The future of the ESG

Reflections based on findings from the QA-FIT project

May 2024

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Acknowledgements

1. Introduction

High-quality higher education provision has been one of the key aims of the Bologna Process since its start in 1999, and in 2020, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) confirmed their commitment to quality assurance (QA) and the implementation of the European quality assurance framework, including the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)](). Today, cooperation in quality assurance within the EHEA has significantly increased, becoming one of the most successful outcomes of the Bologna Process, and the ESG are widely recognised as a valuable and indispensable common framework for developing shared criteria and methodologies.

As the ESG have proven themselves as an effective and widely implemented tool, there have been calls to widen their scope following recent developments and trends impacting higher education or emerging within the sector (e.g. micro-credentials, sustainability, fundamental values, digitalisation, internationalisation etc.), that pose new challenges for and expectations from quality assurance. It is in this context that the [QA-FIT project]() (Quality Assurance Fit for the Future[1]) was launched in June 2022. The goal of the project was to map the state of play of quality assurance in the EHEA, and explore how the ESG have been used by actors at different levels (European, national, regional, institutional) and how they are responding to the emerging needs and trends. The project aims also to critically evaluate the fitness for purpose of the ESG and the possible need to extend their scope, as well as to gather perspectives on the future of quality assurance in the EHEA.

The first phase of the project looked at how the ESG have been adapted to different (national and institutional) contexts, and explored how quality assurance activities are addressing recent and emerging issues, including those beyond the current scope of the ESG. A survey to gather quantitative and qualitative data was designed for each stakeholder group (institutions, QA agencies, students, and national authorities). This paper draws on the data collected with the objective of identifying and analysing commonalities and divergences in the perception of the ESG by different stakeholder groups, and the key messages that can inform the future revision of the ESG.

The response rates varied across the different stakeholder groups[2]. It was a fairly easy task to achieve a wide coverage of the European landscape from the perspective of quality assurance agencies, ministries, and national student unions, due to their national presence and a direct link with the project partners.

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[1] 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 organisations (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] The surveys were answered by 36 Ministries, 76 quality assurance agencies, 31 National Unions of Students, 260 Higher education institutions.

However, the response rate from higher education institutions was significantly lower. A total of 260 valid responses were received from 41 countries of the EHEA (out of a total of 49). It is understandable that the responses from institutions remained at a lower level, as it is not an expectation that institutional actors know the ESG in detail, nor that they directly apply them in their daily work.

While the QA-FIT surveys and analyses provide an information basis from which to consider the direction, extent and content of the revision of the ESG, it is important to note that this paper is based on the surveys only, and does not constitute a proposal for the way forward towards the revision of the ESG.

2. State of Play

In this chapter, we discuss the stakeholder groups' (national student unions, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and ministries) opinions on the relevance of the European quality assurance framework as well as perceptions on the need for and extent of the revision of the ESG.

A clear message is that stakeholders agree on the importance of having a European framework for quality assurance. The survey data show an especially strong agreement for the promotion of common standards in higher education, stimulating enhancement of learning and teaching quality, facilitating degree recognition, and supporting international cooperation in general. The stakeholders also agree that the current ESG promote the development of learning and teaching, trust in qualifications, student mobility, and the development of a quality culture. There is an overwhelming agreement that the ESG are still needed and their importance and relevance for European higher education is not put into question. Quite the contrary, in multiple events, webinars and informal discussions within the QA-FIT project and other related initiatives, the extension of the scope of the ESG has been put forward numerous times. The assumption is that due to the success and relevance of the ESG in implementation of some higher education reforms (such as the shift to student-centred learning since 2015), as well as the development of quality assurance practices at national level, there is not only an agreement on the continued relevance of the ESG, but also discussions on the possible extension of their scope.

Scope of the ESG

The stakeholder groups expressed different needs and priorities in terms of the extension of the scope.

The majority of student respondents thought that the scope of the current ESG is too limited, and should be significantly widened, to cover areas such as fundamental values and the social dimension of higher education. Also the majority of QA agencies thought that the current focus of the ESG should be expanded (although a significant minority disagreed), while less than half of HEIs agreed. One in four ministry respondents found the scope too limited, while 70% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement.

Overall, while recognising the need for some revision, higher education institutions are overall the least keen on changes to the three parts of the ESG

(50% or less in favour), with QA agencies generally in favour (about 75%), and with students most keen on revision (around 90% in favour). This said, there is wide agreement among all stakeholders that the "purpose and principles" of the ESG need only minor or no revision at all. This seems to indicate that while some adjustments need to be made, the fundamentals of the document are still relevant and useful.

It should also be noted that not all respondents have a detailed knowledge of the ESG: quite understandably, thus, almost 30% of the higher education institution respondents and about 20% of student and ministry respondents replied "I don't know" when asked about the revision of the different parts of the ESG, against only 5% or less of QA agencies.

When asked what they would want to be covered in more detail by the ESG, or in what direction to expand the scope of the ESG, the QA agencies, ministries and students were slightly more keen than higher education institutions on covering new activities and aspects of higher education. This difference was the most pronounced when considering the inclusion of "institutional management" and "institutional autonomy" in quality assurance standards.

There is also a high degree of ambiguity to the results. For QA agencies, around 80% of respondents indicated that academic freedom and integrity, lifelong learning, digitalisation of learning and teaching, research, service to society/third mission should be covered in more detail to a large or some extent by the ESG. However, a similar percentage of responding agencies also indicated that these topics are already covered by their external QA approach, to some extent or to a large extent, suggesting that they would like to see European level standards for matters that are already being addressed by the agency.

In comparison with other stakeholders, students are more hesitant about an increased focus on "cooperation with labour market and its relevance for higher education" in the ESG: 53% agree to a large or to some extent with covering it in more detail, while 34% disagree. In comparison, 70% of institutional representatives believe this should be covered in more detail to a large or to some extent. This may be due to some students considering that there is sufficient focus on employability, especially in comparison to the other purposes of higher education, and a fear that increasing attention on this aspect would come at the detriment of other policy areas. The link with the various purposes of higher education is also evident, as the other stakeholders put a much stronger emphasis on employability as the primary purpose of higher education in comparison with students, which prioritise personal development.

From the governmental perspective, ministry representatives also brought into focus a wish to link the ESG more closely to the internationalisation of higher education institutions as well as internationalisation in the work of quality assurance agencies (going beyond ESG Part 1), the integration of AI tools in the governance and work of higher education institutions as well as the importance of addressing related issues concerning data privacy and data protection.

Apart from the points mentioned above, all other aspects proposed in the survey (e.g. digitalisation, research, the third mission, academic freedom, etc.) see a majority of stakeholders in favour of their inclusion in the ESG. However, it is important to note that there is a significant minority within each stakeholder group (between 15% and 35%) that disagree with the extension of the scope to specifically cover the listed additional elements. There could be a number of reasons for this, including that those topics are already covered by other quality and monitoring tools and processes at national or European level, that they are already implicitly covered by the ESG, or that they are included in national standards without the need to include them also in the ESG.

It is worth reflecting on the implications of integrating additional topics into the standards or guidelines of the ESG. On the one hand this may limit the flexibility of the ESG and come at the cost of real or perceived deterrent of innovation or experimentation. On the other hand, common standards on important issues are seen as necessary to increase transparency and trust. In addition, while the guidelines to the standards may provide examples and ideas of good practice, and thereby support enhancement (and potentially innovation), regardless of how they are phrased, any additional details to the standards and/or the guidelines may lead to implicitly defining what is considered to be quality higher education. In the revision of the ESG this should be thoroughly discussed and carefully considered.

Structure of the ESG

The surveys also explored stakeholders' opinions on the structure of the ESG, and specifically the separation between standards and guidelines. There is general agreement that guidelines are a useful element of the ESG, with a majority of stakeholders disagreeing that the ESG should focus on standards only, and not include guidelines at all. Furthermore, over 50% of respondents in each stakeholder group agreed or somewhat agreed that the ESG should provide more guidance, although there is a significant majority that disagreed or did not know. Suggestions that the ESG could be reduced to fewer core standards, or that compliance with the guidelines should be required in the same way as compliance with the standards were met with mixed reactions. Students were most in favour of more compliance requirements, perhaps due to their perception of the ESG as a tool for regulation and guarantee of educational quality, whereas higher education institutions were generally against this proposal, perhaps as they do not work directly with the ESG but rather with their national criteria. The main view from the ministry side was that the ESG would need mostly only minor revisions, at least in its guidelines (a view shared by over 50% of respondents).

3. New areas to explore

Two issues can currently be seen as 'hot topics' in the European higher education policy discussions due to their societal and political relevance and attention given through the working structures of the Bologna Process: social dimension of higher education, and fundamental values of higher education. In the course of debates about how to address and uphold these issues in the EHEA, frequent reference has been made to the role of quality assurance in promoting and

monitoring both. The sections below address each of these topics, through the lens of quality assurance stakeholders.
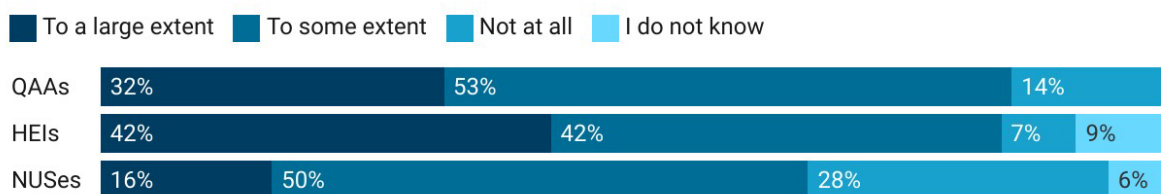
ESG and the social dimension

The recent adoption of the [Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the European Higher Education Area](#) ('PAGs'), as an annex to the Rome Communiqué in 2020, sparked renewed discussions on to the best ways in which social dimension policies could be fostered, monitored and enhanced at institutional and national levels, as well as the role played by European policy tools in this endeavour.

As such, in the policy work within the Bologna Process – both in the adopted PAGs and in the development indicators for their implementation by the Working Group on Social Dimension, as well as in debates in the policy arena among stakeholders, the role that quality assurance mechanisms could play to support the social dimension of higher education has been emphasised.

As evidenced in the QA-FIT surveys for stakeholders and presented in the graphic below (see Figure 1), social dimension is already part of quality assurance procedures to a large or to some extent in the majority of the member states of the Bologna Process. The results are fairly consistent with previous findings from the Eurydice publication ['Towards equity and inclusion in the Higher Education in Europe'](#), where it was found that 20 higher education systems have given a mandate to quality assurance agencies to address social dimension, while in 17 systems the quality assurance agency does not have such mandate (and social dimension is either not monitored or the responsibility of monitoring is given to another public body). The higher percentage of systems covering social dimension in the QA-FIT surveys can be attributed to the cases where external quality assurance covers matters pertaining to social dimension without an explicit mandate from the regulatory framework to do so.

To what extent is social dimension covered in external QA in your country?

■ To a large extent   ■ To some extent   ■ Not at all   ■ I do not know

QAAs	32%	53%	14%
HEIs	42%	42%	7% 9%
NUSes	16%	50%	28%	6%

Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 1. Coverage of social dimension in external QA

At the same time, we can observe that quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions consider that social dimension is already covered to a larger extent than students. Based on the importance put by students on the topic, this difference can be down to expectations regarding the depth or intensity of coverage. As students generally expect a stronger emphasis on social dimension, they tend to perceive that current frameworks cover social dimension only to some degree.

The surveys also delved into what concrete aspects related to social dimension are covered in external or internal quality assurance procedures. The average results across the four stakeholder groups show that areas such as 'increasing completion rates', 'access for students with disabilities', 'psychological counselling and wellbeing' and 'antidiscrimination policies' are part of most quality assurance systems, with situations of 'not at all' coverage ranging around 15% to 20%. Other policies, such as 'institutional strategy on social dimension', 'monitoring concrete targets on social dimension' and 'data collection of social dimension' are apparently less prevalent, with around 25% to 35% of stakeholders answering they are not present at all. The aspect with the lowest inclusion in quality assurance policies is related to training on equity and inclusion for both students and staff.

From this data we can observe that there is a high degree of integration of social dimension topics in quality assurance procedures, with the majority of indicators present in around two thirds of systems. Furthermore, the difference between stakeholders is a matter of perception between coverage 'to a large extent' or 'to some extent', which could pertain to the policy focus mentioned above as well as to subjective interpretations of the answer options. Moreover, there is a very strong correlation between the indicators covered by internal quality assurance and external quality assurance in relation to social dimension.

The surveys do not tell us however how social dimension is included in practice (for example, through specific indicators or transversally within other broader policies, such as learning and teaching and student-centred learning) or the 'logic' of intervention, and therefore this is a question still left open. The logic of intervention could either be linked to appropriateness (quality assurance is fit to support social dimension), normativity (inclusive higher education is part of the understanding/expectation related to quality higher education) or consequences (it is easier to monitor social dimension through quality assurance than through other means).

While observing that most systems have, to a varying degree, references to social dimension in their quality assurance provisions or practices, the next step of the analysis was to identify the views of stakeholders on a stronger inclusion of social dimension policies in the ESG.
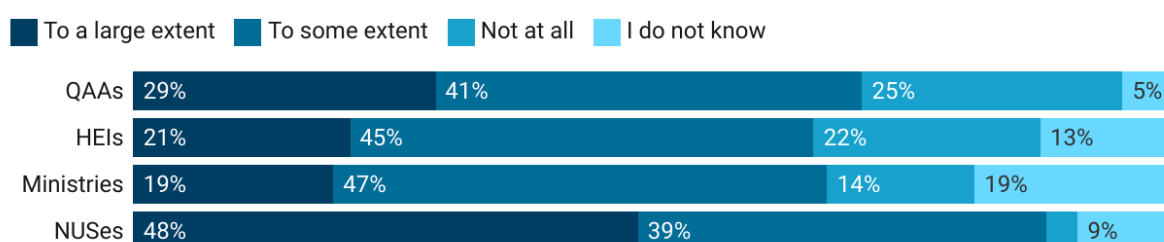
The current edition of the ESG already includes references to social dimension. The guidelines to standard 1.1 mention that policies for quality assurance should guard against intolerance of any kind or discrimination, the guidelines to standard 1.3 refer to respecting the diversity of students and their needs under the concept of student-centred learning, and standard 1.6 and its guidelines cover learning resources and student support, including resources adapted to students with disabilities or mature students.

Stakeholders have an unanimous view that promoting common standards of quality assurance is one of the most important objectives of the ESG, with less than 1% of any stakeholder group disagreeing with this statement. To this end, the question of (the extent of) covering social dimension lies within the broader discussion of the role of the ESG. The data mentioned above show that social

dimension is already present in quality assurance procedures at national level in most cases. From this viewpoint, irrespective of whether the ESG are seen as a set of minimum criteria for quality assurance or as the general standard, we can observe that social dimension policies are present.

This is also evidenced by the opinion of stakeholders toward expanding the social dimension policies in a revision of the ESG, specifically linked to Part I (see Figure 2). The results show that at least two thirds of all stakeholders support the proposition to a large or to some extent, while the highest degree of opposition comes from QA agencies

Expanding coverage of Social Dimension in ESG Part I

■ To a large extent   ■ To some extent   ■ Not at all   ■ I do not know

	To a large extent	To some extent	Not at all	I do not know
QAAs	29%	41%	25%	5%
HEIs	21%	45%	22%	13%
Ministries	19%	47%	14%	19%
NUSes	48%	39%	9%	

Source: QA FIT · Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2. Views on expanding coverage of social dimension in Part I of the ESG

Despite this, it is important to highlight that the answer opens a wider discussion into what parts of such a broad policy area could and should be captured within the standards and guidelines of the ESG. While the indicators already in use at national level, presented above, can offer guidance on this, it is important to prioritise those elements under the umbrella of social dimension that bring the most added value to the process and can be monitored through quality assurance.

ESG and the fundamental values

The fundamental values of higher education have been a hot topic in recent years, particularly on a policy level, with specific working groups of the Bologna Follow-up Group seeking to define those values[3] and explore ways to monitor the extent to which higher education systems respect them. As part of the discussion around monitoring the values, the role of quality assurance has frequently been mentioned. A careful reading of the current ESG shows that many aspects of the fundamental values are already mentioned, albeit in the guidelines and not in the standards. The QA-FIT surveys explored further the extent to which this was operationalised by agencies and institutions, and whether the values should be more directly addressed through the ESG and external QA in particular. The student respondents were most strongly in favour of having fundamental values explicitly addressed by external quality assurance (85% said yes). Other stakeholder groups were overall in favour but significantly less emphatically (63%

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[3] In the context of the Bologna Process, the fundamental values of higher education are specified as: public responsibility for higher education, public responsibility of higher education, participation of students and staff in higher education governance, academic integrity, academic freedom and institutional autonomy.

of QA agencies, 61% of ministries and 55% of HEIs answered yes). There was also a significant amount of uncertainty, with between 12% and 20% of respondents answering 'I don't know' (see Figure 3).

Do you think quality assurance should directly evaluate if fundamental values are respected?

■ Yes ■ No ■ I do not know

Quality assurance agencies	63%	21%	16%
Higher education institutions	54%	31%	15%
Ministries	62%	19%	19%
National unions of students	85%		12%

Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 3. Support for addressing fundamental values in the ESG

Quality assurance agencies indicated that several aspects of the fundamental values are already covered to a large extent through their own external QA activities, most notably student participation in governance (67%), staff participation in governance (64%) and institutional autonomy (57%). The issue that is reported by QA agencies as being least addressed is that of democratic and free elections at all levels within higher education. However, it is interesting to note that in some cases, ministries and students did not have the same perceptions as to the coverage of fundamental values by external QA, with students in particular reporting them to be addressed to a lesser extent than perceived by QA agencies. This is particularly evident in the topic of student participation in higher education governance. Sixty seven percent (67%) of agencies report that they cover it to a large extent, while only 45% of national student unions believe that to be the case. These differences may be in part due to differing levels of knowledge about the external QA standards and criteria as well as differing interpretations of the answer options (address 'to a large extent', 'to some extent' and 'not at all').

In terms of internal quality assurance, over 80% of higher education institutions responded that the aspects named in the survey were covered to a large extent or to some extent by their internal QA processes. The aspects that were addressed the least were institutional autonomy and democratic and free elections at all levels within higher education institutions, with 11% and 12% of institutions reporting that these were not addressed at all, which still points to a rather substantial coverage among the responding institutions.

As well as being addressed through internal quality assurance, additional comments provided by QA agencies noted that many issues linked to fundamental values were already addressed in some other way through the national legal framework and therefore it was not considered to be within the scope of the QA agencies to evaluate them. Furthermore, other observations by QA agencies highlight the complication of evaluating fundamental values specifically through external quality assurance, including: the difficulty of operationalising values into criteria for evaluation, the need to consider what is

within the control of an higher education institution (rather than the broader system or society), the different types of agencies and theirs remits, and differentiation between evaluating fundamental values and otherwise upholding or safeguarding them.

Institutions consider fundamental values as largely part of institutional (quality) culture, and that they are addressed through institutional mission statements as well as national level regulations. The differences between stakeholder answers may also be due to their different positions in the QA framework: students' reflections may have been guided more by the policy-level considerations, while it is likely that QA agencies brought more practical considerations into their views. In addition, while methodological questions might be more complicated for some of the values, they may be more easily established for others, such as for example staff and student participation. These differences will also need to be taken into account when considering their potential inclusion into the ESG and system level QA criteria and processes.

4. Open questions and areas for further discussion

The surveys give us some basic information regarding the position of the different stakeholders groups and users of the ESG regarding the relevance of the European quality assurance framework and the future revision needs. However, the information should be complemented through other means, as not all respondents have the same level of experience in quality assurance and/or know the ESG in detail. The survey data were inconclusive as to which elements should be definitely covered in the revised ESG, as many topics are considered important. More information and discussions within and between stakeholder groups are needed to ensure that the future quality assurance framework for the EHEA is fit for purpose, and fit for the future. The focus group meetings and additional consultation processes conducted within the QA-FIT project will provide important further input on the key topics identified through the survey.

Some of these key topics and further discussion questions are outlined below under three headings.

1) Purpose of the ESG

Are the ESG principally a tool for international cooperation by providing a common European framework? To what extent should they set basic requirements for national quality assurance systems? Should they be a tool to develop and enhance systems, through good practice and innovation, or focus on achievement of minimum standards of quality? And if so, could all these expectations be addressed by the ESG?

Across all stakeholder groups, a majority attach great importance to the purpose of a European framework in promoting common standards (around 80% find this very important). At the same time, only around 40-50% consider it very important that it encourages innovation and experimentation. The ESG may be thus considered currently more a compliance and accountability tool, while also providing elements of good practice in guidelines.

A related reflection regards the interplay between the ESG and existing national and regional frameworks and standards for quality assurance, as well as their connection to other instruments for monitoring and quality that exist at European or other levels. This topic is often addressed in discussions about innovation: while the ESG provides a common framework and sets certain parameters, they are not per se constraining innovation in quality assurance. It will also be important to consider whether and to what extent the different interpretations of the ESG (their purpose, principles and individual standards) may be creating perceived limitations. Duplication should be avoided, and awareness of the different roles of the existing tools would need to be improved.

2) Scope of the ESG

What would be the main reasons to widen the scope of the ESG, and which areas would be most important to include explicitly and/or through specific standards? What relation do the ESG have with our conception of quality in higher education and is there a risk that the ESG drift from being standards for quality assurance towards being standards for quality itself? What consequences can we foresee in widening the scope, in terms of wide acceptance, maintaining centrality of learning and teaching, and of changing (or not) the nature of QA as we know it in terms of methods and approaches? What consequences can we foresee in not widening the scope, in terms of continued relevance and support for international cooperation.

In terms of considering the level of detail of the ESG, and inclusion of new elements, it is important to remember that the document should remain relevant for a sufficiently long period of time. The ESG is a document that requires significant consultation and political endorsement to change, so a frequent revision is not feasible, nor desirable.

3) Structure of the ESG

Is the current structure (in three parts) useful and helpful? How detailed should the standards be and what will be the role of the guidelines? Are the guidelines the best approach to explain and interpret the standards? Should there be more guidelines and/or other forms of guidance within the ESG and/or as a separate document? What benefits and risks are there in having additional guidelines and accompanying documents for different stakeholders, for example for different types of higher education institutions or quality assurance agencies, or different formats of education such as micro-credentials?

In this context it will be important to consider the impact and consequences of major or minor changes to the ESG. Would this lead to the need to change also other related tools (such as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes)? What about regional frameworks in other parts of the world, which may be well aligned with the current ESG? What will be the impact of the changes for countries/agencies that are still on the road to compliance with the current version of the ESG, considering potential

difficulty in making changes to legal frameworks required to implement a new version, and what would be the consequences for EQAR and ENQA, which use the ESG as criteria for inclusion and membership respectively? These are not reasons not to make changes, but they need to be carefully kept in mind and the implications thoroughly examined.