

Discussion on the process of revising the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in EHEA

BFUG meeting XCV, Warsaw (Poland), 24-25 February 2025

Plenary Session (1,5h)

Background Paper

1. Introduction and context

The Tirana Ministerial Communiqué acknowledges that the application of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) “promotes trust and transparency within and between higher education systems and facilitates accountability and enhancement”. Considering that the last version of the document was approved through the Yerevan Communiqué in 2015¹, and in order “to keep them in line with ongoing developments, challenges and expectations” the ministers gave mandate to the authors² of the ESG to revise the document ahead of the next Ministerial conference. The authors have been tasked with presenting a revision proposal by 2026, with the final version of the ESG to be adopted at the 2027 Ministerial conference. If and where necessary, the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes³ will also be updated.

At the XCIII Bologna Follow-Up Group meeting, hosted by Hungary in Budapest between 26-27 September 2024, a [briefing note](#)⁴ on process and structures for the ESG revision was presented.

Between 2022 and 2024, an extensive stakeholder consultation – involving ministries, students, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies - was carried out within the QA- FIT project, financed by the ERASMUS+ Programme (call ERASMUS-EDU-2021-EHEA-IBA). Key outcomes of the project, including the outcomes of stakeholder consultations, are available [here](#).

The ESG revision Steering Committee has so far met twice (30 September and 4 December 2024), while the Drafting Committee also held two meetings. An updated roadmap for the continuation of the process is included in Annex to this paper.

2. Discussions and outcomes so far

In this initial stage of the work on the ESG revision, the Steering Committee (SC) and the Drafting Group (DG) focused on the introductory part of the ESG: *Context, scope, purposes and*

¹https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/72/7/European_Standards_and_Guidelines_for_Quality_Assurance_in_the_EHEA_2015_MC_613727.pdf

² The primary authors are ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE - the E4 Group, in cooperation with Business Europe, EI and EQAR.

³https://ehea.info/media.ehea.info/file/2015_Yerevan/73/1/European_Approach_QA_of_Joint_Programmes_613731.pdf

⁴https://ehea.info/Download/ESG%20revision%20process%20and%20structures_for%20BFUG%20Sept%202024.pdf

principles. The main topics debated, relevant to the scope of the plenary session, are outlined below.

(1) Definitions of key concepts

(...) stakeholders, who may prioritise different purposes, can view quality in higher education differently and quality assurance needs to take into account these different perspectives. Quality, whilst not easy to define, is mainly a result of the interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment. (ESG 2015, p. 7)

Questions were raised about whether the notion of “quality” itself needs to be defined. The SC agreed that although a brief description can be included, the document needs to remain as open as possible to different concepts of quality in higher education.

(2) Scope

The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. (ESG 2015, p.7)

In complementarity with the feedback gathered through the QA-FIT project, some potential expansion areas include research activities, service to society, social dimension, and fundamental values such as academic freedom. The SC agreed that the focus of the ESG should remain on learning and teaching, but that there might be a stronger reference to the links to the research and societal missions of institutions. It is worth underlining that countries can decide to include also other aspects of the higher education institutions activities in their quality assurance procedures.

(3) Applicability

The ESG apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery. Thus, the ESG are also applicable to all higher education including transnational and cross-border provision. In this document the term “programme” refers to higher education in its broadest sense, including that which is not part of a programme leading to a formal degree. (ESG 2015, p.7)

Another issue that was discussed was whether to define the scope of the ESG in terms of educational level it applies to, i.e. “higher education”. This question has both a structural dimension – in correlation with the qualification frameworks, and a content dimension – i.e. does higher education require certain academic or scientific rigour. It was concluded that the ESG should be almost fully neutral to the content of the programme, while its applicability should be connected to provision aiming for alignment with qualification framework levels corresponding to the levels of QF EHEA.

The current version of the ESG is already deemed applicable to all types of higher education provision. It was however discussed whether that link needs to be made more explicit with references to providers other than higher education institutions (“alternative providers”) and to units of learning smaller than full programmes (e.g. micro-credentials). The SC agreed that the focus of the ESG needs to be on the provision itself, regardless of what type of entity delivers it, and that all elements of the ESG need to be suitable for different types of educational offer, including micro-credentials. However, in ensuring this, the ESG should not be made too vague or generic to the point where it would lose its guidance function for the primary actors in delivering higher education in Europe, which are higher education institutions.

(4) Structure

The standards for quality assurance have been divided into three parts:
- Internal quality assurance

- External quality assurance
- Quality assurance agencies

(...)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 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)

After thorough discussion and consideration, the SC agreed that the current structure should be maintained, even though there are cases in which the compliance of the quality assurance agencies with the ESG standards can be achieved only in certain legal framework conditions set at the national level. It was also underlined that the definition of standards should be self-explanatory, and not rely on the implementation indications described in the guidelines.

3. Questions for discussion

The objective of this plenary session is to determine the opinion of the BFUG members on key elements included in the introductory part of the ESG, reflecting on the following questions:

1. Which concepts should be defined by the ESG as being related to the scope of the document? Are the definitions for quality and quality assurance sufficient?
2. Should learning and teaching and the relevant links to research still remain the main focus of the ESG?
3. To which types of institutions and programmes should the ESGs apply?
4. Does the current structure of the ESG adequately support the implementation of the Bologna Process key commitment in quality assurance?

Next steps and timeline

The ESG revision Steering and Drafting Committee will continue working on the revision in accordance with the roadmap presented below. The roadmap will be modified if needed, based on the decision of the Steering Committee.

Date	Meeting/actors	Action
2025		
As needed between each SC meeting	DG meetings	Prepare each new draft of the ESG (and EAJP)
24-25 February 2025	BFUG meeting in Poland	1,5 hour session for discussion on key issues for the ESG revision
12 March 2025	SC meeting	Discuss input from BFUG, the draft Introduction, and directions for revision of Part 1
9 June 2025	SC meeting	Discuss draft Part 1 and on directions revision for revision of Part 2 and 3 Launch work on the EAJP
11 September	SC meeting	Discuss Draft Part 2 and 3
9 December 2025	SC meetings	Finalise draft ESG to be launched in public consultation
Autumn 2025	BFUG meeting in Denmark	TBC session for comments on draft of ESG
Winter 2025		Launch Public consultation on draft of the ESG
2026		
Early 2026	Meetings of the SC and DG	Work on ESG and EAJP
Spring 2026	BFUG meeting in Cyprus	TBC session to discuss ESG and EAJP
Spring/summer 2026		TBC consultation on drafts of ESG and EAJP
Autumn 2026	BFUG meeting Ireland	BFUG approve the final versions of the ESG 2027 and the EAPJ 2027
2027		
Spring 2027	Bologna Process Ministerial Conference in Romania/Moldova	EHEA Ministers adopt the ESG 2027 and EAJP 2027

SC: Steering Committee

DG: Drafting Group

ESG: Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA

EAJP: European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes