

**Final Report of the Matchmaking Committee
Peer Support on Quality Assurance in Higher
Education: “Staff Mobility”**

November 2024

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IMINQA project



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I'MINQA

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IMINQA – November 2024

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Introduction

Staff mobility programme in IMINQA

Within the IMINQA project (2022-2025) a staff mobility programme was organised. The IMINQA Project (“Implementation and Innovation in Quality Assurance through Peer Learning”) supports the Bologna Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance. The project made sure funding was available for staff mobilities among the partner countries of the peer group. The IMINQA project is co-funded by Erasmus+ (ERASMUS-EDU-2021-EHEA-IBA).

The Ministry of Education and Training of Belgium/Flemish Community (MINEDUC-FC) acts as project coordinator; project partners are the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the Romanian Agency for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ARACIS). The Ministry of Education and Training had the lead in this staff mobility programme.

A system for staff mobility was set up, to stimulate peer learning and mutual understanding among the EHEA countries, in the field of quality assurance. All mobilities were organised on an individual basis or in small groups so as to address specific learning in an effective way. Each mobile peer had the possibility to (further) develop specific or more general (QA) competencies through job shadowing, observation periods and/or training at a partner QA agency, ministry or stakeholder organisation abroad.

Policy context

IMINQA (“Implementation and Innovation in Quality Assurance through Peer Learning”) is an umbrella project that focuses on quality assurance

(implementation). The Standards and Guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, adopted in 2015) provide the framework for internal and external quality assurance.

In the work plan of the EHEA for 2021-2024, reference is made to the 2020 Rome Communiqué¹ with regard to peer learning and peer support:

“We reconfirm our determination to see the Key Commitment² fully implemented. We ask the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) to continue to employ the peer support method to achieve this. We commit to the continued participation in and contribution to this effort.”

In the Tirana Communiqué (2024), the method of dialogue and collaboration is also mentioned specifically:

“We recognise the need for all EHEA countries to disseminate knowledge and engage in dialogue and collaboration on ongoing work, in order to ensure a more effective linkage between the policy level and the higher education community. This may also include the establishment of international and national expert networks, supporting their implementation and cooperation across borders and with the BFUG”.

Fostering peer support among countries and among stakeholders (Ministries, QA Agencies, and other relevant actors) is an important action for the Thematic Peer Group C on QA and thus for IMINQA. In a previous project (the [Bologna Peer Group on QA: Staff Mobility](#)), a similar system of funding was set up to ensure staff mobilities for peer learning were made possible. The IMINQA Staff Mobility Scheme was inspired by the results of the previous project.

Matchmaking Committee

A Matchmaking Committee (MMC) was established, composed of the co-chairs of the TPG C on QA (Belgium, Flemish Community, Romania and Kazakhstan), the project partners (ENQA and EQAR) and an external expert from the European University Association (EUA). In two calls, interested participants from ministries, QA agencies and stakeholder organisations could submit an application form with information on their needs and priorities and their preferred destination and organisation. The role of the Matchmaking Committee was to evaluate these applications and help match the possible mobile staff members to a host organisation based on relevance and expertise, mutual thematic interest and geographical spread. To make sure there was a good match, some of the applicants received suggestions to visit a different destination or organisation or to change to a topic that would suit their needs in a better way (see below).

After the mobilities took place, the Matchmaking Committee also reviewed the outcome reports of the participants in order to disseminate their lessons learned and analyse the success of the mobility scheme. The MMC also asked the hosts to provide them with feedback on the mobility from their point of view.

The observations of the Matchmaking Committee, based on outcome reports of participants and hosts, form the basis of this report, together with conclusions from the conclusions from the Flemish Ministry of Education and training as lead partner for this project.

Staff Mobility Programme

In terms of the specific mobilities, all flows and directions of staff mobility between ministries, QA agencies and stakeholder organisations were possible. As such, the system supported the professional development of staff by offering learning opportunities in another country and – if requested – another type of organisation.

Calls

There were two calls for application in the programme, open to all members of the TPG C on QA to send and receive staff for a limited period of time.

The first call was launched in June 2022, with the end of July 2022 as a deadline. The Matchmaking Committee meeting to evaluate the applications took place on 31 August 2022 in Brussels. The actual staff mobilities took place in the period from October 2022 until March 2023.

The second call was launched in February 2023 with the end of March 2023 as a deadline. The Matchmaking Committee met in May 2023 in Kazakhstan to evaluate the applications and to review the outcome reports of the first call. The mobilities of the second call took place from October 2023 until the end of March 2024. The last MMC meeting to review the outcome reports and to finalise the programme took place on 4 June 2024 online.

Timing

The duration of the mobility could vary from a few days to a longer period of time, as decided by the two partners that were involved. However, participants did not spend more than 5 days at their host organisation, seeing that financing for the staff mobilities was limited to 5 nights. The average duration of a mobility was 4 nights.

In the previous project, the maximum duration was 14 days. The current project chose to limit the duration of the mobilities for several reasons.

On the one hand, while the limited number of nights (5) gives the mobile staff member a chance to get to know the organisation she/he is visiting the duration is not too time consuming for the host. For the host organisation, this duration is not too time consuming. On the other hand, a shorter mobility offers more opportunities and possibilities for a mobile staff member to participate in the programme, as it is easier to organise. The duration and timing of the mobilities are summarised in the graphs below.

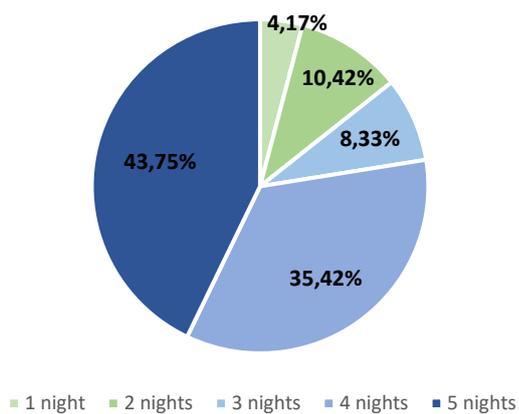


Figure 1: Mobility duration

Topics

Each staff mobility focused on needs and topics that were specified in the (individual) application. The host had to demonstrate experience in a specific field in QA and offer the mobile peer an interesting programme in this area. Furthermore, the applicant needed to relate the specific topics to their country’s action plan, developed in the context of the TPG C on QA for the period 2021-2024. This way, the programme went beyond a personal development experience and supported also the national implementation priorities.

The IMINQA project included the following thematic orientations: legislative framework in line

with the ESG, internal quality assurance, enhancement-oriented use of the ESG, cross-border QA and the European Approach for the QA of joint programmes. These topics were put forward in the staff mobility programme, together with stakeholder engagement and the digitalisation of QA processes. Applicants had to indicate which topic they were interested in.

The main topics of the staff Mobilities in the two calls were:

Call 1

1. Stakeholder engagement
2. Legislative framework in line with ESG
3. Internal QA
4. Enhancement-oriented use of the ESG
5. European Approach for QA of joint programmes

Call 2

1. Enhancement – oriented use of the ESG
2. Stakeholder engagement, European Approach of QA of joint programmes, Digitalisation of QA processes
3. Cross-border QA
4. Internal QA
5. Legislative framework in line with the ESG



Figure 2: Mobilities taking place over the programme period

*Time in between the two calls – no mobilities took place

Number of participants

The programme was successful: over the two calls, the Matchmaking Committee received a total of 72 applications of which 68 applications were approved (94%).

48 individuals actually participated in the Mobility Programme, which constitutes 70,5% of people with an approved application. Most of the participants went alone or with one colleague.

In the table, the numbers of received and approved applications are indicated, as well as the number of participants that actually went on mobility. Attracting mobile peers from ministries appeared to be quite difficult, as most participants came from QA agencies. This may be because many countries delegate representation in TPG C to representatives from their national QA agency, and because the chosen topics were related to the internal activities of agencies rather than the legal frameworks.

	Call 1	Call 2	Total
Received applications	41	31	72
Approved applications	37	31 (includes 2 delayed mobilities of call 1)	68
Actual Participants (from)	29	19	48
QA Agency	27	18	
Ministry	1	0	
Stakeholder Organisation	1	1	

Table 1: Overview on the number of the applications and participants

Geographical spread of participating countries

Overall, many countries of the EHEA were involved in the programme. The map below shows the outgoing mobilities (in light blue); the countries in darker blue were host and sending country. There were slightly more outgoing mobilities from Southeast Europe, going to North (West) Europe. In general, applicants came from a broad set of countries, ranging from countries that are still in the development phase in terms of their quality assurance (system), to countries that have a rather

strong track record in QA. The host countries also ranged from medium to strong QA systems.

Participants in the mobility programme came from 24 different countries of the EHEA and three organisations.

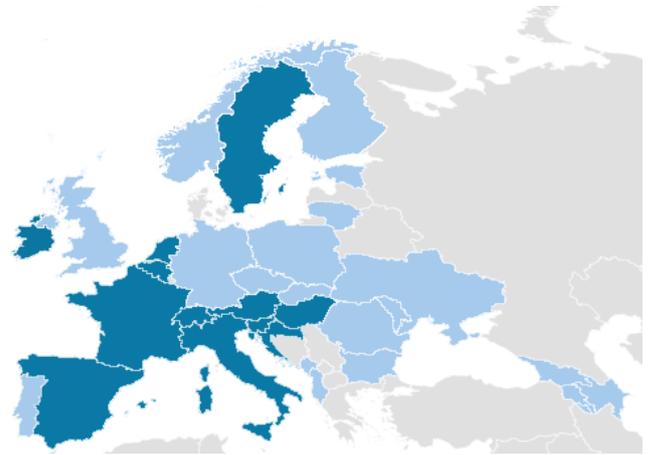


Figure 3: Participating countries
Light blue: countries with outgoing mobility
Dark blue: countries that were host and had outgoing mobility

The most popular host countries of the two calls were Finland, with 7 participants, and the Netherlands and Sweden, who each received 6 participants.

The most popular host countries in call 1 were:

1. the Netherlands: NVAO (6)
2. Belgium: VLUHR QA (4) – Finland: FINEEC (4)
3. Spain: ANECA (3)

The most popular host countries in call 2 were:

1. Sweden: UKÄ (6)
2. Finland: FINEEC (3)
3. Slovenia: NAKVIS (2)

Types of mobility

Several types of mobility could be identified in the Staff Mobility Programme.

Small group mobility

A “Staff Mobility Week” was organised by the QA Agency UKÄ in Sweden in the beginning of October 2023. A group of nine people participated in this staff mobility week of which four QA experts from

three different countries that were reimbursed by this staff mobility programme.

This exchange week was very well received and appeared to be an efficient and effective way to boost the learning experience.

For the host, receiving a small group at one point in time is less burdensome in terms of organisation and the involvement of experts from the host organisation and external experts. It can however be challenging to stay in line with the concept of 'peer mobility' and to not turn into a seminar or a small conference. The aspects of mutual exchange should be kept in mind and a personalised approach, addressing the mobile staff members' needs, should remain at the centre of the mobility.

From the enthusiastic reactions of the participants, this was the case in the exchange week in Sweden where a lot of mutual learning took place.

In some cases the host organisation received several participants from different countries in the same mobility experience (e.g. ARACIS received two people from France and one from Italy).

Duo-exchange

The impact of a mobility can be significantly enhanced when there is a duo-exchange, meaning mutual visits from one agency/organisation to another and vice versa. This enables prolonged exchanges on key topics and may also lead to a greater engagement of the organisations and their staff, eventually leading to a long-term cooperation or partnership.

It is clear that this type of 'dual' mobility is not applicable in all cases and depends on the maturity and complementarity of the partners involved.

In call 1 there was a duo-exchange between the QA Agency of Slovenia (SQAA) and the European University Association (EUA). In the second call there was one between the Swedish QA Agency UKÄ and the QA agency of the French Community of Belgium AEQES. Reactions on this type of mobility by the participants were positive.

“Participation in the staff exchange was seen as a reciprocal exchange between Swedish and Belgian French-speaking colleagues. The visit to Sweden provided an opportunity to learn more about the practices of UKÄ colleagues, while the visit to Belgium provided an opportunity to present and explain the AEQES way of working. The experience was like a brief reciprocal Erasmus.”
(AEQES, Belgium)

“This double visit (being hosted and hosting) was a source of real exchange and mutual learning. We were also able (during the hosting visit) to get feedback on our practices, which fed into our own reflections on our methodologies and tools.”
(AEQES, Belgium)

Twin mobility

When revising the outcomes reports, the Matchmaking Committee identified two models of 'twin mobility'. Perhaps the most interesting one from the MMC's point of view, was a combined mobility of staff members from both a ministry and a QA agency to one host organisation. During call 1, one twin mobility of this type took place where a staff member of the QA agency and a colleague from the Italian Ministry of Education visited NVAO in the Netherlands.

This type of twin mobility can enhance the communication of the sending country and can support joint reflections and maybe even the creation of a joint action plan for the future. Overall, the impact of the learning experience can be enriched through the twin mobility model.

Another model is when two colleagues visit two different, but similar (in terms of the QA system) countries. This way, they can discuss the same topics so as to get different views that can be compared when they return to their own organisation afterwards.

Two Portuguese colleagues from A3ES changed their original destination countries after a suggestion from the Matchmaking Committee and visited quality assurance agencies in Ireland and Finland.

The participants explained that the Finnish and Irish system are somewhat comparable, but different from the Portuguese system, for instance in terms of autonomy of higher education institutions. After the mobility, they could compare their experiences and disseminate the information to their colleagues at home.

“Ireland and QQI can serve as a model for how a HEI can gradually transition to a greater autonomy in terms of program accreditation and External Quality Assurance.” (A3ES, Portugal)



Above: exchange between QQI (Ireland) and A3ES (Portugal)

Blended mobility

In some exchanges the participants engaged in an online meeting before the physical mobility took place, with the purpose of getting to know each other, introducing the host as well as the sending organisation, and answering questions. The exchange of a member of the Polish QA Agency to VLUHR QA was a good example, where other organisations were also involved in the preparatory meeting, so as to give their point of view and expertise.

This focused online intervention before the actual mobility made sure the mobility itself was more efficient and effective, seeing that it built on knowledge that was previously gained.

However, replacing all physical meetings with an online exchange was not considered useful as stated by ARACIS:

“We were also glad the study visits were in person because we believe this type of interaction brings a richer experience with deeper insights and more opportunities for fruitful discussions.”

Sustainability of the mobilities

The participants were asked how they disseminated the outcomes of their mobility within their organisation in order to promote multiplication of the lessons learnt. Most of the participants discussed their experience and/or shared presentations with their team leader, staff members, and sometimes also with other agencies or organisations. Some participants experienced their staff mobility as a personal learning moment, whereas others mentioned it as a learning experience for the organisation they were representing. This depends to a large extent on the experience of the participant, the maturity of the sending organisation and the set-up of the visit by the receiving country.

In general, leadership mobility has a 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. The mobilities undertaken in this programme had both ‘types’ of participants.

Achieving a long-term impact after a short exchange is not an easy objective. Whether or not the objective can be achieved depends on many factors, but it is fair to say that in every case, the seeds have been planted for further and more intense cooperation in the future. For instance, the mobility of a member of ANACEC from Moldova to Slovenia formed the basis of a possible future cooperation between the two organisations.



Above: Exchange between ANACEC (Moldova) and NAKVIS (Slovenia)

“We discussed on draft Cooperation Agreement between NAKVIS and ANACEC, prepared by ANACEC. Adaptations were made and this document was sent to the NAKVIS Director. (ANACEC, Moldova)”

Lessons learned

The outcome reports of the participants and the feedback from the host organisations provided the Matchmaking Committee with a broad view on the implementation of the staff mobility programme. They were an inspiration for distilling good practices and identifying challenges.

During the preparation of the mobility

Defining clear topics and expectations, based on real needs from the person who wants to undertake the mobility, can help the host to organise a meaningful schedule for the visit. Early communication, and -why not -preparatory online meetings to get to know each other beforehand, also help the visitor to prepare the mobility thoroughly, together with the colleagues from the sending organisation. Not only personal needs but also organisational needs on specific topics should be taken into account.

“Beforehand, we already made a very comprehensive plan on what topics should be discussed when visiting our institution. Thus, the expectations were very clear from the beginning.” (AQAS, Germany)

The host organisation can involve not only colleagues within the organisation but other relevant stakeholders as well, as long as it meets the demands of the participant.

During the mobility

When implementing the programme, it is important that the host schedules enough time for the mutual exchange of ideas and critical reflection and doesn't overload the visitor with information and

presentations. Also, the importance of social elements within the programme should not be neglected, so as to install professional, and perhaps even personal, bonds that can help make the mobility more sustainable.

Using specific materials

Sharing specific templates, tools and guidelines (e.g. guidelines to involve experts or students in QA) can be a practical and hands-on way of exchange. A lot of these materials are mentioned in the outcome reports, as qualitative and almost ready-to-use examples for participants to take home.

“We shared our templates for report-writing and discussed the interactive training materials for experts. Also, how to guide experts through the process step by step and explain our national context but at the same time follow the principles of the ESG.” (Estonia)

Internationalisation at home

The visit of a colleague from abroad is a good opportunity for internationalisation at home. Hosting meetings with colleagues from abroad is not a job for one person, the host organisation's staff is probably also engaged in the organisation of the mobility, in discussions and/or presentations given by the host and by the mobile peer. We can fairly say that the involvement of several people in the organisation of the programme at the host agency strengthens the opportunities for mutual learning and provides non-mobile staff with an opportunity for international exposure.



Above: Exchange between AKOKVO (Montenegro) and QAA (Scotland)

Cooperation between host organisations/joint hosting

In a number of mobilities, participants visited more than one organisation and combined their mobility with visits to or meetings with other relevant organisations. The value of a mobility can thus be enhanced and enriched by visits to other stakeholder bodies and/or a local higher education institution.

For instance in call 1, a participant from the Slovenian QA visited not only the European University Association (the host organisation), but also EQAR and VLUHR QA. What is interesting for the visitor is that they are able to compare views from different organisations and to have a topic explained by different stakeholders. For the host organisation, the main takeaway is that the organisational workload can be shared with other organisations.

Combining different types of activities, including active involvement (site visits, cooperation in daily tasks, joining an assessment,...) enhances the learning experience for the mobile peer.

“We would encourage the use of such joint hosting arrangements, where appropriate. Although there might be some extra coordination involved, it brings an added value to the mobile staff member and eases the burden on the hosting organisations in terms of the time dedicated during the mobility” (VLUHR QA, Belgium Flemish Community)

Reflections after the mobility

In the outcome reports the Matchmaking Committee found several statements from the mobile staff that the mobility facilitated their understanding of the quality assurance system in general, and of the system of the specific country or context they visited in particular. Some people commented that the mobility offered excellent opportunities to create international connections with colleagues from the same field, as well as the opportunity to learn from peers from abroad. Similarities and differences in context, procedures and systems were both detected and discussed critically.

Joining colleagues in their daily work (job shadowing), such as site visits to higher education institutions on quality assurance topics, was also identified as a great opportunity for mutual learning.

Overall, the participating staff found ample opportunities to self-reflect and better understand how the organisations they visited operate in a wider context and how their own organisation fits into that bigger picture. The mobile staff members also bring the potential to facilitate a more international mindset to be rooted in the work and activities of Ministries, QA agencies and other relevant organisations.

“The study visits were an excellent opportunity to learn about new perspectives and practices regarding external quality assurance activities, to build a mutual relationship between ARACIS and the other agencies and it offered us the proper context for developing our professional skills.” (ARACIS, Romania)

“There were opportunities for mutual exchange over the course of the three days. The mobile peer presented to the staff in our agency on QA in Higher Education in Portugal which was well attended and included lots of questions and discussion from QQI colleagues” (QQI, Ireland)

Challenges

A few times, the mobility was cancelled last minute, either from the side of the host organisation, or from the staff member who would undertake the mobility. This could be due to external reasons such as health issues (e.g. COVID-19) or visa problems, or to other problems such as insufficient capacity from the host organisation to receive the mobile peer. Other participants did their utmost to undertake a long journey to reach their host organisation in circumstances that were far from easy, as is shown by Ukrainian mobile peers.

In some cases, the Matchmaking Committee approved an application, but never received further information from the applicants. In these cases, the reason for the cancellation was unclear. The administrative follow-up of the programme was also challenging, both from the side of the project coordinator as from the participant's side. Communicating with the applicants, following up on deadlines, sending out reminders to send in outcome reports, and looking after the financial part of the programme took considerable time. For the Matchmaking Committee, the preparation and evaluation of the application and outcome reports-including three meetings of the MMC- was quite a bureaucratic burden as well.

Therefore, the procedures were simplified in preparation of the launch of call 2, right before the second meeting of the MMC, in order to focus on collecting the specific information necessary for the quality of the evaluation process.

The outcome reports of the people who went on mobility also mentioned this administrative workload as a point of attention for the applicants. For a possible future project, the workload and administration for all stakeholders involved (leading organisation, Matchmaking Committee, participants) must be examined carefully and reduced where possible to reach a good balance between workload and expected outcomes.

Finally, it is clear that the mobility programme used far more by staff of QA agencies than by ministries. While this is in part influenced by the topics of

interest, in any future project, there should be reflection to ensure that there are not specific barriers that prevent ministry staff from benefitting from the opportunity, to strengthen dissemination of the opportunity to ministries, and to encourage twin mobility arrangements to support learning at different levels where this is relevant for the topics to be addressed.

Financial and organisational aspects

Looking back at the staff mobilities, we should also consider the financial and organisational aspects of the programme.

To enable staff mobility, the project provided funding for each mobile employee. However, the programme is based on **shared responsibility** - the project provided only partial reimbursement of the costs incurred; any surplus had to be paid by the participating organisation.

The maximum travel **allowance** was based on a maximum stay of 5 nights. A mobile staff member could receive up to € 120 per night (max of 5 nights) for accommodation and € 360 or € 520 for travel, depending on the travel distance (up to 999 km or over 1000 km). Based on the previous project, these allowances should have been sufficient, but the financial situation changed significantly between 2022 and 2024. As the second call progressed, it became clear that this amount was no longer sufficient due to inflation.

Moreover, prices vary greatly between the EHEA countries and certain countries/organisations have fewer resources available, which lead to a lack of interest. These aspects should be taken into consideration for future projects.

Since living costs differ from one European country to another, it might be better to tie the maximum budget to the host country (some countries are much more expensive than others). More flexibility to accommodate the real financial needs of the mobility could be foreseen.

Participants were encouraged to travel in the most **sustainable way** possible by using public

transport, preferably the train (especially for trips under 500 km.) We noticed that quite a few people followed these ecological considerations and travelled by train or public transport.

Conclusions

From 2022 until 2024, the IMINQA project- as a follow-up of the previous “Bologna Peer Group on QA: Staff Mobility project”- enabled 48 mobilities between Ministries, QA agencies and other relevant organisations across Europe. This is almost twice as much as the participants in the previous project (but COVID-19 played a significant role in the reduced number of mobilities in 2020-2021) thus the project has proven to be a success. However, since 68 applications were approved, the programme was not fully exploited and there is a gap of 30% between approved applications and actual mobilities.

The outcome reports of those who have taken part in a staff mobility exchange show that the project provided a meaningful context for the mutual exchange of ideas and practices, the sharing of knowledge, mutual learning and understanding regarding Quality Assurance in Higher Education. Depending on the context and the specific topics, procedures and policies were demonstrated and the measures translating the key commitments at the national level explained. The key topics of the ESG were always at the centre of the learning experiences.

One of the conclusions of the Matchmaking Committee was that it is not easy to achieve a reasonably geographically balanced mobility programme. The majority of the mobilities took place from Southeast Europe to the countries in Northwest Europe, but overall a lot of countries and organisations were involved in the programme.

Several testimonies showed a strong call for a more intensive cooperation between (Balkan) countries in Southeast Europe that face similar problems. It might be a good idea to go deeper into that need for cooperation amongst neighbouring and similar countries in possible future projects. The project was much appreciated by both the participants and by the hosts. The majority of the participants rated their experience ‘good’ to ‘excellent’. Most of the host organisations on their part indicated that they would like to host a mobile peer again. In terms of learning experiences, these ranged from receiving new insights on an individual and personal level to learning on a more structural basis, between two or more organisations involved. Host organisations often cooperated in setting up an interesting mobility experience for mobile peers, when receiving 1 visitor or a small group. When visits were combined with active events such as training sessions or observations of an external quality assurance site visit, the mobility became more interesting and effective for the participant.

In terms of dissemination, several participants of the staff mobility programme testified about their experiences in the Thematic Peer Group C on Quality Assurance, in May and December 2023.

Drafting final conclusions on the medium- and long-term impact of the mobilities is not easy and will largely depend on personal experiences and the maturity of the organisations involved.

Acknowledgements

The project partners of IMINQA would like to thank all mobile staff members and hosts for their enthusiastic participation in this project, and the members of the Matchmaking Committee for sharing their insights and making this programme even more valuable.

End notes

¹ Rome Communiqué 2020, p.7 https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique.pdf

² One Key Commitment is quality assurance to be in compliance with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).