

HERE Seminar: **Towards the 2024 Tirana Ministerial Conference: Implications and points of interest for higher education systems in Partner Countries neighbouring the EU**

7-8 November 2023

Materials and background information on: Quality Assurance and the EHEA

Short history

- A main focal point of the BP since its inception (1999) has been quality assurance in higher education, especially in developing comparable criteria and methodologies
- This was intended to not only bolster the quality of higher education delivery, but facilitate recognition of studies across borders and mutual confidence in degrees and studies
- The first **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area** (ESG) were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in 2005. They address three levels: Internal QA in HEI (Part 1), External QA, conducted by agencies or regulators (Part 2) and external assessment of the agencies and regulators (Part 3).
- The ESG underwent a revision 10 years later and a new version was endorsed in 2015
- The ESG 2015 are based on four principles: 1) that the primary responsibility lies with higher education institutions for the quality and quality assurance of their provision; 2) that quality assurance needs to respond to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes, and students; 3) that quality assurance needs to support the creation of a quality culture; and that quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, other stakeholders, and the society.
- The ESG do not prescribe in detail what quality is, nor do they prescribe how quality assurance processes should be implemented. Rather, they maintain their role in providing guidance and indicating areas that are vital for quality provision of higher education.
- The EQUIP¹ project has published a **Comparative analysis of the ESG 2015 and ESG 2005** which summarises the key differences, such as the greater emphasis in diversity of QA systems in Europe, the importance of embedding QA in strategic management, and that all programmes should be referenced to a national qualifications framework.
- The ESG were widely promoted by stakeholder organisation, like EUA, ENQA, EURASHE and ESU and also by the European Commission, which has funded many cooperation projects within the EHEA and beyond to promote their application. They have helped to generate a culture of quality in HEI as well as a greater trust between HEI and national agencies that may externally assess and in some instances accredit them and their programmes.
- EQAR² – The European Quality Assurance Register – was established in 2007, as an official listing of QA agencies that comply with the ESG (and have been subject to an external

¹ [chrome-extension://efaidnbnmnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/EQUIP_comparative-analysis-ESG-2015-ESG-2005.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/EQUIP_comparative-analysis-ESG-2015-ESG-2005.pdf)

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

review). It now also houses DEQAR, a database of programmes and HEI that have been subject to review by registered agencies.

Did you know?

- As a unique feature of Bologna, key stakeholders, called the ‘E4’ are all members of the process (EUA, EURASHE, ESU and ENQA) and proposed the first and second version of the ESG to ministers to be approved. This shows the critical bottom-up/ top-down nature of Bologna, and its inherent stakeholder inclusiveness
- 57 agencies are registered in EQAR, but this does not cover all countries in the EHEA. Georgia and Kazakhstan are two HERE countries that have registered agencies.
- In the EHEA, QA agencies should in theory recognise the QA decisions of other registered agencies. In addition, HEI in some countries are legally allowed to be assessed by an agency that is in the EQAR, which is not their national agency. This happens seldom.
- Ministers have also adopted a European Approach to Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes³.

Global Impacts

- The ESG and the Quality Assurance alignment in the Bologna Process have inspired other world regions, which have also been the target of EU cooperation for development and numerous capacity building projects under the former Tempus Programme, Alfa Programme and what is now Erasmus+.
- Examples include the ASEAN Quality Assurance Framework and the African Standards and Guidelines for QA (ASG-QA).
- Each has its own distinct political integration frameworks and dynamics, but many similarities are shared with QA in the EHEA, in particular the three part approach to the ESG, ASG-QA, etc
- Two points of discussion in the African context, for example, are whether separate guidelines for open and online learning are needed in a post-covid context and also whether specific standards and procedures for the assessment of doctoral studies and research would be an advantage.

What is new?

- **QA as concerns the Rome Communiqué:**

We acknowledge the progress made in the development of quality assurance systems aligned with the ESG, and we commit to removing the remaining obstacles, including those related to the cross-border operation of EQARregistered agencies and the application of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes. We commit to ensuring that our external quality assurance arrangements cover transnational higher education in the EHEA with equal standards as for domestic provision. In view of the need for increased flexibility and openness of learning paths, smaller units of learning and greater synergies among higher education institutions, we encourage an enhancement-oriented use of the ESG to support innovation in higher education and its quality assurance.

- **QA and Micro-credentials**

³ <https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/>



- This emergent topic in Europe⁴ initially was a source of worry, especially as regarding to quality assurance. It was addressed by the Bologna Process in Rome Communiqué (2020) as a possible tool for flexible learning pathways
- A survey conducted by ENQA in 2021 for the MICROBOL project found that all QA agencies that answered felt the ESG Part 1 (IQA) and Part 2 (EQA) were a solid basis for quality assurance of micro-credentials:
- Most agencies in Europe have decided not to evaluate micro-credentials separately, primarily because this would require a lot of human and other resources, but also because HEIs have been through several rounds of institutional and programme level evaluations.
- The MICROBOL project recommended that programme level evaluation should not be encouraged for each micro-credential, as it is too elaborate for such small volumes of learning (MICROBOL, 2021a, p. 4).
- Studies have been done to scan approaches to QA in Micro-credentials across the EHEA: <https://www.enqa.eu/publications/approaches-to-quality-assurance-of-micro-credentials/>
- **European University Alliances⁵**
 - A Flagship of the European strategy for universities and the European Education Area, these strategic alliances have received considerable seed-funding from the EU
 - They can be seen as a litmus test for QA in the EHEA, as the alliances require a deeper integration of programmes and, which requires common governance and QA approaches
 - They are seen as a test ground for also exploring a joint European degree
- **Revision of ESG**
 - The ESG are up for revision again. However, in celebration of almost 20 years of this important tool, the changes will be light, showing how robust it has been.

⁴ Certification of learning outcomes of short-term learning experiences, for example a short course or training. They offer a flexible, targeted way to help people develop the knowledge, skills and competences they need for their personal and professional development.

⁵ <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative/about?>