ENHANCING QUALITY:

Messages for policy-makers

Design and use each tool with specific purposes in mind

There are many tools that contribute to the development of quality higher education. The ESG and quality assurance are just two of these. In order to increase efficiency and avoid duplication of work, **it is important to consider the synergies between the tools and ensure collaboration between different actors in the system.**

For a high-quality student-centred learning to be mainstream in the EHEA, it is crucial to combine a supportive institutional infrastructure, including policies, support services and facilities, with the input, engagement and continuous professional development of academic staff, as indicated in the ESG Part 1. For this to happen, quality assurance processes need to be complemented by other actions that support learning and teaching.

Therefore, **public authorities should ensure that system-level regulation, rewards and incentives encourage and facilitate the engagement of institutions and staff alike in teaching enhancement.**

Benchmarking

ECTS

Laws and regulations

Qualifications frameworks

Academic staff careers

Funding

QUALITY ASSURANCE

Excellence initiatives

Key performance indicators

Performance-based mechanisms

Learning outcomes

Diploma Supplement

Rankings

Ensure legislation and conditions that provide the necessary framework for high quality education as well as room for innovation and creativity

The legal framework and the design of the higher education system has a fundamental impact on the quality and quality assurance of education. To ensure that legislation is not a barrier to implementing the ESG, **public authorities should adapt legal frameworks so that quality assurance agencies and institutions can meet the expectations of the ESG and make certain that regulations determining the basic design of the external quality assurance system are fit for purpose.** In doing so, it is also necessary to develop other tools and steering mechanisms for higher education in a way that complement quality assurance, allow for innovation and creativity, and ultimately contribute to a high quality higher education system.

A key part of ensuring the effectiveness of any quality assurance system is to guarantee that all actors involved in making it work feel ownership and understand its purpose. Therefore, **public authorities should engage all stakeholders – quality assurance agencies, higher education institutions and their staff, as well as students and employers – in the design of quality assurance systems.**

Higher education is a public good that contributes to societal development and economic growth in the EHEA. To do so successfully, it must continuously adapt to the changing needs of society. Identifying those needs and adapting accordingly requires investment in resources. Therefore, **public authorities should ensure appropriate levels of public funding to enable institutions to develop and offer high-quality education.**

Be clear on the purpose of quality assurance and design its processes according to the context

The ESG state that quality assurance processes "should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose". In broad terms, two main purposes of quality assurance can be identified: demonstrating accountability and enhancing quality. In most EHEA countries, both are present, although one may be more evident than the other.

Regardless of how external quality assurance is organised in a system or how its main objectives are defined, **public authorities should make clear to all actors its purpose and the division of responsibilities.** This includes making information available across borders as knowing the status of external quality assurance decisions and their consequences plays an important role in fostering trust and transparency both within and between systems. This provides a stronger framework for mobility and cross-border cooperation in the EHEA.

Evidence shows that quality assurance is most effective in fostering quality culture when it is context-sensitive. **Public authorities, in collaboration with quality assurance agencies, should design external quality assurance in a way that allows institutions to take into account their own specific context when developing their internal systems.**

Quality assurance carried out in compliance with the ESG 2015 is one of the three commitments that characterise the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), alongside the three-cycle degree structure and recognition procedures in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Overall, the EQUIP activities have demonstrated that more than a decade after the adoption of the initial ESG, s**takeholders in the EHEA have a common understanding of quality assurance**. Furthermore, while not all actors are familiar with the ESG and there are differences in perspectives and approaches, many of the challenges in meeting the expectations of the ESG are shared across different countries and stakeholder groups.

Changes in higher education and thus external and internal quality assurance are continuous and are caused by a variety of factors. In most cases, quality assurance and higher education reforms stem from the local and national context, but the ESG are used as a framework that sets certain requirements and boundaries. The EQUIP activities showed that some challenges in meeting the expectations of the ESG remain and the effectiveness of quality assurance can be improved. T**herefore, the EQUIP consortium puts forward the following messages to public authorities responsible for deciding on the design of the higher education and external quality assurance system.**

The full findings of the EQUIP project are explained in the project publication *Enhancing quality: from policy to practice*, available online at **www.equip-project.eu.**

In May 2015, the Bologna Process Ministerial Meeting saw the formal adoption of the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The EQUIP project – Enhancing Quality through Innovative Policy & Practice – was developed as a response to a need for training and dissemination activities after the adoption of the ESG. The purpose of the project, which is co-funded by the European Commission Erasmus+ programme, is to support and promote a consistent, efficient and innovative embedding of the ESG 2015 at the grass-roots level.

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