

# Use of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

Nora Skaburskienė

# What are “standards”?

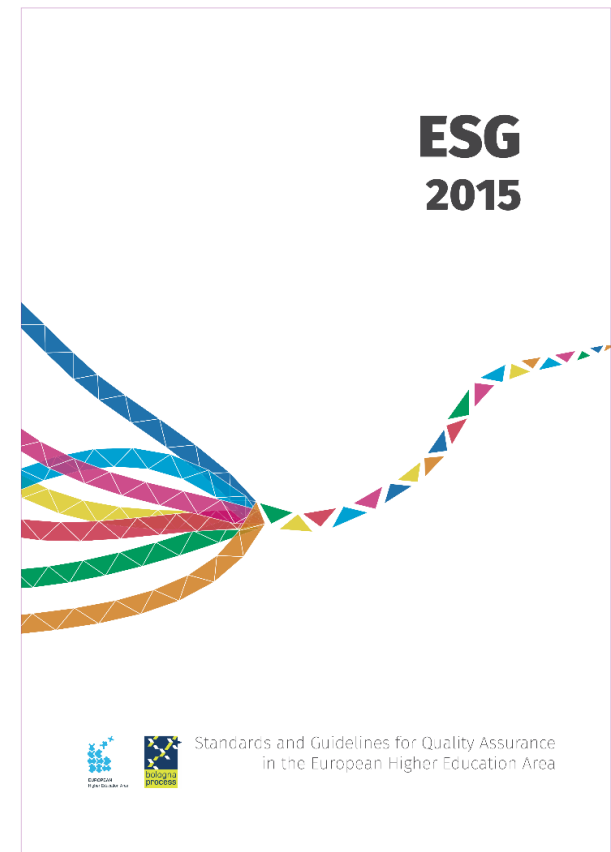
# What are “guidelines”?

- **“Standards”** in this context are not meant to imply ‘standardization’ or ‘requirements’.  
„Standards’ set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in HE in the EHEA; they are short and general.
- **„Guidelines”** are meant as illustrations of the standards in action; they explain why the standards are important and describe how standards might be implemented.
- ADDITIONALLY: the term ‘[quality assurance](#)’ is used in ESG to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e. assurance and enhancement activities).

# Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) – 2015

- adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005
- revised ESG adopted in 2015
- reflect a consensus among all the organizations and ministries involved on how to take forward quality assurance in the EHEA and, as such, provide a firm basis for successful implementation.

[http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)



# ESG-2015

3 parts:

- ✓ „Standards and guidelines for **internal quality assurance**
- ✓ „Standards and guidelines for **external quality assurance**
- ✓ „Standards and guidelines for **quality assurance agencies**

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# ESG – what it is all about?

- The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for **internal and external** quality assurance in higher education.
- The ESG are not standards for quality, nor do they prescribe how the quality assurance processes are implemented.
- Provide **guidance**, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education.
- The ESG should be considered in a broader context that also includes qualifications frameworks, ECTS and diploma supplement that also contribute to promoting the **transparency and mutual trust** in higher education in the EHEA.

# Objectives of the ESG

- They **set** a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level;
- They **enable** the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area;
- They **support** mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- They **provide** information on quality assurance in the EHEA.

# Principles of ESG

- **Higher education institutions** have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- The focus is on quality assurance related to **learning and teaching** in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation.
- The ESG apply to **all higher education** offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery. Thus, the ESG are also applicable to all higher education including transnational and cross-border provision.
- Quality assurance supports the development of a **quality culture**.
- Quality assurance **takes into account** the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society.

# The ESG: What they ARE

- ✓ Generic, not specific, standards and guidelines
- ✓ A view of what should be done, not how it should be done
- ✓ A source of assistance and guidance

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# The ESG: What they are NOT

- ✓ Prescriptive
- ✓ A checklist
- ✓ Compendium of detailed procedures
- ✓ European quality assurance system

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# ESG Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance

- 1.1 Policy for quality assurance Institutions.
- 1.2 Design and approval of programmes.
- 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment.
- 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification.
- 1.5 Teaching staff.
- 1.6 Learning resources and student.
- 1.7 Information management.
- 1.8 Public information.
- 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes.
- 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

# ESG Part 2: Standards for external quality assurance

- 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance.
- 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose.
- 2.3 Implementing processes.
- 2.4 Peer-review.
- 2.5 Criteria for outcomes.
- 2.6 Reporting.
- 2.7 Complaints and appeals.

## 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

**Standard:** External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.

**Guidelines:** Quality assurance in HE is based on the institutions' responsibility for the quality of their programmes and other provision; therefore it is important that external quality assurance recognises and supports institutional responsibility for quality assurance. To ensure the link between internal and external quality assurance, external quality assurance includes consideration of the standards of Part 1. These may be addressed differently, depending on the type of external quality assurance.

## 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

**Standard:** External quality assurance should be defined and designed specifically to ensure its fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for it, while taking into account relevant regulations. **Stakeholders should be involved** in its design and continuous improvement.

**Guidelines:** In order to ensure effectiveness and objectivity it is vital for EQA to have clear aims **agreed by stakeholders**.

The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will:

- bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions;
- take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality;
- allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement;
- result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The system for EQA might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance.

## 2.3 Implementing processes

**Standard:** External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. They include:

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit;
- a report resulting from the external assessment;
- a consistent follow-up.

## 2.3 Implementing processes

**Guidelines:** EQA carried out professionally, consistently and transparently ensures its acceptance and impact.

Depending on the design of the EQA system, the institution provides the basis for the EQA through a self-assessment or by collecting other material including supporting evidence. The written documentation is normally complemented by interviews with stakeholders during a site visit. The findings of the assessment are summarised in a report (cf. Standard 2.5) written by a group of external experts (cf. Standard 2.4).

EQA does not end with the report by the experts. The report provides clear guidance for institutional action. Agencies have a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institution. The nature of the follow-up will depend on the design of the EQA.

## 2.4 Peer-review experts

**Standard:** External quality assurance should be carried out by groups of external experts that include (a) student member(s).

**Guidelines:** At the core of EQA is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners.

In order to ensure the value and consistency of the work of the experts, they:

- are **carefully selected**;
- have appropriate **skills** and are **competent** to perform their task;
- are supported by appropriate **training and/or briefing**.

The agency ensures the independence of the experts by implementing a mechanism of **no-conflict-of-interest**.

The involvement of **international experts** in external quality assurance, for example as members of peer panels, is desirable as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.



## 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

**Standard:** Any outcomes or judgements made as the result of EQA should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.

**Guidelines:** EQA and in particular its outcomes have a significant impact on institutions and programmes that are evaluated and judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, outcomes of EQA are based on **pre-defined and published criteria**, which are interpreted consistently and are evidence-based. Depending on the external quality assurance system, outcomes may take different forms, for example, recommendations, judgements or formal decisions.

## 2.6 Reporting

**Standard: Full reports** by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If the agency takes any formal decision based on the reports, the **decision** should be published together with the report.

## 2.6 Reporting

**Guidelines:** The report by the experts is the basis for the institution's follow-up action of the external evaluation and it provides information to society regarding the activities of an institution. In order for the report to be used as the basis for action to be taken, it needs to be clear and concise in its structure and language and to cover:

- context description (to help locate the HEI in its specific context);
- description of the individual procedure, including experts involved;
- evidence, analysis and findings;
- conclusions;
- features of good practice, demonstrated by the institution;
- recommendations for follow-up action.

The preparation of a summary report may be useful. The factual accuracy of a report is improved if the institution is given the opportunity to point out errors of fact before the report is finalised.

## 2.7 Complaints and appeals

**Standard:** Complaints and appeals **processes** should be **clearly defined** as part of the design of EQA processes and communicated to the institutions.

## 2.7 Complaints and appeals

**Guidelines:** In order to safeguard the rights of the institutions and ensure fair decision-making, EQA is operated in an open and accountable way. Nevertheless, there may be misapprehensions or instances of dissatisfaction about the process or formal outcomes. Institutions need to have access to processes that allow them to raise issues of concern with the agency; the agencies, need to handle such issues in a professional way by means of a clearly defined process that is consistently applied.

A complaints procedure allows an institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out.

In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

# ESG Part 3: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance

- 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance.
- 3.2 Official status.
- 3.3 Independence.
- 3.4 Thematic analysis.
- 3.5 Resources.
- 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct.
- 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies.

## 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

**Standard:** Agencies should undertake EQA activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a **regular basis**. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available **mission statement**. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the **involvement of stakeholders** in their governance and work.

## 3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

**Guidelines:** To ensure the meaningfulness of EQA, it is important that institutions and the public **trust** agencies.

Therefore, the goals and objectives of the QA activities are **described and published** along with the nature of interaction between the agencies and relevant stakeholders in HE, especially the HEIs, and the scope of the agencies' work. The expertise in the agency may be increased by including international members in agency committees.

A variety of EQA activities are carried out by agencies to achieve different objectives. Among them are evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities at programme or institutional level that may be carried out differently. When the agencies also carry out other activities, a **clear distinction** between EQA and their other fields of work is needed.



## 3.2 Official status

**Standard:** Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.

**Guidelines:** In particular when external quality assurance is carried out for regulatory purposes, institutions need to have the security that the outcomes of this process are accepted within their higher education system, by the state, the stakeholders and the public.

## 3.3 Independence

**Standard:** Agencies should be independent and **act autonomously**. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without third party influence.

**Guidelines:** Autonomous institutions need independent agencies as counterparts.

In considering the independence of an agency the following are important:

- **Organisational independence**, demonstrated by official documentation (e.g. instruments of government, legislative acts or statutes of the organisation) that stipulates the independence of the agency's work from third parties, such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations;

## 3.3 Independence

- **Operational independence:** the definition and operation of the agency's **procedures and methods** as well as the nomination and **appointment of external experts** are undertaken independently from third parties such as HEIs, governments and other stakeholders;
- **Independence of formal outcomes:** while experts from relevant stakeholder backgrounds, particularly students, take part in QA processes, the final outcomes of the QA processes remain the responsibility of the agency. Anyone contributing to EQA activities of an agency (e.g. as expert) is informed that while they may be nominated by a third party, they are acting in a personal capacity and not representing their constituent organisations when working for the agency. Independence is important to ensure that any procedures and decisions are solely **based on expertise**.

## 3.4 Thematic analysis

**Standard:** Agencies should regularly publish **reports** that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.

**Guidelines:** In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the HE system. These findings can contribute to the reflection on and the improvement of QA policies and processes in institutional, national and international contexts.

A thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulty.

## 3.5 Resources

**Standard:** Agencies should have **adequate and appropriate resources**, both human and financial, to carry out their work.

**Guidelines:** It is in the public interest that agencies are adequately and appropriately funded, given higher education's important impact on the development of societies and individuals. The resources of the agencies enable them to organise and run their EQA activities in an effective and efficient manner. Furthermore, the resources enable the agencies to improve, to reflect on their practice and to inform the public about their activities.

## 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

**Standard:** Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.

**Guidelines:** Agencies need to be **accountable** to their stakeholders. Therefore, high professional standards and integrity in the agency's work are indispensable. The **review and improvement of their activities** are on-going so as to ensure that their services to institutions and society are optimal.

# 3.6 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct

**Guidelines:** Agencies apply an internal quality assurance policy which is available on its website. This policy:

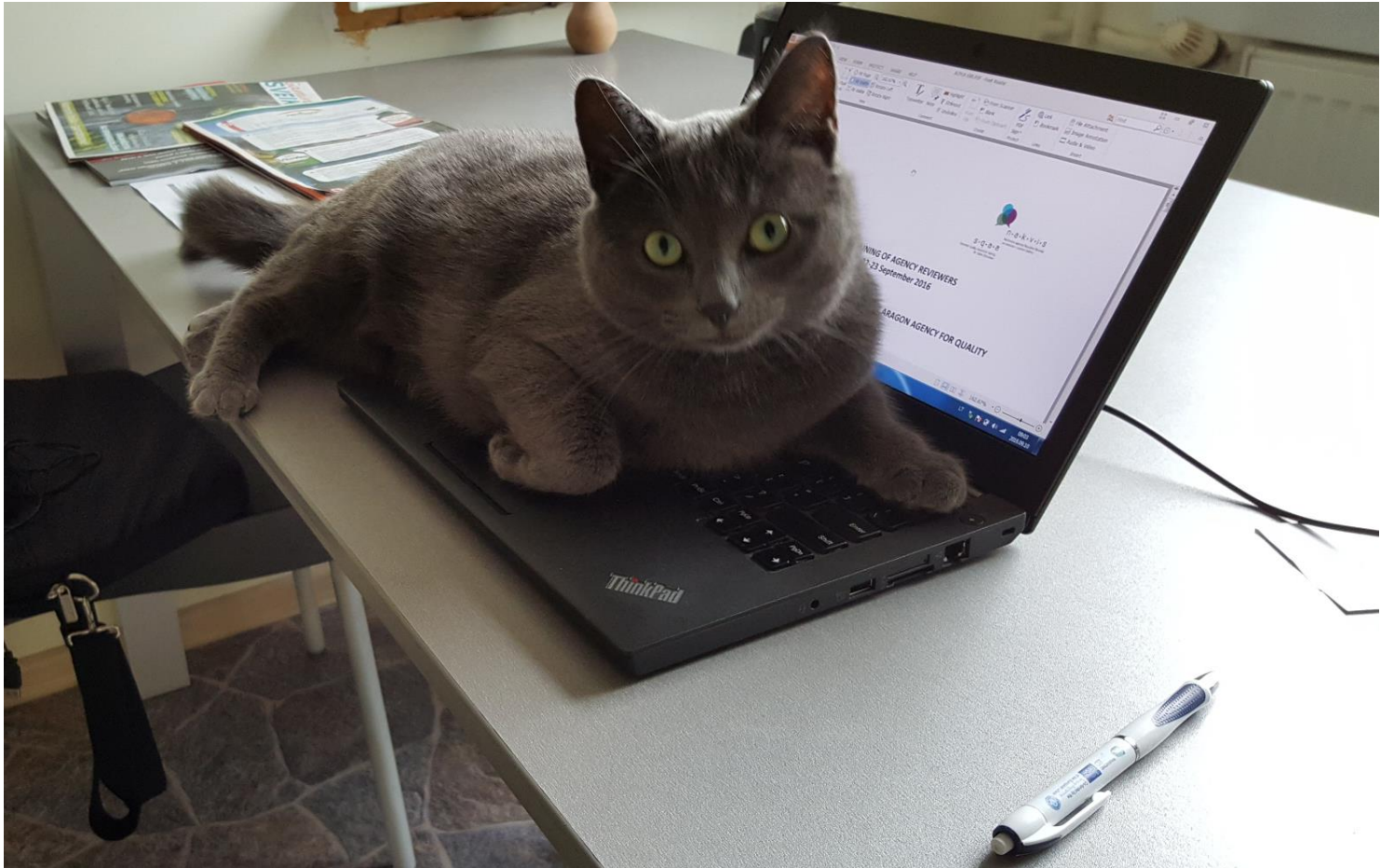
- ensures that all persons involved in its activities are **competent** and act **professionally** and ethically;
- includes **internal and external feedback** mechanisms that lead to a continuous improvement within the agency;
- guards against **intolerance** of any kind or discrimination;
- outlines the appropriate **communication** with the relevant authorities of those jurisdictions where they operate;
- ensures that any activities carried out and material produced by **subcontractors** are in line with the ESG, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance activities are subcontracted to other parties;
- allows the agency to establish the status and recognition of the institutions with which it conducts EQA.

## 3.7 Cyclical external review of agencies

**Standard:** Agencies should undergo an **external review** at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG.

**Guidelines:** A **periodic** external review will help the agency to reflect on its policies and activities. It provides a means for assuring the agency and its stakeholders that it continues to adhere to the principles enshrined in the ESG.







Thank you!

