

Context, scope, purposes and principles of the ESG

Setting the context

Higher education, as well as research and innovation, plays a crucial role in supporting social cohesion, economic growth and global competitiveness. Given the desire for European societies to become increasingly knowledge-based, higher education becomes an essential component of socio-economic and cultural development.

At the same time, the demand for better skills and competences is growing and higher education institutions are confronted with more diversity in the student population. The context within which they work is constantly changing. Responding to diversity and change requires a fundamental shift in the provision of higher education; it requires a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning, embracing flexible learning paths and recognising competences gained outside formal curricula.

Quality assurance processes, in particular external ones, allow European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and better recognition of outcomes, and therefore help building mutual trust.

A key goal of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance across borders and among all stakeholders. They have played an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the EHEA, cross-border cooperation and provision of quality assurance, enhancing the transparency of quality assurance processes and outcomes. In this context, the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) fosters coherence of quality assurance systems across borders to build confidence in European higher education.

Scope and Concepts

The primary focus of the ESG is on quality assurance processes related to teaching and learning in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research. The ESG apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode or place of delivery.

Higher education aims to fulfil multiple purposes; including preparing students for active citizenship and for their future careers, creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation¹. Stakeholders however can view quality in higher education differently. Quality assurance needs to take into account such different perspectives. *Quality*, whilst not easy to define, is mainly a result of the interaction between teachers and students, enabled by institutional planning processes. Quality assurance activities should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose.

¹ Recommendation Rec (2007)6 by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on the public responsibility for higher education and research, http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/News/pub_res_EN.pdf

At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of *accountability* and *enhancement*. Taken together, these create trust in the higher education institution's performance. The degree of *autonomy* and *accountability* (of which quality assurance is part) will depend as much on the national context within which the higher education system sits, as on the individual institution.

Quality assurance and *quality enhancement* are inter-related and describe a cycle that allows a higher education institution to assure itself of the quality of its activities and to take opportunities for continuous improvement. Such activities support the development of a *quality culture* that is embraced by all: from the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management. This quality culture should be verifiable by external quality assurance agencies, national ministries, employers and society at large, through external quality assurance procedures.

The term 'quality assurance' is used in this document to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e. assurance and enhancement activities).

ESG: purposes and principles

The ESG have the following purposes:

- **They set a common framework** for quality assurance systems at European, national and institutional level;
- **They enable the improvement of quality** of higher education in the European higher education area;
- **They support mutual trust**, thus facilitating recognition within and across national borders;
- **They provide information on quality assurance** in the EHEA.

The ESG may be used in different ways within these purposes by countries, institutions and agencies. At the European level, they provide the criteria against which quality assurance agencies and their activities are being assessed.² This ensures that the quality assurance agencies in the EHEA adhere to the same set of principles, while the processes and procedures they apply are modelled to fit the purposes and requirements of their contexts.

The ESG are based on the following ten **principles** for quality assurance in the EHEA:

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- Quality assurance processes respond to the diversity of HE systems, institutions and programmes across the EHEA;
- Quality assurance processes take into account the expectations of all stakeholders and society at large;

² Agencies that apply for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) undergo an external review for which the ESG provide the criteria. Also the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) relies on compliance with the ESG when it comes to granting quality assurance agencies full membership status in the organisation.

- Quality assurance processes enable higher education institutions to continuously improve and demonstrate their accountability;
- Quality assurance supports a quality culture;
- Internal and external quality assurance processes are fit-for-purpose;
- Quality assurance processes aim at creating appropriate learning opportunities and environments;
- External quality assurance processes are carried out by independent quality assurance agencies;
- Quality assurance processes involve stakeholders;
- Quality assurance processes and their outcomes are transparent and clear.