

EUA OCCASIONAL PAPERS

ESG PART 1: ARE UNIVERSITIES READY?

ANNA GOVER, TIA LOUKKOLA, ANDRÉE SURSOCK

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EUA

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List of acronyms

BFUG	Bologna Follow-Up Group
DS	Diploma Supplement
ECTS	European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System
EHEA	European Higher Education Area
ENIC/NARIC	European Network of Information Centres/National Academic Recognition Information Centres
ENQA	European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education
EQAR	European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education
EQC	Examining Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions project
ESG	Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area
ESU	European Students' Union
EUA	European University Association
EURASHE	European Association of Institutions in Higher Education
NQF	National Qualifications Framework
QA	Quality assurance
QF-EHEA	Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area
SCL	Student-centred learning

I. Introduction

Quality assurance (QA) has long been a key area of activity for the European University Association (EUA), both at European and institutional levels. In practice this has meant active participation in European QA policy discussions, in which the association represents the voice of universities and works in collaboration with its members to promote the development of internal QA systems and – most notably – quality cultures.

In 2012-2014, EUA was part of the stakeholder group¹ that revised the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). This work resulted in the current ESG,² which were adopted by the ministers in charge of higher education in May 2015.

In response to consultations with policy makers and QA practitioners during the revision process, a great deal of attention was paid to Part 1, which focuses on internal QA. As a result, many of the changes to the ESG bring forward new expectations for higher education institutions.³ Furthermore, while the ESG 2005 already held an expectation that QA agencies should address Part 1 during their review process, it is foreseen that they will do so more systematically in the future. This will certainly be the case for agencies that wish to be listed in European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). EQAR's interpretation expects agencies to "systematically include all standards of Part 1 of the ESG in their criteria and procedures used to evaluate/accredit/audit institutions or programmes, while they may be addressed differently depending on the type of external quality assurance" (EQAR, 2015, p. 4).

In light of these developments, it appears to be an appropriate time to review the status of internal QA developments and consider the challenges that may lie ahead. Thus, the aim of this paper is two-fold: (i) to present in a concise format the available evidence on how higher education institutions are addressing the areas covered by the current ESG Part 1; and (ii) using this information, to reflect on which parts of the current ESG Part 1 will be a challenge for higher education institutions. It is written in particular with institutional QA practitioners in mind, whose work is underpinned and affected, whether directly or indirectly, by the ESG.

The paper is largely based on the data gathered for EUA's Trends 2015 study.⁴ In addition it draws on some other reports prepared in advance of the ministerial conference in Yerevan, Armenia, in May 2015. When appropriate, earlier studies, in particular EUA's Examining Quality Culture (EQC) survey, are referenced to provide a longitudinal perspective on the developments that have taken place in recent years. The methodologies and information sources of these studies vary: when this variation limits the analysis, it is identified. Key features of the reports most commonly referenced in this paper are summarised on the next page.

While this paper provides a hurried reader with a concise overview of the status of internal QA in Europe, the list of references may be of interest to those wishing to delve deeper into some of the themes raised.

Internal QA developments and the implementation of the ESG Part 1 by higher education institutions do not happen in a vacuum; they take place in a specific context – both national and European. Therefore,

¹ The revision was carried out by the E4 Group – The European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European University Association (EUA) and the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) – in collaboration with BUSINESSEUROPE, Education International (EI) and European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

² Throughout this paper, the version of the ESG adopted at the Bologna Ministerial meeting in Yerevan in 2015 will be referred to as the current ESG. The previous version will be referred to as the ESG 2005.

³ In this paper, the words universities and institutions are used interchangeably to refer to any type of higher education institution.

⁴ The authors of this paper wish to thank Henriette Stoeber for her careful review of the data.

Chapter II gives a brief overview of national QA trends and discusses the scope of the ESG. Chapter III examines what is known about the status of implementation of each standard in Part 1, based on the available evidence. Chapter IV provides conclusions on the key themes that emerge from the data discussed in the paper.

Summary of the studies most commonly referenced in this paper⁵

Trends 2015: Learning and Teaching in European Universities (referred to as Trends 2015)

The Trends report series has been published by EUA since 1999 with the view of providing the higher education institutions' perspective on European higher education developments, particularly in relation to learning and teaching. The Trends 2015 report is the seventh in the series and is based on survey responses of 451 higher education institutions from 46 countries (48 higher education systems). This paper makes use of published and unpublished data from the Trends survey.

The European Higher Education Area in 2015: Bologna Process Implementation Report (referred to as Implementation Report 2015)

Eurydice, Eurostat and Eurostudent prepared the Bologna Process Implementation Report 2015 for the Ministerial Conference in Yerevan (May 2015), under the oversight of the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). The report provides both quantitative and qualitative information on the status of European higher education from the perspective of national authorities. Qualitative information was gathered through a questionnaire addressed to EHEA member countries through their BFUG representatives. 46 countries replied to the questionnaire.

Bologna with Student Eyes 2015 (referred to as BWSE 2015)

The European Students' Union (ESU) has been publishing Bologna with Student Eyes reports since 2003 with the aim of providing the students' perspective on the implementation of the Bologna Process and on European higher education in general. The 2015 report is based on responses from 38 National Unions of Students to a questionnaire, the results of which were complemented by other studies and meetings with student representatives.

Examining Quality Culture Part I (referred to as EQC I)

As the first step of the Examining Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions (EQC) project, EUA carried out a survey in 2010, mapping the status of internal QA systems across Europe. 222 higher education institutions from 36 European countries replied to the survey. The results were presented in a report, which was the first of three produced during the project. Beyond the data presented in the published report, this paper makes some references to raw data not previously published.

⁵ In cases where percentages were stated to one decimal place in the original report or raw data, they have been rounded to whole numbers for the purposes of this paper.

II The context for internal QA developments

External QA frameworks

Quality assurance is largely regarded as one of the most successful action lines of the Bologna Process – one that resulted in a considerable increase in QA activities across the continent (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 89; ENQA, 2011b, pp. 20-22). A key milestone in this development was the 2003 Berlin Communiqué, in which the Bologna signatories agreed to develop national QA systems. This communiqué also recognised the role of higher education institutions in taking primary responsibility for the quality assurance of their provision. This set the tone for national QA developments, in which the institutions play a key role while being supported and monitored by the QA agencies.

A further push for the development of external and internal QA was provided when the ESG were adopted in 2005. The ESG were developed by ENQA, in collaboration with ESU, EUA and EURASHE, and outlined the principles by which internal and external QA should be carried out in the EHEA. It required the higher education institutions and the QA agencies to ensure the quality of their activities.

This set in motion a variety of QA reforms at national level aimed at aligning QA approaches with the principles presented in the document. New QA agencies and processes were created or existing ones were transformed to match the expectations set out by the ESG (ENQA, 2011a). As of June 2015, 49 QA agencies are members of ENQA, and 40 agencies from 21 countries are registered in EQAR (ENQA 2015; EQAR website). This means that they have all been tested successfully against the ESG.⁶

Nonetheless, while external QA is to an increasing extent aligned with the ESG, there prevails a significant diversity in approaches. Thus, after a wave of accreditation procedures washed across the continent, the movement stopped and, contrary to what was expected in the early years of the Bologna Process, accreditation has not become the default form for external QA. A considerable portion of national systems and agencies rely instead on different forms of audit, evaluation or review.

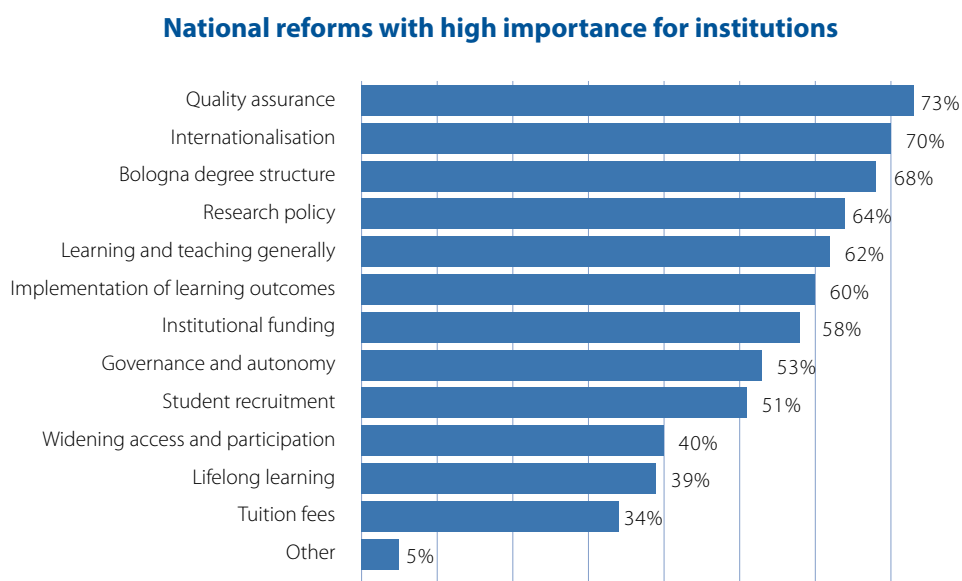
Furthermore, the past decade has seen the steady growth of institutional level (as opposed to programme level) QA approaches. An ENQA survey of its member agencies in 2008 found that about two-thirds carried out programme level QA and only 40% did so at institutional level (ENQA, 2008, p. 24). Four years later, a subsequent survey noted that there was an increased trend for agencies to operate both at institutional and programme levels. Furthermore, in the 2012 survey, 34% of the responding QA agencies identified the introduction of QA processes focused on the institution as a whole as the central change that would be introduced in the future (ENQA, 2012, p. 28). This, however, does not mean that institutional level QA has become the mainstream and single approach to external QA. The Implementation Report 2015 states that 26 QA systems focus on a combination of institutions and programmes:

Only three systems – Belgium (French Community), the Czech Republic and Sweden – now focus more exclusively on programmes (although in the French Community of Belgium there are also elements of institutional evaluation) and another three countries – Bosnia and Herzegovina, Finland and the United Kingdom – focus on institutions. Overall, this picture suggests that quality assurance systems are becoming more complex, and dealing with more information at different levels (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 91).

⁶ EQAR was established in 2008 to maintain a register of agencies operating in Europe, on the basis of their compliance with the ESG.

From the universities' perspective, Trends 2010 already showed that QA reforms had been the second most important change (after the Bologna Process) that affected them in the previous decade, and many Trends respondents expected quality assurance to stay high on their agenda in the upcoming years (Sursock and Smidt, 2010, p. 73). Five years later, Trends 2015 confirms that QA reforms continue to have high importance for universities with 73% of respondents giving it high priority – more than for any other reform (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Trends 2015 Q9 – Since 2010, how important have national reform initiatives on the following issues been for your institution? Answer option: “High importance” (Trends 2015 data)



To the extent that the two Trends questionnaires asked about the impact of these initiatives on the institutions, these changes show continuous importance for at least 15 years of both external and internal QA arrangements and processes. Thus, in parallel to the considerable efforts that have been put into external QA developments and reforms, higher education institutions themselves have been developing their own QA processes as is discussed later in this paper.

The impact of the ESG 2005

The ESG 2005 were based on the principle enunciated in the Berlin Communiqué that higher education institutions hold the primary responsibility for the quality of their provision. Part 1 of the ESG spelt out how an institution would be expected to do this through seven standards; this was the first European document to do so.

The EQC I survey carried out by EUA in 2010 showed that slightly over half (52%) of the responding institutions started working on a systematic approach to internal QA after 2005, with another fifth having launched similar work between 2000 and 2005 (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 21). This would indicate that the policies of the Bologna Process, and specifically the introduction of the ESG, have had impact at institutional level. However, a variety of studies have also shown that for higher education institutions, the ESG (and specifically its Part 1) is not necessarily the explicit document of reference for their QA work (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 35; Sursock and Smidt, 2010, p. 63; ENQA, 2011b, p. 42). When developing internal QA, institutions are more likely to be steered by the guidelines and criteria of their national external QA agency.

As discussed above, however, an overwhelming majority of European QA agencies design their own work in a way that is compliant with the ESG, which means that they incorporate Part 1 into their processes and criteria. The exact way in which agencies have done so varies. Some systems reference the ESG explicitly in national legislation while others incorporate them more loosely into the guidelines developed by the agency (AQ Austria, 2013, p. 19). Therefore, when examining how higher education institutions address each of the standards for internal QA, it is important to recognise that the standards are interpreted in a wide variety of ways and they are sensitive to national and institutional contexts. Indeed the diversity of European higher education is reflected in the range of QA approaches that are nonetheless developed within the common framework set out by the ESG.

Scope of the current ESG for internal QA

Like the ESG 2005, the current ESG are not only a list of standards and guidelines. In order to understand what they are about, one needs to be familiar with the introduction to the document, which lays out the context, scope, purposes and the principles of the ESG. For the purposes of this paper, and before examining each standard, it is worth looking in particular at how the introduction to the ESG defines their scope.

Firstly, the focus of the ESG is limited to the quality assurance of “learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation.” Early on in the ESG revision process, there was some discussion about widening this scope to cover all activities carried out by higher education institutions. This was rejected for a variety of reasons, among them the conclusions of EUA’s consultation of its members stating that

... attempting to define joint principles for quality assurance processes in these fields through the ESG would probably not be feasible given the present responsibilities and modalities in place in national systems. This is even more important as developments in this direction would not necessarily gain acceptance from the parties concerned (i.e. first and foremost, the research community) (ENQA, 2011b, p. 43).

Therefore, the introduction to the ESG acknowledges the need for institutions to focus not only on the aspects covered in the ESG Part 1 but also to have QA processes covering all their activities, albeit without specifying how these processes should look.

Secondly, the current ESG clarify the types of higher education covered by the standards: do they cover any higher education institution regardless of the award level that it delivers? Should they apply to transnational education? Joint programmes? Different modes of delivery? The response to all these questions is “yes”. As stated in the introduction of the current ESG, they “apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery”.

Will the scope of the current ESG be a challenge to higher education institutions?

Already in 2010, the EQC I survey results showed that while the vast majority of internal QA systems covered learning and teaching (98%), many also covered research (79%) and student support services (76%). Less common were QA processes for the governance and administration of an institution (66%) and service to society (48%) (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 19). This might have changed since then, but the EQC I results indicated an emphasis on the quality assurance of learning and teaching, albeit without neglecting other aspects. This may be related to the predominance of programme accreditation or evaluation procedures in the early days of quality assurance in Europe, which has been reflected in the ESG, as well as the general focus of the Bologna Process.

With regards to the specific modes of delivery and transnational education, there may be some need for adjustments of institutional QA processes. For instance, EUA's e-learning survey carried out in 2013 found that only 29% of the responding institutions had in place internal QA related to e-learning and 35% were discussing the matter (Gaebel *et al*, 2014, p. 42). With the growth of blended-learning, however, QA processes in this area might develop organically and may well extend to connected aspects such as lifelong learning provision.

III Mapping the status of internal QA

This chapter discusses each of the 10 standards that apply to higher education institutions. Using the available information, it presents the current state of implementation and recent progress, focusing in particular on the new or changed elements of the ESG, or areas where there is particular evidence of institutional development.

The ESG distinguish between the standards, which “set out agreed and accepted practice”, and the guidelines, which “explain why the standard is important and describe how standards might be implemented” (ESG, 2015). Thus, as a general rule this paper focuses on the standards and does not examine individual aspects of the guidelines in detail.

1.1 Policy for quality assurance

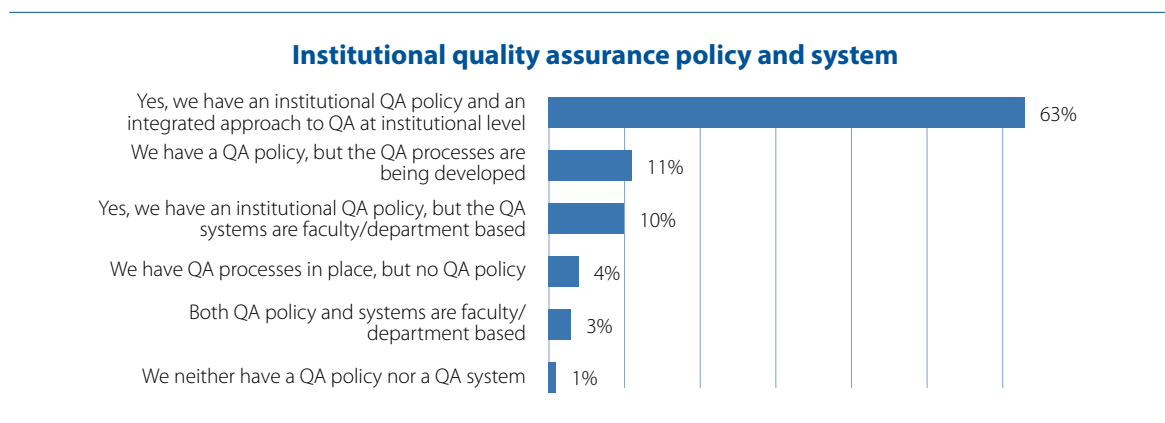
Standard: Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.

Standard 1.1 underlines the need for a strategic approach to quality assurance. The standard covers two aspects: (i) a policy underpinning the individual QA processes; and (ii) the need for this policy to be linked to the institution’s overall strategy. Furthermore, the standard stresses the need to engage all stakeholders, creating a broad ownership for quality and thereby fostering a quality culture.

Institutional QA policy

Trends 2015 shows that 87% of institutions have a QA policy, the vast majority at institutional level (84%) and some only at faculty level (3%); 4% of institutions have no QA policy in place but some form of internal QA processes. Only 1% of respondents reported having no QA policy or system in place in their institution (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Trends 2015 Q51 - Does your institution have an institutional quality assurance policy and system? (Sursock, 2015, p. 40)



Little is known about the content of these QA policies: no research currently exists on what the exact components are or their level of detail. However, it could be anticipated that the uptake of the current ESG may result in changes to these policies, in order to take into account some of the new elements mentioned in the guidelines of this standard, such as the issue of academic integrity, the links between the

teaching and research activities, and how QA processes are part of the institution's strategic management (cf. also Standard 1.7).

In the majority of cases, the requirement to have a QA policy and processes is stipulated not just by the external QA agencies (which are required by Standard 2.1 to evaluate this) but also by national legal requirements. The Implementation Report 2015 notes that there is a formal requirement at national level for institutions to establish internal QA systems in all the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), except Estonia and Switzerland (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 88). Even in these countries, however, requirements are embedded or implied in the guidelines of the national QA agency, despite the lack of a formal legal stipulation.

The Implementation Report 2015 also shows that in the majority of national systems (37 out of 47), it is the institutions that bear the ultimate responsibility for determining the focus of their internal QA system (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 88). This reflects a general adherence to the principle that institutions hold the primary responsibility for quality assurance, a key concept underpinning the ESG and European QA. However, the report also acknowledges that in many countries the national guidelines for internal QA systems may be so comprehensive that in practice the leeway for institutions is rather limited. This might mean that it would be challenging for these institutions to demonstrate that their QA policy is developed in line with their institutional strategies.

The Implementation Report 2015 also indicates not just an increase in the development of QA policies but also in their accessibility for stakeholders.⁷ Thus, in 33 national systems over 75% of the institutions have published a QA strategy in the past five years while in 15 systems 100% of institutions have done so, an increase from 12 in 2012 (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 88).

Involvement of the internal and external stakeholders

It is not sufficient to inform internal and external stakeholders about QA policies, Standard 1.1 expects that they are involved in the QA processes as well.

EQC I showed that the academic staff were overall more likely to be involved in formal QA processes than other institutional stakeholders, including administrative staff and institutional and faculty leadership (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, pp. 23-24).

Trends 2015 notes that students participated actively in QA activities in 83% of the responding institutions, for example as members of university or faculty QA committees (Sursock, 2015, p. 40). This reflects a wide involvement of students in institutional governance and decision-making processes, albeit more at the faculty than at the university level. Thus, 72% of Trends respondents reported that their students have the right to vote in faculty and departmental bodies. At the institutional level, many institutions give their students voting rights in the senate (66%) and the university board/council (58%). Furthermore, "Where students do not have voting rights, they usually have a consultative role; it is very rare that they are completely absent from the decision-making process" (Sursock, 2015, p. 89).

BWSE 2015 confirms that over 96% of their respondents stated that students were involved in institutional decision-making structures and in many cases their representation in these bodies is guaranteed by law. However, the report also notes that the quality of participation varies considerably from tokenistic to genuine involvement (ESU, 2015, p. 43). Specifically related to quality assurance, an earlier survey carried out by ESU noted that 60% of students reported limited or no knowledge about quality processes at institutional level (ESU, 2013, pp. 61-62). Similar results were seen with regards to QA activities at the

⁷ Stakeholders are defined as "all actors within an institution, including students and staff, as well as external stakeholders such as employers and external partners of an institution" (ESG, 2015).

programme level (58%). Around half of the students surveyed (51%) had “some”, “good”, or “in-depth” knowledge about how to get involved in institutional QA processes (ESU, 2013, p. 63).

External stakeholders are involved in institutions in multiple ways. As an example, Trends 2015 notes that the percentage of institutions considering that “cooperation with industry was highly important went up from 43% in 2010 to 53% in 2015 and is expected to grow by 16% in the medium term” (Sursock, 2015, p. 54). As part of new accountability frameworks, a growing trend is to integrate external stakeholders in governing boards, whether these are university-wide or in a specific faculty (Estermann *et al.*, p. 29). In addition, employers are also involved in programme revision as is discussed under Standard 1.2 below.

However, while the involvement of students and academic staff in institutional QA have been given some attention in previous research, the engagement of other stakeholder groups in this specific area, beyond their general involvement in governance, has not been studied with any depth or continuity.

Furthermore, while the link between QA policy and institutional strategy may be implied through overall governance structures that bear ultimate responsibility for quality assurance, there is little comparative European information about how this works in practice. However, the evidence points to a generally positive situation regarding the development and accessibility of QA policies, providing a good basis for further progress.

1.2 Design and approval of programmes

Standard: Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.

Standard 1.2 has been revised to include a reference to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA),⁸ which was adopted during the ministerial meeting in Bergen in 2005, that is, at the same time as the first version of the ESG. This explains why the ESG 2005 did not reference it. Progress in the implementation of learning outcomes and the growing number of national qualifications frameworks that are certified to be in line with the QF-EHEA made it possible to make a link between two Bologna action lines at institutional level: quality assurance and qualification frameworks.

The following sections discuss qualifications frameworks and learning outcomes, while setting aside the issue of ECTS – a connected aspect that is addressed in the guidelines that accompany Standard 1.2, but not explicitly in the standard itself.⁹ A third section is focused on the involvement of external and internal stakeholders in programme design.

Qualifications frameworks

The QF-EHEA describes the three degree cycles with the help of generic descriptors based on learning outcomes and credit ranges. The Bologna signatories expressed their commitment to the development of national qualifications frameworks (NQFs), in line with the QF-EHEA, as instruments for achieving comparability and transparency within Europe, thereby facilitating mobility and more flexible study programmes (i.e. with modules based on learning outcomes and ECTS). According to the Implementation

⁸ The QF-EHEA can be consulted in full here: http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/QF/050520_Framework_qualifications.pdf; cf. also: <http://www.ehea.info/article-details.aspx?ArticleId=67>

⁹ Those interested in the ECTS discussion can turn to the Implementation Report 2015, BWSE 2015, and the newly revised ECTS guide http://www.ehea.info/Uploads/SubmittedFiles/1_2015/125002.pdf

Report 2015, progress has been slow and mostly achieved during the period 2012-2015 (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, pp. 66-69).

Although 64% of Trends 2015 respondents state that they have a NQF, it is only in four countries – Belgium, Ireland, the Netherlands and the United Kingdom¹⁰ – that all institutions answer in the same way. This is surprising given that the self-certification process for implementation of a NQF requires it to be fully used by institutions; therefore, one would expect that in the self-certified countries, all institutions would answer that they have a NQF (Sursock, 2015, p. 37). This is clearly not the case as around half of the countries have completed the self-certification process (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, pp. 66-67). Trends 2015 concludes that although NQFs are seen as having had a globally positive impact in promoting transparency, they “may have fallen short of broadly engaging the academic community, although response from institutional leadership in a number of countries indicate a far higher awareness and use than is commonly assumed” (Sursock, 2015, p. 54).

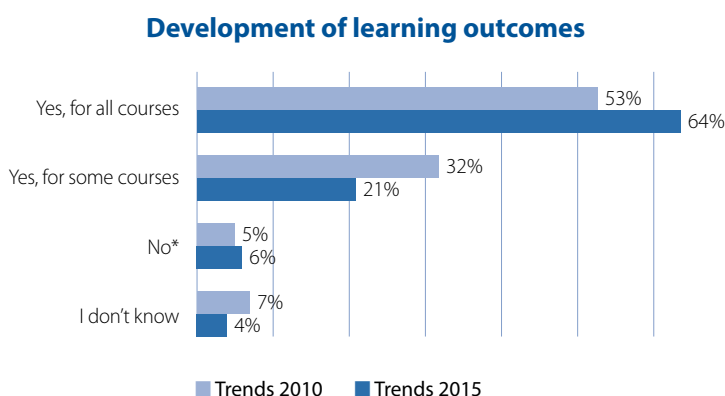
Similarly, BWSE 2015 shows a failure in engaging students in this reform. It reports that eighteen unions saw little real use of the NQF, even when it was adopted formally (ESU, 2015, p. 49).

Learning outcomes

A discussion of qualifications frameworks leads naturally to the issue of learning outcomes. As mentioned above, there has been a progressive implementation of learning outcomes in Europe as reflected in the results of various studies.

According to Trends 2015, implementation of learning outcomes has been of high importance to 60% of respondents, with 64% reporting that learning outcomes had been developed for all courses and a further 21% stating that this had been the case for some courses (Sursock, 2015, p. 77). This reflects continuous progress since Trends 2010 as Figure 3 shows.

Figure 3: Trends 2010 Q19 & Trends 2015 Q36 – Have learning outcomes been developed? (Sursock, 2015, p. 77)



* Trends 2015 “No”: “No, but we intend to” (5%) plus “No” (1%)

The Implementation Report 2015 shows that there has been a strong push for institutions to adopt this approach, with 32 higher education systems stipulating the use of learning outcomes and a further 14 encouraging learning outcomes through guidelines or recommendations (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 72). Indeed, the Trends 2015 results show that this is a high priority in many countries, with most striking

¹⁰ In the case of the United Kingdom, there are three UK QFs: England and Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland. All three are referenced to EQF and feature in the comparison tool on the EQF website: <https://ec.europa.eu/ploteus/en/compare>.

progressions in Denmark, the Netherlands, Sweden and the United Kingdom where 100% of institutions have developed learning outcomes for all courses. In Belgium, Ireland, Lithuania, Norway, Poland, Slovakia and Spain at least 75% of institutions have done so (Sursock, 2015, p. 77).

From the student perspective, the implementation of learning outcomes has also been noticed. BWSE 2015 states: “51% of students confirmed having results of study programmes defined in terms of learning outcomes” and “59% of respondents said that at least in some cases, students are evaluated in terms of those learning outcomes” (ESU, 2015, p. 45). The results of the Trends questionnaire reflects this finding, albeit with a higher proportion of institutions (67%) reporting that assessment approaches had been revised as part of introducing a learning-outcome approach (Sursock, 2015, p. 78).

While the quantitative results of these three studies cannot be compared, it is safe to conclude that there is a partial implementation of learning outcomes in Europe. In places where the approach is well established, the external QA system usually takes this into account in programme accreditation, evaluation or approval.

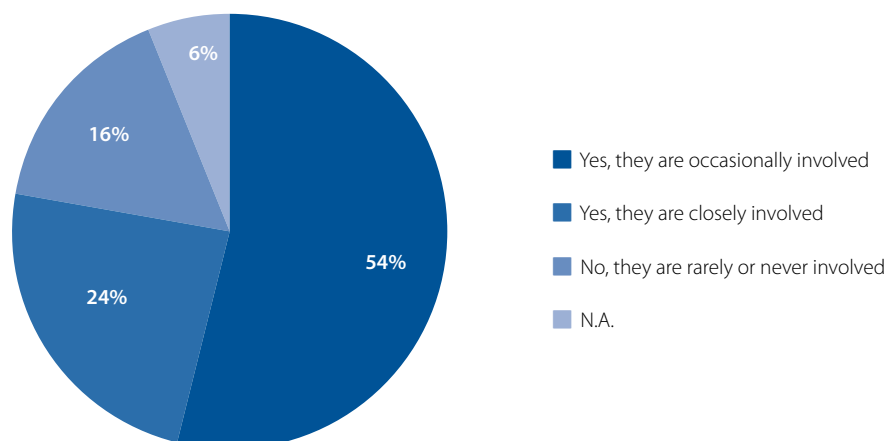
Involvement of internal and external stakeholders in programme design

There is little recent comparative European research on the exact processes used by institutions for the involvement of internal and external stakeholders in curriculum design and development. In 2010, the EQC I study reported that programme design was carried out by a “working group, committee or equivalent” among 85% of the respondents (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 29), while BWSE 2015 comments that “79% of student representatives stated that students are in some way consulted with regards to curriculum development. 18% of them believe that it is only formally, while 21% of students are not consulted at all” (ESU, 2015, p. 44).

With the increased importance given to employability of graduates, the participation of external stakeholders has been a particular topic of debate. Trends 2015 shows that employers and professional associations are involved in curriculum development either closely or at least occasionally at over three-quarters of institutions (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Trends 2015 Q37 – Are professional associations and employers involved in curriculum development? (Trends 2015 data)

Involvement of professional associations or employers in curriculum development



The longitudinal analysis of Trends data since 2003 shows that involvement of external stakeholders seems to have been particularly prevalent during the peak time when degree structures were redesigned as part of the Bologna Process; since then, their involvement is less frequent for the routine programme revision process (Sursock, 2015, p. 81).

In sum, while there have been developments in introducing NQFs and learning outcomes, this is still work in progress. The involvement of internal and external stakeholders will require attention as well, to ensure that this is done in the most appropriate and useful manner.

1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Standard: Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

Student-centred learning (SCL) has become central to the Bologna reforms. However, when the ESG 2005 were developed, the discussion was about “students as partners in higher education”. Standard 1.3 is new and was developed to both capture this change and respond to criticism that quality assurance in higher education was too far removed from learning and teaching and did not consider the quality of the students’ learning experience. Due to the broad nature of this standard, its implementation will inevitably be linked to a number of other issues covered by the ESG, in particular Standard 1.2.

What is student-centred learning? The three main reports produced for the Yerevan meeting define SCL in roughly the same way; unsurprisingly, the wording of Standard 1.3 reflects this broad consensus.

The three reports are globally positive about progress with SCL, albeit with some reservations. Thus, although Trends 2015 is mostly affirmative, it concludes: “not all these positive developments are common everywhere and, therefore, more progress is needed” (Sursock, 2015, p. 94).

BWSE 2015 is equally encouraging about progress but similarly raises some doubts. On the positive side, the report observes that “there has clearly been some progress in the past years, and 90% of our respondents agree with this statement... 38% of student representative respondents have had direct influence in promoting the SCL concept through their respective organisations.” On the negative side, however, it found that 50% of the student representatives think that progress is slow while “the other half see concrete actions taking place, but are still not convinced that SCL has been made a clear priority in higher education, and observe that SCL has still not been presented to students with all its characteristics and opportunities” (ESU, 2015, p. 41).

The Implementation Report 2015 elaborates further, identifying as particular challenges “a lack of recognition of the value of student evaluation of teaching, independent learning and the use of learning outcomes” (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 18).

While there is consensus on both the definition of student-centred learning and the fact that there is partial progress in this area, it is unclear what evidence will or should be used to show that the requirements of this standard are being met. How will institutions demonstrate that their students are more actively engaged in the learning process? Should it require the use of students’ evaluation of teaching? Should it encompass students’ involvement in governance and the support given to student organisations? Will it be done by showing how learning outcomes are used and assessed? If so, what evidence should be used (e.g. looking at a sample of students’ works)?

Thus, due to the broad scope of Standard 1.3 and the variety of forms that student-centred learning can take, two challenges emerge for institutions: implementing SCL and demonstrating evidence of this implementation.

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", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Standard 1.4 is new and an acknowledgment that the quality of the student experience depends, in part, on the integrity and effectiveness of processes related to admission, progression, recognition and certification.

The standard focuses on the existence and consistent application of published regulations in these four areas. These four steps in the students' lifecycle have certainly been regulated but there is precious little in the three main reports produced for Yerevan to show that the regulations are published and available. Instead, the reports focus on the effectiveness of some important aspects such as dropout rates (Trends 2015 and BWSE 2015) and tracking student progression (Trends 2015) and most particularly recognition, which has been flagged as an issue in the Bologna Process for the past 15 years.

Admission

Admission is an institutional practice that usually rests on a set of formal policies. Formally satisfying this aspect of the standard should not be an issue for the vast majority of higher education institutions, although it is important to keep in mind that admission can be regulated nationally, institutionally or both (Estermann *et al.*, 2011, pp. 44-47), which means that, in some cases, institutions do not have much autonomy in this regard.

Furthermore, it remains to be seen if this standard will be interpreted in such a way that societal issues and widening access are also taken into account. Nevertheless, the important point is that institutions have obligations toward their students to be fair and transparent and consider that specific admission policies (e.g. selective vs. open admission) have consequences on other aspects of the students' learning experience (and related standards of the ESG).

Progression

Collecting and analysing data on students, including on their progression, are essential responsibilities for higher education institutions and should be carried out regularly to look for patterns of success and failure and analyse and address their underlying causes.

An EUA report found that in 22 out of 31 higher education systems covered by the study, all institutions tracked their students, while in a further eight systems, at least some institutions tracked students (Gaebel *et al.*, 2012, p. 10). This is primarily done through administrative systems that collect and store information on progress (Gaebel *et al.*, 2012, p. 25).

Thus, the growing use of new software is putting at the disposal of institutions a wide range of data that can be analysed. By using sophisticated data mining, institutions can identify and respond more effectively

to difficulties met by their students and develop and further improve student services (for more on student services, cf. Standard 1.6). Furthermore, aside from providing valuable data to complement other information (cf. Standard 1.7), data mining enhances an institution's capacity for strategic development and evidence-based decision-making (cf. also Gaebel *et al.*, 2012, p. 51).

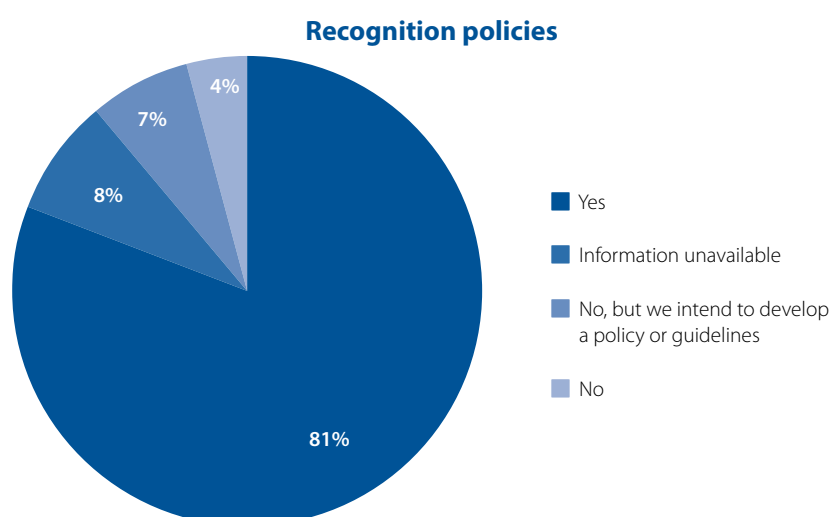
Recognition

With respect to recognition, when ministers met in 2012, they considered the E4 Group's proposal to revise the ESG and the report of the BFUG working group on recognition that put forward the expectation that any revised ESG should include the quality assurance of recognition procedures (2012, p. 4). As a result, the Bucharest Communiqué (2012, p. 4) encouraged "higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies to assess institutional recognition procedures in internal and external quality assurance" and endorsed the European Area of Recognition Manual.¹¹

All three reports produced for the Yerevan meeting focus on recognition, which is seen as an essential element of the EHEA, with both BWSE 2015 and the Implementation Report 2015 addressing the national aspects of recognition and of the Lisbon Convention.¹² According to the Implementation Report 2015, in 12 of the EHEA countries, final recognition decisions are made by the central government authority upon the advice of the ENIC/NARIC offices¹³ or by the ENIC/NARIC themselves; this means that where "recognition implies a right to admission, the higher education institutions are excluded from a decision-making process that affects them directly" (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, p. 79). Clearly, as with the general admission process, there are issues of institutional autonomy in some national systems that the QA process will need to take into account when assessing how this standard is implemented.

Trends 2015 questioned institutions on the issue of recognition and found that, as required by the standard, the majority have a policy or guidelines to administer this function (see Figure 5).

Figure 5: Trends 2015 Q54 – Does your institution have an institutional policy or guidelines for the recognition of credits and degrees? (Trends 2015 data)



Nevertheless, the report concludes that the challenges of recognition endure: the obstacles have been identified for at least a decade and the most frequent challenge is related to "a misplaced focus on the

¹¹ http://eurorecognition.eu/manual/EAR_manual_v_1.0.pdf Since then another manual on recognition (this time for higher education institutions) has come out (<http://eurorecognition.eu/Manual/EAR%20HEI.pdf>)

¹² Cf. http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/recognition/lrc_EN.asp

¹³ For the description of ENIC/NARIC, cf. <http://www.enic-naric.net/welcome-to-the-enic-naric-website.aspx>

notion of equivalency. This includes differences in content, credit points, length of studies, types of examinations and grading cultures” (Sursock, 2015, p. 46).

The Trends 2015 report observes, however, that “institutions take credit recognition seriously and that this is not an ad hoc and informal process by any means”; thus, recognition procedures are evaluated by 39% of Trends respondents and a number of institutions have put in place oversight mechanisms to ensure the integrity of the process (Sursock, 2015, p. 47).

Certification

Certification refers to the document issued to students upon finishing a course of study (“documentation explaining the qualification gained” to use the language of the ESG). While the standard does not specifically refer to the Diploma Supplement (DS),¹⁴ in practice the DS should be the most commonly used tool for this.

The DS was developed before the qualifications frameworks and the learning-outcome approach were emphasised in the Bologna Process and various reports have identified challenges in using it (e.g. Sursock and Smidt, 2010, pp. 55-56; ESU, 2015, p. 61; EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015 pp. 74-76). In 2014, the Structural Reforms Working Group recommended that the Council of Europe, the European Commission and UNESCO revise this document (SRWG, 2014, p. 9).

Regardless of difficulties with the current version of the DS, the important point here is that it is incumbent upon institutions to provide clear and transparent information about what students have learned, and to guarantee the integrity of the documentation that certifies that a study cycle has been completed.

In meeting the requirements for this standard, there is evidence to suggest that there is room for improvement both in ensuring fair policies at all stages of the student lifecycle and in making these policies publicly accessible. It is clear that progress in some aspects will be closely linked to national regulations and, particularly in the case of certification, developments at European level.

1.5 Teaching staff

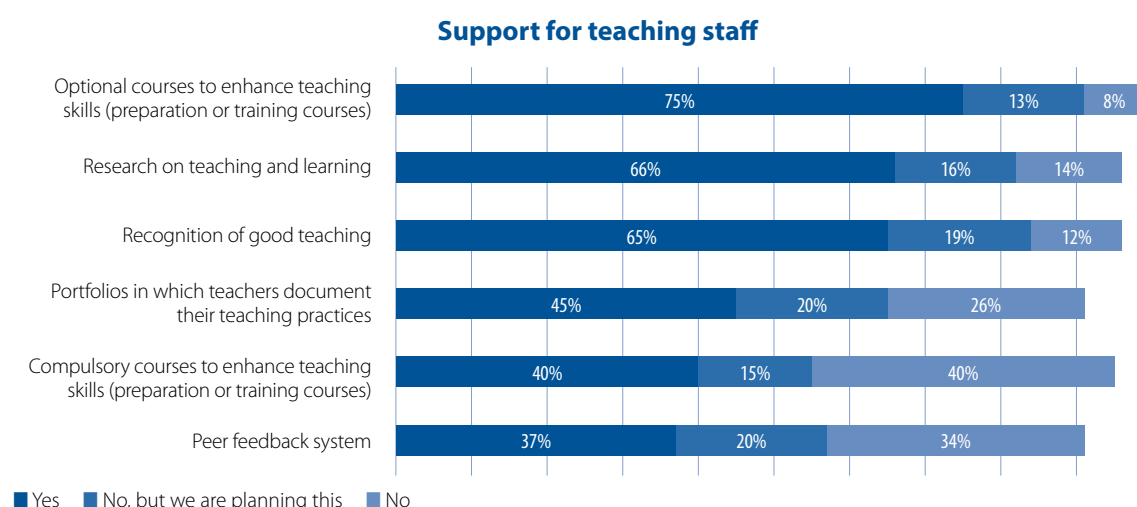
Standard: Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.

Standard 1.5 covers issues related to teaching staff, from recruitment through to evaluation and support offered through pedagogical training.

As a starting point, Trends 2015 mentions that there is a growing recognition of the importance of teaching for 59% of its respondents (35% state that this is the case “to some extent”). This is reflected in the introduction of innovative teaching methods and techniques for 57% (“to some extent” for a further 40%) (Sursock, 2015, p. 80). Other initiatives commonly taken by institutions to support and value teaching (see Figure 6) include recognition of good teaching (65% of Trends respondents) and research on teaching and learning (66%). Less common approaches are teaching practice portfolios (45%) and the use of a peer feedback system (37%), although this figure shows progression from the 19% of EQC I respondents who reported using such a system in 2010 (EQC I data).

¹⁴ For a full explanation of the Diploma Supplement cf. http://ec.europa.eu/education/policy/higher-education/doc/ds_en.pdf

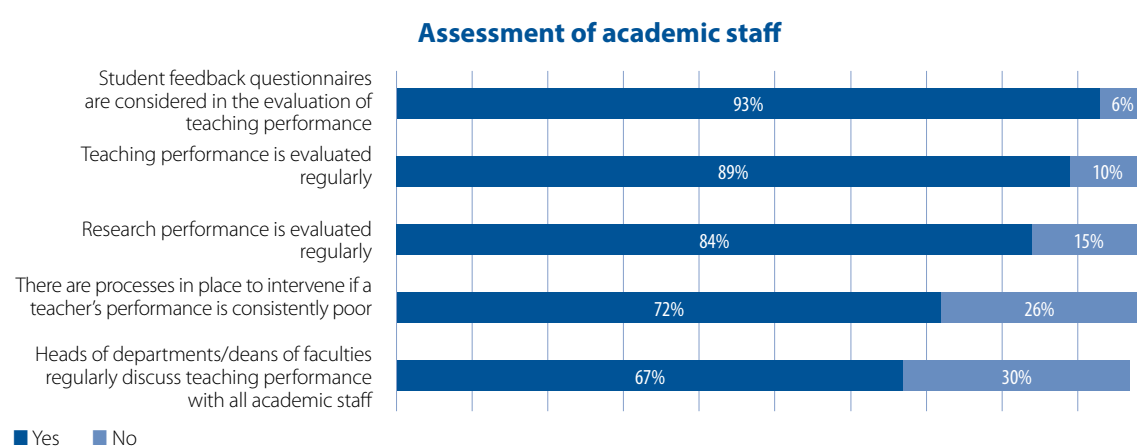
Figure 6: Trends 2015 Q13 – Has there been a systematic effort to introduce or enhance the following at your institution? (Respondents could choose multiple answers) (Trends 2015 data)



The Europe-wide studies currently available do not provide information on whether the growing importance of teaching has had an impact on recruitment practices, nor is there information on how fair and transparent these processes are. In 2010 EQC I found that 56% of institutional recruitment practices were bound by formal national requirements for teaching competencies, while 63% had their own institutional requirements (EQC I data).

With regards to the evaluation of teaching staff (see Figure 7), 89% of Trends respondents do this regularly: slightly more than the percentage of respondents (84%) that evaluate research performance. When evaluating teaching performance, whether this is done regularly or occasionally, 93% of Trends respondents reported that they take into account the results of student feedback questionnaires. In addition, 72% of Trends respondents reported that there are processes in place to intervene if a teacher's performance is consistently poor. This indicates development since 2010, when EQC I reported that just under a third of institutions (31%) had processes in place to oblige teachers to improve if they were demonstrably ineffective (EQC I data).

Figure 7: Trends 2015 Q15 - Which of the following is applied in the assessment of academic staff at your institution? (Respondents could choose multiple answers) (Trends 2015 data)

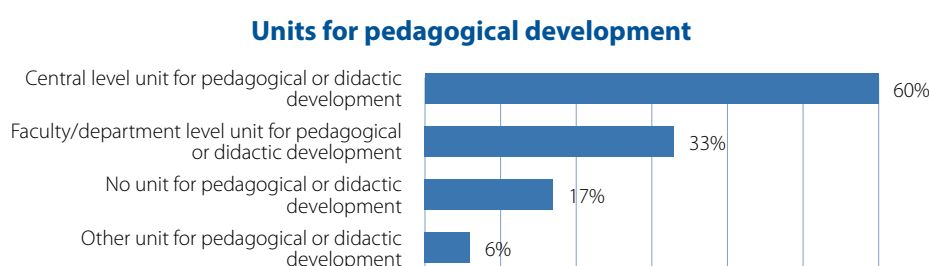


Evaluating teaching regularly has resulted in a renewed emphasis on the skills and professional development of teaching staff. Furthermore, an essential condition for being successful in developing

student-centred learning is to provide teachers with opportunities allowing them to master new ways of teaching and understand better how to promote active and independent learning (thus, Standard 1.5 is closely linked to Standard 1.3). Pedagogical development has become more prevalent as a consequence. In 2010 the EQC I survey showed that 62% of institutions organised optional pedagogical training, and in 26% of institutions this was compulsory (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 34). Trends 2015 reports that 75% of institutions offer optional courses and 40% offer compulsory courses, with some institutions offering both options (Sursock, 2015, p. 83).

To facilitate the support that is offered to teachers, 60% of the Trends respondents have a central unit for pedagogical development and 33% at faculty or departmental level. Only 17% reported having no such unit at any level (see Figure 8).

Figure 8: Trends 2015 Q14 - At your institution, is there a unit for pedagogical or didactic development? (Respondents could choose multiple answers) (Trends 2015 data)



In sum, while the reports show progression in the area of academic staff evaluation and development, evaluating recruitment practices requires taking into account, in some countries, the extent of institutional autonomy.

1.6 Learning resources and student support

Standard: Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.

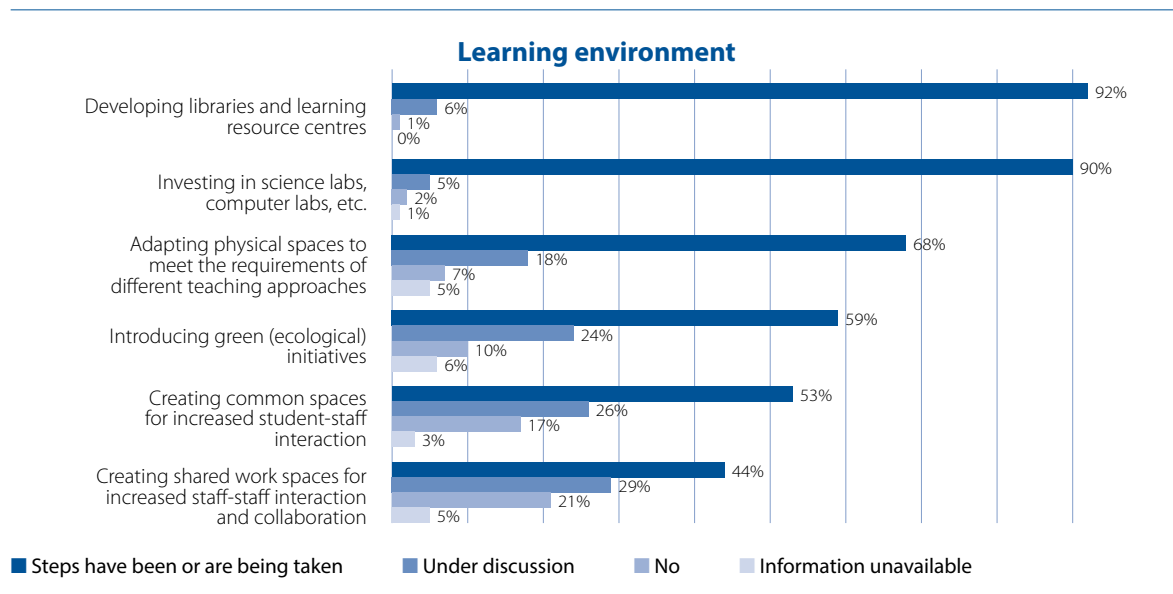
Good teaching is certainly central in ensuring student success (as discussed in Standard 1.5) but so is the quality of the general learning environment, as well as the ancillary student services and the support provided to student representative associations.

By considering all these aspects, Trends 2015 provides a good overview of current institutional practice in this area (Sursock, 2015, pp. 86-90). The results show rather strong patterns of convergence in supporting students at all points of their lifecycle. Many of the items covered in Trends 2015 were offered by 50% to 95% of respondents. These included bridging courses, academic orientation, academic advice, mentoring/tutoring, psychological counselling, special support for first-year students, career guidance and events to promote the employment prospects of graduates, etc. Students with special needs are not forgotten: additional courses are available to bolster some of their skills. Most importantly, Trends 2015 observes that institutions located in countries that stood out as offering the largest range of student services have seen their dropout rate reduced (Sursock, 2015, p. 90).

Trends 2015 documents that changes in the learning environment seem fairly common. They include improving equipment, libraries and learning centres and creating common rooms for students and staff as well as centres for learning and teaching as Figure 9 shows. Trends 2015, however, does caution that it is

difficult to evaluate the scope of the changes introduced based on a questionnaire (Sursock, 2015, p. 94). In 2010, the EQC I survey had already reported that the majority of institutions offered learning resources and that improvements were made often even if many did not systematically monitor and evaluate them (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, pp. 31-32).

Figure 9: Trends 2015 Q17 – Have the following issues been addressed at your institution?
(Respondents could choose multiple answers) (Sursock, 2015, p. 85)



Thus, there are indications that providing a suitable learning environment, including through support services, is an area that is a growing focus of attention for institutions, including for the most research-oriented universities (Sursock, 2015, p. 18).

1.7 Information management

Standards: Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.

An institution's self-knowledge and ability to collect, manage and use data (both quantitative and qualitative) form a core part of its strategic decision-making processes. As such, effective information management is also linked to many other aspects of the ESG. Unsurprisingly, institutions are increasingly investing in this function and making use of electronic information management systems.

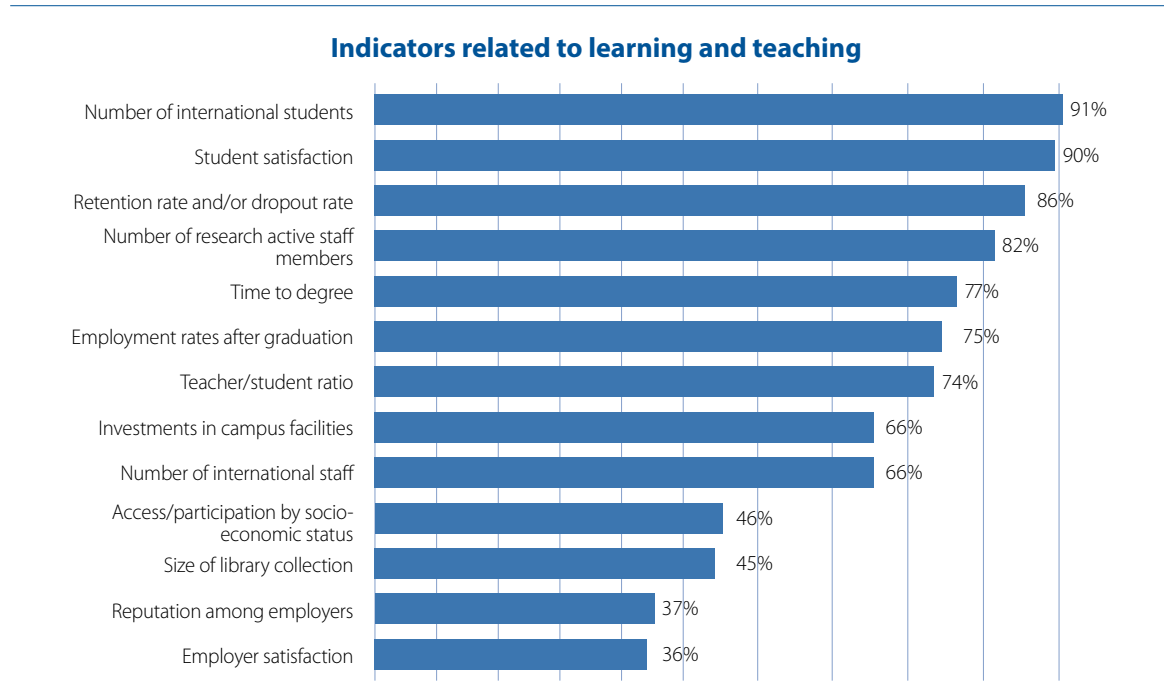
This section covers the general issues related to information management and offers some additional information on the use of surveys, which are a common method of collecting feedback from stakeholders and in particular from students.

Previous EUA studies have pointed out that there are many challenges associated with information management and there remains a need for institutions to invest in developing their institutional research capacity, particularly as a result of increased demands for accountability (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2014, p. 50; Loukkola and Morais, 2015, p. 15). However, Trends 2015 paints a more positive picture by noting that the institutional research function is developing quickly, at least as it relates to its learning and teaching mission (Sursock, 2015, p. 92). The apparent contradiction in these findings may be explained by the fact that these reports referred to data collected and used for different purposes – external vs. internal.

In many countries, the data collection and key performance indicators are required by the national framework. A primary example of this is the requirement to monitor completion and dropout rates. The Implementation Report 2015 shows that the majority of EHEA countries systematically measure this at the end of the first and second cycles. In countries where it is not done at system level, some form of data collection takes place at institutional level. In almost one third of EHEA countries, performance indicators have an impact on institutional funding (EC/EACEA/Eurydice, 2015, pp. 179-181).

The EQC I data shed light on the type of indicators used, with the most common being student progression and success rate (88%) and profile of the student population (83%) (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 26). A more recent EUA study (Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2014) investigated the wide range of indicators used by institutions as part of their strategic planning and internal monitoring. Figure 10 lists the indicators related to learning and teaching.

Figure 10: In the framework of your strategic planning and internal monitoring of activities, does your institution pay special attention to the following, either at institutional or at faculty level? (Respondents could choose multiple answers) (Adapted from Hazelkorn *et al.*, 2014, p. 42)



Surveys

Feedback collected from stakeholders, particularly students, can be used to complement other information. Trends 2015 reveals that 98% of institutions gather student feedback on teaching; 83% on the general learning environment and 73% on support services (Sursock, 2015, p. 83).

One of the most commonly used methods for collecting feedback remains surveys: 76% of institutions that responded to the Trends 2015 questionnaire report having a central unit to analyse student survey data. A further 6% are planning to set one up and 6% say that this function is handled at faculty level (Sursock, 2015, p. 92). Responses also show that information collected this way is used primarily for three broad purposes: to evaluate and improve the institution; to evaluate people; and to improve the interface with society (Sursock, 2015, p. 91).

Of the institutions that systematically conduct student surveys, 84% of institutions actively use them for strategic purposes, as part of the internal QA processes and for a dialogue between central leadership and faculties (68% use them centrally, 16% at faculty level) (Trends 2015 data).

Gathering feedback from graduates is also an increasingly common activity, with 53% of Trends respondents doing so regularly (Sursock, 2015, p. 90). Trends 2015 also found that the most common use for graduate surveys is “for strategic purposes and to enhance the quality of teaching provision and services” (80%) (Trends 2015 data). This may also reflect the increased pressure on institutions to consider employability as an aspect of their curriculum design, as discussed in Standard 1.2.

In addition to the use of surveys, institutions are seeking other ways to collect feedback. This includes, for example, using focus groups and paying attention to feedback gained through informal communication (Sursock, 2011, pp. 39-40; Gover and Loukkola, 2015, p. 29).

Overall, there is evidence to suggest that institutions are developing their ability to collect and manage information in a variety of formats, but that there is still work to be done to ensure that they can respond efficiently to the range of demands for information, from feeding into programme revision and decision-making processes to responding to external accountability requirements.

1.8 Public information

Standard: Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to-date and readily accessible.

The demand for institutions to provide transparent and reliable data on their activities has grown in recent years following increased expectations towards higher education to play an active role in society. This is particularly the case following the financial crisis, which has made policy makers examine carefully the return on investments in higher education. Furthermore, targeted information is also important, notably to prospective students who require specific information to enable them to make informed decisions regarding places of study and to employers who look at other types of information for recruitment purposes.

The reports published in advance of the 2015 ministerial meeting in Yerevan did not provide information on how the institutions address the expectations of this standard. Previous research has shown that institutions offer public information on their programmes, but the exact components of that information vary considerably. According to the EQC I study the information most commonly available is about the qualifications granted; the teaching, learning and assessment procedures of a programme; and the intended learning outcomes. Each of these types of information was made available by over 80% of institutions surveyed, with information on the qualifications granted unsurprisingly topping the list, being provided by 87% of institutions. Quantitative data came next, with information on the number of students and number of academic staff involved in a programme supplied by 76% and 70% of institutions respectively (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 27).

With the increasing importance that higher education stakeholders attach to employability, it could be anticipated that institutions will pay more attention to collecting and publishing information on the employment of their graduates. As mentioned under Standard 1.7, higher education institutions are putting more effort into graduate tracking. Despite this, responses to the Trends questionnaire indicate that less than half of institutions (44%) use the information collected through graduate surveys to communicate with the public (for example, by publishing the information on the institution’s website) (Sursock, 2015, p. 91).

As already mentioned, students form a key target group for information. A recent project by ESU provided some further insights into their sources of information. It found that the websites of both the institution and the programme are used more often and considered more important, with better quality information, than other institutional information sources (e.g. open days and printed brochures) and external sources, such as rankings (ESU, 2013, pp. 43-46).

In sum, public information is provided by most institutions and is found by students to be quite useful. However, the format and exact content of the information vary considerably and public information is bound to grow further.

1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

Standard: Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.

The issues covered in this standard are at the core of internal QA: ensuring the programmes are fit for purpose. The regular monitoring and review of programmes and then closing the feedback loop by revising them based on the results of the monitoring, taking into account the principles set out in Standards 1.2 and 1.3, form a critical part of an institution's QA activities. Despite the importance of this, there is a lack of information available at European level as to exactly what sort of processes institutions use to review their programmes and how this fulfils the requirements set out by the standard.

In 2010, EQC I data indicated that two-thirds of institutions (67%) had processes in place as part of external QA activities, and the majority of these institutions reported some sort of internal processes as well. EQC I also noted that there was a variety of internal processes and combination of activities, both formal and informal, implying that there did not exist one typical model to approach the evaluation of programmes (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 30). Furthermore, EQC I concluded that there was room for improvement when it comes to taking action on the basis of the evidence gathered from programme reviews and communicating these activities to stakeholders (Loukkola and Zhang, 2010, p. 38).

Particularly in light of changes to external QA approaches from focusing on programme level to institutional level, it is likely to become even more important that higher education institutions can demonstrate reliably that they are able to review their own programmes effectively.

1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

Standard: Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

Standard 1.10 is not new to the ESG but it has been moved from Part 2 to Part 1 in the current version, thus shifting the responsibility for ensuring the cyclical nature of quality assurance from the external agencies to the institutions.

The background for moving this standard was to address the implications of a statement in the Bucharest Communiqué aiming to “allow EQAR-registered agencies to perform their activities across the EHEA, while complying with national requirements” (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012, p. 2). This would create a situation where the responsibility for ensuring the cyclical nature of external QA no longer lies with the QA agency but with institutions, which – hypothetically – could each time turn to a different agency to conduct a review.

However, research by EQAR has shown that realisation of the political commitment given in the Bucharest Communiqué has been slow. While a growing number of QA agencies are offering their services across

borders, for institutions the use of a foreign QA agency is ruled out by national legislation in most cases. Only 25% of countries had in place legislative provisions to allow higher education institutions to choose an EQAR-registered agency other than their national one; and even in these countries the provision may come with a number of limitations or apply only to specific cases (for example, joint programmes or transnational education) (EQAR, 2014).

Thus, while compliance with this standard will not be a problem for institutions, it is clear that in most cases they are not at liberty to choose the manner in which they meet its requirements. However, now that the standard is part of the ESG Part 1, it does invest institutions with the important responsibility of reflecting how external QA processes can provide added value to them. With careful planning and coordination of both internal and external QA processes, an institution can take full advantage of the external processes, in order to stimulate further self-reflection, gain alternative perspectives and improve its activities.

IV Conclusions

This paper provided the reader with a concise overview of the themes addressed in the current ESG and discussed the extent to which institutional QA systems meet the expectations they set out. The chosen method – relying on data collected from different sources of information and for a variety of purposes – has its limitations and does not allow in-depth investigation of some topics of interest.

Where information is available, it shows that while a number of challenges remain, in most cases higher education institutions are already making progress in the direction indicated by the standards. As institutions continue to work in this area, it will be crucial to recognise that the standards in the ESG Part 1 are interlinked, even overlapping to an extent. As a result, a weakness in meeting the expectations of one standard may well have an impact on the implementation of several other standards.

From the material presented in this paper, the following five themes may require further attention on the part of institutional leaders and quality officers:

1. **The need to link quality assurance to institutional strategic management** is explicitly mentioned in Standard 1.1, but is crucial also for fulfilling the requirements set in various other standards (1.4, 1.7, 1.8 and 1.9). The reports examined for this paper did not provide information on how this link is currently made, but it would be important that each institution analyses how this happens in its own context and whether the link could be strengthened through a re-design of the QA system.
2. Closely linked to the role of quality assurance in supporting and being an integral part of institutional strategic management is **the institutional research capacity, that is, the ability of the QA system to generate information that is valuable for both internal decision-making and external stakeholders** (Standards 1.7 and 1.8). Previous EUA studies have indicated that this capacity currently varies and have made two key recommendations: that institutions collect the information that is useful and makes sense for their own context and purposes (Gover and Loukkola, 2015, p. 25) and that this is done through a variety of information sources and methods in order to ensure a comprehensive and objective view of institutional activities (Sursock, 2011, p. 50).
3. Several of the standards (1.4, 1.5, 1.6) deal with **ensuring the quality of student experience and success**. Evidence indicates that this is already of growing concern for institutions: student tracking is becoming more common, increasing attention is being paid to supporting teaching staff in improving their skills and acknowledging good teaching, and student services and learning support are in place. However, these aspects need constant monitoring and review so as to ensure that the measures taken continue to be fit for purpose and effective.
4. Standards 1.2 and 1.3 may be the elements of the current ESG that will lead to the most profound and interesting changes in quality assurance. Because both these standards make **a strong link between quality assurance and the academic quality of learning and teaching**, they will require joint actions across the institution. Higher education institutions will need to look at how they design and deliver their programmes and how they will demonstrate to external reviewers and stakeholders that they take into account the many aspects covered by these standards. These are topics that require expertise that is typically located outside the QA unit; therefore, it will be important to strengthen co-operation among different institutional actors.
5. With the rise of external QA regimes that focus on how institutions ensure the quality of their provision, rather than providing an external check at programme level, one could expect that increasing

importance will be placed on the need to **demonstrate that institutions have put in place robust measures to review their programmes** (Standard 1.9). However, the lack of comparative European data on the kind of processes that institutions use for reviewing their programmes is rather striking. This is clearly an area where the higher education community could benefit from sharing information and good practices. Regardless of this, it is crucial for each institution to put in place clear mechanisms for linking programme review to strategic management and decision-making.

Finally, it should be remembered that according to the ESG one of the principles for quality assurance in the EHEA is its role in supporting the development of quality cultures. By linking quality assurance more explicitly with strategic management and learning and teaching and by emphasising the involvement of different actors in quality assurance, it can be hoped that the ESG Part I provides an impetus for institutional leaders and quality officers to revisit their policies, making adjustments where necessary. In doing so, there is an opportunity to foster an institution-wide commitment to quality, thereby strengthening a quality culture in their institution.

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