

Quality assurance fit for the future

Policy brief

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Introduction

This policy brief aims to provide insights into the future of the European quality assurance framework, in the context of the quality assurance priorities set out by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Union (EU). It is prepared by the consortium of the *Quality Assurance Fit for the Future* project (QA-FIT)¹ and does not represent a policy statement from the authors of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area² (ESG).

Policy context

Quality assurance of higher education has been a key commitment of the Bologna Process since its outset. It stands as one of the most transformative developments within the sector with nearly all EHEA countries having established both internal and external quality assurance systems.

The ESG have significantly supported this transformation. They have been instrumental in fostering trust, accountability and transparency within and between higher education systems, thereby enhancing the overall quality and comparability of higher education across the EHEA. Furthermore, trustworthy quality assurance in line with the ESG is one pillar that supports the implementation of other policies, particularly those aimed at facilitating mobility and recognition.

In the Tirana Communiqué³, the EHEA Ministers responsible for higher education reaffirmed the role of the three key commitments for the successful development of the EHEA: implementation of the three-cycle system of programmes and degrees, based on learning outcomes and the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); recognition of qualifications in accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention, with a view to achieving automatic recognition; and promotion of a quality culture and ensuring quality assurance systems in line with the ESG. These commitments are seen as essential preconditions for fostering resilient and dynamic higher education, capable of responding to contemporary and evolving challenges. Considering this, and to keep the ESG in

¹ Further information: <https://www.enqa.eu/projects/quality-assurance-fit-for-the-future-qa-fit/>

The project is coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The other stakeholder partners of the project are the so-called E4 Group (the authors of the 2005 ESG), i.e. the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Students' Union (ESU). The project also includes the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and a number of national organisations as partners: the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Romania (ANOSR), and the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (associated partner).

² https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

³ <https://ehea.info/Immagini/Tirana-Communique.pdf>

line with ongoing developments, challenges and expectations, Ministers mandated the authors of the ESG⁴ to propose a revised version by 2026 (Tirana Communiqué, p. 3).

Quality assurance also remains a high priority on the policy agenda of the EU, as seen in the recent higher education package proposed by the European Commission.⁵ As part of the development of the European Education Area, this package includes a proposal for a *Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education*. This proposal aims to ensure that national quality assurance arrangements enable transnational cooperation, particularly with regards to the European Universities Initiative. In particular it lays the ground for new elements, such as the external quality assurance of all joint educational provision at alliance level, and quality assurance arrangements for the proposed European Degree. The EU initiatives related to various forms of international cooperation have again highlighted the long-standing challenges for quality assurance that arise due to the rigid legal frameworks in some countries. The proposal therefore reiterates the need for Member States to fully meet the existing Bologna Process commitments for quality assurance such as quality assurance in accordance with the ESG, the use, where necessary, of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, and recognition of external quality assurance outcomes from any EQAR-registered agency within the national arrangements for decision-making.

Key issues for the revision of the ESG

In advance of the expected revision of the ESG, the QA-FIT project was launched in June 2022. It has gathered data through surveys and focus groups involving higher education stakeholders in order to map the state of play of quality assurance in the EHEA, explore how the ESG have been used by actors at different levels (European, national, regional, institutional), and reflect on how the ESG can be applied to emerging trends in higher education. The project outcomes provide an evidence base to inform the revision of the ESG, to ensure they remain relevant and effective in the face of ongoing changes within the sector.

The evidence indicates that the revision of the ESG should be an evolution rather than a complete overhaul. The key purposes of the ESG – namely, to assure and improve the quality of higher education and to foster trust – remain relevant. This is true despite the changing geopolitical and social context since the ESG were first published in 2005 and then revised in 2015. Consultations with stakeholders suggest that **the primary focus of the ESG should remain on ensuring the quality of learning and teaching within higher education institutions.** However, it is recognised that institutional quality assurance policies may cover all higher education missions, and at system level these may be addressed holistically by the quality assurance agency, or separately by different bodies and tools.

⁴ The primary authors are ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE - the E4 Group, in cooperation with Business Europe, EI and EQAR.

⁵ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/news/commission-presents-a-blueprint-for-a-european-degree>

Therefore, it may be necessary that the **ESG pay attention to the synergies between different areas of institutional activity, especially how these impact and relate to learning and teaching in higher education.** It has also been highlighted that the ESG exist and are used within a broader eco-system of policy and tools for higher education, both within the EHEA and globally. **Therefore, it will be important to consider referencing these, including those that have emerged since 2015,⁶ to emphasise their role and complementarity with the ESG.**

Much of the recent debate about the revision of the ESG has focused on the range of topics to be covered by the standards. In order to ensure continued relevance, it is likely that **Part 1 of the ESG (for internal quality assurance) will need to address more explicitly issues such as digitalisation, diversity of learners and academic staff, and flexible learning pathways, while Part 2 of the ESG (for external quality assurance) may need to allow flexibility for quality assurance agencies to use methodologies that reflect the growing maturity of internal quality assurance systems, while still maintaining sufficient accountability.**

The success and strength of the ESG means that it could be seen as a vehicle for ensuring common approaches to other broader issues not explicitly related to the quality assurance of learning and teaching. However, some stakeholder groups have raised concerns that covering too many topics risks turning the ESG into a monitoring tool for emerging policies (such as those related to the social dimension and fundamental values of higher education), rather than maintaining its use as a common framework with standards for quality assurance. Furthermore, the evidence from the QA-FIT project and other sources shows clearly that the scope of institutional and agency approaches to quality assurance already go far beyond the baseline requirements of the ESG.

One of the core strengths of the ESG is its role in supporting internationalisation, by providing a basis for trust and information provision, which facilitates international partnership and the recognition of qualifications and study periods. With further international cooperation and mobility being high on the EHEA and EU policy agenda, **it may be necessary, to further emphasise the applicability of the ESG to all higher education provision and external quality assurance, no matter whether it is conducted domestically or internationally. This would also again highlight the relevance of the ESG for various cooperation models including the European Universities Alliances, as long as the legal frameworks are sufficiently flexible to allow their appropriate use.**

Finally, the evidence collected suggests that as the common framework for quality assurance across the EHEA, **the ESG need to maintain their current wide applicability in order to be used in the diversity of operating contexts, as this is one of its key strengths and fundamental principles.** However, the revision process will explore areas where there is a lack of clarity regarding the intensions

⁶ I.e Qualifications frameworks, ECTS, Diploma supplement, Global Convention on the Recognition of Qualifications concerning Higher Education, Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA, EHEA Statements on fundamental values.

of the standards in order to further ensure their usability. This will draw on the substantial practical experience of all stakeholders in using the ESG in a range of settings.

Next steps for the ESG revision

The authors of the ESG are expected to propose a revised version of the ESG as well as any necessary adjustments to the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes to ensure it remains aligned with the ESG. The revision process will occur between 2024 and 2026, with the updated ESG to be presented to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG)⁷ by 2026 and adopted by Ministers at the 2027 Ministerial Conference, after which they will become operational. As with the previous revision, the process is stakeholder-led and will be implemented by bodies composed of representatives of the author organisations. A Steering Group will coordinate the overall process, including setting the main directions for the content and analysing feedback from the consultations, while a Drafting Group will be responsible for concretely preparing each new draft and identifying issues for further discussion.

There will be several rounds of consultation with all key stakeholders in higher education, including the BFUG. One of the key factors underpinning the success of quality assurance in the EHEA is that it is stakeholder-owned and stakeholder-driven. This inclusive approach must be maintained to ensure that the ESG continue to be a widely accepted and relevant tool in the EHEA.

⁷ <https://ehea.info/page-the-bologna-follow-up-group>

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The QA-FIT project aims to map the state of play of quality assurance in the EHEA and to critically evaluate the fitness for purpose of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

More information: <https://www.enqa.eu/projects/quality-assurance-fit-for-the-future-qa-fit/>



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