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New Perspectives of Quality Assurance in European Higher Education

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Abstract

The concept of quality in higher education has become an increasingly important matter for institutions, as well as for public policy and debates on education. Quality assurance has been used for the overall improvement of institutions and their management. As the demand for higher education has increased, so has the demand for its accountability, reliability and value for money (Harvey and Askling 2003). Quality assurance agencies have the responsibility to institutions and the public to assure that the education and experience providers deliver is of a good standard, in order to maintain trust in the education system nationally and internationally. Most importantly, however, quality assurance review mechanisms provide valuable recommendations to how institutions can enhance their provisions. Undoubtedly, quality assurance has seen many improvements since the launch of the Bologna Process in 1999. Given the new developments of quality assurance at European level the purpose of the present paper is to realize a comparative analysis between the new and the old ESG with a look on the impact that the policy document has on Romanian Higher Education.

Keywords: quality assurance, european higher education, development.

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Nomenclature

A   EHEA – European Higher Education Area
B   BFUG - Bologna Follow-up Group
C   E4 – Policy making group composed of ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE
D   EUA – European University Association
E   ENQA – European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
F   ESU – European Students' Union
G   EURASHE - European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
H   ESG – European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
I   MAP – ESG - Mapping the Implementation and Application of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality
Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
J   EQAR – European Quality Assurance Register
K   EI – Education International
L   QA – Quality Assurance
M   HE – Higher Education
N   HEI – Higher Education Institution

European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education

Basing itself on Recommendation CM/Rec(2012)13 (Council of Europe 2012), the 24th Standing Conference of Ministers of Education (Helsinki, 26 and 27 April 2013), on the theme of "Governance and quality education"(Council of Europe 2013), agreed that quality of education was closely linked to four inter-related purposes, namely:
•   preparation for sustainable employment;
•   preparation for life as active citizens in democratic societies;
•   personal development; and
•   the development and maintenance, through teaching, learning and research, of a broad, advanced knowledge base. (Bergan 2005)

In the same recommendation, Council of Europe places a strong emphasis on a broad understanding of quality, which encompasses system quality as well as institutional quality and underscores the social dimension of quality: an education system cannot be of high quality unless it provides adequate opportunities for all students. However there are many challenges still remaining as many external quality assurance mechanisms still do not manage to take a holistic view of quality.

1.1. ESG – adoption and revision

In the Berlin communiqué of 19 September 2003 the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory states invited the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop 'an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance' and to 'explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies'. "Quality assurance" is a generic term in higher education which lends itself to many interpretations: It is not possible to use one definition to cover all circumstances. Similarly, the word "standards" is employed in a variety of ways across Europe, ranging from statements of narrowly defined regulatory requirements to more generalized descriptions of good practice. The words also have very different meanings in the local contexts of national higher education systems.

Moreover, the drafting process itself has made evident that, within the quality assurance community itself, there are some quite fundamental differences of view of the appropriate relationship that should be established between higher education institutions and their external evaluators. Some, mainly from agencies which accredit programmes or institutions, take the view that external quality assurance is essentially a matter of "consumer protection", requiring a clear distance to be established between the quality assurance agency and the higher education

institutions whose work they assess, while other agencies see the principal purpose of external quality assurance to be the provision of advice and guidance in pursuit of improvements in the standards and quality of programmes of study and associated qualifications. In the latter case a close relationship between the evaluators and the evaluated is a requirement. Yet others wish to adopt a position somewhere between the two, seeking to balance accountability and improvement.

As their starting point, the standards and guidelines endorse the spirit of the "July 2003 Graz Declaration" of EUA which states that "the purpose of a European dimension to quality assurance is to promote mutual trust and improve transparency while respecting the diversity of national contexts and subject areas". Consonant with the Graz declaration, the standards and guidelines contained in this report recognize the primacy of national systems of higher education, the importance of institutional and agency autonomy within those national systems, and the particular requirements of different academic subjects.

The standards and guidelines reflect the statement of Ministers in the Berlin communique that "consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework". In the standards and guidelines, therefore, an appropriate balance has been sought between the creation and development of internal quality cultures, and the role which external quality assurance procedures may play.

As a consequence, the most important policy setting document, European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ESG was adopted, in 2005 (Bergen), while the purposes of this document were "to encourage the development of higher education institutions which foster vibrant intellectual and educational achievement, to provide a source of assistance and guidance to higher education institutions and other relevant agencies in developing their own culture of quality assurance, to inform and raise the expectations of higher education institutions, students, employers and other stakeholders about the processes and outcomes of higher education, to contribute to a common frame of reference for the provision of higher education and the assurance of quality within the EHEA." (ENQA 2005).

In 2010 the organizations that form the E4 Group launched the "Mapping the Implementation and Application of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (MAP-ESG)" project in order to gather information on how the ESG have been implemented and applied in the 47 Bologna signatory countries in higher education institutions and in quality assurance institutions, and to launch a thorough discussion on the ESG in their entirety. When the Map - ESG project was finalized, the recommendation of the project consortium was to realize a careful revision of the ESG in order to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness. In regards to purpose and scope, it was generally concluded that it was essential to maintain the concept of the generic principle in order to ensure the continuing relevance of the ESG to all relevant stakeholders in the EHEA and to maintain their authority as the common reference point for QA in the EHEA. A tension regarding the purpose of the ESG was raised: that of their role as a reference document as opposed to that of a compliance tool. The scope was deemed to be generally appropriate but there was encouragement to reflect on the extent to which a revised ESG document should link to specific Bologna commitments and reflect overarching principles agreed among the Bologna signatories.

Regarding the ESG clarity and usability, it was clear that the document could be improved by some further work to increase clarity of terminology and to ensure the removal of ambiguity both in terms of the language used and also with regard to the standards and guidelines themselves to ensure that they are as clear as possible. When referring to the implementation and impact there was clear evidence that the ESG have been widely implemented and have impacted significantly on QA in the EHEA. However, further work was necessary in order to to raise awareness and ownership of the ESG even further, particularly amongst faculty staff directly involved in the student learning and teaching process.

The conclusions of the project, therefore, focused on the improvement of the ESG as they were formulated rather than recommending a wholesale revision of the content of the principles enshrined in the document.

Given this changing context, in 2012 the Ministerial Communiqué invited the E4 Group to prepare an initial proposal for a revised ESG "to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope'. The proposal for a revised version of the ESG was published and presented on 18th of May 2014 in Brussels and has

been forwarded to the Bologna Follow up Group (BFUG), which oversees the Bologna Process in between Ministerial meetings. The expectation is that the proposal will be adopted at the latest at the next EHEA Ministerial Meeting that will take place in Armenia in 2015.

ESG state that the "purpose of these standards and guidelines is to provide a source of assistance and guidance both to higher education institutions in developing their own quality assurance systems and agencies undertaking external quality assurance, as well as to contribute to a common frame of reference, which can be used by institutions and agencies alike. It is not the intention that these standards and guidelines should dictate practice or be interpreted as prescriptive or unchangeable." (ENQA 2005: 13)

The document further defines the purpose of the standards and guidelines as being:
> • "to improve the education available to students in higher education institutions in the EHEA;
> • to assist higher education institutions in managing and enhancing their quality and, thereby, to help to justify their institutional autonomy;
> • to form a background for quality assurance agencies in their work;
> • to make external quality assurance more transparent and simpler to understand for everybody involved." (ENQA 2005: 14)

1.2. ESG – reform through the revision process?

The revised form of the ESG, in setting the context of the document to be adopted, underlines that higher education, research and innovation play 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 is an essential component of socio-economic and cultural development. At the same time, an increasing demand for skills and competences requires higher education to respond in new ways.

A key goal of the ESG is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. They have played and will continue to play an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and cross-border cooperation. Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision.

The ESG are used by institutions and quality assurance agencies as a reference document for internal and external quality assurance systems in higher education. Moreover, they are used by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which is responsible for the register of quality assurance agencies that comply with the ESG.

The focus of the new ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. In addition institutions have policies and processes to ensure and improve the quality of their other activities, such as research and governance.

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. A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the higher education institution's activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement). Quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus inter-related. They can support the development of a quality culture that is embraced by all: from the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management. The term 'quality assurance' is used in the new ESG to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e. assurance and enhancement activities). Unless otherwise specified, in the document stakeholders are understood to cover all actors within an institution, including students and staff, as well as external stakeholders such as employers and external partners of an institution. The word institution is used in the standards and guidelines to refer to higher education institutions. Depending on the institution's approach to quality assurance it can, however, refer to the institution as whole or to any actors within the institution.

In order to avoid existing overlaps between the parts 2 and 3 some standards were moved from the one to the other part because in both chapters subject matters were a mixture of standards referring to external QA processes and standards referring to agencies' policies.

Moreover, a clearer distinction between standards and guidelines is made:

"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.

Guidelines explain the importance of the standards and provide information to assist higher education institutions, agencies and governments in the implementation of the standards in their individual context.".

Figures 1, 2 and 3 depict in a structured way the comparative analyses between old and new ESG, as follows:

Current ESG – Part 1	Draft initial proposal – Part 1
1.1 Policy and procedures for QA	1.1 Policy and processes for QA
1.2 Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes	1.2 Design and approval of programmes
1.3 Assessment of students	1.3 Student-centred learning
1.4 QA of teaching staff	1.4 Student admission, progression and completion
1.5 Learning resources and student support	1.5 Development of teaching staff
1.6 Information systems	1.6 Learning resources and student support
1.7 Public information	1.7 Information management
	1.8 Public information
	1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes ,
	1.10 Cyclical external QA

Fig. 1. Comparative analysis of ESG Part 1

Current ESG – Part 2	Draft initial proposal - Part 2
2.1 Use of internal quality assurance procedures	2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance
2.2 Development of external quality assurance processes	2.2 Designing processes fit for purpose
2.3 Criteria for decisions	2.3 Processes
2.4 Processes fit for purpose	2.4 Criteria for formal outcomes
2.5 Reporting	2.5 Reporting
2.6 Follow-up procedures	2.6 Complaints and appeals
2.7 Periodic reviews	
2.8 System-wide analyses	

Fig. 2. Comparative analysis of ESG Part 2

Current ESG – Part 3	Draft initial proposal – Part 3
3.1 Use of external quality assurance procedures for higher education	3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance
3.2 Official status	3.2 Official status
3.3 Activities	3.3 Independence
3.4 Resources	3.4 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct of the agencies
3.5 Mission statement	3.5 Thematic reflection and analysis
3.6 Independence	3.6 Resources
3.7 External quality assurance criteria and processes used by the agencies	
3.8 Accountability procedures	

Fig. 3. Comparative analysis of ESG Part 3

1.3. ESG – critical view of the changes

The proposal for the new ESG presents joint views of all stakeholder organizations involved, based on a comprehensive and complex revision process. Secondly, the document reflects the recent changes in the EHEA and shows a way forward for the concepts that have represented priorities of Bologna Process since the first ministerial meetings. The proposed document will also allow to further develop quality assurance systems in order to support quality learning and teaching.

Talking about the stakeholder organizations' involvement in the revision process, we can notice that most vocalized comments coming from BFUG were positive and welcomed the new draft. On the other hand, the European Commission was proven to be highly critical about the whole process, purpose and content of the ESG. While referring to comments and suggestions for changes made by individual countries/organizations we can notice a request for more focus on the role of employers in the panels, more information on employability aspects and inclusion of integrated traineeships into the QA of a programme.

Looking at the comparative analyses above, we can underline a few major changes:
- A more visible focus on Qualification Frameworks, student centered learning and Learning Outcomes;
- A shift of view from the quality assurance to the development of the teaching staff suggesting that the paradigm of enhancement will be enforced at the grass-root level of staff;
- Closer attention is paid to provisions regarding funding for learning and teaching activities as well as for adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support. In the same time, this future focus on provisions and quality of student services will inevitably call for student engagement, at institutional, national (and agency) and European level. 1.4. of part one is, in the ESG proposal, encompassing features of social dimension and equity concerns, while assuring the admission, progression and completion of studies for students;
- Both 1.9. and 1.10. enforce the view of enhancement-led view of quality assurance procedures, paradigm aiming at the continuous development of practices and processes at institutional and programme level;
- Accountability which was perceived as a subjective term presents itself now under professional conduct of quality assurance agencies;

- System –wide analysis was moved from part 2 to part 3, given the fact that it is a responsibility of the quality assurance agencies and comes now under the title of thematic reflection and analysis;
- The entire view of the document, which comes also enlisted as a principle is that quality does not represent an end in itself, but aims at going through a continuous feedback loop for all practices and procedures of an institution, with a view at enhancing them;
- The revised proposal leaves place for great diversity given the differences in quality assurance systems at European level. The ESG leaves places for development of new systems that fits their purpose and national contexts.

  Looking at the Romanian context, we can surely affirm that changes will be needed in the national quality assurance methodology, anticipating that ARACIS will enter a revision process of its own methodology after the proposed form of the new ESG will be adopted. In the same time, the document will bring some changes for universities' strategies and practices given the multiple changes in Part 1. We trust that the shifts of paradigm brought by the ESG will be also reflected in every classroom, office and stakeholder priorities.

Conclusions:

Most substantial changes brought about by the revised ESG relate to their Part 1, addressing internal quality assurance organized by higher education institutions. That is, agencies will need to accommodate these changes in their standards and criteria used in reviewing higher education institutions or programmes (ESG 2.1).

Furthermore, national quality assurance agencies might need to adjust their structures or processes to accommodate the changes in parts 2 and 3. The extent of these changes will depend on each individual agency, and while some agencies will need to make substantial changes, others might be able to accommodate the revised ESG with only minor adjustments.

While institutions will need time to tune their processes and activities to the revised ESG, agencies will need time to consult their stakeholders on adapting criteria and processes.

The new ESG underline the following purposes:

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

These purposes provide a framework within which the ESG may be used and implemented in different ways by different institutions, agencies and countries. The EHEA is characterized by its diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations. This makes a single monolithic approach to quality and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate. Broad acceptance of all standards is a precondition for creating common understanding of quality assurance in Europe. For these reasons, the ESG need to be at a reasonably generic level in order to ensure that they are applicable to all forms of provision.

The ESG provide the criteria at European level against which quality assurance agencies and their activities are assessed. This ensures that the quality assurance agencies in the EHEA adhere to the same set of principles and the processes and procedures are modelled to fit the purposes and requirements of their contexts.

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