



The ESG in the changing landscape of higher education

Statement by the E4 Group, August 2020

The [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG) set out the quality assurance framework for the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and have been adopted by the Ministers for higher education as part of the Bologna Process. They were developed by the stakeholder organisations representing quality assurance agencies ([ENQA](#)), universities ([EUA](#)), professional higher education institutions ([EURASHE](#)) and students ([ESU](#)): a collaboration known also as the E4 Group. This consortium developed the original version in 2005 and collaborated with three further organisations when the current 2015 edition was developed: [BUSINESSEUROPE](#), [Education International](#) and [EQAR](#).

The ESG are generally considered as one of the most successful EHEA tools: evidence shows that they have been major drivers for more professional, transparent and streamlined quality assurance processes both at the level of higher education systems and institutions. While respecting their diversity and autonomy, the ESG have also been a powerful tool for creating a common language for quality assurance in Europe and establishing a set of shared principles for quality assurance in the EHEA, namely: the primary responsibility of higher education institutions for quality and quality assurance; the responsiveness of quality assurance to diversity in higher education; the support for quality culture; and the central role of stakeholders.

In recent years higher education provision has been changing rapidly, including the mainstreaming of e-learning, the emergence of micro-credentials, the launch of the European Universities Initiative, and the renewed importance of the third mission of higher education institutions. Furthermore, some higher education institutions and systems are exploring ways to approach quality assurance that go beyond the ESG. Questions have thus been asked about the continued relevance and applicability of the ESG in this changing context and calls have been made for a further revision to take account of these developments.

This statement is prepared in response to those discussions. The E4 Group underlines that in order to continue to be a unifying force, the ESG must remain fit-for-purpose, be sufficiently flexible to respond to the developing higher education landscape, and have high potential to support innovation and diversity in higher education and quality assurance. The appropriate use and interpretation of the ESG are at the core of their suitability for this. Furthermore, the E4 Group wishes to underline that the ESG are primarily a tool for the enhancement of the quality higher education learning and teaching.

The purpose of quality assurance and the ESG

“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, but they 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.” (ESG 2015, p. 6). This description of the purpose of the ESG remains valid and relevant. The E4 Group acknowledge that the quality assurance frameworks will need to evolve over time as higher education



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and the external challenges, such as the demand for sustainability, develop. A general consensus exists on the dual purpose of quality assurance processes as outlined in the ESG: accountability and enhancement. Depending on the national and institutional context, one may be more dominant than the other. This variation is appropriate and acceptable in light of the core philosophy of respect for diversity and accommodating flexibility.

While the ESG, and quality assurance in general, are a powerful tool to support higher education development, quality assurance processes should not be assigned purposes for which they were not designed, such as overall policy implementation or monitoring. Broadening the aims of quality assurance risks reducing its effectiveness and could dilute the consensus towards the ESG across the EHEA. Furthermore, in many higher education systems policy steering and monitoring is achieved through a variety of other means which are effective in their own context. The most effective approach is to reflect on the synergies between the different tools and steering mechanisms and ensure collaboration between different actors at the system level.

The focus of quality assurance and the ESG

The ESG's focus on "quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation" remains pertinent. The ESG also call for institutions to develop "policies and processes to ensure and improve the quality of their other activities, such as research and governance" (ESG 2015, p. 7) and evidence shows that increasing numbers of institutions are working in this direction. A range of other reputable tools, actors and approaches to quality assure different areas of an institution's operations are available. It is for institutional leaders to consider how to bring these approaches together into a comprehensive internal quality assurance system. In addition, experience in many higher education systems shows that ESG driven procedures can be successfully combined with evaluation of other institutional activities, when that it considered useful.

The ESG further state that they "apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery." (ESG 2015, p. 5). As such, they can be well used for any form of education provision, including e-learning, micro-credentials and university alliances. The standards outline basic principles for the good management of any educational process and are appropriate and fit for new forms of education provision.

Use of the ESG

Many of the current key challenges linked to the use of the ESG are related to the interpretation of the ESG and its individual standards. The interpretation is often too restrictive and the scope for going beyond the standards is not exploited. Further, some misunderstandings prevail.

The ESG make a clear distinction between standards and guidelines. "The *standards* set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA and should, therefore, be taken account of and adhered to by those concerned, in all types of higher education provision." The guidelines, on the other hand only "explain why the standard is important and describe how standards *might* be implemented. They set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the actors involved in quality assurance. *Implementation will vary* depending on different contexts." (ESG 2015, p. 9, italics added here for clarity). Therefore, when making judgements of compliance with the ESG, only



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the standards should be considered. If the guidelines are taken for standards, there is a risk of uniformity to the detriment of innovation and appropriate implementation in different contexts.

It is vital to have in place quality assurance processes that are flexible, fit-for-purpose, and that allow for experimentation. This philosophy underpins ESG, which encourage context-sensitive interpretation of the standards. It is also important to remember that the ESG set out the minimum standards for quality assurance. Such guidance is important for institutions and systems of diverse maturity - both those at an earlier stage as well as those with longer experience in developing their quality assurance processes. However, any additional or innovative processes, be they related to education or other activities of higher education institutions, should not be excluded on account of them not being explicitly included in the scope or standards of the ESG.

The distribution of roles in quality assurance

The primary responsibility for quality and quality assurance of their activities lies with the higher education institutions. This is reflected in the important tasks outlined in Part I of the ESG. The role of the quality assurance agencies is to provide assurance to stakeholders, including the public, that the institutions have in place policies and processes to assume this responsibility and to support institutions in this work.

The task of public authorities is to clearly articulate the purpose and role of quality assurance as part of the higher education system, to ensure that the legal frameworks allow quality assurance agencies and institutions to meet the expectations of the ESG, and to make certain that regulations determining the basic design of the external quality assurance system are fit-for-purpose.

Conclusion

The E4 Group believes that the ESG remain valid and relevant in the current higher education landscape. We encourage a more flexible use and interpretation of the ESG, underpinned by cross-stakeholder discussion on the consequences of this for the various actors involved in each context. As the key stakeholder organisations in the EHEA, we are committed to a continuous dialogue with our constituencies about the needs and expectations of the sector, so that any discussion on future revision is informed by evidence drawn from the full range of stakeholders, including evidence collected by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), and achieved in a way that maintains consensus across the EHEA.