Institute for the
Development of Education

Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education

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ENQA General Assembly, 24-25 October 2024, Malta

About us

Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia

- **European think-tank** committed to advancing **policies in higher education**. Our focus areas include:
  - o **Equity and inclusion** in higher education:
    Driving the development of the European Framework for Social Dimension
  - o **Community engagement** in higher education:
    Establishing the European Platform for Community Engagement
  - o **Quality assurance** in higher education:
    Linking quality with inclusion and engagement with society

- Providing **consultancy services** in key focus areas to public authorities and higher education institutions in Europe. More at www.iro.hr

About us

Nino S. Schmidt

- **Executive Director and Founder** of the Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia

- Former **Co-Chair** of the Working Group on Social Dimension within the **Bologna Follow-Up Group** (BFUG)

  o 2018 – 2024: successfully led the creation of the **first EHEA Framework for the Social Dimension**, establishing principles, guidelines, and indicators to help 47 EHEA countries improve social dimension policies in higher education.

- 2010 – 2018: Member of the **Accreditation Council** of the Croatian QA Agency for Science and Higher Education

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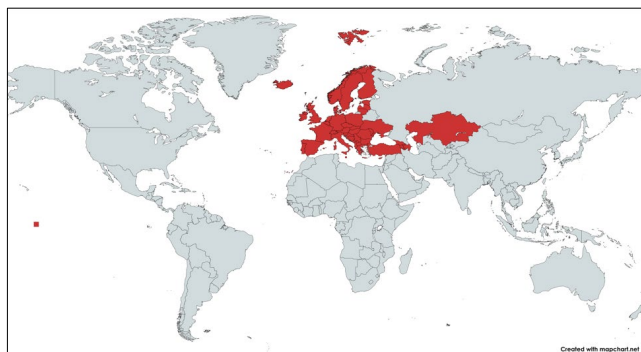
1.
Overview of policy development:

o Quality assurance in higher education
o Social dimension in higher education

Overview of policy development: Quality assurance in higher education in the period 1999 - 2024

Quality assurance is a **mature policy with an established policy landscape**. This consists of:

- **European level:**
  - Stable EHEA level framework for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance (E4 = ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU + EQAR)
  - Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

- **National level:**
  - National quality assurance systems; quality assurance agencies

- **Higher education institution level:**
  - Institutional quality assurance processes at HEIs

Overview of policy development: Social dimension in higher education in the period 2001 - 2024

2001 – 2020: the notion of a social dimension has been **embedded** into the policy objectives of the **Bologna Process**

⬇

rather than being derived from the research that informed these policy objectives
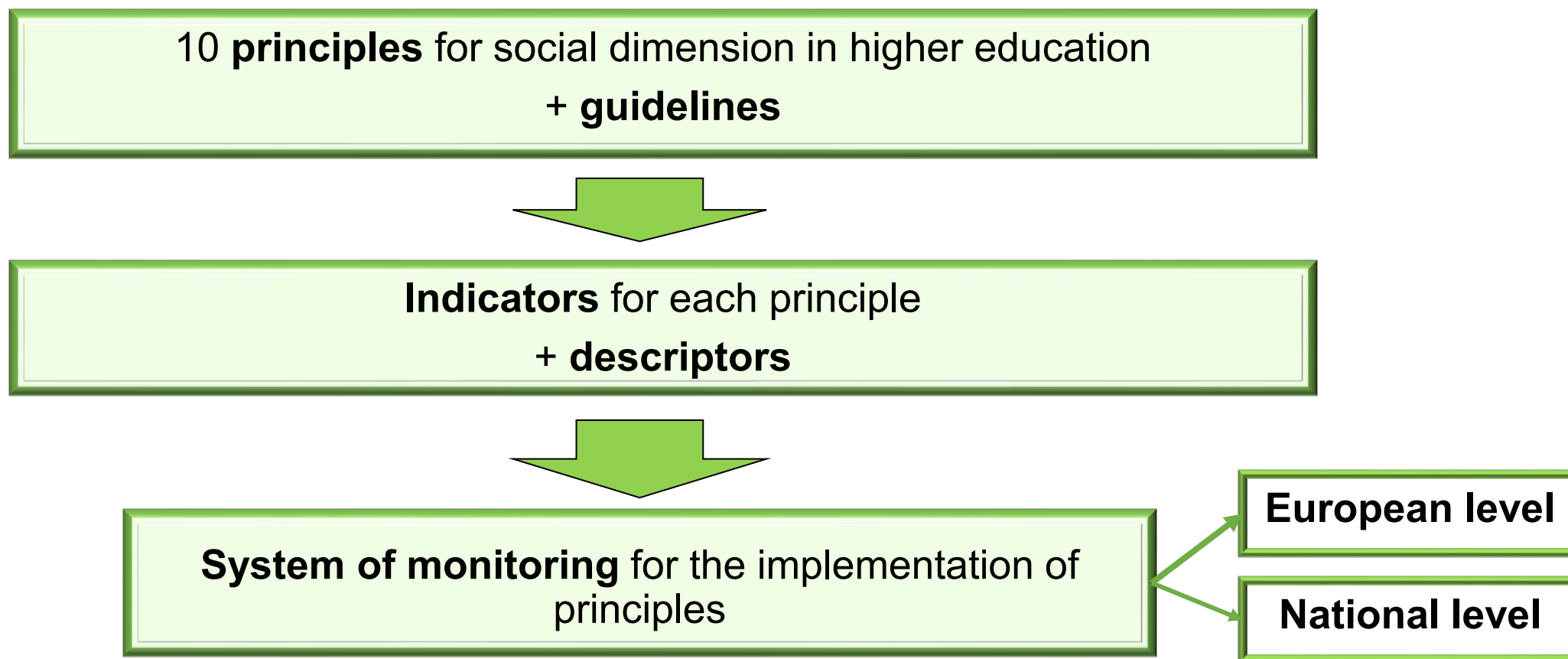
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definitional anarchy

Overview of policy development: Social dimension in higher education in the period 2001 - 2024

- 2020 Rome Communiqué: the **first official definition** of the social dimension and the **formulation of 'Principles and Guidelines** to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA'

  o **'Game-changer'** for the further development of social dimension in the EHEA

- 2024 Tirana Communique: '**Indicators and descriptors** for the Principles of the Social Dimension in the EHEA'

  o Principles and guidelines + indicators and descriptors = new **EHEA framework for the social dimension** in higher education

EHEA policy framework for the social dimension in higher education adopted in 2024:

```
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│  10 principles for social dimension in higher education │
│                      + guidelines                       │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ⬇
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐
│              Indicators for each principle              │
│                      + descriptors                      │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘
                          ⬇
┌──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────┐
│  System of monitoring for the implementation of         │───────│ European level  │
│                      principles                         │        └─────────────────┘
│                                                         │        ┌─────────────────┐
│                                                         │───────│ National level  │
└──────────────────────────────────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────┘
```

New definition of the social dimension – adopted in 2020

Starting point: definition in the 2007 London Communique

New: fosters **equity**

New: responsive to the **needs of local communities**

New: fosters **diversity**

Social dimension in higher education is
- **a process** aimed at creating an inclusive environment in higher education
- in which the **composition of the student body** entering, participating in and completing higher education
- **at all levels** corresponds to the **heterogeneous social profile of society at large** in the EHEA countries.

This definition of the social dimension encompasses also
- the desired **inclusive environment** in higher education that
- fosters **equity, diversity**, and is responsive to the **needs of local communities**.

Principles and Guidelines – adopted in 2020

10 principles for the social dimension **for the upcoming decade**:

- **Principles** = should be understood as high-level statements that serve as **political commitments** and as a **basis for the conceptualization of different policies** for social dimension enhancement.

- **Guidelines** = recommendations intended to advise policy makers on how the principles should be implemented in practice.

EHEAROME2020

Rome
Ministerial
Communiqué

ANNEX II

Principles and Guidelines

10 principles for the social dimension **for the upcoming decade**:

1. Principle on **strategic approach** to the social dimension
2. Principle on **flexibility** of higher education systems
3. Principle on the **inclusivness of the entire education system**
4. Principle on monitoring and **data collection**
5. Principle on **counselling** and guidance
6. Principle on **funding**
7. Principle on **inclusive** institutional **culture**
8. Principle on **international mobility**
9. Principle on **community engagement**
10. Principle on **policy dialogue**

Indicators = tools for measuring progress in implementing the principles of the social dimension in higher education.

Descriptors = each indicator has its descriptor, which outlines characteristics of the indicators in more detail providing a better understanding of the indicators and how they can be implemented.

- **Not prescriptive – toolbox approach!** > enable the EHEA countries to implement the indicators in a way that suits their national higher education systems

- Important for creating **European-level** and **national-level SYSTEMS OF MONITORING and evaluating** the progress in the implementation of the principles for the social dimension.

Indicators and Descriptors
for the Principles of the Social Dimension
in the European Higher Education Area

FINAL REPORT

MAY 2024

EHEA: Transforming Education together

Institute for the Development of Education

Figure 11.1: Results of the 10 scoreboard indicators on Principles & Guidelines, 2020/2021

|	P&Gs 1	P&Gs 2	P&Gs 3	P&Gs 4	P&Gs 5	P&Gs 6	P&Gs 7	P&Gs 8	P&Gs 9	P&Gs 10	Points per country
Belgium (BE fr)											20
Belgium (BE de)											6
Belgium (BE nl)											18
Bulgaria											11
Czechia											23
Denmark											16
Germany											14
Estonia											25
Ireland											14
Greece											15
Spain											25
France											25
Croatia											18
Italy											28
Cyprus											15
Latvia											8
Lithuania											17
Luxembourg											11
Hungary											14
Malta											25
Netherlands											18
Austria											21
Poland											20
Portugal											19
Romania											24
Slovenia											20
Slovakia											9
Finland											27
Sweden											25
Albania											7
Bosnia and Herzegovina											3
Switzerland											19
Liechtenstein											6
Montenegro											5
North Macedonia											13
Norway											24
Serbia											12
Turkey											15
Points per P&Gs	91	65	62	97	76	73	51	68	27	24	635

Legend:
- All criteria are met (4 pts)
- Most criteria are met (3 pts)
- Some criteria are met (2 pts)
- Few criteria are met (1 pt)
- No criteria are met (0 pts)

There is still much to be improved in the EHEA in addressing the social dimension!

→ Eurydice report (2022) shows that the **total number of points achieved** by the countries covered by this report **is 635.**

→ If all the education systems had been in the dark green category, **the total number would have been 1 520** (38 education systems × 40 points).

→ The result indicates that **EHEA systems have put in place policies for nearly 42% of the interventions** required to meet the commitments.
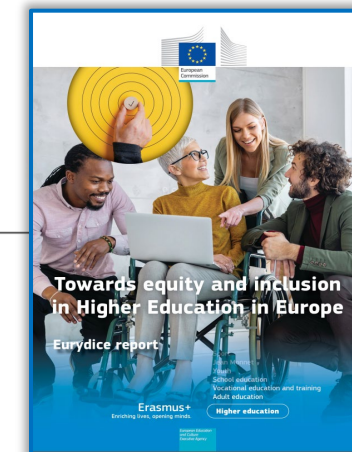
European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice. (2022). Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

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Monitoring: Principle 1 on strategic approach to the social dimension

The European Higher Education Area in 2024

Bologna Process Implementation Report

Figure 4.2: Strategic commitment to the social dimension of higher education: requirement for quality assurance agencies to monitor higher education institutions' (HEIs') strategies on the social dimension, 2022/2023

Quality assurance agencies are required to monitor HEI strategies on the social dimension

No such requirement exists

Data not available

AD
LU
LI
MT
SM
VA
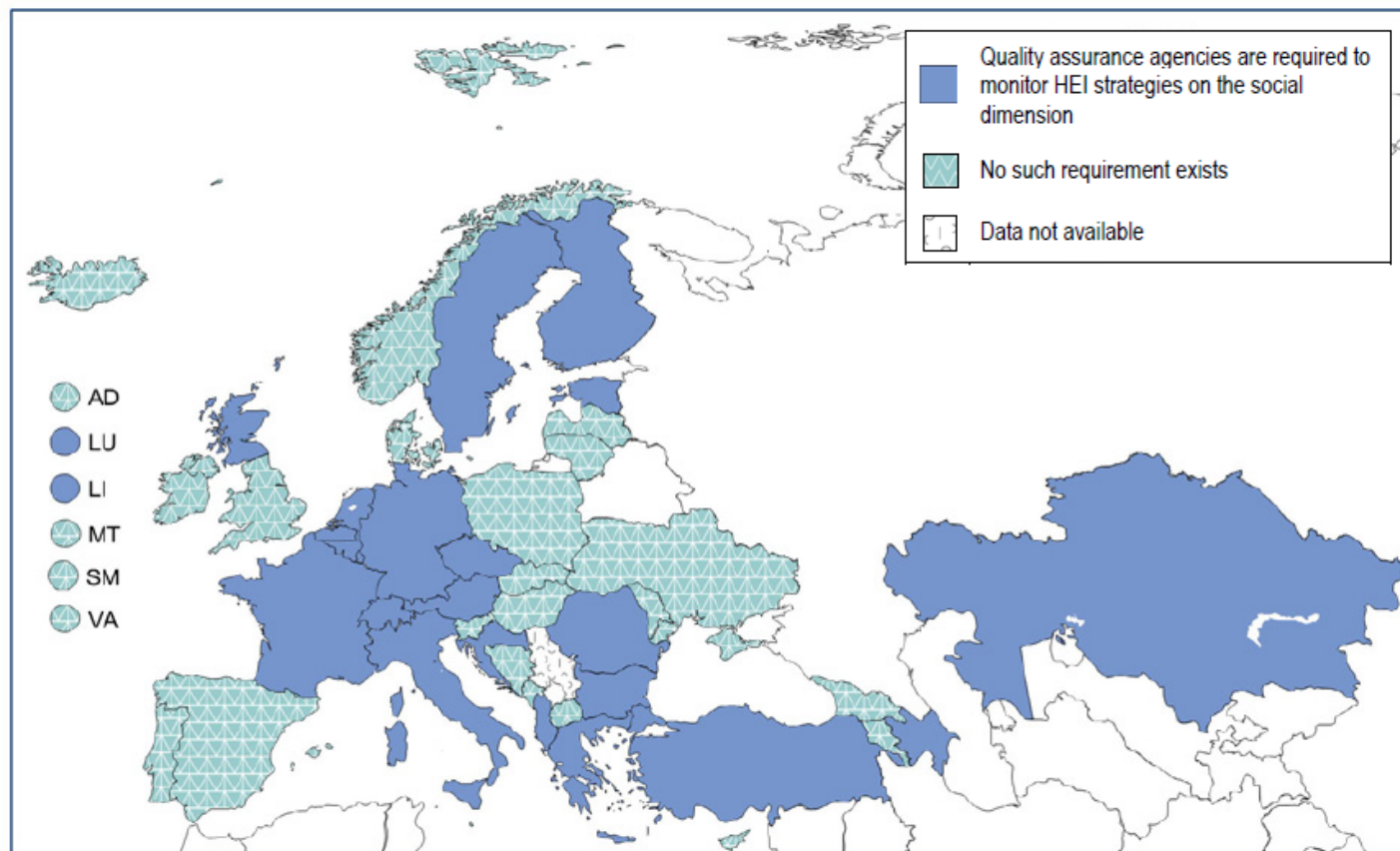
Source: BFUG data collection.

Principle 1:

"The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies **at system and institutional level**, as well as at the EHEA level."

European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice [EC]. (2024). The EHEA in 2024: Bologna Process Implementation Report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Overview of policy development: Social dimension in higher education in the period 2001 - 2024

- Significant development of the **policy architecture** in the period **2020 – 2024**

- **Long term policy landscape** for the implementation of the EHEA framework for the social dimension is **yet to be developed**

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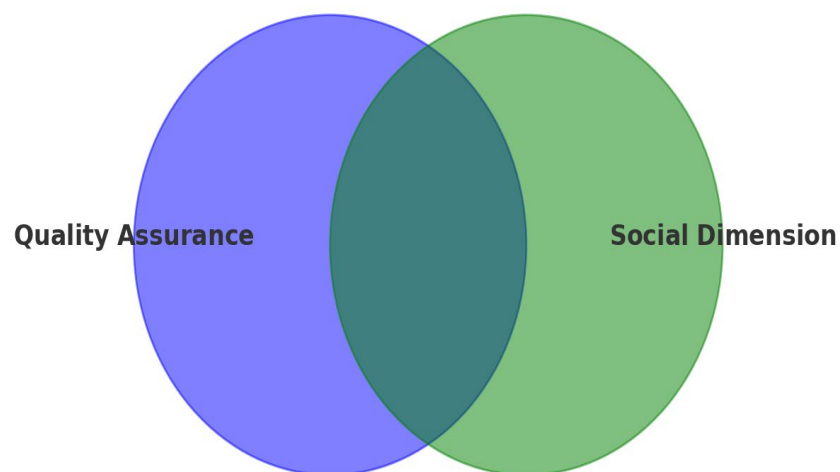
2.
Linking quality assurance and the social dimension

The aim of the report:

- To explore the possible links between **quality assurance** and the **social dimension** of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Education Area (EEA):
  - at European level,
  - within national higher education systems,
  - at higher education institutions (HEIs)

Šćukanec Schmidt, N., Skledar Matijević, A, and Anić, Z. (2023). 'Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education', *NESET report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

Links between quality assurance and the social dimension

Quality Assurance

Social Dimension

- Explicit links could be created between the two policies > through the analysis of strategic documents:
  - o 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA' (**ESG 2015**)
  - o **'Principles and Guidelines** to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' (2020).

Links between quality assurance and the social dimension

Quality Assurance   Social Dimension

- **ESG 2015**: no explicit link to the social dimension, nevertheless…
  - **5 of its standards** from Part I refer to the recognition of **diversity of students** and their needs, **flexible learning** paths, **non-formal and** informal learning, and the importance of **securing counselling** to support students - corresponds to underlying ideas of the social dimension.
  - Can be **connected with 7 principles** of the social dimension covering strategic approach, supportive legal framework, councelling, funding and community engagement.

Links between quality assurance and the social dimension
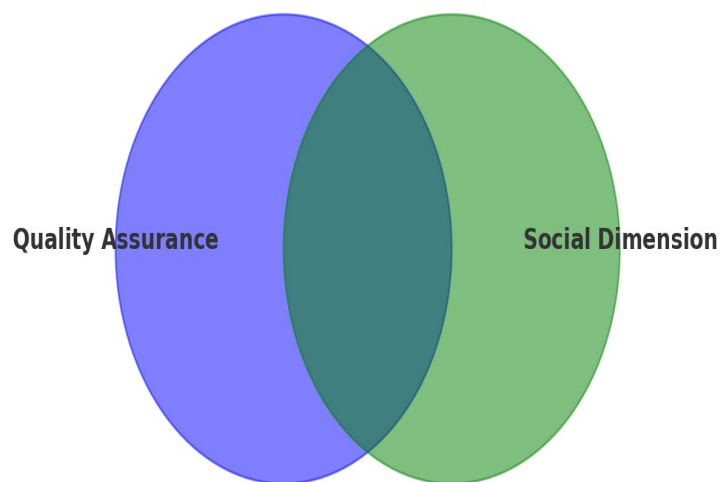
Quality Assurance   **Social Dimension**
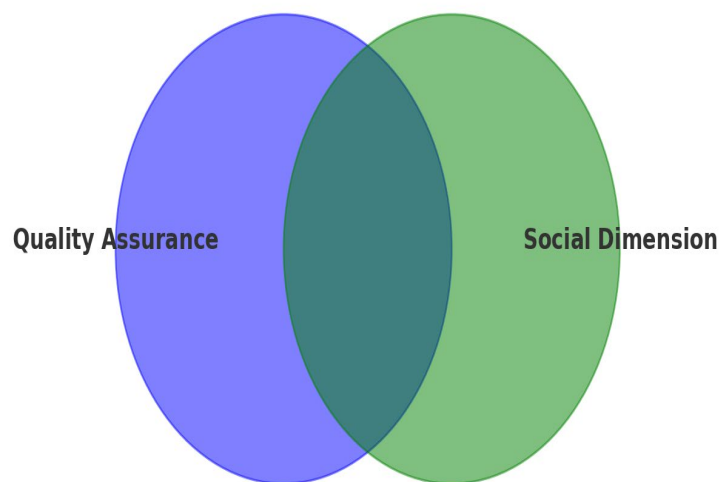
- **2024 EHEA Framework for the Social Dimension**
  - **4 of its principles of the social dimension** and their corresponding indicators can be connected to four standards for quality assurance from Part I of ESG 2015.
  - Perceives quality assurance mechanisms as tools that can help to reinforce the implementation of social dimension policies.

Concerns to be considered

- EHEA principles, guidelines and indicators for the social dimension **should not infringe the autonomy of national public authorities, quality assurance agencies and HEIs**. They should be able to implement the EHEA agreed policies in the way that is best suited to their context.

- **ESG 2015** applies specifically to **quality assurance of learning and teaching**, and not to the quality assurance of all activities undertaken by HEIs. It is therefore important to bear in mind that certain quality assurance agencies do not have a remit to look beyond learning and teaching.

- **Not to create an additional administrative burden** for agencies and/or HEIs, in order to avoid reducing quality assurance procedures to box-ticking exercises.

Concerns to be considered

- Take into account the **diversity of external quality assurance systems and agencies** within the EHEA:
  - Some national frameworks combine evaluations of both programs and institutions, while others employ either one or the other.

- Care should be taken **not to create barriers to cross-border** quality assurance.
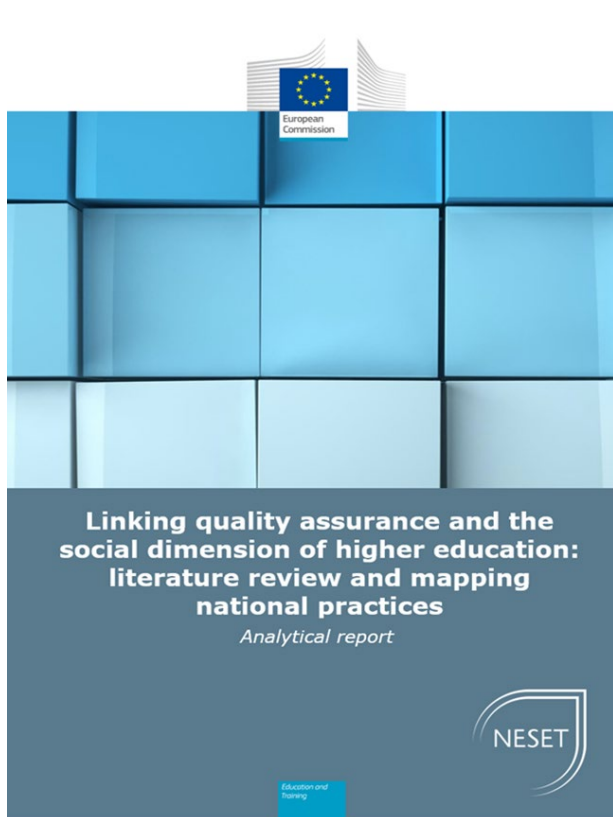
3.
Evidence

Evidence of links between quality assurance and the social dimension

Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education: literature review and mapping national practices
Analytical report

EHEA and EEA level:

- It remains to be seen if the **Principles and Guidelines** will have the same strength in terms of the implementation of policy regarding the social dimension as the **ESG** has had in terms of quality assurance – and if so, **which body**/bodies will be **in charge of monitoring.**

- No indication that the existing quality assurance framework in Europe will be expanded to include the task of overseeing the implementation of Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension of higher education.

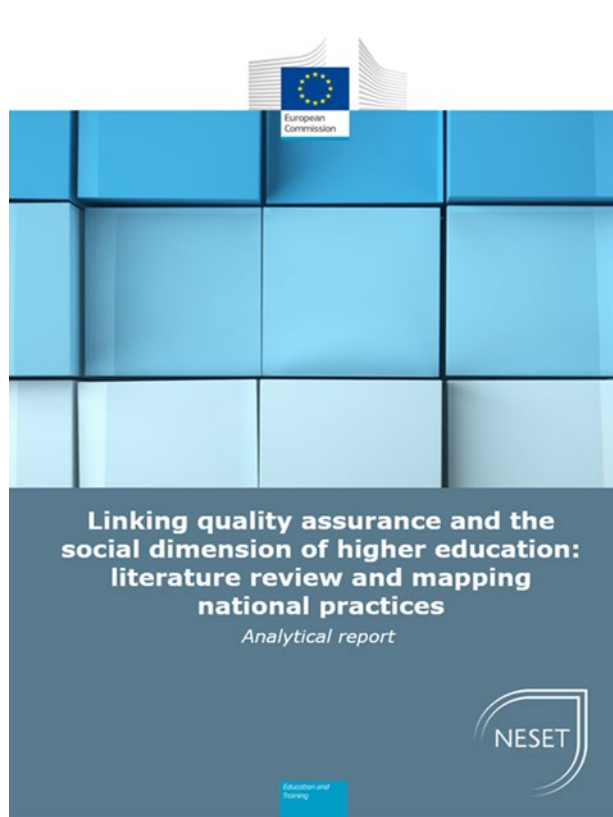# Evidence of links between quality assurance and the social dimension

National level:

- In some European countries, **strategic documents regarding the social dimension** of higher education contain references to quality assurance (case studies – Croatia, Ireland, Catalonia-Spain)

- National **standards and criteria for external quality assurance** in some European countries already include references to the social dimension (EC-Eurydice, 2022)
  - Some national quality agencies are evaluating the implementation of policies on the social dimension (in 20 HE-systems related to Principle 7; in 15 HE-systems related to Principle 2, etc.)

Evidence of links between quality assurance and the social dimension

National level:

- The findings of the survey Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-FIT, 2023) project confirm that the **majority of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA** are already addressing the social dimension to a certain extent in their external evaluation.


Figure 8: Areas covered by external QA

Social dimension of higher education — 42% To a large extent | 42% To some extent | Not at all | I don't know
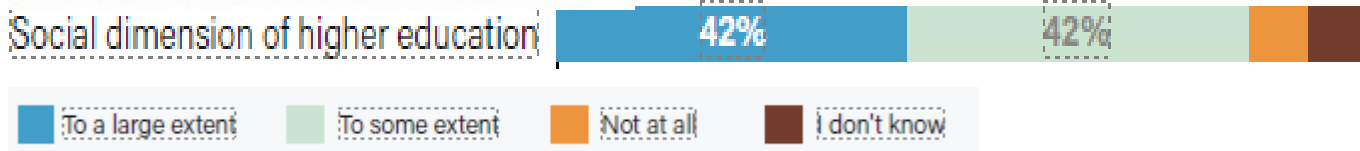
Heigher education institution level:

- It is safe to assume that individual HEIs may have in place internal policies and practices to include the social dimension into **internal quality assurance** or have **institutional strategies** for strengthening the **social dimension** (EC-Eurydice, 2022) .

Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education: literature review and mapping national practices

Analytical report

Evidence of links between quality assurance and the social dimension

Quality Assurance   Social Dimension
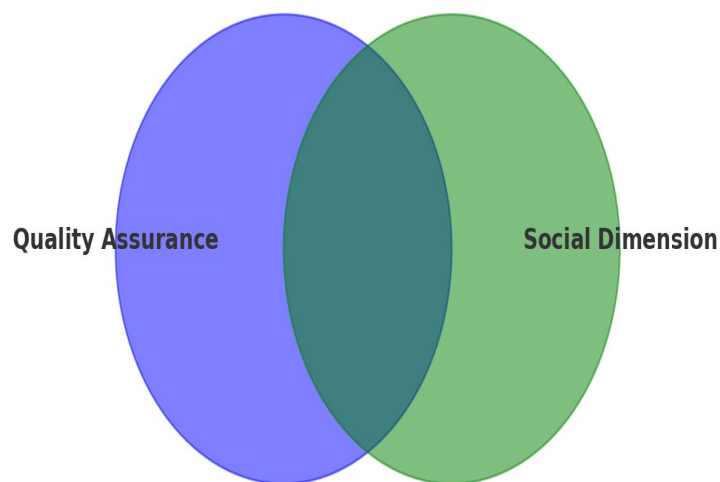
- The evidence of existing links between quality assurance and the social dimension at both national and higher education institution levels leads to the conclusion that such **links are both possible and welcome**.

- Evidence suggests that current **European-level quality assurance policies need to catch up** with developments at **grassroots levels** - national and higher education institutions level - by creating more explicit references to the social dimension.

4.
Conclusions and
policy recommendations

Policy recommendations: EHEA and EEA level

Policy recommendation 1.2	Create synergies between the ESGs and the EHEA frameworks for the social dimension of higher education
Description	Consider implementing changes to the ESG so that they contain more explicit links to strengthening the social dimension of higher education.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG; ENQA, EQAR, EUA, EURASHE, ESU and other relevant stakeholders.

Policy recommendation 1.3	Include the social dimension into any future policy development referring to quality assurance in higher education at EU level
Description	Consider including the perspective of the social dimension, based on the Principles and Guidelines, into new EU policy documents for quality assurance in higher education.
Responsibility for implementation	EU – European Commission

Policy recommendations: national level

Policy recommendation 2.1	Consider creating synergies between national external quality assurance frameworks and national frameworks for the social dimension of higher education
Description	Consider incorporating references to fostering the social dimension into national external quality assurance standards and criteria, in line with national regulatory contexts, the ESG and BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education.
Responsibility for implementation	National quality assurance agencies

Policy recommendation 2.2	Facilitate policy dialogues on implementing the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education
Description	Engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other relevant stakeholders on how to implement the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines in order to strengthen the social dimension of national higher education systems and higher education institutions.
Responsibility for implementation	Ministries and agencies responsible for higher education, with relevant stakeholders

Policy recommendations: higher education institution level

Policy recommendation 3.1	Consider including the social dimension of higher education among internal quality assurance standards
Description	Higher education institutions should consider including standards and criteria that refer to the social dimension into their existing internal quality assurance procedures, if this is in line with the national regulatory framework for quality assurance in higher education. Consider using the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the ESG as guidelines on how to implement this recommendation.
Responsibility for implementation	Higher education institutions

Policy recommendation 3.2	Support higher education institution staff in addressing the social dimension and quality assurance issues
Description	Higher education institutions should aim to raise awareness about the social dimension and quality assurance among their academic and non-academic staff, and to provide training, guidance and support.
Responsibility for implementation	Higher education institutions, in cooperation with ministries and agencies responsible for higher education

Thank you for your attention!

Nino S. Schmidt

- Executive Director of the Institute for the Development of Education, Croatia

- Former Co-Chair of the Bologna Folow-up Working Group on Social Dimension

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Web sites:

- Institute for the Development of Education: www.iro.hr

- European Higher Education Area – social dimension: https://ehea.info/page-social-dimension