

# Quality assurance fit for the future

Key considerations  
for the revision of the ESG



Co-funded by  
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## Acknowledgements

We wish to thank the authors of this paper Elena Cirlan and Anna Gover and the QA-FIT project partners and Expert Board for their contributions, comments and reflections in the preparation of this paper.

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).

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## Introduction

The Bologna Process has given impetus and direction to the development of quality assurance of higher education through several key milestones. The launch of the Bologna Process marked the initial step, aiming to create more coherent and compatible systems of higher education across Europe, with the goal of enhancing mobility and fostering internationalisation. In 2005, the adoption of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area<sup>1</sup> (ESG) further strengthened these efforts by providing a shared framework of standards for the quality assurance of higher education institutions and programmes and common methodologies for external quality assurance.

The creation of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education<sup>2</sup> (EQAR) in 2008 represented another significant advancement. EQAR serves as a registry of quality assurance agencies that comply with the ESG, thereby promoting trust and transparency in quality assurance across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In 2015, the ESG underwent their first revision<sup>3</sup>, which aimed to improve clarity and useability, based on feedback from stakeholders. Additional topics, notably that of student-centred learning, were also introduced in order to reflect the most recent

developments in higher education. In May 2024, the authors of the ESG<sup>4</sup> were mandated by the EHEA Ministers to conduct another revision, signalling an ongoing commitment to enhancing and updating quality assurance practices within the EHEA. Adoption of the new version by the EHEA Ministers is expected in 2027.<sup>5</sup>

In advance of that revision, the Quality Assurance Fit for the Future project (QA-FIT)<sup>6</sup> was launched in June 2022 to map a broader picture of internal and external quality assurance, showcasing how higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies go beyond the baseline provided by the ESG, both in terms of scope and methodologies for quality assurance.

At the same time the project gathered a robust evidence base of the diverse use and perceptions of the ESG to inform their revision. Based on the main conclusions drawn from the collected data and extensive consultations with stakeholders, this paper reflects on some key considerations that the authors of the ESG should keep in mind during the revision process in order support its continued acceptance and success and to help avoid unintended consequences that could arise from new or updated elements.

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<sup>1</sup> [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.eqar.eu/register/agencies/>

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the changes between the ESG 2005 and 2015, see the EQUIP project 'Comparative analysis of the ESG 2015 and ESG 2005': <https://www.enqa.eu/publications/comparative-analysis-of-the-esg-2015-and-esg-2005/>

<sup>4</sup> The primary authors of the ESG are ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE (the E4 Group), in cooperation with Business Europe, EI and EQAR.

<sup>5</sup> <https://ehea.info/Immagini/Tirana-Communique1.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Further information about the project and detailed data and conclusions presented in other papers can be found here: <https://www.enqa.eu/projects/quality-assurance-fit-for-the-future-qa-fit/>

## Recognise the existing purposes of the ESG as relevant and valid

The QA-FIT project found that there is wide agreement among all stakeholders that the purposes and principles of the ESG are valid, requiring minor revisions rather than fundamental changes. This confirms the importance of having a common framework for quality assurance, serving as a shared language for higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies within the EHEA and providing significant support for the development of quality culture. Additionally, the ESG enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education, foster trust and provide information on quality assurance, which in turn facilitates the mobility of students and the recognition of qualifications and study periods.

Each standard of the ESG contributes to the overall goal of ensuring quality education across the EHEA. In the revision process, it will be essential to carefully reflect on the specific objectives of each standard and how they individually and collectively support the overall aim of the ESG. To ensure continued relevance of the ESG, it is likely that Part 1 (for internal quality assurance) will need to address more explicitly issues such as digitalisation (including online and blended provision), diversity of learners and academic staff, and flexible learning pathways, while Part 2 (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 primary focus of the ESG is to ensure the quality of learning and teaching within higher education institutions, and stakeholders agree that this should remain a central priority. Overloading the ESG with additional topics could dilute their effectiveness and decrease their acceptance among stakeholders. While relevant links should be made, the ESG should not be appropriated as a general tool for monitoring all EHEA policy commitments. However, it should also be noted that evidence from the QA-FIT project and other sources clearly shows that most quality assurance systems, to varying degrees, already go beyond the baseline requirements of the ESG and in some cases do have the remit to cover transversal topics that are high on the EHEA policy agenda such as the social dimension and fundamental values of higher education.

The revision of the ESG should be considered in the broader context of evolving higher education policy, and national authorities are called upon to reflect on the most appropriate body and mechanism to address each topic.

## Maximise the added value of EHEA standards

The ESG serve as a foundational common denominator that underpins all higher education quality assurance systems across the EHEA. The implementation of this common framework is one of the key commitments of the Bologna Process as well as supporting and linking with the other two key commitments (the three-cycle degree system, and recognition in accordance with the Lisbon Recognition Convention). The ESG provide also a solid basis for developing trust, accountability and transparency within and between higher education systems across the EHEA.

To maximise the value of the ESG for all stakeholders, it is essential that the standards are clear, widely applicable and address the topics where there is a clear benefit and relevance for an agreed EHEA standard. As such, when revising the ESG it might be helpful to focus on aspects that strengthen quality assurance cooperation among higher education institutions, support student mobility and facilitate automatic recognition of qualifications, in addition to aspects that are fundamental to enhancing the quality of

learning and teaching.

During the QA-FIT consultations, all stakeholders agreed that not all quality assurance criteria need to be included in the ESG. The ESG are intentionally high-level and flexible, allowing national authorities, quality assurance agencies, and higher education institutions to determine specific approaches and criteria according to their contexts and priorities. While national and institutional additions or variations are possible - and even beneficial - care needs to be taken that these are still conducive to international cooperation and mobility. By focussing on keeping the ESG fit for purpose, this cooperation can thrive, minimising the complexities and potential barriers that could arise from more intricate procedures and criteria.

This aligns with the role of the ESG in creating a shared language for quality assurance in the EHEA, which supports not only formal cooperation across borders, but also facilitates peer learning and exchange of expertise, ultimately strengthening both internal and external quality assurance systems.

## Celebrate the diverse contexts and cultures in higher education

The ESG are designed to be flexible and broadly applicable, acknowledging and accommodating the diversity of higher education systems and cultures, various profiles of higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies, and different quality assurance methodologies. This inclusivity is essential for maintaining widespread acceptance and use of the ESG.

The diversity of higher education systems, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions are a great asset of the

EHEA. Higher education institutions tailor their missions and strategies to regional and national priorities, research capacities, and societal contexts. There may be significant differences in priorities, practices and expectations across the spectrum of different types of institutions, including comprehensive, research-intensive universities, universities of applied sciences, and vocational education and training institutions. Similarly, quality assurance agencies vary widely in their profiles, missions, and mandates. Many evaluate

all aspects of higher education provision within an institution, while others specialise in specific subject areas. Some cover only certain types of institutions, whereas others the entire education system. Additionally, agencies may operate at a national, regional, or international level.

The clarity and flexibility of the ESG are crucial for respecting the varying needs and functions of higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies. The guidelines provide the contextual information that allows the standards to be translated into the wide variety of contexts. The use of the ESG over the past 20 years has demonstrated that this

approach for the most part accommodates the variety of contexts and has not resulted in a homogenisation of higher education systems. However, the authors will need to weigh the benefits and risks of introducing more detailed standards and additional guidelines as well as draw on the extensive evidence of how the ESG are applied in different settings in order to address those areas where translating the standards into practice has proven challenging due to contextual interpretations or developments not foreseen in the 2015 version. This will facilitate the consistency of application, while continuing to celebrate and promote diversity.

## Situate the quality assurance of learning and teaching in its broader context

The missions of higher education institutions are increasingly interconnected. Institutional quality assurance policies may cover all higher education missions, and at system level these may be externally reviewed holistically by the quality assurance agency, or separately by different bodies and tools. Although the ESG focus on quality assurance of learning and teaching, the revision may explore strengthening the links and synergies between institutions' various missions, and specifically reference how research and service to society activities impact and relate to the education mission of institutions (and vice versa). This approach would also recognise the importance of research-based teaching as well as the increasingly blurred boundaries

between degree education provision and lifelong learning.

Furthermore, the ESG are used within a broader ecosystem of policies and tools for higher education in different policy spheres. It will be important that the authors consider how the ESG can reference and complement other tools and frameworks, including those developed since 2015<sup>7</sup>, to ensure coherence and avoid duplication or contradiction. It should also be noted that in parallel to the revision of the ESG, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes will also be updated, as it is explicitly based on the ESG.

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the tools of particular relevance in the context of the Bologna Process include: 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. It may also be relevant for the authors of the ESG to consider others, such as those relating to doctoral education and research.

## Balance current issues with long term relevance

There have been numerous calls to include various current topics in the ESG. However, when revising the ESG, it is important to remain mindful of the potentially transient nature of some political issues and trends.

'Hot topics' in higher education may emerge and fade relatively quickly, whereas the ESG need to be applicable over a longer term. The priority should be on enduring principles that ensure quality and consistency over time. However, discussions around how quality assurance addresses current topics (such as micro-credentials, artificial intelligence, and new forms of international cooperation to name just a few) provide an opportunity to examine some of the existing challenges related to lack of flexibility in higher education systems and structures. Overly rigid approaches may be an obstacle for effective implementation of quality assurance in a rapidly changing

higher education environment. In this context, appropriate use of the ESG and the derived system-level frameworks is as important as appropriate content of the ESG.

The QA-FIT evidence indicates that the revision of the ESG should be evolutionary rather than revolutionary. Change should not be pursued as a goal in itself; instead, the focus should be on identifying changes that are necessary for promoting quality assurance systems that are responsive to the needs of students and higher education institutions. As such, the ESG also have the potential to facilitate the mainstreaming of emerging good practice, as was the case with the introduction of student-centred learning into the ESG 2015. This approach also recognises and supports those systems that are still on the road towards meeting the expectations of the ESG by ensuring that future developments build on the existing foundations.

This publication has been developed under the Erasmus+ co-funded “Quality Assurance Fit for the Future”(QA-FIT) project, coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), in partnership with the European University Association (EUA), the European Students’ Union (ESU), and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE). 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).

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/>

