

ENQA Message to EHEA Ministers

MAY 2024



On the occasion of the 2024 Bologna Process Ministerial Conference, ENQA asks the EHEA Ministers of Education to:

- 1 Ensure that national legislative frameworks allow quality assurance agencies to operate in compliance with the ESG**
- 2 Enable international collaboration by reducing national-level barriers in quality assurance and higher education while enhancing transparency**
- 3 Maintain the relevance and added value of external quality assurance by allowing quality assurance agencies to implement flexible and enhancement-oriented approaches**

QUALITY ASSURANCE IN 2024

As we reach the 25th year of the Bologna Process, the 2024 Tirana Ministerial Conference is a moment to celebrate what has been achieved and reflect on the challenges and work ahead.

Quality assurance is one of the most successful features of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Transparent and effective internal and external quality assurance play an important role in ensuring that European higher education remains globally competitive, attracting high calibre staff and students, supporting international partnerships between institutions as well as student and staff mobility, and opening doors for its graduates by underpinning recognition of qualifications.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA (ESG) are known worldwide and European practice is notable particularly in areas such as student involvement, transparency, and independence of quality assurance agencies.

The Bologna Process has provided the framework and impetus for the ESG as a strong and commonly agreed set of standards for quality assurance, which support high quality teaching, learning and assessment in a way that facilitates trust, recognition and transparency while respecting the diversity of systems, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions. One of the key success factors has been the principle of stakeholder engagement and ownership of this framework.

ENQA has grown alongside the Bologna Process and will celebrate the 25th anniversary of its establishment in 2025. During this time, the Association has made a significant contribution to key commitments, policy developments and innovation in practice, notably as co-authors of the ESG, as co-founders of EQAR, and as the primary coordinator of external reviews of quality assurance agencies. Beyond Europe, ENQA has contributed to the development of quality assurance practice in Africa and Southeast Asia and worked with partners worldwide on the topic of trans-national education.

Across the EHEA today there are 60 external quality assurance agencies operating in compliance with the ESG, up from 48 in 2015, when the current version of the ESG was adopted.

As the EHEA has grown, the development of quality assurance is uneven and there are still several countries where there is no ESG aligned agency. ENQA, through the SEQA-ESG project and other peer learning activities, has been supporting countries and agencies in aligning their quality assurance approaches and national frameworks with the ESG. At the same time, well-established agencies have been through multiple external reviews and ENQA has adapted its services to ensure an ongoing added value of the review process.

As higher education adapts to new challenges and embraces new opportunities brought about by the fast-changing environment, the ESG must evolve to remain relevant and fit for purpose. The ENQA-led QA-FIT project outcomes demonstrate that all stakeholder groups place a high level of importance on the purpose and value of the common European quality assurance framework. It is clear that the evolution of that framework must continue to underpin trust and transparency, while also enabling flexibility and innovation in quality assurance practices.

ENQA looks forward to taking up these issues in the forthcoming revision of the ESG. Finding this balance will allow European quality assurance to continue to protect student interests, while supporting the competitiveness, cooperative capacity and societal relevance of European higher education institutions. If European higher education is to thrive, quality assurance agencies must be enabled to fully embrace quality enhancement, supporting institutions in developing quality culture as outlined in the ESG and avoid purely compliance culture.

ENQA RECOMMENDATIONS TO EHEA MINISTERS

Work by ENQA and other stakeholders has repeatedly shown that national legislative frameworks are both the primary barrier and enabler for effective external quality assurance designed and conducted in alignment with the ESG. With this in mind, and based on the key issues raised and addressed in ENQA's work over the past four years, ENQA makes the following three recommendations to Ministers of Education in the EHEA:

1

Ensure that national legislative frameworks allow quality assurance agencies to operate in compliance with the ESG

National frameworks are vital for enabling quality assurance agencies to fully meet the expectations of the ESG. Two areas of ESG compliance that prove particularly challenging for agencies are independence, and complaints and appeals processes. National authorities are encouraged to engage in dialogue with quality assurance agencies to find solutions in situations where compliance in these areas may be hindered by national law. Ensuring that there is no political or other interference in the governance and decision-making mechanisms of quality assurance agencies is vital to underpinning trust in European higher education systems.

This dialogue and engagement between agencies and national authorities, together with institutions and students, will be particularly important with the upcoming revision of the ESG. Agencies and national authorities are strongly encouraged to consult each other on contribution to and implementation of policy developments. Flexibility and simplification are highly recommended in order to maintain fitness for purpose, and for all stakeholders this requires guarding against overly rigid legislation and interpretation of the ESG, in order to allow agencies to innovate in their practices and also to react to innovations that affect higher education.

2**Enable international collaboration by reducing national-level barriers in quality assurance and higher education while enhancing transparency**

The recent focus on international collaboration has drawn attention to the legislative and practical barriers that limit activities such as the European Universities Initiative, as well as long established cooperation models, such as joint programmes and credit or degree mobility. Facilitating cooperation requires national authorities to allow the proper implementation of existing commitments and tools, while respecting national requirements and system diversity. This includes appropriate provisions for cross-border quality assurance (inside and outside the EHEA), allowing use of the European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, and facilitating recognition of qualifications in line with the Lisbon and Global Recognition Conventions. International cooperation is further supported by the availability, at national level, of consistent, comparable and reliable data related to the higher education sector.

Quality assurance of trans-national education inside and outside the EHEA is an area that is often overlooked. National authorities, particularly in significant 'sending' countries, are recommended to ensure that the lines of responsibilities for quality assurance of trans-national education are clear in order to avoid duplication or risk some provision falling between the gaps. There should be greater transparency on how the interests of students on trans-national education programmes are being protected. In particular, students should know that provision in other settings is of equivalent standard and quality of experience as in the provider's home country.

3**Maintain the relevance and added value of external quality assurance by allowing quality assurance agencies to implement flexible and enhancement-oriented approaches**

External quality assurance can best meet its goals when agencies are able to design and implement methodologies that reflect their operating context. As quality assurance systems in the EHEA mature and there is a high level of trust in institutional internal quality assurance mechanisms, a focus on external enhancement-oriented approaches can reduce the bureaucratic burden and allow an effective and efficient use of resources, while maintaining sufficient levels of accountability. Overlap and overburdening of different quality assurance mechanisms and other types of monitoring should be avoided.

National authorities are encouraged to provide a flexible framework for agencies to develop their methodologies according to the ESG, which permits an appropriate balance between enhancement and accountability. This may include providing space for exploring how best to use data and risk-informed approaches, support and guidance to higher education institutions to further develop their internal systems, and opportunities to review and adjust methodologies as often as needed.

In order to maintain trust and transparency, this has to be coupled with clear and accessible information and constant dialogue with stakeholders about system level frameworks and criteria, as well as robust procedures for identifying and addressing problems. In our ambitions for comparability of qualifications and quality assurance outcomes, care should be taken to avoid pushing conformity to a one size fits all approach which ignores our diverse contexts.

Flexible and responsive systems also ensure that quality assurance agencies have space to be proactive in addressing recent and emerging topics such as micro-credentials, increased internationalisation and artificial intelligence, thus supporting higher education institutions to keep pace with developments.

ABOUT ENQA

ENQA is the designated stakeholder organisation of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA.

ENQA has three main goals:

- Representing interests of quality assurance agencies
- Providing services to members and other stakeholders
- Driving the development of external quality assurance

As of May 2024, ENQA represents 60 members from 32 countries, which are quality assurance agencies in the EHEA that have demonstrated their compliance with the ESG through an independent peer review. ENQA also has 41 affiliates from 26 countries worldwide.

ENQA is a consultative member of the Bologna Process, and supports its members and the wider quality assurance community through representation, expertise, external reviews of agencies, projects, events and working groups. All activities are designed to collect evidence, develop knowledge, facilitate peer learning, and drive innovation.



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