships (Business, 2014). The relevant Erasmus+ activities for cooperation with business are:

- Traineeships for students: students do a work experience in a company abroad for up to a year;
- Staff 'mobility' for teaching: company staff can teach at a higher education institution abroad, passing on their experience to academia;
- Staff 'mobility' for training: teaching and other higher education staff receive training in a foreign company;
- Co-operation: business or representative associations can take part in projects through:
- Strategic Partnerships
- Capacity Building Projects
- Knowledge Alliances".

Traineeships

Students registered in a higher education institute can apply for grants to work abroad for up to 12 months. The organisations can be private or public and before starting the placement the students receive:

- A grant agreement covering the mobility period and signed between the student and his or her sending higher education institution;
- A Learning Agreement regarding the specific programme for the traineeship, approved by the student, the sending institution and the enterprise;
- The Erasmus+ Student Charter setting out the student's rights and obligations with respect to his/her period of training/work experience abroad (Quality Framework, 2014).

At the end of the period abroad:

- "For a traineeship which is an integral part of the curriculum, the sending institution must give full academic recognition for the period spent abroad, by using ECTS credits or an equivalent system (ECTS, 2014). Recognition shall be based on the Learning Agreement approved by all parties before the period of mobility starts;
- In the particular case of a traineeship that is not part of the curriculum of the student, the sending institution shall provide recognition at least by recording this period in the Diploma Supplement or, in the case of recent graduates, by providing a traineeship certificate" (Diploma, 2014).

Aston University Case Study: "Placement years - The Aston Advantage"

Aston University offers many 4 year courses where a placement year or a year abroad is integrated into the degree often in the 3rd year of study. As international experience is a key quality employer's seek, Aston University encourages and support students to find placements abroad and on average 70% of the undergraduate students take the opportunity to do a placement year or language year abroad, over 25% study or work abroad.

Aston University has "over 50 years of experience in providing students with integrated employer placements and was one of the pioneers of this approach to university degrees". The institute has developed "relationships with a large number of local, national and international employers", who utilise "the university year after year to employ the students". Therefore, "unlike some other universities, the placement year at Aston is not a "bolt-on" year, it is an integral part of the degree", where the student is prepared during the second year and are further encouraged to utilise their experience during their final year. "Aston University is one of only four UK Universities where over 50% of students consistently take a placement year or year abroad and had the highest percentage of all UK Universities in the 2010 (UK Government Performance Indicators published via HESA)". Many employers recruit their placement students fresh from graduation making it a success.

In addition to a more varied degree, "the placement year gives students the opportunity to take on graduate-level responsibility and 'try out' a career path". The placement experience will give students 4 key advantage/benefits:

- "Improved job prospects: A placement year enhances graduate employment prospects and enables students to make more informed career decisions. Over a third of the placement students are offered graduate jobs by their placement employer.
- Improved your degree results: Aston students who take a placement year consistently get higher results in their degrees than those that don't.
- Work abroad: All language students have a year abroad, and an increasing number of students on non-language degrees take placements abroad. From 2012, all first year students have the opportunity to learn a language for free.
- Payment: The vast majority of placements are paid and so contribute to a student's finances as well as to the CV. On average our students earn £15,000 on their placement year with many earning significantly more" (Placement, 2014).

4.1.2 Languages

The CBI's 'Education and skills survey 2010' (CBI, 2014, pp.45) revealed that:

- "Language skills are particularly important in sectors such as manufacturing and banking, finance and insurance, reflecting the globalisation of organistions.
- The greatest demand is for a level of language skills that can help in building relations with overseas contacts."

The study asserts that there is an appetite to employ graduates with language skills.

A Report for the Routes into Languages Initiative states:

"Findings from several decades of research into plurilingualism (i.e. competence in several languages, rather than just one) show that there are considerable benefits both for the individual and the society which promotes plurilingualism among its members. For the individual, plurilingualism is known to produce cognitive advantage (Bialystok, 2001), to improve performance on a range of tasks related to educational attainment (Ricciardelli, 1992), including acquisition of literacy (Kenner, 2004), to facilitate the learning of additional languages (Cenoz & Valencia, 1994) and to delay the effects of ageing on the brain (Bialystok et al., 2006). There are economic advantages for societies in which adults can use more than one language in commercial contexts (CILT/ InterAct International, 2007) and social gains to be derived from ensuring that public services are linguistically accessible to all (Corsellis, 2001). People who grow up speaking more than one language in their daily lives therefore have the potential to gain personally but also to constitute a valuable resource for wider society" (Local Language, 2014, pp.13).

Foreign languages are essential to ensure that European citizens are able to move, work, and learn freely throughout Europe. This mobility, will in turn contribute to the development of jobs and growth, reducing unemployment and increasing living standards. "It is also essential to ensure that languages are not a barrier to participation in society, and that marginalised language groups can be identified, represented, and included in society" (Language Policy, 2014). The EU recognises that language skills are imperative to encourage the free movement workers, fosters intercultural dialogue in Europe, important factor for economic competitiveness.

The European Commission (EC) is committed to developing language learning policies across Europe, as part of its aim to "improve the mastery of basic language skills in Europe". Priorities in field of languages include several important objectives:

- "to **retool education systems in Member States** so that students graduate with higher competencies in foreign languages,
- **to gather data in order to formulate benchmarks** in the design of new language-learning policies,
- to **encourage multilingualism as a pathway to improved employment prospects** and free movement in the EU,
- to **enable the European Centre of Modern Languages** to effectively teach foreign language skills,

- to **reward innovative initiatives** in the field of teaching and learning languages" (Language Policy, 2014)

The EU aims to achieve the objectives by:

- The first European Survey on Language Competences, indicates Member States must reform their education systems based on new methodologies for teaching both the first and second foreign languages (EC Report, 2014).
- The European Indicator of Language Competence and the European Benchmark of Language Competence initiatives will help European governments to develop language-learning policies and improve national standards (European Indicator, 2014).
- In addition, the new Erasmus+ programme will provide young people with the opportunities to participate in exchange programmes for learning new languages (Language Policy, 2014).

Erasmus offers language support to students through Erasmus Intensive Language Courses (EILCs). These courses are usually 3-8 weeks and conducted within the host country before the placement enabling students to improve their language skills (EILC, 2014). The EU also has additional tools to improve language ability across Europe which is developed by the "Language Policy Unit (formerly Division) in Strasbourg since 1957, and by the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML) in Graz, Austria, since it was established by a Partial Agreement in 1994" (Language Policy, 2014).

Mission of the Language Policy Unit is to design and implement "initiatives for the development and analysis of language education policies aimed at promoting linguistic diversity and plurilingualism. The Unit is particularly well known for its work in developing tools and standards to help member states elaborate transparent and coherent language policies. These instruments, which are disseminated and used not only throughout Europe but all over the world, have become a vital contribution to the establishment of a European education area for modern languages and serve as benchmarks for other bodies and institutions, such as the European Union. The Unit's programmes cover all languages - mother tongue/first language/language(s) of education as well as foreign, second or minority languages - and address the needs of all of the 49 states that have ratified the European Cultural Convention" (Language Opportunities, 2014; European Convention, 2014).

Mission of the European Centre for Modern Languages is the "implementation of language policies and the promotion of innovative approaches to the learning and teaching of modern languages. To respond to this mission the ECML organises international language education projects primarily targeting teacher trainers, researchers and key multipliers in the field. These essentially aim to raise awareness on critical issues, provide training to language education practitioners and facilitate networks of specialists. The ECML offers educational facilities at its premises in Graz"(ECML, 2014).

CASE STUDY ASTON UNIVERSITY

Languages for all: Free language tuition in your first year

Aston University offers free language courses for first year undergraduate students on the "Languages for All" scheme. Classes take place during term-time, in the evenings, in order to give to students across the University access. Benefits include: learning a new language; improving existing

language skills; enhancing a CV; incresing employability; preparing for international placements and incresing intercultural awareness (Languages for All, 2014).

The University Wide Language Programme (UWLP)

Aston University offers the University Wide Language Programme which provides language courses to staff, students and the public. For current students, on relevant courses, the language course can count towards the overall credits of the main degree (UWLP, 2014).

4.2 Joint Programmes/Collaborations

Erasmus+ Joint Master Degree programmes are integrated study programmes delivered by consortia of organisations from Programme and (optionally) from Partner Countries. Erasmus Mundus Joint Master Degrees (JMDs) aims at:

- fostering quality enhancements, innovation, excellence and internationalisation in higher education institutions (EUA, 2006);
- boosting the attractiveness of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA);
- improving the level of competences and skills of Master graduates, and their employability.

JDAZ (Joint Degrees from A to Z) "is an initiative of a consortium of six Erasmus Mundus National Structures. The Erasmus Mundus National Structures are responsible to inform and advise Higher Education Institutions that wish to develop an Erasmus Mundus joint (degree) programme. The objective of JDAZ is to produce a comprehensive, practical reference guide on joint degrees/joint degree programmes based on all relevant major work done in this field. In doing so, JDAZ aims to support the further development of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and provide an exhaustive source of information for all stakeholders working with the theme of joint degree programmes. The JDAZ project runs from 15 September 2012 until 1 April 2015. Expected outcomes:

1. the publication of a guide that provides information on all relevant issues relating to developing, establishing and sustaining high quality international joint degree programmes;
2. an integrated presentation of information that contributes to coherent knowledge and expertise of Erasmus Mundus coordinators and higher education institutions" (JDAZ, 2014).

5 QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORK

5.1 European Qualifications Framework (EQF)

The European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning (EQF) provides a common reference framework which assists in comparing the national qualifications systems, frameworks and their levels. It serves as a translation device to make qualifications more readable and understandable across different countries and systems in Europe, and thus promote lifelong and life-wide learning, and the mobility of European citizens whether for studying or working abroad.

In order to make the EQF work, European countries participating in "Education and Training 2020" should relate their national qualifications levels to the appropriate levels of the EQF and to indicate in all new qualification certificates, diplomas and Europass documents the relevant EQF level.

The core of the EQF consists of eight reference levels describing what a learner knows, understands and is able to do – i.e. 'learning outcomes'. Levels of national qualifications will be based on one of the central reference levels, ranging from basic (Level 1) to advanced (Level 8) as described in Figure 5.1. This will enable a much easier comparison between national qualifications and should also mean that people do not have to repeat their learning if they move to another country.

Descriptors defining levels in the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) (see Figure 5.1**):**
KNOWLEDGE: In the context of the EQF, knowledge is described as theoretical and/or factual.
SKILLS: In the context of the EQF, skills are described as cognitive (involving the use of logical, intuitive and creative thinking) and practical (involving manual dexterity and the use of methods, materials, tools and instruments).
COMPETENCE: In the context of the EQF, competence is described in terms of responsibility and autonomy.

5.2 Europass

Europass (2014) is a portfolio of five documents, designed to make skills and qualifications clearly and easily understood across Europe. Two documents are directly completed and updated by citizens with the help of online examples and tutorials and three documents are issued by national authorities as illustrated in Figure 5.2.

Europass helps citizens:

- make their skills and qualifications understood and recognised by employers, education and training;
- find a job or enroll in education or training;
- live and work anywhere in Europe.

	LEARNING OUTCOMES		
	KNOWLEDGE	**SKILLS**	**COMPETENCE**
LEVEL 1	basic general knowledge	basic skills required to carry out simple tasks	work or study under direct supervision in a structured context
LEVEL 2	basic factual knowledge of a field of work or study	basic cognitive and practical skills required to use relevant information in order to carry out tasks and to solve routine problems using simple rules and tools	work or study under supervision with some autonomy
LEVEL 3	knowledge of facts, principles, processes and general concepts in a field of work or study	a range of cognitive and practical skills required to accomplish tasks and solve problems by selecting and applying basic methods, tools, materials and information	take responsibility for completion of tasks in work or study; adapt own behaviour to circumstances in solving problems
LEVEL 4	broad range of factual and theoretical knowledge in a field of work or study	a range of cognitive and practical skills required to generate solutions to specific problems in a field of work or study	exercise self-management within the guidelines of work or study contexts that are usually predictable, but are subject to change; supervise the routine work of others, taking some responsibility for the evaluation and improvement of work or study activities
LEVEL 5	comprehensive, specialised, factual and theoretical knowledge within a field of work or study and an awareness of the boundaries of that knowledge	a comprehensive range of cognitive and practical skills required to develop creative solutions to abstract problems	exercise management and supervision in contexts of work or study activities where there is unpredictable change; review and develop performance of self and others
LEVEL 6: BACHELOR level	advanced knowledge of a field of work or study, involving a critical understanding of theories and principles	advanced skills, demonstrating mastery and innovation, required to solve complex and unpredictable problems in a specialised field of work or study	manage complex technical or professional activities or projects, taking responsibility for decision-making in unpredictable work or study contexts; take responsibility for managing professional development of individuals and groups
LEVEL 7: Master Level	highly specialised knowledge, some of which is at the forefront of knowledge in a field of work or study, as the basis for original thinking and/or research; critical awareness of knowledge issues in a field and at the interface between different fields	specialised problem-solving skills required in research and/or innovation in order to develop new knowledge and procedures and to integrate knowledge from different fields	manage and transform work or study contexts that are complex, unpredictable and require new strategic approaches; take responsibility for contributing to professional knowledge and practice and/or for reviewing the strategic performance of teams
LEVEL 8: Doctorate Level	knowledge at the most advanced frontier of a field of work or study and at the interface between fields	the most advanced and specialised skills and techniques, including synthesis and evaluation, required to solve critical problems in research and/or innovation and to extend and redefine existing knowledge or professional practice	demonstrate substantial authority, innovation, autonomy, scholarly and professional integrity and sustained commitment to the development of new ideas or processes at the forefront of work or study contexts including research

Figure 5.1 Learning Outcomes of the European Qualifications Framework

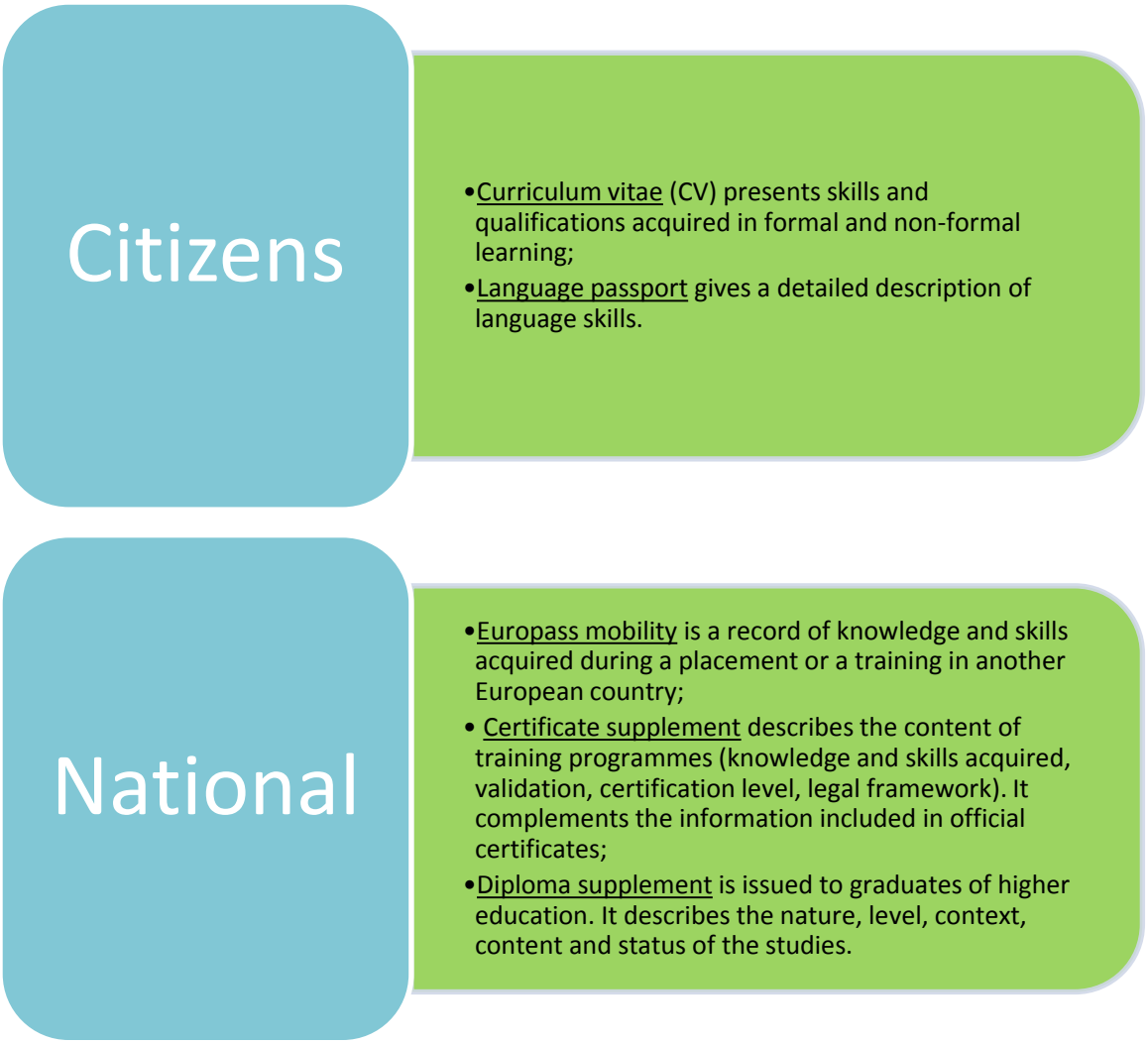

Figure 5.2 Five Documents for the Europass

5.3 ECTS Points

ECTS points makes teaching and learning in higher education more transparent across Europe and facilitates the recognition of all studies. The system allows for the transfer of learning experiences between different institutions, greater student mobility and more flexible routes to gain degrees. It also aids curriculum design and quality assurance.

In a very simple way ECTS points reflect the entire workload of a student in a course. One ECTS point equals between 25 and 30 hours (depending on the EHEA member state). The student workload in ECTS includes hours spent in class and self-study.

Institutions which apply ECTS publish their course catalogues on the web, including detailed descriptions of study programmes, units of learning, university regulations and student services.

Course descriptions contain 'learning outcomes' (i.e. what students are expected to know, understand and be able to do) and workload (i.e. the time students typically need to achieve these outcomes). Each learning outcome is expressed in terms of credits, with a student workload ranging from **1 500 to 1 800 hours** for an academic year, and one credit generally corresponds to 25-30 hours of work.

A full-time student would need to complete 60 ECTS per academic year, which represents about 1,500 to 1,800 hours of study. According to the ECTS, study programs in Europe are worth the following number of credits:

- Bachelor's degrees (first cycle) are worth 180 - 240 ECTS (3 to 4 years)
- Master's programs (second cycle) are worth 60 - 120 ECTS (1 to 2 years)
- PhD studies (third cycle) have no ECTS range

A series of ECTS key documents help with credit transfer and accumulation – course catalogues, learning agreements, transcript of records and Diploma Supplements (DS) (ECTS Guide, 2009).

Although ECTS can help recognition of a student's studies between different institutions and national education systems, higher education providers are autonomous institutions. The final decisions are the responsibility of the relevant authorities: professors involved in student exchanges, university admission officers, recognition advisory centres (ENIC-NARIC), ministry officials or employers.

5.4 European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET)

The European credit system for vocational education and training (ECVET) helps individuals who are trying to acquire a VET qualification to move between countries and gain access to lifelong learning. It does so by making it easier to transfer, to have recognised and to accumulate assessed learning outcomes. In cooperation with the European Commission, Cedefop provides technical and analytical support for the implementation of the ECVET Recommendation at the EU, national and sectoral levels. ECVET assists individuals to transfer, have recognised and accumulate the learning outcomes they have achieved in diverse contexts (Cedefop Learning, 2009).

It describes units of learning outcomes as parts of qualifications that can be assessed and validated. It gives an indication of the size of units and qualifications in ECVET points. It offers a framework for making learners more mobile and qualifications more portable. It does so by laying down principles and technical specifications and by making use of existing national legislation and regulations. It complements and builds on concepts and principles shared with the European qualifications framework (EQF, 2014), Europass (Cedefop Europass, 2014) and the European quality assurance reference framework for VET (EQAVET, 2014). It applies to VET (vocational education and training) qualifications at all levels of the European Qualifications framework (VET, 2014; VET Curricula, 2010)

5.5 European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET)

European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) brings together the EU Member States, the Social Partners and the European Commission to develop and improve quality assurance in European VET systems within the context of the implementation of the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework by:

- Assisting the Member States in developing effective approaches to support the implementation of the Reference Framework
- Developing a culture of quality, to be embedded at European level and other levels with the help of the Quality Assurance National Reference Points and other Network members
- Supporting the Member States and the European Commission in the monitoring and implementation of the Reference Framework within the context of the Education and Training 2020 Strategy
- Supporting the quality assurance dimension of work in EQF and ECVET

The EQAVET aims to improve the quality of member states VET (EQAVET, 2012).

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