Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2027)

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Foreword

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were first adopted in 2005 by the Ministers responsible for higher education following the proposal of the E4 Group (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education - ENQA, European Students' Union - ESU, European University Association - EUA and European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education - EURASHE).

A revised version was adopted in 2015, prepared by the initial authors together with Education International - EI, BUSINESS EUROPE and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education - EQAR. At that time the ESG, as well as other Bologna action lines such as qualifications frameworks, recognition and the promotion of the use of learning outcomes, contributed to a paradigm shift towards student-centred learning and teaching.

The 2024 Tirana Ministerial Communiqué invited the authors to propose another update, given the necessity of keeping the ESG in line with ongoing developments, challenges and expectations of the higher education landscape. The revision also aimed to provide more clarity in the document in order to facilitate its implementation in practice.

The revision process included several consultation sessions involving stakeholders, the Ministers' delegates in the Bologna Follow-Up Group, as well as a public consultation. The revised version was developed by a Steering Committee and a Drafting Group, which thoroughly analysed and took into consideration the proposals and suggestions received from different stakeholders.

The ESG 2027 were adopted by the Ministers responsible for higher education in the European Higher Education Area in May 2027 at the Iași - Chișinău Ministerial Conference. As a result of the participative revision process, we are confident that they reflect a consensus among all the stakeholders and ministries involved on how to take forward quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area and, as such, provide the basis for successful and widely spread implementation of the ESG.

Introduction

Context, scope, purposes and principles

Context

Higher education, research and innovation play a crucial role in supporting social cohesion, economic growth and global competitiveness. Our societies need resilient higher education institutions that operate within a shared framework of quality assurance standards that enable international cooperation and recognition, ensure that learners achieve the relevant skills and competences to be active citizens in knowledge-based societies and economies, and support innovation through flexible and fit-for-purpose regulatory frameworks. The increasing demand for skills and competences requires higher education to respond in new ways and this common framework should guide and support institutions in this endeavour.

Given the diversity of expectations for higher education, the student-centred approach to learning and teaching enables flexible learning paths, recognition of competencies gained outside formal curricula and through international cooperation, which is necessary to prepare students for life in multi-cultural societies and to find sustainable solutions together for current and future global challenges. Higher education institutions themselves also become more diverse in their missions, modes of educational provision and (international) cooperation.

Quality is mainly a result of the meaningful interaction between teachers, students and the institutional learning environment, in close connection with external stakeholders and society as a whole. Ensuring quality education requires an operating context in which the social dimension of higher education[1] is actively supported and fostered, and the fundamental values[2] of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) are upheld.

Quality assurance should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities, services and facilities are fit for purpose, and take into account the diversity of the student body. Quality assurance is crucial in supporting higher education systems and institutions in responding to constantly changing societies, while ensuring the qualifications achieved by students and their experience of higher education remain at the forefront of institutional missions. The role of quality assurance becomes even more critical in view of the ambitions for international cooperation of higher education institutions and the support it can provide for recognition of qualifications. Moreover, the ambition of the EHEA to increase its attractiveness and further open up to international students must be backed up with reliable and well-developed systems that create trust in the quality and relevance of the offered programmes.

At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of accountability and enhancement. Taken together, these create trust in higher education institutions' performance. A successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure higher education institutions and the public of the quality of its activities

[1] https://ehea.info/Upload/Rome_Ministerial_Communique_Annex_II.pdf
[2] https://ehea.info/Download/ANNEX-1-EHEA-STATEMENTS-ON-FUNDAMENTAL-VALUES%20(1).pdf

(accountability) and provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement). Accountability and enhancement are thus interrelated. 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, and recognised by external stakeholders.

A key goal of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders. They have been and will continue to be an essential factor for developing national and institutional quality assurance systems across the EHEA and support cross-border cooperation both within the EHEA and globally. In addition, the ESG play an important role in ensuring the implementation of the key commitments of the Bologna Process higher education reform agenda and in creating the conditions for the implementation of the fundamental values. 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.

Scope

The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education, covering the areas vital for successful quality provision of learning environments in higher education. While implementation may vary, a broad acceptance of all standards is a precondition for creating a common understanding of quality assurance in the EHEA.

The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance of learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research, innovation, and societal engagement. In addition, institutions should have policies and processes to ensure and improve the governance, organisation and quality of all their activities, also taking into consideration the digital transition and the use of artificial intelligence.

The EHEA is characterised by its diversity of political and higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, institutions, languages, aspirations and expectations. This makes a single monolithic approach to quality and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate. 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 and to all higher education contexts and systems.

The ESG apply to all higher education offered by institutions from the EHEA, regardless of the volume, mode of study, educational provider, place of delivery, or form of education, including but not limited to digitally enhanced provision, lifelong learning opportunities and short units of learning such as micro-credentials. In addition, the ESG also apply to transnational and cross-border provision of higher education within and outside of the EHEA.

Consequently, agencies' external quality assurance activities considered within the scope of the ESG are those that concern learning and teaching in higher education institutions or programmes that aim to assess quality dimensions defined in the ESG Part 1.

Higher education aims to fulfil multiple purposes including preparing students for active citizenship, for their careers (e.g. by contributing to their employability), supporting their personal development, creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation.[3] Therefore, stakeholders, who may prioritise different purposes, can view quality in higher education and quality assurance of higher education differently. The ESG take into account these different perspectives. The specific mention of certain stakeholder groups in some of the standards and guidelines is intended to encourage their meaningful participation and to ensure that relevant perspectives, that might otherwise be overlooked, are taken into account.

The ESG should be considered in a broader context that also includes qualifications frameworks, ECTS, and the diploma supplement, as well as the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes, which contribute to promoting transparency and mutual trust in higher education in the EHEA, thus creating the conditions for closer international and cross-border cooperation. The ESG operate in a comprehensive framework that also includes the EHEA Fundamental Values and the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA.

Purposes

The ESG have the following core purposes:

- They set a core 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 EHEA;
- They support diverse groups of stakeholders in higher education systems in continuously monitoring and enhancing the education provided;
- They support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders and facilitating international cooperation;
- They provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.

Principles

The ESG provide a framework at European level against which quality assurance agencies, and higher education institutions and their activities are assessed.[4] This ensures that quality assurance in the EHEA adheres to the same set of principles and that the processes and procedures are modelled to fit the purposes and requirements of their contexts, and are flexible to support innovation in higher education provision.

The ESG are based on and rely on the respect of the following principles for quality assurance in the EHEA:

[3] 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

[4] 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 membership in the organisation.

- Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
- Quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students;
- Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;
- Quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of society and all stakeholders in higher education, in particular students.

Key terms

In this document, the following terms are understood as described in this list of key terms.

Cross-border quality assurance	External QA activities of a QA agency carried out in a country other than the one in which it is based or primarily operates.
External quality assurance	Refers to the comprehensive set of evaluation activities relating to teaching and learning in higher education, carried out by peer reviewers using a predefined framework. The assessment of institutions is conducted by quality assurance agencies against set standards in line with processes as described in the Part 2 of the ESG, on a cyclical basis. Given the multiple needs of higher education institutions, external quality assurance may take various forms to achieve different objectives. These may include evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities, which may be carried out differently and at different levels (such as programme or institutional level), and may lead to judgements and formal outcomes, depending on the context.
Higher education	Education delivered/provided according to the descriptors of Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area[5] and corresponding European Qualifications Framework.
Institution	Refers to higher education institutions and other providers that deliver education aligned with the descriptors of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area[6] and corresponding European Qualifications Framework.
Internal quality assurance	The continuous process of monitoring, evaluating and improving the quality of higher education provision within an institution, or to internal mechanisms of quality monitoring, evaluation and improvement within an agency. It refers to a set of systematic processes and practices implemented within an organisation to ensure the quality, consistency, and effectiveness of its products, services, or activities. It is an essential part of quality assurance.
Programme	Refers to all higher education provision, including that which is not

[5] Levels 5, 6, 7 and 8 of EQF correspond to QF-EHEA cycles.
In some higher education systems, level 5 EQF is not considered higher education.
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	leading to a degree, regardless of the volume, mode of study, educational provider, place of delivery or form of education (digitally enhanced provision, lifelong learning opportunities and small units of learning such as those leading to micro-credentials). It also refers to international provision such as joint, transnational and cross-border education.
Quality assurance	Refers to all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e. assurance and enhancement activities).
Stakeholders	All actors directly or indirectly interested in or affected by an institution's or agency's activity. Internal institutional stakeholders include students, staff (teaching, research, administration, management, support), while external stakeholders include, but are not limited to, alumni, employers, professional bodies, civil society and public authorities.

Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education

The standards and guidelines for quality assurance have been divided into three parts:

- Part 1: Internal quality assurance
- Part 2: External quality assurance
- Part 3: Quality assurance agencies

It should be kept in mind, however, that the three parts are intrinsically interlinked and together form the basis for a European quality assurance framework. External quality assurance in Part 2 recognises the standards for internal quality assurance in Part 1 thus ensuring that the internal work undertaken by institutions is directly relevant to any external quality assurance that they undergo. In the same way, Part 3 refers to Part 2. Thus, these three parts work on a complementary basis in higher education institutions as well as in agencies and also work on the understanding that other stakeholders contribute to the framework. As a consequence, the three parts should be read as a whole.

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 summary list of standards for quality assurance is placed in the annex for easy reference.

The guidelines 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 Part 1 Internal Quality Assurance

1.1 Policy for quality assurance

Standard
Institutions should have in place, publish and effectively communicate a clear policy for quality assurance of learning, teaching and assessment, and associated structures, all supporting a coherent system that forms an effective cycle of continuous improvement.

The quality assurance policy should be integrated in the strategic and operational management of the institution, ensuring links with the other institutional missions.

The development and implementation of the policy for quality assurance should include a structured, meaningful and visible role for students, staff, and other internal and external stakeholders. The core outcomes of the quality assurance processes and the measures taken should be shared with the stakeholders, including students and staff.

Guidelines
An effective internal quality assurance system — encompassing planning, implementation, monitoring, evaluation, and enhancement — supports the development of a quality culture. Internal stakeholders share responsibility for quality and actively engage in quality assurance and enhancement at all levels of the institution.

Quality assurance policies are most effective when they reflect the relationship between research, learning, teaching and the societal mission of higher education.

The quality assurance policy supports the institutional mission as well as academic and non-academic organisational units in monitoring and improving the quality of learning and teaching.

It is aligned with other institutional policies, such as those supporting the social dimension of higher education and those safeguarding fundamental values, including but not limited to

- academic freedom
- academic integrity
- public responsibility of higher education.

The policy addresses the implications of digital transformation, including artificial intelligence, for learning, teaching, assessment, and quality assurance processes, also in relation to academic integrity.

The quality assurance policy also covers activities that are subcontracted to or carried out in cooperation with other parties nationally or internationally.

1.2 Design, approval, ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes

Standard
Institutions should have processes for the design, approval, monitoring and periodic review of their programmes to ensure that they are coherent, informed by the latest research, academic and professional developments, and reliable in leading to the intended learning outcomes. These processes should ensure that programmes

respond to the needs of students, society and the labour market, supporting graduates' employability and active citizenship.

Institutions should involve relevant internal and external stakeholders, including students, staff and graduates, in the processes. The processes should lead to continuous improvement of the education provision.

Programmes should be revised based on the analysis of information collected during monitoring and periodic review, and any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

The programmes should be designed using the learning outcomes-based approach.

The qualification and learning outcomes should correspond to the correct level of national qualifications' framework for higher education which is aligned to the correct cycle of the Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area, and to professional, sectoral or disciplinary standards. The qualification resulting from a programme should be specified and communicated.

Guidelines

Programmes are designed and delivered to enable students to acquire knowledge, skills, responsibility and autonomy. These include transferable knowledge and skills that support students' personal development, active citizenship, and future careers.

Students are equal partners in programme design, approval, monitoring and review. Other stakeholders, such as employers, professional bodies, graduates and external experts, are systematically and meaningfully involved to ensure relevance for society and the labour market.

Programmes

- are designed in line with the institutional strategy,
- have clearly defined learning outcomes;
- define the expected student workload in ECTS;
- are informed by the latest research and benefit from external expertise and reference points;
- include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate;
- include research-based learning experiences;
- support recognition of qualifications and graduate employability;
- are designed by involving students and other stakeholders, supporting student-centred learning and students' active engagement in the learning process, as well as participation of students in democratic societies;
- foster students' lifelong personal development;
- are regularly monitored and periodically reviewed.

Regular monitoring may include the evaluation of:

- the content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline, thus ensuring that the programme is up-to-date;
- whether the programme responds to the changing needs of society and the labour market;
- the students' workload, progression and completion;
- the effectiveness of procedures for the assessment of students;
- the students' expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme**;**
- the learning environment and its fitness for purpose for the programme.

1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Standard

Institutions should ensure that programmes are designed and delivered in a way that fosters an active role of students in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach. Learning and teaching processes should support students in taking such an active role.

The use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence, in learning, teaching and assessment should be responsible, transparent, human-centred and subject to human verification.

Guidelines

Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment are supported by quality assurance processes that consider how learning, teaching and assessment practices stimulate students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process.

Quality assurance processes for student-centred learning, teaching and assessment:

- ensure that institutional approaches to learning, teaching and assessment respect and address the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths and supporting lifelong learning;
- verify that a variety of pedagogical methods and modes of delivery are considered and used, including the effective use of digital and technological tools to support learning outcomes;
- verify that learning, teaching and assessment practices encourage student autonomy, while ensuring appropriate guidance and support from teaching staff;
- promote a culture of mutual respect within the student–teacher relationship and ensure that this is reflected in institutional policies and feedback mechanisms;
- ensure that institutions regularly evaluate and adjust their modes of delivery and pedagogical methods, based on evidence and feedback from students, staff, and other stakeholders.

Quality assurance processes for student assessment take into account that:

- criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance;
- regulations for assessment also take into account mitigating circumstances;
- assessors are familiar with existing assessment methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field;
- where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner;
- assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students, and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures;
- assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved.
- Students are given personalised feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process;
- a formal procedure for student complaints and appeals is in place. The procedures are visible, accessible, and include regular publication of anonymised outcomes and actions taken.

1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition, and certification

Standard
Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle": student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Guidelines
Access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently, fairly, and in a transparent manner, and induction to the institution and the programme is provided.

Institutions put in place processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression.

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study, work placements, and prior learning, including non-formal and informal learning, is essential for ensuring students' progress in their studies, and for promoting mobility.

Appropriate recognition procedures rely on:

- institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
- cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the system.

Students receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed. This information is included in the diploma supplement or other relevant documents.

1.5 Teaching staff

Standard
Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of all staff involved in education delivery.

They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment, development and evaluation of staff, in line with the required competences.

To ensure continuity in their activities, institutions should have an appropriate share of core staff under long-term employment.

Guidelines
Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the competences of their staff and for providing them with appropriate support, development opportunities, and regular review of teaching practice to carry out their work effectively.

These processes reflect the mission of the institution and the objectives of its programmes. They consider the evolving role of staff, including in the context of student-centred learning, digital technologies, internationalisation and research.

Incorporating student feedback into teacher evaluation, alongside other evidence, can provide valuable insights into teaching effectiveness and areas for professional development.

A supportive working environment:

- provides conditions of employment that recognise and value the importance of teaching;
- supports the well-being of staff, including their mental health;
- encourages scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research and the societal mission of higher education;
- encourages the development of the teaching methods including the use of new technologies that support innovation and students' learning.

1.6 Learning environment and resources

Standard

Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and should ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources, student support and physical and digital infrastructure are provided.

Guidelines

Institutions take into account the needs of a diverse student population and the principles of student- centred learning when allocating, planning and providing learning resources, student support and physical and digital infrastructure.

Human support is essential for student learning and may be provided by teaching staff as well as technical, administrative and counselling staff. Support services are particularly important in facilitating student mobility within and across higher education systems.

Students are informed about the resources and services available to them, and are consulted in their planning and evaluation to ensure they are fit for purpose.

1.7 Information management

Standard

Institutions should periodically collect, analyse and use relevant, reliable and up-to-date information for the effective management of their programmes and other related activities.

Guidelines

Institutions have effective processes to collect and analyse information on learning, teaching and assessment activities and on graduate outcomes. These data feed into the internal quality assurance system and support evidence-based decision-making.

The information gathered may depend on the type and mission of the institution. It will typically include data that is relevant for the student life-cycle and staff development, such as: profile of the student body; profile of staff; student progression; success and drop- out rates; student satisfaction with their programmes including support services and resources; career paths of graduates; and student and staff mobility rates.

Students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

1.8 Public information

Standard

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes and relevant outcomes of quality assurance processes. Information provided should be clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible to its intended audiences.

Guidelines

Information about programmes includes the admission criteria, the intended learning outcomes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students as well as graduate employment information where available and appropriate.

1.9 Cyclical external quality assurance

Standard

Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG, on a cyclical basis, addressing, where relevant, the outcomes of the previous review.

Institutions should ensure that the external quality assurance procedures that they undergo meet the regulatory requirements, if applicable, especially in the case of cross-border quality assurance.

Guidelines

Institutions participate in cyclical external quality assurance that takes account of the requirements of the legislative framework in which they operate. Therefore, depending on the framework, external quality assurance may take different forms and focus on different organisational levels (such as programme, faculty or institution).

Higher education institutions are encouraged to publish their self-assessment reports.

ESG Part 2 External quality assurance

2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

Standard
External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes for learning, teaching and assessment, ensuring that all standards of Part 1 of the ESG are covered holistically for each institution, by one or more external quality assurance process(es) by the agency.

External quality assurance should verify the effectiveness of the institutional approaches to ensure that programmes correspond to the correct cycle of the QF-EHEA.

Guidelines
Depending on the type of external quality assurance, the standards included in Part 1 may be addressed differently.

External quality assurance recognises and supports institutional responsibility for quality assurance.

2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

Standard
External quality assurance should be defined and designed to ensure that it achieves the aims and objectives set for it, including its dual purpose of accountability and enhancement in higher education.

The design of methodologies should take into consideration the relevant legal and regulatory context for higher education.

Stakeholders should be involved in the design and continuous improvement of external quality assurance.

Guidelines
The processes are designed so that they will:

- bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions;
- take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality;
- allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement;
- result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The system for external quality assurance might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance.

2.3 Implementing processes

Standard
External quality assurance processes should be pre-defined, published, implemented consistently, and adapted to the methodology designed as described in standard 2.2. Processes should support the aims set for them.

The processes should be consistent whether they are applied at the national level or across borders and include the following specific activities

- **a self-assessment or equivalent;**
- **an external assessment normally including an in-person site visit by peer reviewers, including stakeholder interviews, to ensure input from various perspectives;**
- **a report resulting from the external assessment by peer reviewers;**
- **a consistent follow-up.**

The use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence, in external quality assurance processes should be responsible, transparent, human-centred and subject to human verification.

Guidelines

The nature of the specific activities within the process depends on the aims and design of external quality assurance.

Interviewing different stakeholder groups in the in-person site visit is strongly encouraged. However, to ensure that a wide range of perspectives is included, hybrid or online participation for interviewees can also be organised.

When working abroad, agencies communicate appropriately with the relevant authorities of the jurisdiction in which they operate**.**

2.4 Peer reviewers

Standard

External quality assurance should be carried out by competent groups of peer reviewers that include (a) student member(s). The selection of peer reviewers should take into consideration the aims and objectives of the process.

Anyone contributing to external quality assurance activities of agencies, e.g. as a peer reviewer, should be independent, act in a personal capacity and not represent their constituent organisation when working for agencies.

The agency should ensure that the peer reviewers receive appropriate training and preparation.

Guidelines

The peer reviewers contribute to the work of agencies through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and employers/professional practitioners.

The involvement of international peer reviewers in external quality assurance is encouraged as it adds a further dimension to the development and implementation of processes.

Agencies implement a mechanism of no-conflict-of-interest.

2.5 Reporting

Standard

Full reports by the peer reviewers should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners, and other interested individuals.

The reports should be useful for the evaluated institution and provide recommendations for improvement.

The evaluated institution should be given an opportunity to check the factual accuracy of the report before it is finalised.

Guidelines
The report by the peer reviewers is the basis for the institution's follow-up action. It also provides information to society regarding the activities of the evaluated institution.

To achieve this, the report needs to be clear and concise in its structure and language and to cover:

- context description (to help locate the higher education institution in its specific context);
- description of the individual procedure, including peer reviewers involved;
- evidence, analysis and findings;
- conclusions;
- features of good practice demonstrated by the institution;
- recommendations for follow-up action.

To increase the accessibility and usability of the reports, agencies are encouraged to make them available in a searchable electronic format and publish them in DEQAR.

A summary of the report will increase its accessibility and transparency.

2.6 Processes and criteria for outcomes

Standard
Any outcomes, including formal decisions, that result from external quality assurance, should be based on evidence collected and analysed through the review process as documented in the review report by the peer reviewers. Outcomes should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied consistently.

Agencies should provide transparent information on if and how the outcomes of the process may be recognised by relevant authorities.

The outcomes of the review process should be published. If the decision-making relies on additional evidence, assessment or recommendation beyond the review report, this should be published together with the decision.

Guidelines
Limiting the use of additional evidence, assessment or recommendation beyond the review report in agency decision-making strengthens the peer-review principle.

2.7 Complaints and appeals

Standard
Agencies should have complaints and appeals processes that are defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and they should be clearly communicated to the institutions.

Appeals should be considered by a different structure within the agencies than the one

whose decision is appealed against.

Guidelines
Agencies need to handle issues of concern related to the conduct of the process or those carrying it out in a professional way by means of a clearly defined complaints procedure that is consistently applied.

Agencies may also have a policy for complaints from third parties.

In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcome of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, or that criteria or processes have not been correctly and consistently applied.

ESG Part 3 Quality assurance agencies

3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

Standard
Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis.

Agencies should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of agencies.

When agencies also carry out activities that are not in the scope of the ESG, they should clearly define these activities and ensure a transparent distinction between external quality assurance and other fields of work. This needs to be clearly communicated to the public.

Agencies should ensure the meaningful involvement of stakeholders, including students, in their governance and work.

Guidelines
The goals and objectives of the different quality assurance activities and the scope of agencies' work are described transparently and are published. This information also addresses the nature of interaction between the agencies and relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions.

Depending on the structure and mission of the agencies, stakeholders may be involved in different ways.

The expertise in agencies may be increased by including international members in agencies' structures.

3.2 Independence

Standard
Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have full responsibility for their operations and the outcomes of those operations without undue influence.

Agencies should have specific safeguards, checks and balances that ensure autonomy and independence so that no one stakeholder, entity, or individual has undue influence over the agencies.

The key elements of independence of agencies include:
1) **Organisational independence, demonstrated by official documentation**
2) **Operational independence in defining and implementing procedures and methods**
3) **Independence of formal outcomes of quality assurance processes.**

Guidelines
1) Organisational independence may be demonstrated in official documentation (e.g. instruments of government, legislative acts or statutes of the organisation). These documents clearly stipulate the independence of the agencies' structure from any party, such as higher

education institutions, governments and other stakeholder organisations.

2) Operational independence is safeguarded if the definition and operation of the agencies' procedures and methods are independent from any party, such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholders. Additionally, the nomination and appointment of peer reviewers are undertaken independently by the agency.

3) Independence of formal outcomes includes the principle that the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agencies, while the review procedure itself is based on the assessment by peer reviewers from relevant stakeholder backgrounds.

3.3 Activities for enhancement

Standard
Agencies should regularly engage in activities, reflect on their experiences, and disseminate materials that support the enhancement of quality assurance and learning, teaching and assessment in the context in which they work.

Guidelines
In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system.

These findings can contribute to the reflection on developments, trends and areas of good practice or persistent difficulties, and can be used for the improvement of quality assurance policies and processes in national and international contexts.

3.4 Resources

Standard
Agencies should have adequate resources to carry out their work professionally. These resources, both human and financial, should enable effective and sustainable implementation of the agencies' activities.

Agencies should provide their staff with appropriate support and professional development opportunities, including the use of digital technologies, to ensure a high level of competence.

Guidelines
The available resources enable the agencies to reflect on their practices, to improve them when needed, and to inform the public about their activities.

When managing resources, aspects of digital and green transition are taken into consideration.

3.5 Internal quality assurance and integrity

Standard
Agencies should have an internal quality assurance system that assures and enhances the quality and integrity of their activities. Agencies should have a published internal quality policy that defines the procedures and tools in use for continuous enhancement

of their activities.

Agencies should act with transparency and have high professional standards to create trust in their work. Effective tools should be in place to ensure the integrity of their operations, both nationally and internationally, and to prevent conflicts of interest.

Guidelines
Internal and external feedback is collected by the agencies from their stakeholders. This contributes to continuous improvement of their activities.

Agencies ensure that all persons involved in their activities have adequate competencies and act professionally and ethically.

There are mechanisms in place that guard against intolerance of any kind or discrimination.

Responsibility for the quality of any activity carried out by partners on behalf of the agencies, lies within the agencies.

3.6 Review of agencies

Standard
Agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG, addressing, where relevant, the outcomes of the previous review.

Guidelines
Agencies reflect on their policies and activities continuously. A periodic external review assures the agencies and their stakeholders that they continue to adhere to the principles enshrined in the ESG.

Annex: Summary list of standards

Part 1

1.1 Policy for Quality Assurance

1.2 Design, approval, ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes

1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition, and certification

1.5 Teaching staff

1.6 Learning environment and resources

1.7 Information management

1.8 Public information

1.9 Cyclical external quality assurance

Part 2

2.1 Addressing internal quality assurance

2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

2.3 Implementing processes

2.4 Peer reviewers

2.5 Reporting

2.6 Processes and criteria for outcomes

2.7 Complaints and appeals

Part 3

3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance

3.2 Independence

3.3 Activities for enhancement

3.4 Resources

3.5 Internal quality assurance and integrity

3.6 Review of agencies