



## **Mapping the implementation and application of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)**

Final Report

Public Part

## Project information

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## Executive Summary

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education (ESG) have been widely applied and implemented by the Bologna signatory countries since they were adopted by the Ministers in Bergen May 2005. The purpose of the ESG is to set high standards and a common ground for the professionally conducted QA procedures by collaborating with all the stakeholders.

As short-term target groups, the project aimed at reaching all the ENQA quality assurance member agencies and affiliates situated in Bologna signatory countries as well as higher education institutions and students. ENQA has 40 full member, 9 candidate members and 28 Affiliate bodies in 25 Bologna signatory countries. ENQA is also constantly connected to other regional QA networks in the U.S., Asia and Arabic countries. Students were reached through the European Students' Union (ESU) which currently represents 45 national unions of students in 38 European countries. European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), representing 1.200 higher education institutions in 33 countries within and outside the EHEA, and the European University Association (EUA), representing and supporting more than 750 higher education institutions in 47 countries, helped, from their side, to reach higher education institutions across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which uses the ESG when approving membership, and other stakeholders such as BusinessEurope, Education International and government representatives were also considered as short-term target groups.

Long-term target groups include the European Ministers of Education of the Bologna signatory countries and all other parties interested in quality assurance and using the ESG.

The overall aim of the MapESG project was to map the implementation of the ESG in the EHEA and detect the need for revision.

The project was undertaken jointly by the E4 Group comprising of European Students' Union (ESU), European University Association (EUA) and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) who was the leader and the coordinator of the project.

In order to achieve the main goal of the project, the E4 Group have respectively realised a consultation process within their constituencies and they identified how the ESG had been implemented and applied in the 47 Bologna signatory countries. One of the aims of the consultations was to see whether a revision of the ESG is deemed necessary.

The implementation of the project started with the gathering of preliminary feedback from stakeholders on the application of the ESG, in order to identify the most relevant issues to be investigated in the evaluation process. Following the feedback gathering, the consultation of chosen respondents took place, namely higher education institutions (HEIs), quality assurance agencies, the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), students and other stakeholders on their experience in the application of the ESG. As a third step, the information gathered during the first two phases were analysed and each partner drafted an interim report that were fed

into the final report and submitted to the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG). A Final Dissemination Conference was organised at the end of the project in order to present the results to the wider public.

Each partner carried out a consultation within their members using different methodologies such as online survey, workshops, face-to face interviews and direct emailing. All of the consultations resulted in a separate interim report with the findings of each partner which was then integrated and fed into the final report of the project. ENQA carried out its consultation at two levels resulting in a questionnaire that was sent to all ENQA Agencies and Affiliate bodies and the ENQA experts workshop. ESU evaluated the understandability, clarity and completeness of the ESG as well as its implementation and impact on the institutional, national and quality assurance agencies levels through a questionnaire and the work of a research team responsible for conducting the consultation. EUA managed its consultation process by doing desk research with existing information sources and workshops where the participating universities had the opportunity to benchmark their QA processes in teaching and learning against the ESG and share good practices. EURASHE, on its side, reached not only its members but also other professionals in the sector of QA via an on-line survey on its website and simultaneously used direct mailing in order to get touch with its “institutional members”. The next steps were to organize workshops at members’ events and to do structured and face-to-face interviews.

The use of different approaches and the consultation processes resulted in a well-documented and diverse set of findings.

The project presented an opportunity to evaluate, through the outcomes of the consultations, the need for a revision of the ESG. The project presented a unique opportunity to assess the effectiveness of the ESG and to understand the differences of implementation and impact of the ESG throughout the EHEA. The mapping revealed that a large number of respondents consider that a slight revision of the ESG is necessary in order to improve the clarity, applicability and consistency. The final findings of the project were presented to the European ministers responsible for higher education at the Ministerial Conference and Bologna Policy Forum in Bucharest on 26-27 April. In the communiqué of the Conference, it has been underlined that the ESG will be revised in order to *improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope*.

The project website has been active since the launch of the project and has provided the stakeholders with information and updates throughout the project. The website will be kept active after the project is over and will be accessible to public.

For further information please consult the project website:

[www.mapesg.wordpress.com](http://www.mapesg.wordpress.com)

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# 1. Project Objectives

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were published in 2005 in co-operation and consultation with ENQA member agencies and the E4 Group (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU). Since then, they have clearly contributed to the consistency of quality assurance (QA) procedures and transparency in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The ESG have contributed to the enhancement of a common understanding of QA and the development of a European dimension of QA. Nevertheless, the level of implementation of the ESG throughout the EHEA and their impact on European higher education had not been explored, which is why the Consortium decided to undertake the MapESG project.

The overall aim of the project was to evaluate how the ESG are interpreted and implemented in the Bologna signatory countries. The project provided a systematic approach to assess how the ESG have been interpreted and applied in the Bologna Signatory Countries. The mapping exercise looked closely into possible areas of concern in the structure and contents of the ESG. It has also considered whether there are developing areas of higher education (such as Life-long Learning, transnational education or e-learning) that are not covered in the current version of the ESG. On the basis of the findings of the project and their respective consultations, the E4 group (consortium of the project) made recommendations as to the necessity and scope of a revision of the ESG.

## **Reached target groups**

Each member of the E4 group carried out a consultation among its members. The project reached out short term target-groups as well as long-term target groups. Each project partner reached its respective members; ENQA has disseminated the results of the project to its Full member QA agencies as well as Candidate members and Affiliate bodies throughout the EHEA. This represents a total of 76 agencies. ENQA also maintains a dialogue with quality assurance professionals in other regional networks such as with the United States, Asia-Pacific and Arabic countries. EUA represents more than 750 higher education institutions and 34 national rectors' conferences across 47 countries and EURASHE has 1.200 higher education institutions members in more than 30 countries and 19 associate members. This covers a very wide range of Higher education institutions (HEIs) and was very helpful in disseminating the project results. ESU, on its side, reached several local student organisations, as well as ESU student experts' pool and individual students.

## **Potential impact and benefits**

The QA agencies, HEIs and partly the students are direct target groups on which the project was foreseen to have a direct impact. The HEIs refer to the ESG for their internal and external reviews. The QA agencies as well use the ESG as an

evaluation tool when assessing the HEIs and for their external evaluation by other national or European bodies. Student presence is required within the evaluating panel when a HEI is going through an internal evaluation process therefore the students are partly direct target groups. The students are also subject to an indirect impact as the improvement of the ESG would mean an increase of the quality level of the programme/curricula and the teaching. Other relevant stakeholders active in the sector of QA and using the ESG would also benefit from a potential revision. The project's overall expected impact was to contribute to the policy debate about whether a review of the ESG is needed, thus, to improve the ESG and the quality of the European higher education and to foster transparency and co-operation in the QA sector.

## 2. Project Approach

### Management and structures

The MapESG project was foreseen to be implemented through 9 Work Packages (WP). WP1 was related to the management of the project and was led by ENQA. WP3, 4, 5 and 6 were related to the consultations led by the applicant and each partner in order to report and exploit all the results simultaneously.

A Steering Group (SG) composed of two representatives of each organisation was set up to supervise the activities in the project as well as the final joint report of the project. The SG met four times throughout the project. ENQA provided secretarial support to the steering group. ENQA also carried out the daily operational and financial management of the project. Regular and stable communication within the partnership was assured through emails and face-to-face consultations in conjunction with other meetings.

An Advisory Board (AB) was consulted throughout the project lifespan. The AB was composed of representatives from EQAR, BusinessEurope, Education International and European ministries of education nominated by the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG). The chair of the AB was invited to attend the SG meetings in order to supervise and assure a high level of quality in all the processes of the project. The AB was expected to comment on the outline of the project and the preliminary findings following the consultations. The AB met two times during the project and ENQA liaised with them on behalf of the SG.

### Stakeholder consultations

Simultaneous consultation processes were carried out by ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU with their respective members. Each partner drew conclusions and made recommendations that fed into the final report of the project. Different methodologies and approaches were adopted by the partners for their individual consultations reflecting the specific areas of interest of the target groups and best suited methodological tools in each context. ENQA carried out its consultation at two levels: a **questionnaire** was sent to all ENQA members and a **meeting** of a group of ENQA experts was organised in order to analyse, test and challenge the findings of the questionnaire. ESU organised a **workshop** gathering experts from its expert pool in order to discuss the clarity and the implementation of the ESG from the students' point of view. EUA's consultation process was organised on a twofold basis: **desk research** to look into the existing information sources and previous studies done by EUA and a series of **workshops** organised for the universities giving them the opportunity to benchmark their QA processes in teaching and learning against the ESG. EURASHE's consultation was composed of four parts: an **on-line survey** on EURASHE website addressing all stakeholders identifying themselves from institutions, as students etc. A **direct mailing** was sent to the "institutional members" via the Council of EURASHE. After the first phase, EURASHE organised **workshops at members' events** and because of the diversity of the participants EURASHE decided to conduct **structured telephone and face-to-face interviews** with a selection of "interested people" and addressed open questions with regards to the implementation and the "review" perspective of the ESG. Each consultation fed into a separate self-standing interim report, which fed into and was integrated in the final report of the project.

## **Quality monitoring**

The quality monitoring of the project was assured at multiple levels; the Advisory Board was in charge of supervising the implementation process as well as the outcomes of the project. The members were regularly consulted by the Steering Group throughout the project. The AB also attended the Final Dissemination Conference in Copenhagen where the project results were presented to the stakeholders.

## **Dissemination and exploitation**

The dissemination and exploitation strategy was mainly based on the websites of the E4 organisations and especially on the project specific MapESG website (<http://mapesg.wordpress.com/>). Target groups and other stakeholders were reached mainly through the website as well as direct e-mail contacting, newsletters and the final publication. Each partner has pursued their own dissemination and exploitation strategy to reach their target groups. The main event of the project was the Final Dissemination Conference that took place on 17 January 2012 in Copenhagen, Denmark and was attended by 97 participants. The event was organised in order to launch the findings of the project and present the final report to a wide range of target groups and other stakeholders. The final result of the project was published by ENQA in its “ENQA Occasional Papers” series and was made available during the Final Conference. Examples of the MapESG publication were also sent to all member and affiliate bodies of ENQA as well as to other stakeholders.

The sustainability of the project is supported through the maintenance of the website with the accessible project results. The final publication can be ordered at ENQA anytime. Another important element of longer term impact is the revision of the ESG based on the findings of the MAP-ESG project outcomes.

### 3. Project Outcomes & Results

Each partner (E4 Group) carried out a consultation process with their membership and respectively produced interim reports with the findings of their consultations. These reports reflect the findings of the consultations and can be considered as important outcomes of the project. They constituted the basis for the SG work in the preparation of the joint final report and recommendations for revision.

The project's main outcome was the final report of the consultation processes led by the E4 Group. It was proved that ESG are perceived to be a useful and useable tool which has been widely implemented across the EHEA and has had a significant impact on the development of QA both as a European-wide concept and in individual national contexts.

The consultations of the E4 resulted in a need to revise the ESG on the purpose and scope, clarity and usability and impact and implementation levels. The findings of the consultations have been fed into a final report that was presented to the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) who will take on the revision process and implement the suggested revisions. However, there was a general agreement that it is crucial to maintain the ESG as generic principles as these can be adapted to various political, national and cultural contexts and respect system level and institutional diversity.

The final aim of the project was to assess, based on the interim report results, whether a revision of the ESG is necessary. The final report indicates clearly that a revision of the ESG in order to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness is needed. The conclusions suggest a focus on the improvement of the ESG rather than a wholesale revision of the content. ESG will be kept as a generic principle in order to ensure the continuing relevance of the ESG to all relevant stakeholders in the EHEA. Following the consultations, there was a general consensus about the encouragement to reflect on the extent to which a revised ESG document should link to specific Bologna commitments and reflect overarching principles agreed among the Bologna signatories. It was also recommended that the clarity of terminology used should be improved and the ambiguity between the words "Standards" and "Guidelines" should be removed. The consultation therefore suggested the development of a guide on how to use the ESG for external reviews or an explanatory report similar to that of the Lisbon Recognition Convention in order to improve usability in external reviews.

With regards to the impact and implementation of the ESG, substantial impact was observed on both internal and external QA processes. However, further work would be needed to raise awareness and ownership of the ESG even further.

The results of the MapESG project can be found on the project website: <http://mapesg.wordpress.com/> as well as ENQA website: <http://www.enqa.eu/> The final report has also been published under the "occasional papers" series of ENQA and can be ordered at the ENQA Secretariat.

The final report of the project was presented at the Final Dissemination Conference in January 2012 as planned initially but an extension of 3 months of the project period was asked in order to be able to insert the comments of the Ministerial

Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum that took place in Bucharest on 26-27 April 2012, and to discuss among the project partners the impact of the Ministerial conference outcomes on the future of the ESG.

The target language of the project was English and all the outputs of the project were in English as well.

## 4. Partnerships

The project was undertaken by the E4 Group which is composed of the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) and European Students' Union (ESU). The E4 are the authors of the ESG (2005) and the founders of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). In this sense, the consortium's composition is very relevant and it covers a wide range of expertise in the application of the ESG. The membership covered by the E4 includes QA agencies throughout the EHEA, European HEIs and students which means a solid expertise at a national level but also at a European level. In particular, ENQA has strong experience in gathering European best practices in the fields of quality assurance.

The MapESG partnership had already solid basis in the sense that the E4 had been collaborating since 2003 and had published the ESG in 2005. Therefore, communication structures between the partners were already established.

The Steering Group, which played a major role in the management of the project, was composed of two members nominated by each partner and actively contributed to each stage of the project.

An Advisory Board, composed of a representative from EQAR and stakeholders such as Educational International, BusinessEurope and governmental representatives nominated by BFUG, was closely involved in the consultations, dissemination and quality monitoring phases. Partnership with these external stakeholders active in the QA field was of crucial importance for the MapESG project as a wide range of target groups were foreseen to be reached and opinions of various stakeholders coming from different sectors (business, student, QA agencies) could thus be taken into account and integrated into the final report.

The project consortium covered a very wide range of European actors in higher education applying the ESG through the membership of the four partners. This was an important factor with regards to the consultation processes and the dissemination activities of the project. The nature of the consortium made it possible to reach diverse target groups from different sectors active in European higher education.

## **5. Plans for the future**

As it was underlined in the previous sections of this report, the main conclusion drawn from the consultation processes is a review of the ESG concerning their scope, clarity, usability, and further activities to raise awareness of their use. The report was presented at the Bologna Ministerial Conference and Third Bologna Policy Forum in Bucharest on April 26-27, 2012 and the communiqué of the Conference clearly indicated that a revision of the ESG is recommended. Given that, the revision process started in July 2012 and is foreseen to last until February 2014. The revision will aim at improved clarity, applicability and usefulness of the ESG across the European Higher Education Area.

The sustainability of the project results will be assured mainly through the project website but also partner organisations' websites and the possibility to order hard copies of the final publication at the ENQA Secretariat.

There is no commercialisation or intellectual property rights issues to underline. The final publication of the project has been published under "ENQA Occasional papers" and ENQA owns the copyright.

## 6. Contribution to EU policies

When the development of the ESG was proposed by the Ministers of the Bologna Process signatory countries in the 2003 Berlin Communiqué it was also specified that ENQA, in co-operation with the other E4 partners, had “to explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies”

ENQA and its partners have met this call by building on the interpretation of the mandate that a system of peer review of agencies must include not only the peer review process itself, but also a careful consideration of the quality standards on which a review could be built. Further, there has been agreement in the process that peer review of agencies should be interpreted as basically the means to achieve the goal of transparency, visibility and comparability of quality agencies.

The MapESG project is in line with the Bologna Process and the overall aim is to endorse the achievement of a European Area of Higher Education (EHEA) by supporting transparency in European higher education. In the Leuven Communiqué of 2009 the Ministers had identified several priorities including the establishment of “multidimensional transparency tools” and the ESG is considered as one of the main transparency tools in the field of Quality Assurance in European higher education. The use of common standards and guidelines ensures the comparability of the quality reviews of higher education thus contributes to this specific priority of the Bologna Process.

The project’s final outcome foresees a revision of the ESG in order to ensure a more efficient awareness-raising, information dissemination and collaboration in quality assurance that is expected to lead to better recognition, mobility, student retention and employability in the EHEA on a long term basis.

## 7. Extra Heading

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