Quality Assurance Fit for the Future - Students' perspective

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Authors: Horia Onița, Ana Gvritishvili, Joanna Maruszczak

Table of Contents
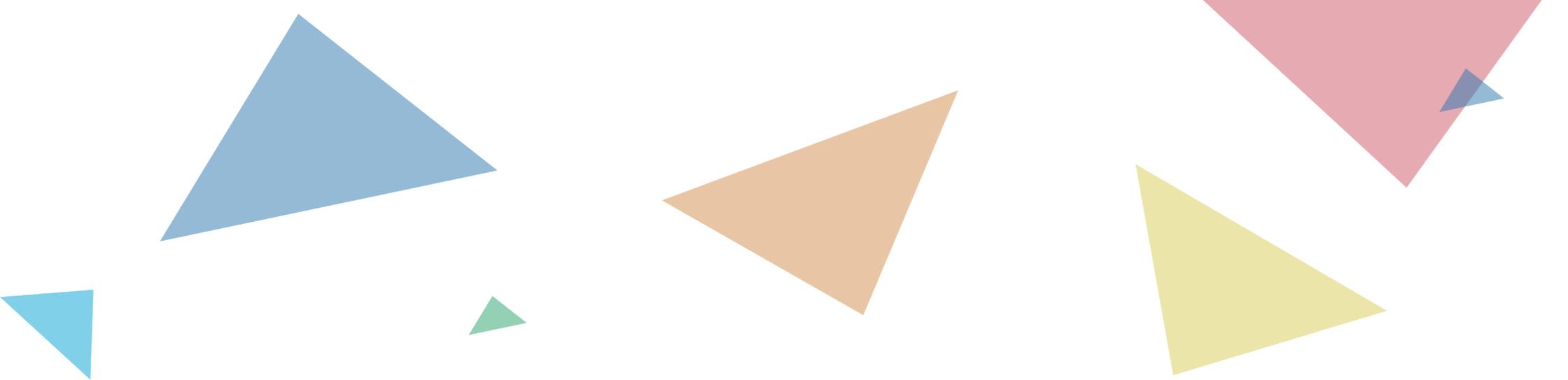
I. Introduction

Despite emerging as an established mechanism within several Eu-ropean countries since the 90's, the process of quality assurance in higher education has expanded as a commonality across all Europe as it was embraced by the Bologna Process since its early beginnings.

The adoption of the first edition of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area in 2005 represented a cornerstone in European cooperation in higher education for several reasons: it was the first policy docu-ment adopted by ministers of higher education where the agen-cy was put in stakeholders (E4 - ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU), which came with the proposal; it demonstrated that overarching, but also concrete commitments in national jurisdictions can be agreed upon; and it had created a coherent system with ingenious relations of cau-sality that would ensure its application: to be 'recognised', quality assurance agencies should comply with the ESGs, which in turn re-quires that they assess the compliance of HEIs against the ESGs (in most cases with effects regulated by national regulations in case of non-compliance), and finally also that the national framework for quality assurance is in line with the set of standards enacted by it.

After the development and improvement of the framework, both in terms of coverage and depth, in the second edition of the ESGs, ad-opted in 2015, quality assurance has been recognised as a 'key commitment' within the Bologna Process, signifying its role as a building block in the maturing and expansion of the Bologna Pro-cess, as well as in the implementation of the other commitments.

And it could have difficulty been considered differently, as quality assur-ance confirms and consolidates trust and thus is a catalyst for recognition and international cooperation. The ESGs are a central piece in the puz-zle, establishing commonly agreed principles and standards that should be applied in all quality assurance procedures consistently and similarly while also providing orientations for enhancement, serving thus multiple purposes and gearing quality assurance and higher education systems towards common concepts, goals and means to instrumentalise them.

Since the beginning of the incorporation in the Bologna Process, students have been enthusiastic and vocal supporters of both quality assurance processes and the ESGs. Apart from fostering mobility and recognition, the quality assurance framework provided a well round-ed system for promoting student participation and an apparatus fruit-ful for guaranteeing student interests. ESGs have been instrumental in ensuring student participation in quality assurance across Europe, as well as student-centred learning, while the whole QA mechanisms are set to guarantee minimum basic standards of quality for stu-dents while simultaneously enhancing it. On the other side, students have also been keen on pointing out issues related to tokenistic im-plementation, meaningless procedures or a too wider interpretation of indicators or standards (be them at European level, in the ESGs, or at other levels) that dilutes the commonly agreed expectations for institutions, study programmes or quality assurance procedures. The QA FIT project, which will end in November 2024, is coordinated by the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA). The other stakeholder partners of the project are the E4 organ-isations (the authors of the 2005 ESG), i.e. the European University As-sociation (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Edu-cation (EURASHE), and the European Students' Union (ESU). The project also includes the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Ed-ucation (EQAR) and a number of national organisations as partners: the Irish Universities Association (IUA), the Finnish Education Evaluation Centre (FINEEC), the National Alliance of Student Organisations in Ro-mania (ANOSR), and the Ministry of Education and Science of Geor-gia (associated partner). The first phase of the project looked at how the ESGs have been adapted to different contexts, and explored how quality assurance activities are addressing recent and emerging issues, including those beyond the current scope of the ESG. A survey to gath-er quantitative data was designed for each stakeholder group (insti-tutions, QA agencies, students, and national authorities). All responses were analysed in terms of general trends and respecting the principle of confidentiality. Each of the stakeholder partners and EQAR will publish a paper based on the data gathered via their surveys in early summer 2023. Additional publications on transversal topics will follow in autumn 2023. The second phase of the project will further explore the perspec-tives of students and other stakeholder groups on the current quality assurance frameworks, as well as on alternative approaches to quality assurance in the EHEA, through focus groups to be held in autumn 2023.

The second phase of the project will further explore the perspectives of students and other stakeholder groups on the current quality assurance frameworks, as well as on alternative approaches to quali-ty assurance in the EHEA, through focus groups to be held in au-tumn 2023. The second phase will contribute to the interpretation of the quantitative data collected during the first phase. This, in turn, will help identify the implications of the project findings in relation to the revision of the ESG. A final publication, scheduled for June 2024, will bring together the data gathered from all the stakeholders and will focus on the implications of the project's outcomes for quality assurance policy in the EHEA, in particular for the future of the ESGs.

This paper's aim is to analyse the views of students on the state of play and future of Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area, based on the responses of students to the QA FIT survey As a first step within the project, we asked students descriptive questions on current trends and challenges at the national and European level, as well as questions regarding their perception of barriers and priori-ties for unlocking QA's potential and the future of the process in EHEA. Our analysis will feed in the common work of E4 on the topic in the future, as well as for further discussion on ESU's vision and priorities.

Within the project, two different sets of questionnaires were applied for National Unions of Students (hereafter abbreviated as 'NUSes') and members of the ESU Quality Assurance Student Experts' Pool. The two surveys represent adaptations to the same themes and content, however taking into account the different profiles of the respondents. While the perspective of the Quality Assurance Student Experts' Pool has been taken into account, this paper will put forward and analyse the opinions given by the NUSes. As representative bodies of students at national level, we aimed for their organisation-al perspective based on their policy-focused and multi-level (national and institutional) insights and engagement into QA policies.

The structure and order of the chapters follow those of the survey:

- Student-centered learning
- Social Dimension
- Fundamental Values
- Implementation and future of the European Standards and Guide-lines on Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area ('ESGs') - with two distinct sub-chapters, focused on the current edition of the ESGs and the future edition

Regarding the choice of the chapters, apart from the common themes decided by the projects' consortium, ESU added the chapter on stu-dent-centred learning for three reasons: the theme is a longstand-ing central piece to ESU's perspective and priorities in the develop-ment of Quality assurance policies, NUSes have hands-on experience in the topic from different standpoints, and finally the standard on student-centred learning was introduced in the ESGs only at the re-vision from 2015. For student-centred learning, this is the first over-view of students' perspectives on the implementation of the standard. Based on the future common analysis of the common question from E4 members and EQAR, this paper dives into more detail on themes and questions which are specific to/prioritised by ESU.

II. Profile of the respondents

31 National Unions of Students filled in the QA FIT survey. Based on the total number of NUSes (45), the response rate is 68.88%. The 31 NUSes cover a geographical area of 30 countries, which represents 75% of the countries where NUSes members of ESU are present and 61.22% of the members of EHEA. We have recorded two different answers from Belgium, based on the distinction between the Flemish community (VVS) and the French community (FEF). The visualisation of countries from which NUSes have filled in the survey can be found in figure 1. As it can be observed, NUSes from most jurisdictions with a high number of students have answered the survey, with some exceptions such as the UK, Portugal and countries in the Western Balkans.

In terms of the experience of NUSes representatives in the QA field when answering the survey, 60% of participants have more than 2 years of experience. While this is relevant when analysing different types of answers that the NUSes have provided, it is important to take into account that most NUSes have policy approaches built from practice, interactions and perception that have led to positions and policy options usually adopted by their decision-making bodies. Revisited periodically, this arrangement ensures both legitimacy and consistency.

According to the survey, NUSes are engaged in several activities within quality assurance processes: policy consultations within ministries, cooperation with QA agencies, including through nominat-ing students for governance or advisory boards, training for students or (co)-running student expert pools. This entails an unique posi-tion for NUSes: as representatives of students, they advocate for a vision towards the decision-makers of legislation or regulation/frameworks (be them ministries or quality assurance agencies), while as experts in quality assurance they provide expertise, nom-inate or train experts or act within the quality assurance agencies.

## Figure 1 - National coverage of countries

National coverage

Map: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 2 - Years of experience in QA for NUSes representatives

Years of experience in Quality assurance of the respondent

Less than one year (12%)
1-2 years (27%)
More than 5 years (18%)
3-5 years (18%)
2-3 years (24%)
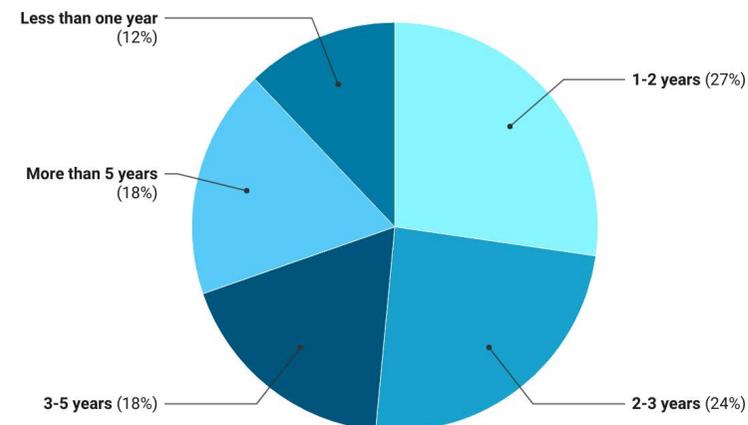
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

III. Student-centred learning

The first chapter of analysis focuses on the implementation of student-centred learning (SCL) in higher education and, more specifically, its role in Quality assurance policies.

Student-centred learning has been adopted as a paradigm of learning and teaching policies in the Bologna Process since the London Commu-nique, with each of the next Communique expanding its understanding and areas covered. While never formally defined as such, the concept is not unclear, but flexible and adaptive to context. A definition coined by ESU in 2015 (also used by the Bologna Process Implementation re-ports) serves as a de facto definition of SCL: "both a mindset and a cul-ture [...] characterised by innovative methods of teaching which aim to promote learning in communication with teachers and other learners and which take students seriously as active participants in their own learning, fostering transferable skills such as problem-solving, critical thinking and reflective thinking." The development of student-centred learning policies in the European Higher Education Area has been ana-lysed by ESU in the Statement on the future of student-centred learning.

In quality assurance, SCL is seen both as an end-goal of different policies and as a standard for higher education institutions. The foreword of the ESG 2015 mentions that 'Since 2005, considerable progress has been made in quality assurance as well as in other Bologna action lines such as qualifications frameworks, recognition and the promotion of the use of learning outcomes, all these contributing to a paradigm shift towards student-centred learning and teaching', while Standard 1.3 (for internal QA) states that '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.' In order to understand what the 'active role' entails in the development of SCL, one needs to analyse simultaneously the guidelines for the standard, which apart from offering recommendations, it also explains its application. However, in order to mainstream student-centred learning in the study programmes referenced in Standard 1.3, a whole-institutional gear to-wards student agency should take place.

The first question asked to NUSes was whether they consider that a student-centred approach is taken into account by higher education institutions (HEIs) in the implementation of study programmes, thus signalling directly the content of the Standard 1.3 42% of NUSs considered that the student-centred learning approach is implemented in most cases, while 9% of NUSes answered that it is not used in most cases or not used at all. Only 3% of NUSs answered that it is used in every programme and study course which gives a rational basis to say that the HEIs still need to intensify their endeavours in implementing stu-dent-centred learning across all their programmes and study courses.

Figure 3 - Implementation of SCL in HE study programmes

To what extent do higher education institutions implement student-centred learning in your country?

It is used in some programs and study courses	42%
It is used in most programs and study courses	42%
It is not used in most programs and study courses	6%
Not used at all	3%
It is used in every program and study course	3%
I do not know	3%
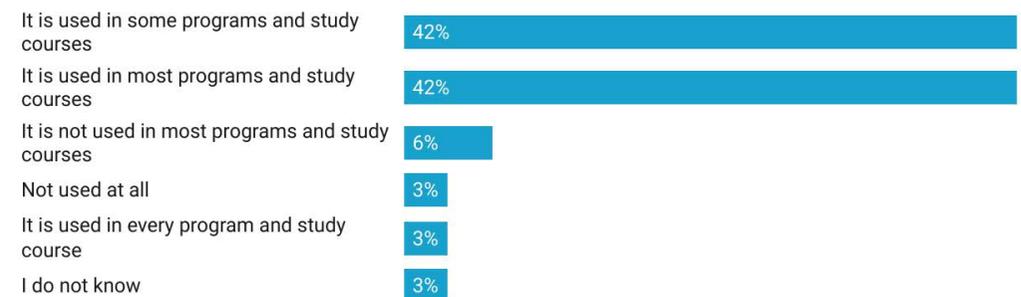
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT survey • Created with Datawrapper

The survey participants were requested to provide specific instanc-es from their experiences. This was also helpful as it outlined their understanding of what can be included in the SCL concept. They reported that in some countries, the significance, as well as the main orientations of student-centred learning (SCL), are governed by le-gal regulations (nationwide) or by institutional regulations. Howev-er, in some answers, the difference between regulations and com-mon practice at the classroom level was pointed out. on teachers whether SCL is implemented or not, and that it is usually more eas-ily identified in Master programmes rather than at Bachelor level.

For example, an answer mentioned that students are theoretically in-volved in designing the learning outcomes and the assessment meth-ods are announced in advance, but this does not necessarily happen in practice. Another respondent said that it is depending on teachers whether SCL is implemented or not, and that it is usually more eas-ily identified in Master programmes rather than at Bachelor level.

Furthermore, SCL is perceived as a means of engaging students in quality assurance processes as active participants in the learning process, providing constructive and regular feedback, offering flex-ible learning pathways (e.g. students can choose 25% of the courses as electives) and teaching/methods, and engaging with instructors or tutors. Some participants also mentioned active involvement in designing study programs and course content, as well as the eval-uation of courses and teaching activities. Another NUS noted that their universities assess student well-being and equity and offer training for teachers as tools considered under the umbrella of SCL.

The aforementioned examples merit due consideration by HEIs as they endeavour to promote the widespread implementation of student-cen-tred learning (SCL) across their diverse range of academic programs.

The next question asked respondents to evaluate the de-gree to which the Quality Assurance mechanisms effectively as-sess the implementation of SCL in Learning and Teaching (L&T).

Figure 4 - Degree to which IQA assesses SCL in Learning and Teaching

To what extent do you think Quality Assurance mechanisms adequately assess the implementation of student-centred learning?

Not at all To a little extent To some extent To a large extent To a very large extent

External Quality assurance	6%	21%	39%	27%	6%
Internal Quality assurance	12%	21%	48%	15%	
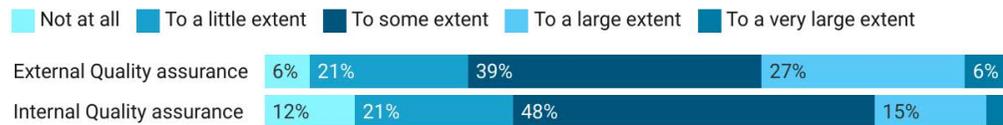
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Based on the answers to the two previous questions, we can observe that external QA mechanisms are seen to be in a better position in terms of evaluating student-centred learning than internal QA mechanisms.

While the results may seem intriguing to some, it can be attributed to the fact that QA agen-cies have a more holistic view and understanding of different policies which fall under the paradigm of student-centred learning, while for Higher edu-cation institutions it may still be a struggle to grasp the concept and design overarching policies, or they are scattered throughout various processes, depart-ments and responsible structures, thus escaping the reach of QA processes. However, for both of them, there is a space to further incorporate the evalua-tion criteria for SCL in their QA mechanisms. Never-theless, it is important to highlight that the deficiency in 'adequately' measuring and assessing SCL does not equate to a lack of standards, but rather gives an impression of the position of the NUS on the topic.

The survey respondents were requested to eval-uate the degree of importance they attribute to specific indicators as a means to assess the im-plementation of SCL. In order to determine the list of indicators used for the survey, ESU took into ac-count both the general and specific measures men-tioned in the European Standards and Guidelines on Quality Assurance, as well as other elements men-tioned across the time within the Bologna Process.

The process of selection effectively required two steps, first of them being to determine the importance of the indicator within the understanding of SCL, and secondly to determine the prioritisation based also on what the QA processes can effectively assess.

The most important indicators, from the NUSes per-spective, are teaching methods being assessed regu-larly by students, students being consulted regarding teaching and assessment methods and assessment methods being announced in advance, using differ-ent and appropriate teaching methods. This goes very much in line with what stakeholders believe to be the 'nucleus' of student-centred learning, including in the ESGs, and is also consistent with the policy work within the European Higher Education Area. We can also ob-serve that two of them are linked to assessment, which can heavily influence both student behaviour and the perceived satisfaction of the teaching and learning pro-cess, while the most selected one is, in essence, means to ensure student participation in the process through offering tools that would incentivize teaching activity.

The least relevant factor is the students/ staff academic ratio. While this was considered more relevant in the past, one of the explanations could be the up-take of digital resources, which can offer adapted teaching and learning methods despite a high stu-dents/staff ratio. However, it can also signal a vi-sion of moving from quantitative ratios, that often are not well fitted to capture the whole picture, to more nuanced and qualitative-based indicators.

Nevertheless, we can also observe that all proposed indi-cators have a degree of support (as very or fairly import-ant) of at least half of the respondents, but also that the responsibilities for achieving SCL in this conception are multi-level, as they do not encompass only activities of-fered within the study programme, but also services that are usually institutional (e.g. counselling), but that have a high degree of impact in each and every programme.

The next question asks whether the aforementioned indicators are al-ready used in external QA practices in their country. The results indicate that almost all of the NUSs (ranging from 70% to 94%) mentioned that indicators such as the existence of an appropriate learning environ-ment, development possibilities for academic staff, teaching methods and activities assessed regularly by students, academic guidance and using different and appropriate teaching methods, were already being used in External QA in their respective countries. While it has been be-yond the scope of the analysis to dive in depth into what is concretely assessed, we can observe that there is a high degree of convergence among QA systems on these 'core' elements, but also the transmission chain from European to national level, as these elements stem from and are present in the ESGs, either explicitly or implicitly.

Figure 5 - Importance of indicators to assess SCL

How important do you consider these indicators as means to assess the implementation of student-centred learning?

Legend: Not important · Slightly important · Somewhat important · Fairly important · Very important

Indicator	Not important	Slightly important	Somewhat important	Fairly important	Very important
Teaching methods and activities assessed regularly by students		12%	9%	24%	55%
Assessment methods announced in advance			15%	24%	55%
Students are consulted regarding teaching and assessment methods			9%	36%	52%
Using different and appropriate teaching methods			9%	33%	52%
Existence of an appropriate learning environment (information resources, material resources etc.)			15%	33%	48%
Using different and appropriate assessment methods		9%	21%	21%	48%
Academic guidance and counselling facilities			21%	27%	45%
Teaching methods take into consideration the diversity of students group		12%	27%	18%	42%
Existence of mechanisms to help students from disadvantaged backgrounds		9%	18%	33%	39%
The flexibility of learning paths		12%	15%	33%	39%
Development possibilities for academic staff (training, mobility, etc.)			27%	45%	27%
Flexible mechanisms for recognition, including recognition of prior learning	(small)		33%	33%	24%
Students' involvement in designing learning outcomes		15%	21%	39%	24%
Students/academic staff ratio		12%	33%	33%	21%

Chart: ESU · Source: QA FIT · Created with Datawrapper

Furthermore, there is an obvious correlation between the perceived importance of indicators in assessing SCL from students' perspective and the in-dicators already used in practice. The only clear exception is for 'de-velopment possibilities for academic staff', which scores low in terms of perceived importance of assessing SCL but high in existing indica-tors, which can be determined by the fact that students may consider it outside of the scope of SCL, not that they do not deem it important.

Five indicators (student/staff ratio, teaching methods taking into consideration the diversity of students group, the flexibility of learn-ing paths, students' involvement in designing learning outcomes, us-ing different and appropriate assessment methods) were marked by less than half of the NUSs as being used in EQA. Relatively, the sur-vey revealed that there are still challenges in implementing some important indicators in External Quality Assurance mechanisms.

Students were also asked to evaluate the extent to which they con-sider Student-Centred Learning (SCL) to be embedded into Internal and External Quality Assurance policies as a transversal principle.

We can observe that for External QA, 43% of NUSs think that SCL is em-bedded always or usually, while the percentage drops to only 15% for In-ternal QA, thus students assessing that External QA puts more emphasis holistically on SCL. They were also requested to provide specific exam-ples related to the preceding question. Many answers focused on the strong student participation in QA agency work and the review panels, as well as the methodologies of QA agencies.

Figure 6 - Use of the indicators in current external QA practices

Which of the indicators are already used in external Quality assurance procedures in your country?

■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know
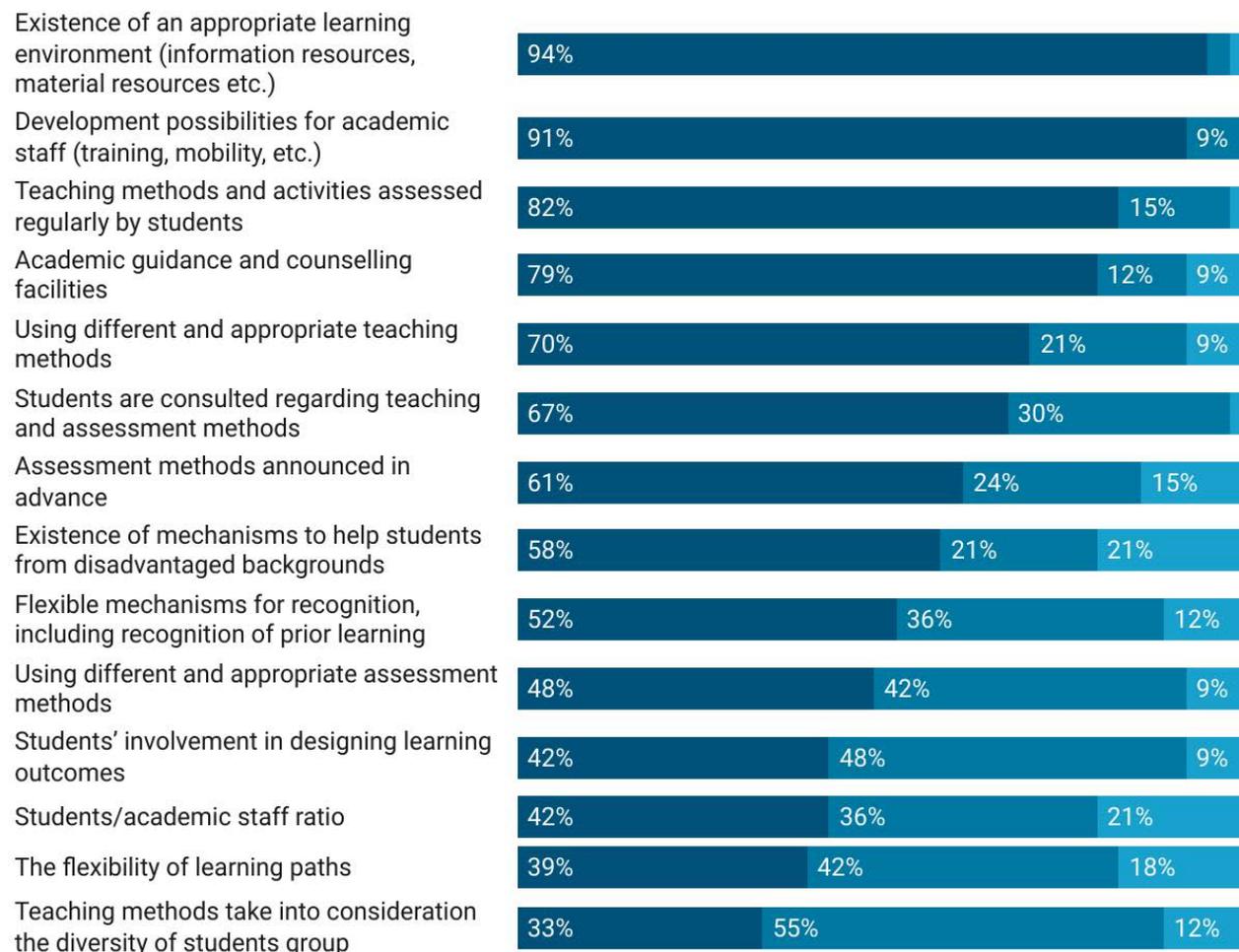
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

At an institutional level, it was mentioned that SCL is a buzzword but its prioritisation depends more on leadership than systemic regulations and practices. It was also pointed out that in some cases the only objective instrument as far as internal quality assurance is concerned that takes students' opinion of the SCL into account is the end-of-course questionnaire, to be com-pleted before registering for the examination. However, it is also high-lighted that students seldomly receive information about the follow-up actions after filling in the surveys or these follow-up actions are lacking. One comment looking into External QA mentioned that university posi-tions in rankings are taken more into account than student experience. Apart from these examples, we can also add that QA agencies and the external experts usually have additional training that permits a more conceptualised vision on how different standards corroborate be-tween themselves and how SCL could be embedded within the process.

In the next question, the respondents were asked to provide details on the prevalence of certain practices within their national higher educa-tion (HE) system, which are usually considered as a tool to support SCL across the European Higher Education Area. The results indicate that while students are generally involved in evaluations of teaching quality, the outcomes of such evaluations are often not published, and students rarely receive feedback following their participation. HEIs need to take into consideration not only conduct the evaluation of study courses, but also to make the results public and follow-up such evaluations. The very essence of student participation at this level is the meaningful measures taken afterwards, otherwise the whole process can turn into a tokenis-tic and bureaucratic ticking-the-box exercise. As a consequence, stu-dents feel a lack of belonging and agency, which impacts not only their wellbeing and satisfaction, but also their willingness to engage, to be agents of change and to cooperate for policy goals of common interest.

Figure 7 - SCL as an embedded principle in QA

To what extent do you consider that student-centred learning is embedded in the Quality assurance policies as a transversal principle?

Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

External QA 9% 24% 24% 33% 9%
Internal QA 12% 30% 42% 15%
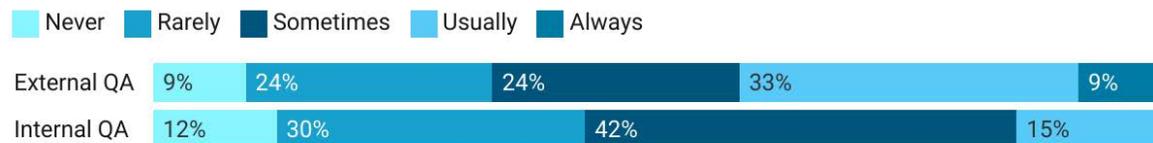
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 8 - Situation of student surveys on teaching quality

To what extent are the following practices common in your national HE system?

Never Rarely Sometimes Usually Always

Students can participate in evaluations of teaching quality on a regularly basis 9% 24% 27% 36%
The results of such evaluations are regularly published 24% 39% 15% 15%
Follow-ups to such evaluations are a norm 24% 33% 21% 15%
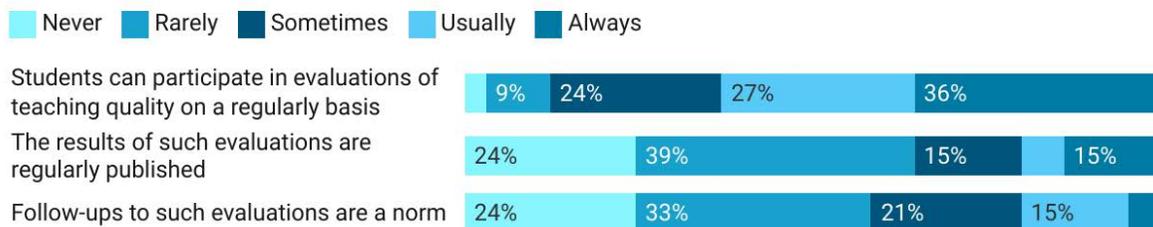
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

IV. Social Dimension of higher education

The reflection on whether QA tools are fi t for the purpose of monitoring and supporting the enhancement of social dimension policies has gained promi-nence at the European level in recent years, partly based on the policy goal of speeding up implementation of institutional policies on social dimension. While improvement has been shown, analysis of this improvement over the last 40 years shows that that it could take over 100 years to promote equality in higher education, should the current rate of improvement be maintained[1].

In 2019, ESU appreciated that diversity and inclusion policies have an impact on the quality of education (ESU Policy Paper on Social Dimension, 2019). Fur-thermore, in 2021 ESU considered that addressing the aspect of the social dimension of higher education is one of the multiple purposes that QA should have (ESU Policy Paper on Quality of Education, 2022). Seeing quality assurance mechanisms as potential tools for supporting social dimension policies has also been evidentiated by a reference in the Principles and Guidelines on Strengthening Social Dimension in the European Higher Education Area, adopted as an annex to the Rome Communique in 2020. While most national frameworks on QA mandate the inclusion of social dimension policies[2], the debate is still ongoing on whether QA is best fitted to serve this purpose, but also if so, whether the ESGs should be strengthened in this direction.

The second chapter of the surveys focused on the current state of play regarding the evaluation of social dimension policies through quality assurance tools, looking into whether a certain set of indicators, selected as the most representative and appropriate for analysis, are considered in internal, respectively external quality assurance mechanisms. Furthermore, the same set of indicators was evaluated by NUSes based on their appropriateness for being used as indicators for external quality assurance.

However, it is worth noting that social dimension is not completely absent from the ESGs to this point either. While ESGs' guidelines make reference to non-discrimination policies, Standard 1.6 mentions that 'Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided' and further details the support system in its guidelines.

The first question (Fig. 9) of the chapter asked NUSes which indicators are already included in external quali-ty assurance processes in their own country. The results show that a strong presence is attributed to student sup-port services (40%), adapted policies to support access for students with disabilities (29%), Higher Education Insti-tutions' involvement in providing grants and scholarships (24%) as well as policies on increasing student completion rates (24%). As is the case with a similar question for the SCL chapter, we can observe the chain of transmission from European level to national level, as 'student support services' have their own standard in ESGs, but are also part of the list of measures related to student-centred learning. However, in this case the coverage is broad-er, as at least in some cases the student support ser-vices which are analysed as part of the QA framework are not linked exclusively to academic affairs, but also to issues such as housing or psychological counselling.

The presence of the indicator related to policies to sup-port students with disabilities so high on the list can be attributed mostly to the analysis of teaching and assess-ment methods, while the looking into the physical acces-sibility or spaces or the availability of learning resources is either the remit of another body (including outside the education system) or are monitored to a lesser extent.

The same remark can be beared in mind for the involve-ment in providing grants and scholarship for students, as QA processes could either look into the specific con-tribution of the HEIs (financial, organisational) on top of national policies, or to how HEIs distribute grants/scholarships (analysing therefore the equity/non-dis-crimination of the process rather than the contribution).

In any case, delving deeper into the data collected we can observe that we find both expected patterns of na-tional frameworks that prioritise social dimension policies and include a relevant segment of the indicators, and national frameworks that include some of the indicators (usually the most common ones and an additional few). There is only one country where the NUS answered that no indicators are included in their national framework.

1 Tupan-Wenno, M., Camilleri, A.F., Fröhlich M., King, S. (2016) Effective Approaches to Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education. Knowledge Innovation Centre.

2 European Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2022. Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe. Eurydice report. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

The indicators which are least present per NUS answers ('not at all') are training on inclusion for staff (62%), training on inclusion for staff (49%), and involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies (47%). For the training the lack of coverage in ESGs, as well as the additional resources required can help explain the lower take-up, however for the 'remedial activities for disadvantaged groups', which is effectively part of learning and teaching policies and adapted/flexible learning, the results are more surprising.

The next question (Fig. 10) focused on the current usage of social dimension indicators in internal QA. The NUSes answered that the most used indicators 'to a large extent' in internal QA are student support services (45%), policies on increasing student completion rates (36%), and psychological support and student wellbeing (29%). The indicators which are least present per NUS answers ('not at all') are training on inclusion and equity for students (65%), involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies (50%), and remedial activities for disadvantaged groups (47%). It is also worth mentioning that NUSes answered 'to some extent' on 7 options with more than 40% results (such as gender equality policies or antidiscrimination policies), which means that while present, the NUSes either assess their coverage or their implementation as unsatisfactory.

Based on this, we can observe that there is a high degree of correlation between the indicators at the top and the bottom of the list in external and internal QA, without any clues regarding the cause and effect. One special mention should have the situation of student completion rates, which are more analysed at the internal QA level. Among other factors, this can also be a consequence of funding models which are calculated 'per capita', therefore would incentivize

completion rates, in contrast to dropping out, but also in terms of reputation. Finally, the last question (Fig. 11) for NUSes regarding the social dimension of higher education was related to which indicators they consider important to be used in external QA as means to assess social dimension policies. This question was even more relevant considering the discussions happening at the European level regarding the link between social dimension and quality assurance.

NUSes agree that the most important indicators would be 'adapted policies to support access for students with disabilities', psychological services and student wellbeing (0% answers as 'not important') and student support services. As mentioned, the provision of student support services is a topic that the ESGs already touch upon. We can observe that there is a fair complementarity between the indicators already used the most in practice and the ones marked as the most important by NUSes, with the exception of psychological services and wellbeing (also an overarching/ transversal topic), which is distinctively more prioritised by NUSes than implemented already in practice.

Figure 9 - Indicators on social dimension used in external quality assurance

To what extent are the following aspects of social dimension covered by the external quality assurance procedures in your country?

Legend: ■ To a large extent ■ To some extent ■ Not at all ■ I don't know

Indicator	To a large extent	To some extent	Not at all	I don't know
Student support services	40%	40%	17%	
Adapted policies to support access for students with disabilities in higher education (i.e. physical access, adapted teaching and assessment methods)	29%	41%	29%	
Higher Education Institutions' involvement in providing grants and scholarships	24%	36%	30%	9%
Policies on increasing student completion rates	24%	47%	26%	
Existence of a higher education institution strategy regarding social dimension and its implementation	22%	47%	28%	
Psychological services and student wellbeing	21%	47%	24%	9%
Antidiscrimination policies and responsible structures	21%	50%	26%	
Data collection on social dimension indicators	18%	42%	27%	12%
Training on inclusion and equity for students	18%	15%	62%	
Monitoring concrete targets on social dimension	15%	36%	39%	9%
Remedial activities for disadvantaged groups	15%	36%	39%	9%
Gender equality policies and responsible structures	15%	53%	24%	9%
Training on inclusion and equity for staff	14%	29%	49%	9%
Involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies	12%	38%	47%	

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Few indicators were considered as not important. An outlier is an indicator of higher education institutions' support towards providing need-based grants and scholarships, where one-quarter of students evaluated it as not important or only slightly important. Another indicator receiving low approval rates is regarding training on inclusion and equity for students, which had the least answers assessing it as very important for NUSes.

Figure 10 - Indicators on social dimension used in internal quality assurance

To what extent are the following aspects of social dimension covered by the internal quality assurance procedures in your country?

Legend: To a large extent · To some extent · Not at all · I don't know

Indicator				
Student support services	45%	36%		12%
Policies on increasing student completion rates	36%	33%	21%	9%
Psychological services and student wellbeing	29%	41%	15%	15%
Adapted policies to support access for students with disabilities in higher education (i.e. physical access, adapted teaching and assessment methods)	24%	39%	21%	15%
Data collection on social dimension indicators	21%	30%	30%	18%
Gender equality policies and responsible structures	21%	56%	12%	12%
Higher Education Institutions' involvement in providing grants and scholarships	18%	42%	24%	15%
Existence of a higher education institution strategy regarding social dimension and its implementation	18%	47%	24%	12%
Monitoring concrete targets on social dimension	15%	42%	21%	21%
Antidiscrimination policies and responsible structures	15%	48%	21%	15%
Training on inclusion and equity for staff	15%	35%	35%	15%
Involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies	33%	39%	21%	
Training on inclusion and equity for students	26%	50%	18%	
Remedial activities for disadvantaged groups	45%	30%	21%	

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 11 - Appropriateness of social dimension indicators for external QA

How important is it that the following indicators on social dimension are used for External QA?

Legend: Not important · Slightly important · Somewhat important · Fairly important · Very important

Indicator				
Adapted policies to support access for students with disabilities in higher education (physical access, adapted teaching and assessment)		18%	70%	
Psychological services and student wellbeing	18%	15%	64%	
Student support services	12%	30%	58%	
Antidiscrimination policies and responsible structures	15%	27%	52%	
Gender equality policies and responsible structures	18%	27%	48%	
Involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies	9%	9%	30%	48%
Higher education institutions' involvement in providing need-based grants and scholarships	18%	21%	12%	42%
Existence of a higher education institution strategy regarding social dimension and its implementation	24%	24%	42%	
Training on inclusion and equity for staff	15%	36%	42%	
Data collection on social dimension indicators	21%	30%	39%	
Remedial activities for disadvantaged groups	9%	27%	18%	39%
Monitoring concrete targets on social dimension	9%	27%	24%	39%
Policies on increasing student completion rates	15%	36%	12%	36%
Training on inclusion and equity for students	33%	30%	27%	

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

V. Fundamental Values of Higher Education

The reflection process on the future of quality assurance and what it can in-clude has led to another subject being the topic of debate within the Europe-an Higher Education Area: whether QA is appropriate to monitor (all or some of) the fundamental values of higher education and, if yes, for what fundamental values would this bring added value and what indicators could/should be used. On one hand, the attention focused on the issue based on the increased importance given to upholding fundamental values in times where they are challenged by both exogenous and endogenous factors. While academic freedom is restricted or under threat in some jurisdictions, the proliferation of predatory companies that seek profit out of enticing students into fraud strains academic integrity, with disruptive influences of Artificial Intelligence also gaining prominence recently. However, the coordinates of the discussion are ostensibly different than in the case of social dimension. While for social dimension we have a product of integrated national and institutional policies, in the case of fundamental values the national level can unduly impact the institutional level. As such, for some of fundamental values the issues aiming to be fixed not only escape QA processes reach, but can even influence the QA processes themselves.
The fundamental values taken into account were those defined in the Paris Communique in 2018: institutional autonomy, academ-ic freedom, academic integrity, student and staff participation in high-er education governance, public responsibility for and of higher education.

The first question respondents were asked to evalu-ate was whether they believe that external quality assur-ance should directly assess whether fundamental values (in general, without specifying which values) are respect-ed in higher education. The results of the survey indicate that 85% of NUSs responded affirmatively to this question.

The NUSes were asked to assess the degree to which external qual-ity assurance processes already address various fundamental values. Based on the survey results, it can be determined that cer-tain aspects related to fundamental values are more commonly addressed than others, while proving that national frameworks already include matters associated with fundamental values.

Specifically, the survey results of students indicate that stu-dent and staff participation in HEIs governance is addressed to a large extent. 39% of NUSs mentioned that institution-al autonomy, procedures to foster academic freedom and to combat academic misconduct are also addressed to a large extent. Moreover, the survey results revealed that the least addressed topic within external QA is community engage-ment. While the classification of community engagement as fundamental values is in any case imprecise, the low take-up of this indicator can be attributed to the fact that it is consid-ered part of the third mission of higher education institutions, which falls outside the scope of the learning and teaching di-mension included in the ESGs. While most QA agencies go be-yond it and cover to various degrees also the second mission (research), the inclusion of the third mission is more limited.

The last question in the chapter was to determine the per-ceived importance of monitoring specific fundamental val-ues through external quality assurance processes. The find-ings revealed that NUSs consider monitoring fundamental values to be of high importance in External QA processes.

The most important indicators to be monitored are student and staff participation in HEI governance and procedures to combat harassment and other forms of discrimination (while this can also be considered overlapping with social dimension).

Figure 12 - Whether fundamental values should be assessed by external QA

Do you think that external quality assurance should directly evaluate whether fundamental values are respected in higher education?

■ Yes ■ No ■ I don't know

| A | 85% | 12% |

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

On the other side, NUSs agree that community engage-ment and institutional autonomy are the least fitted to be monitored through external QA. While for the community engagement the same rationales as for why it is not pres-ent so far can apply to this question as well, the institu-tional autonomy as the second-last can be attributed to the difficulty of assessment, as the degree of autonomy is determined or highly impacted by the national regula-tions and as such falls outside the remit of QA agencies. While still the second fundamental value supported to be monitored after student and staff participation, it is relevant to mention that as the survey answers were collected before or during the spread of generative language models, and as such calls for greater analysis of academic misconduct or, more precisely, how to adapt learning, teaching and assessment policies in order to prevent academic miscon-duct, may increase in the future. Even to this point though, academic integrity has already been a topic where many QA agencies have already been proactively working on.

As a general perspective, the survey indicates that re-spondents believe that it is very important or fair-ly important that virtually all values are monitored.

Figure 13 - Use of indicators addressing fundamental values in external QA

To what extent are the following aspects on fundamental value addressed through external quality assurance processes?

■ To a large extent ■ To some extent ■ Not at all ■ I don't know
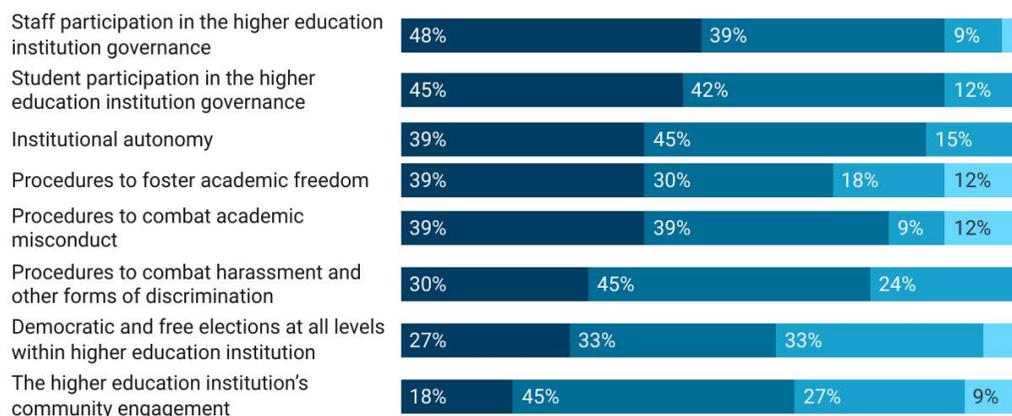
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 14 - Importance of indicators on fundamental values in external QA

How important is it that the following aspects of fundamental values are monitored for in external QA processes?

■ Not important ■ Slightly important ■ Somewhat important ■ Fairly important ■ Very important
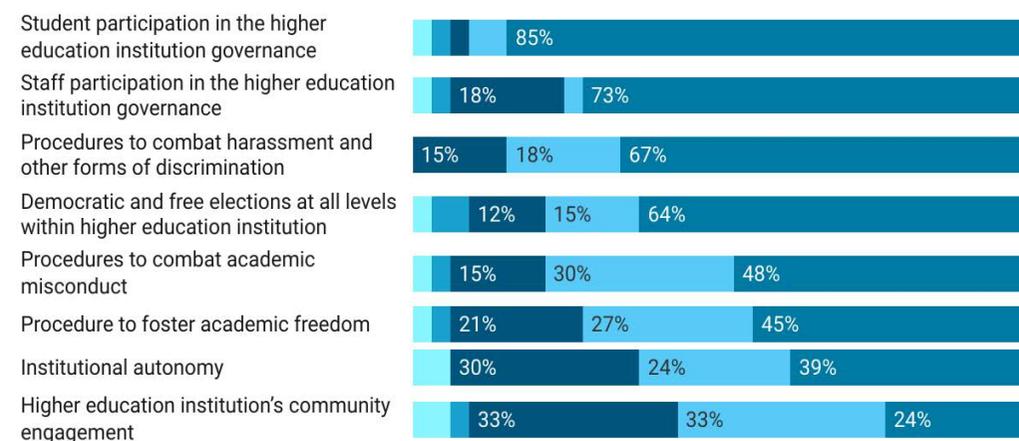
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

VI. Quality Assurance and the future of ESGs

The most comprehensive chapter will look initially into the current state of play of external QA in Europe, aiming to understand NUSes positions on the trends and barriers in external QA, as well as its purpose and aims. The second sub-chapter shifts the focus from the national to the European perspective, present-ing the perception of the respondents to the current role and future of the Eu-ropean Standards and Guidelines. This section represents the first overview of NUSes perspective on Quality Assurance after the approval of the revised ESGs in 2015.

V.1 Quality of education and the national external quality assurance framework

As already mentioned, quality assurance has inherent limits into what it can achieve, based on its scope and tools. However, before arriving at specif-ic policies based on what can be done, the first step is to determine 'what' is as-sured, and as such what 'quality' is. This approximation of the definition of 'quality education' moves from the realm of expertise to that of system 'polit-ical' vision and legitimate interests, which form the basis for policy creation.

For this, we asked NUSes whether they have a definition of what quality of education means, included in their strategic docu-ments or policies. 62.5% of NUSes answered positively, refer-encing different definitions or documents that include a mo re concrete or general definition, as well as an 'indirect' defi-nition through what 'quality education' should contain. One approach is to effectively acknowledge that a 'fixed' defini-tion cannot be determined, as several factors are interrelated.

In an attempt to summarise before giving some examples, the key concepts which were mentioned include: practical skills in the study programme field, critical thinking, interdisciplinarity, student-cen-tred learning, ethics, transparency,, lifelong learning, democracy, student participation, inclusivity, developing for future careers, personal development, solid academic background, links to re-search and innovation, well funded. We can observe that most, if not all of them are part of general 'quality' understanding in higher education policy or in Bologna Process in particular, albeit some do not represent an object of QA policies - e.g. lifelong learning or funding if understood as public funding for higher education. Some examples of definitions/references from NUS documents include[3]:

- 'The quality of education is defined based on the institutions' efforts to analyse their own activi-ties and organise all aspects of higher education so that they contribute to the achievement of the set learning criteria or goal' - definition based on pro-cess, more linked to its enhancement-oriented QA)

- 'High quality education means that students are given good conditions to learn useful knowledge, skills, abilities and attitudes that rest on a scien-tific basis, an artistic basis or proven experience'

- combination of learning environment and re-search conducive to 'useful' (non-defined) skills

- 'Quality higher education equips students with the knowledge, attitudes, skills and key com-petences needed to succeed after graduation'

- 'Educational quality has many facets and is something that largely arises in an interplay be-tween the learning environment, students, teach-ers and the academic content. There is a big dif-ference between both what quality is and what creates quality, across institutes as well as internally.'

- 'Quality of teaching, student-centeredness, stu-dent wellbeing, learning results, and employment'

- 'It promotes a cooperative environment and the ac-tive and incisive participation of students, enhanc-ing the personality of the individual, and combats the debasing perspective of university education as mere preparation for the labour market. The quality of HE is inclusive and attentive to the needs of all stu-dents and does not consider them solely on the basis of the grades they will achieve, but offers adequate services so that everyone can complete their studies.'

- 'Students should learn to question, explore and further develop social conditions, norms and dogmas. Teaching should develop in students the interest and curios-ity to further their own education and to acquire new knowledge independently'

- 'All the material and human resources needed to achieve excellence for all'

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[3] See documents from LSS, CREUP, FEF, ŠOS.

Despite certain similarities, we can observe a broad base of defi-nitions, which may be for sure linked with the national context and the reaction of NUS towards supporting or contradicting the frame-work based on its results, with the balance between more political or technical perspectives and policies, as well as the prioritisation of the various purposes of higher education, as it can be seen below.

The next question to which NUSes responded was to rank the var-ious purposes of higher education according to their impor-tance for the NUS. Four options were offered: preparing stu-dents for active citizenship, preparing students for future careers, supporting personal development and creating a broad ad-vanced knowledge base stimulating research and innovation.

The results show a very diverse landscape across NUSes, correlated with the definition of quality of education, but also with other structural elements of the type of NUS and national/regional context. The 'most important' purpose of higher education for NUSes, according to the re-sults, is to prepare students for personal development and to create a broad advanced knowledge base, followed by employability and ac-tive citizenship. Some remarks are due. Firstly, if we are looking at the combined results of 'most important' and 'second most important', we can observe that three out of four (all except active citizenship) are tied, with active citizenship trailing behind very closely. Seen this way, the overall results lead into the direction that all of the purposes are import-ant as each individual prioritises differently based on needs or desires. Furthermore, in several cases NUSes are explicitly advocating for rec-ognising the multiple purposes (as opposed to seeing employability as the sole purpose), without giving or being able to give a prioritisation.

In the open section provided for explaining the answer, one NUS men-tioned the importance of seeing education as a public good, and another NUS highlighted the role of higher education for humankind. One NUS mentioned that internationalisation should be a purpose of HE as well.

Another question looked into NUSes'' level of agreement with different statements about understanding of the concept of quality education. These answers can be compared with the similar questions asked to students during ESU's QUEST project in 2013. It is worth noting that the QUEST project survey was done among the general student population.

While in 2013 57% of students agreed that there are different views on what is perceived as quality in HE by professors and students, the percentage for NUSes in 2023 has increased to 44% agreeing and 47% somewhat agreeing.

This is the starkest difference among sur-vey responses between the two surveys ten years apart, and for sure additional analysis needs to be put into identifying the ratio-nale of this extreme discrepancy, albeit one hypothesis is that stu-dent representatives from NUSes, due to their position, encoun-ter more conflictual situations/complaints and are more likely to be put in a position of alternative policy options in the representa-tion relationship with staff, rather than teacher-student relationship.

Figure 15 - Definition of quality of HE in NUSes documents

Is the quality of higher education defined in your NUS strategic documents or policies?

I don't know (9%)
No (34%)
Yes (56%)
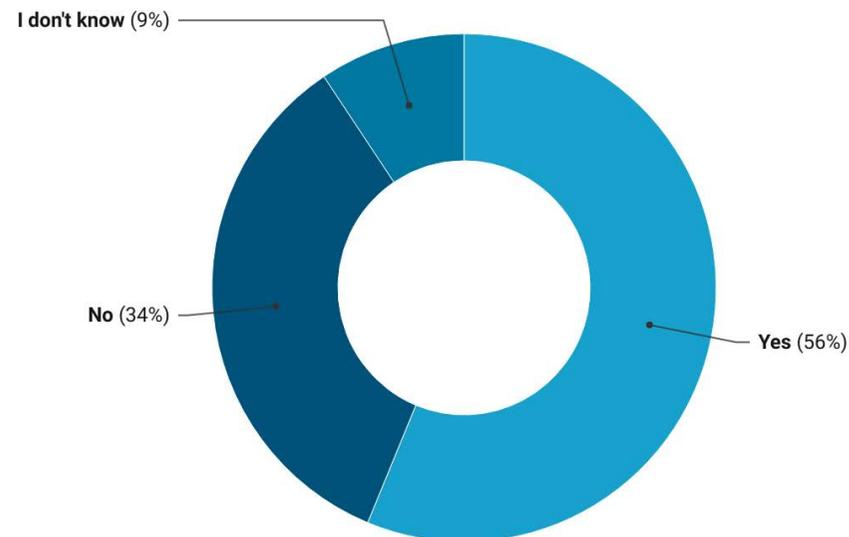
Chart: ESU · Source: QA FIT · Created with Datawrapper

In comparison, for the statement that in discussions about the quality of our study programmes, professors seldom have a unified position, the results from 2013 (43% agreeing) did not change significantly to 2023 (53% agreeing or somewhat agreeing), as well as for disagreeing with the idea that the quality is linked to selectivity at admissions (72% of NUSes disagree-ing or somewhat disagreeing in comparison with 70% of students in 2013).

A stark difference can be found in the question whether the quality of the study programme only depends on its academic excellence. The disagreement among NUSes was high (84% disagreeing or somewhat disagreeing), while in 2013 only 14.4% disagreed with the statement. This difference can also be partly attributed to different understand-ings of what 'academic excellence' may convey. On one hand, it can be equated to 'elitism', while in another sense it can be considered ei-ther 'high standards' or 'state of the art' knowledge and infrastructure.

Finally, regarding the proposition that 'A programme has high quality when the participating professors are chosen based on their academic reputation/image", 59% of NUSes disagreed or somewhat disagreed, while in the QUEST survey 29% dis-agreed, while many answered that they don't agree or disagree.
The next question focused on NUSes perspective on different state-ment regarding external quality assurance in general. Therefore, the perspective was linked to their own national frameworks and practices.

The next question focused on NUSes perspective on different statement regarding external quality assurance in general. Therefore, the perspective was linked to their own national frameworks and practices.

**Figure 16** - Ranking the purposes of higher education, NUSes answers

Please rank the following higher education purposes according to their importance for your NUS:

Most important ◼ 2nd most important ◼ 3rd most important ◼ 4th most important ◼ 5th most important (after others)

supporting students' personal development — 34% | 16% | 25% | 25%
creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation — 34% | 16% | 28% | 19%
preparing students for their future careers (e.g. contributing to their employability) — 16% | 34% | 22% | 25%
preparing students for active citizenship — 12% | 34% | 25% | 22%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 17 - NUSes answers to the statements about the quality of study programmes

Please indicate to what extent you agree with the following statements on the meaning of quality education

◼ Disagree ◼ Somewhat disagree ◼ Undecided ◼ Somewhat agree ◼ Agree

There are different views on what is perceived as quality in HE by professors and students — 9% | 47% | 44%
In discussions about the quality of our study programmes professors seldom have a unified position — 25% | 22% | 34% | 19%
Good programmes offer novel approaches to core topics in a field — 28% | 47% | 19%
The quality of a study programme only depends on its academic excellence — 50% | 34% | 9%
The quality of the study programme is measured by its selectivity at admissions — 56% | 16% | 19%
A programme has a high quality when the participating professors are chosen based on their academic reputation/image — 31% | 28% | 22% | 16%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

NUSes clearly appreciated that external QA encour-ages the development of quality culture in higher ed-ucation, one of the key objectives mentioned in the ESGs. The only statements which are not supported by a majority are that QA adapts quickly to chang-es in higher education (40%) and that QA encourages and promotes innovation in higher education (47%). It is interesting to note also that while there is a low re-sponse rate for QA adapting quickly to changes in HE, on another hand there is a significant degree of sup-port in terms of QA being flexible to adapt to the con-text of the higher education institution/programme.

For sure the most interesting, yet complex set of answers relate to the issue of whether the main purpose of exter-nal QA is accountability and/or enhancement. Among NUSes respondents, more strongly agree that external QA's main purpose is accountability (31% as opposed to 22%), while more generally agree that external QA's main purpose is enhancement (72% as opposed to 53%). This shows the ambivalence of the two sides of the coin and the need for both, while also sheds light on some (at least apparent) inconsistencies, as in the next chapter we will find out that NUSes heavily support that compliance to guidelines is treated similarly as compliance to stan-dards, while usually the approach towards enhancement asks for more general flexibility, albeit the flexibility not being contradictory in itself with the accountability role. As expected, the answer depends a lot on both the na-tional context and the median level of development of a quality culture in HEIs at national level, as well as to the terminology attached to 'accountability' and 'en-hancement' and how they interplay in a specific system (while enhancement can sometimes lead to account-ability when no improvements arise, accountability can be followed not by sanctions, but by expected mea-sures of improvement to reach minimum standards). For the first element, it is also important to mention that pragmatically for those where the situation doesn't require much strict monitoring for accountability, nor the rationales for it diminish, neither they consider it is not generally needed. In this case, the discussion revolves around what brings added value in a certain case

and how to reduce undue burden or rigid lists of 'ticking the box' exercises which are not required. In terms of open answers for this question, it was also highlighted that while some focused on the need that accountability and enhancement be treated together, others argued that one is the basis for the other, in the sense that accountability comes hand in hand with trust: "Without accountability and adequate transparency (both towards students of a HEI and to the wider public), there is no trust" for which enhancement to be build on.

The limited scope of the survey did not delve into solutions for this in terms of processes (e.g. having separate processes, having processes with differ-ent parts for accountability and enhancement or two sides of the same quality assurance provision/indica-tor), as well as into how this would unfold in terms of ESGs in relationship with the current structure of stan-dards and guidelines (with standards serving main-ly for accountability and guidelines mainly for en-hancement, but also for interpreting standards), but this could form the analysis of further initiatives. In terms of the areas of Internal QA that are already cov-ered by external QA, the most analysed topics are re-search, ensuring and improving the quality of education provision (which is the scope of the coverage of ESGs and the core nucleus of looking into internal QA), coopera-tion with labour market, student and staff participation. We can easily see that the areas which are least moni-tored by external QA are those which have only recently received increased interest at European level. In more than a third of cases NUSes answered that online learn-ing and teaching, European alliances, microcredentials, learning analytics are not part of the QA framework. An unusually high degree of positive answers for several topics (including Eu-ropean alliances, microcredentials, but even recognition of prior learning, mo-bility) should raise some doubts regarding the interpretation of the question. As in corroboration with other analysis it is difficult to conceive that so many na-tional frameworks include these topics, a possible interpretation is that they are marginally addressed, discussed or tackled within other topics/indicators.

Figure 18 - NUSes answers to statements about external QA in general

To what extent do you agree with the following statements about external quality assurance procedures?

■ Strongly Agree ■ Agree ■ Undecided ■ Disagree

Statement	SA	A	U	D
External quality assurance encourages the development of a quality culture in higher education	47%	37%	12%	
External quality assurance uses various data sources	34%	31%	19%	16%
External quality assurance's main purpose is accountability	31%	22%	28%	19%
External quality assurance is flexible according to the context/priorities the higher education institution or programme	29%	35%	26%	10%
External quality assurance adapts quickly to changes in higher education	23%	17%	23%	37%
External quality assurance fosters internationalisation of higher education	23%	45%	23%	10%
External quality assurance's main purpose is enhancement	22%	50%	16%	12%
External quality assurance encourages and promotes innovation and experimentation in higher education	16%	31%	34%	19%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 19 - NUSes responses to the topics of IQA already assessed through EQA

To what extent the following areas of internal quality assurance are currently evaluated through external QA?

■ To a large extent ■ To some extent ■ Not at all ■ I don't know

Area	Large	Some	Not at all	Don't know
Research	50%	34%	9%	
How higher education institutions ensure and improve the quality of their educational provision	50%	47%		
Participation of students and staff in higher education governance	47%	37%	9%	
Cooperation with labour market actors on competences and skills needs	41%	34%	16%	9%
Institutional management	37%	50%	9%	
Relevance of qualifications	31%	44%	9%	16%
Mobility of students and staff	31%	44%	16%	9%
Institutional autonomy	28%	34%	31%	
International partnerships and cooperation	28%	44%	19%	9%
Academic integrity	25%	41%	16%	19%
Higher education institutions' structures that support internationalisation (i.e. strategy, support services, etc.)	22%	53%	12%	12%
Online student assessment methods	16%	44%	34%	
Academic freedom	16%	47%	25%	12%
Social dimension of higher education	16%	50%	28%	
Quality of student internships/work-based learning	16%	53%	19%	12%
Online learning and teaching	13%	38%	44%	
Lifelong learning (including micro-credentials)	12%	53%	22%	12%
Micro-credentials	12%	28%	44%	16%
Recognition of prior learning	13%	50%	19%	19%
Activities developed as part of the University Alliances	9%	37%	41%	12%
Service to society/Third mission	47%	28%	19%	
Use of learning analytics by higher education institutions	47%	41%	9%	

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

V.2 State of play of European QA and the future of ESGs

This subsection presents the results from the questions that aim to assess NUSes' perspectives on the European QA framework and, more specifically, the future of ESGs. Firstly we looked into the perceived importance of different purposes of a European QA framework. We can observe that NUSes consider that the European Quality Assurance framework is designed to serve several purposes, while they also reinforce each other. All purposes mentioned in the survey as options gained the support of at least two thirds of respondents as being very important or quite important.

The most selected purposes are facilitating degree recognition, promotion of enhancement of quality as well as common and basic minimum standards, facilitating student mobility, promoting common standards of QA and upholding fundamental values. The purpose of reducing opportunities of accreditation mills to gain prominence as the lowest priority. To this end, it is relevant to make the distinction about what the role of external QA is and what role the European framework plays in that equation. For example, while tackling accreditation mills can be for sure considered an objective which QA is supporting, and even international cooperation is needed, one explanation could be that NUSes consider either that this is an incidental objective achieved through QA or that it is not necessarily the scope of the European QA framework. In contrast with the answers for the external QA in general, we also see a lower support for innovation and experimentation as a specific purpose for the European level framework.

Figure 20 - Purposes of European QA framework

How important do you consider the following purposes of a European QA framework?

■ Very important ■ Quite important ■ Not important ■ I don't know
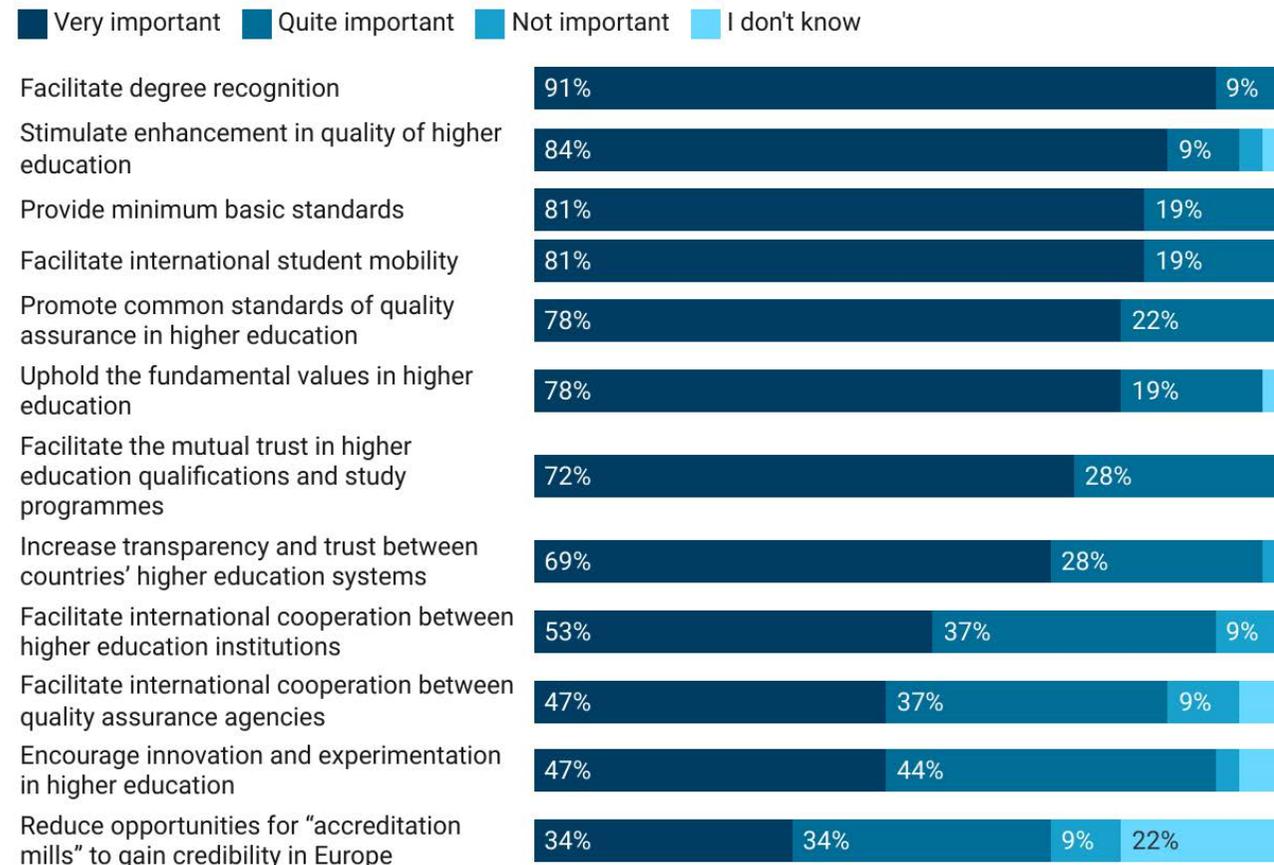
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

On the other hand, the very high percentage of 91% choosing the option of facilitat-ing degree recognition shows the primary purpose of removing barriers by ensur-ing degrees are recognised based on minimum quality standards across EHEA and eventually lead to automatic recognition. Diving deeper into the operationalisation of the purposes selected, we thus observe that degree recognition is intrinsically linked with other purposes (e.g. providing common standards), as the European framework ought to ensure that all QA procedures across EHEA observe some fun-damental conditions that convince decision-makers and stakeholders into trusting and recognising their results. On the other side, the second purpose is linked to en-hancement, proving that the ESGs are a moving force towards improving the quality of procedures to offering guidance, as well as sharing and spreading best practice.

There is an interesting discussion at the interplay between the options 'providing minimum standards' and 'providing common standards for QA', even though both have similar levels of support. Firstly, as a caveat, as the options were presented widely, those 'standards' can include both 'procedural' standards (on how QA is conducted) or 'substantiated' standards (on what QA looks into in order to assess the quality of education). This caveat is important as different opinions can take shape on the question of whether the standards are 'minimum' or 'common' based on the type of the standard. There is still an unclear perception of whether the European framework provides the minimum standards that form the basis for trust and recognition (and afterwards countries/QA agencies can decide to add any other standards that deem to be fit) or if the 'common' nature of the framework implies that only minor adaptations could be made nationally (which would also link the discussion with the topic of cross-border QA based on ESG). Yet again, the lack of differentiation in levels of support offers little clue for perspectives on future developments at this point.

The next question for NUSes was focusing on the impact and importance of the current ESGs, which were revised in 2015, as the respondents had to show their level of agreement with different statements.

From the results we can observe that students strongly believe that ESGs support the development of learning and teaching, the trust in higher education qualifications as well as promote the development of a quality culture. Regarding the scope of the ESGs, 68% agree or somewhat agree that it is too limited. Based probably on the expectation that ESGs should recognise as such and promote more

(some of) the fundamental values, notwithstanding the already existing provisions linked to fundamental values, 28% of NUSes consider that ESGs do not support fundamental values.

A relevant 28% do not know whether the three interconnected parts of the ESGs work well as a whole, while the majority support the statement. This high degree of indecisiveness may be put on the lower familiarity of the part III of ESGs, that is observed in further questions as well. Furthermore, a majority of NUSes think that current arrangements of the ESGs are flexible enough in their architecture to support both diversity of QA approaches and, correspondingly, the diverse interpretation of standards in practice. While the overall conclusion is that a well defined balance has been found, further questions will show that NUSes ask for more clarity and coherence in the application of standards.

As a next step, we asked NUSes what their expectations regarding the future of ESGs as a whole are. Analysing the results, it is clear that ESGs are heavily supported, as no response considered that ESGs are not needed anymore. Furthermore, there is a majority agreeing or somewhat agreeing that all three parts of ESGs should be revised, while for part III there's a significant percentage of 'I don't know' answers. The strongest support is for revising Part I of the ESGs.

The overall message coming from NUSes is that ESGs should be revised, disagreeing with the idea that ESGs should be reduced to fewer standards or that ESGs should focus only on standards.

On one hand, we can consider that ESGs focusing only on standards will lose both advantages of guidelines that serve as added value: enhancement-oriented use of standards and interpretation of standards for the consistency of their application in accountability-oriented use of ESGs. On the other hand, the subject of the number/coverage of standards is political by essence, as it part of the discussion of what we believe it is necessary for guaranteeing trust (to be able to achieve the purposes of the framework), what we define as essential elements of defining what quality education is, as well as what is the role of ESGs in the debate between 'minimum' standards or 'common' standards (in the interpretation problematized before). In this direction, the option of NUSes to expand the understanding of 'quality' education and thus the coverage of standards is clear, albeit the differentiation towards what QA can realistically achieve should be reflected upon.

Furthermore, two thirds of NUSes agree or somewhat agree that compliance with guidelines should be required as compliance with standards, while three quarters believe ESGs should provide more guidance. While these two answers may seem in relation of contrariety, a more thorough analysis could offer new perspectives.

Therefore, NUSes believing that ESGs should provide more guidance could mean both as a view towards enhancement and as a guidance towards how agreed-upon standards (and guidelines) are implemented in practice. This answer can be interpreted towards the call for greater integration and consistency of the interpretation of ESGs in practice, to ensure more compatibility. The call for seeing the compliance with guidelines as the compliance with standards looks into the effectiveness of the ESGs into providing compatibility based on common procedures.

If the standards are interpreted too widely, they are not common anymore as the comparison of different applications in practice would show lower than expected actual resemblance. This goes into the second current objective of the guidelines in ESGs, that of interpreting the standards (in contrast with offering 'genuine' guidance). As such, in this perspective guidelines used for interpreting standards should be 'one with' the standards they interpret and therefore compliance with them should be required to the same degree as compliance with standards, to ensure the 'common' and compulsory nature and understanding of standards in all QA proceedings across EHEA.

Going into more detail regarding the respondents' opinions on what parts of ESG should be revised, we can observe from the figures below that a majority of NUSes believe all parts should undergo a revision, and within the parts both standards and guidelines should be revised.

The highest percentages of answers stating that a major revision is needed are for the standards of Part II, while more than two thirds of NUSes believed that a major or minor revision of the scope of ESG is needed. Generally we see a decrease in support for Part III, mainly attributed to the increase of 'I don't know' answers, which can be understandable based on the lower direct interaction of NUSes with the application of part III of ESGs. Finally, in terms of revising the principles and purposes of the ESGs, albeit still a majority, the lowest number of NUSes believe they should be revised (59%).

Figure 21 - Statements about the impact of ESGs

Please indicate the level of agreement with the following statements about the European Standards and Guidelines:

Agree ■ Somewhat agree ■ Disagree ■ I don't know

Statement	Agree	Somewhat agree	Disagree	I don't know
The ESG as a common quality assurance framework supports the development of learning and teaching	59%	31%		9%
The ESG support trust in higher education qualifications	50%	44%		
The ESG support recognition of qualifications	50%	38%		
The ESG support mobility of students	50%	38%		
The ESG promote and support the development of a quality culture	47%	37%		16%
The three interconnected parts of the ESG work well as a whole	41%	19%	12%	28%
The ESG support and promote fundamental values in higher education	37%	19%	28%	16%
The ESG purposes and principles as described in the ESG introduction are clear	37%	44%	9%	9%
The ESG allow for diversity of external quality assurance approaches	37%	28%	12%	22%
The ESG allow for diverse interpretation of the standards into concrete practice	37%	47%		16%
The scope of the ESG is too limited	34%	34%	19%	12%
The ESG support innovation in higher education	25%	41%		28%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

The high degree of support for extending the scope of ESGs can be attributed to the topics NUSes believe should be included in Part I, as shown in the next question. However, it can also be debatable whether the requests of NUSes actually deem necessary the expansion of the scope of ESGs rather than expanding issues that impact learning and teacher in a wider institutional framework (e.g. expanding topics on social dimension already existing in ESGs or fundamental values).

The next question looked in more detail into what topics NUSes would like to be covered in the Part I of ESGs. We can conclude firstly that all topics galvanise the support of at least 50% of respondents to be included to a large extent or to some extent in ESGs Part I.

The most important topic selected is the participation of students and staff in HE governance, followed by social dimension and then digitalisation of learning and teaching and academic freedom and integrity. Microcredentials, recognition of prior learning and mobility of students and staff are also considered priorities.

While the topic of institutional management received the lowest support in terms of including it in more detail to a large extent, the overall lower results are found for the cooperation with labour market, institutional autonomy and service to society.

It is firstly important to consider that some topics are already covered in the Part I of the ESGs, at least to some extent. Cooperation with the labour market receives several references in the framework, social dimension is touched upon based on the links with student-centred learning in learning and teaching policies, while without being adapted specifically towards digital education, E4 concluded that the ESGs apply nevertheless.

Figure 22 - The perception of NUSes to the future of ESGs as a whole

Please indicate your NUS level of agreement on the following statements regarding the ESGs:
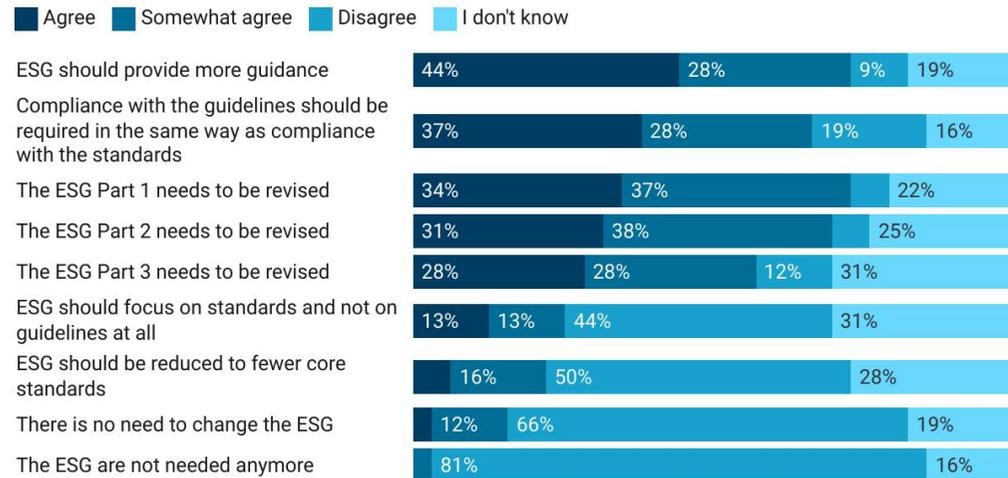
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 23 - Specific parts of ESGs that need revision

Which general aspects of the ESG should undergo changes and to what extent?
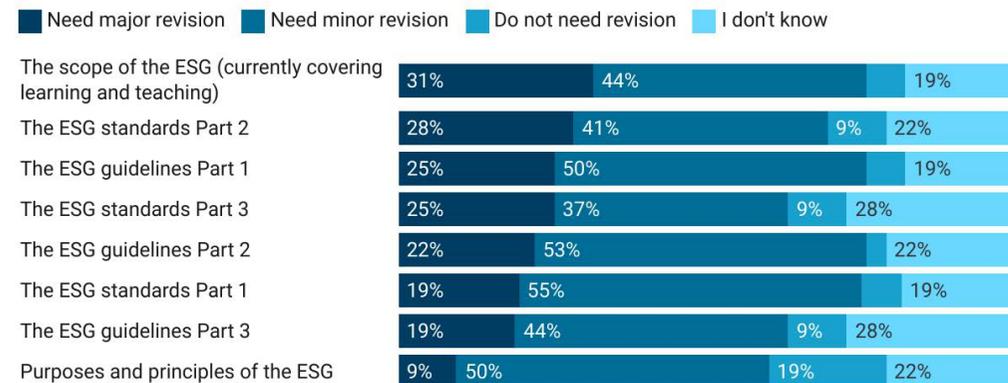
Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

This can also impact the responses of participants as the question doesn't ask abstractly what topics should be covered, but what topics should be covered in more detail compared to the current version of the ESGs.

Furthermore, while some topics could be best tackled through specific provisions in standards and indicators (e.g.student participation or mobility), other topics could potentially be reflected both in specific and longitudinal approaches (e.g. social dimension or digitalisation). Nevertheless, the approach depends on several aspects: policy signalling (what matters are considered a priority for stakeholders, as the root of constructing the understanding of quality and thus quality assurance), links to learning and teaching (as more research or service to society would not only expand the topics, but the overall scope), and capacity to use indicators that would either directly show or proxy the achievement of the feature through standards and guidelines in quality assurance. For NUSes, however, a clear option has emerged towards supporting more specific and transversal integration of social dimension and (some) fundamental values elements in the standards and guidelines.

The next question focused on different possible approaches for setting up an external QA evaluation system for European university alliances. 59% of NUSes agreed that there is a need for an evaluation system of the Alliances, however 75% of NUSes also concurred with the fact that an evaluation system at alliance level should not replace the evaluation at university level, which is still needed. Furthermore, while only one NUSes pointed out that the European Approach for Joint Programes should not be used in the evaluation of joint programmes of alliances, a high degree of indecisiveness is shown by almost half (47%) answering 'I don't know'.

For the question referring to joint programmes, the most probable explanation is that NUSes are not aware of the European Approach to Joint Programmes and what it contains, thus deciding not to present a position on the matter. However, albeit to a smaller degree, there could also be the issue of the coverage in content of the European Approach. While for the ESGs there is still relevant room for adaptation at national level, the European Approach is expected to be used 'in corpore' during an evaluation procedure, without adapting to national particularities, which is understandable for international joint programmes as it would represent a clear barrier in case of contrasting national legislation, especially for accreditation. This, however, shows the need for efficient coordination in updating the content of the European Approach so that main elements considered by stakeholders are incorporated based on new trends, challenges and opportunities, without the possibility to cover the gaps through national legislation.

Figure 24 - Support for adding different topics within ESGs Part 1

If the scope of the ESG Part 1 were to be expanded, what should it cover in more detail?

■ To a large extent ■ To some extent ■ Not at all ■ I don't know

	To a large extent	To some extent	Not at all	I don't know
Participation of students and staff in higher education governance	75%	19%		
Academic freedom and integrity	50%	31%		13%
Social dimension of higher education	47%	38%		13%
Digitalisation of learning and teaching	41%	41%		13%
Microcredentials	41%	38%	13%	9%
Recognition of prior learning	41%	41%		13%
Mobility of students and staff	38%	47%		13%
Research	34%	34%	9%	22%
Lifelong learning	34%	38%	16%	13%
Environmental sustainability	28%	53%		13%
Service to society/Third mission	25%	38%	19%	19%
Institutional autonomy	22%	41%	16%	22%
Cooperation with labour market and its relevance for higher education	22%	31%	34%	13%
Institutional management	19%	50%	16%	16%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

For the European alliances, the strong support from NUSes shows the need to develop veritable internal and external QA mechanisms at Alliance level, considering the role they are invited to play in the European and national higher education systems and they impact they are expected to have on study programmes and learning and teaching. ESU recently adopted a position in the most recent Board meeting (here) that outlines key elements such as student participation in quality assurance procedures at joint programme and alliance level, the current lack of a holistic QA approach at alliance level and a paradigm shift needed from project-QA to institutional (education delivery) QA. While the external evaluation of alliances is deemed relevant, there has been no prospecting so far in the survey on what the possible outcomes of such evaluation should be. While the possibility of the evaluation posing no 'formal' consequences could be imagined (thus being 'required' without any 'corrective' arm or exclusively for enhancement), further consequences could be linked to either (European) funding or possibility to issue joint degrees (in a longer future also with the potentiality of using the alliance-level evaluation for giving the right to issue joint degrees without programme-level accreditation). Nevertheless, in this point both the alliance evaluation and the joint programme evaluation are considered necessary, even more so by the still development and testing phase of improving and scaling up the use of joint programmes in the European Education Area. Furthermore, a clear message is sent in terms of the fact that NUSes believe that the alliance-level evaluation could not and should not replace individual institutional/programme level evaluations/accreditations.

Finally, we asked NUSes what they believe to be challenges in unlocking the full potential of the ESGs. The majority agree that the most important challenges are that students are not seen as equal members of the academic community and their participation is tokenistic, while also students signal the lack of resources and that changes made after external QA procedures are not systemic or impactful.

This perception shows that despite tremendous progress, normative integration and efforts towards ensuring equal student participation in quality assurance procedures at all levels, with a strong general support from European level and QA agencies, there are still issues to be tackled, even more at institutional levels. On the another note, students point out to issues pertaining to the meaningful impact of EQA procedures, which in turn need to be addressed in the wider discussion on the purpose of QA and the degree to which the tools effectively achieve their objectives in the long run.

Figure 25 - Evaluation of European Alliances

What do you think about the following statements related to quality assurance of university alliances?

■ I agree ■ I do not agree ■ I don't know

Statement	I agree	I do not agree	I don't know
The evaluation of each university alliance member is not sufficient and an evaluation at alliance level is needed	59%	22%	19%
The European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes should be used in the evaluation/accreditation of programmes offered by university alliances	50%	47%	
The evaluation of each university alliance member is sufficient and no evaluation at alliance level is needed	22%	59%	19%
The evaluation at alliance level is sufficient and an evaluation of each university alliance member is not needed	9%	75%	16%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

Figure 26 - Challenges to unlocking ESG potential

To what extent do you consider any of the above as challenges in unlocking the full potential of ESGs?

■ Disagree ■ Somewhat disagree ■ Undecided ■ Somewhat agree ■ Agree

Students are not seen as equal members of the academic community
9% | 22% | 19% | 44%

Tokenism in terms of student participation in QA procedures
34% | 25% | 37%

The changes made after an EQA are not systemic
31% | 31% | 28%

Lack of resources
12% | 16% | 9% | 34% | 28%

Lack of appropriate follow-up after EQA reviews
9% | 9% | 19% | 41% | 22%

The national framework which doesn't allow for full implementation of the ESGs
16% | 19% | 25% | 19% | 22%

Lack of transparency in terms of QA procedures, data, and results
19% | 28% | 28% | 19%

National QA methodologies are not applied in practice
12% | 12% | 41% | 16% | 19%

Chart: ESU • Source: QA FIT • Created with Datawrapper

VII. Conclusions

After analysing the responses of the National Unions of Students, it can be concluded that external quality assurance and the European Standards and Guidelines in particular have been a success story of the Bologna Process, while several significant aspects can be further emphasised and improved.

Although NUSes acknowledge that student-centred learning is implemented in most academic programs, meaningful involvement of students in the design of study programs or curricula remains challenging. Responses also suggest that SCL should be viewed as part of the institutional identity and the way universities want to be perceived. However, transforming SCL into a whole-institution paradigm is considered a difficult undertaking. Even though external QA is perceived to put more emphasis on SCL than internal QA, it is clear that students further see different aspects of SCL as highly important to be included in the process. Additionally, HEIs need to prioritise all the main aspects of SCL, such as the flexibility of learning paths, student/staff ratio, flexible mechanisms for recognition (including recognition of prior learning), and students' involvement in designing learning outcomes and teaching methods, taking into consideration the diversity of the student group.

In relation to the Social Dimension, it has been revealed that indicators of the Social Dimension (SD) are to some extent used for both external and internal QA, while there is a strong overlap between the perceived importance of indicators and those used in practice for external QA. Another message taken from NUSes is that fundamental values in higher education could be more strongly monitored through QA practices. We have seen different support for different fundamental val-ues, based on the ability of QA to grasp them through QA processes.

NUSes have various definitions of the purpose of higher education and what 'quality' of education means. This is yet another argument for why it is important that QA allows for different approaches, while maintaining core standards. On another note, it is interesting to note that the respondents did not have a strong position on whether external QA adapts quickly to changes in HE.

A clear majority of NUSes believe that the ESGs serve their purpose and bring essential added value not only for international cooperation, but for each and every study programme in EHEA. While designed to facilitate degree recognition and ensure trust, ESGs go well beyond and determine the common language in Europe for ensuring the quality of higher education. Nevertheless, in order to be adapted to current trends and evolving perceptions of what quality education is, NUSes believe that the ESGs should be revised in both standards and guidelines, but also in terms of the areas covered, with the highest percentage attributed to participation of students and staff in HE governance, social dimension, digitalisation of learning and teaching, microcredentials, academic freedom and integrity and recognition of prior learning.

While not calling for a 'revolution', but rather an optimisation, NUSes point to the need for more and clearer standards and higher accuracy in ensuring the consistency of the implementation across EHEA, so that all relevant stakeholders trust that QA processes abide by the common minimum precepts. This requires both enforcing current elements (e.g. student participation) and expanding the areas covered, while still keeping QA processes fit for purpose and adjusted to the areas that bring the highest added value. The ESGs have been successful for the meaningful balance of bringing together top-bottom and bottom-top initiatives and maintaining the sine-qua-non accountability element of the process while supporting enhancement for those going beyond.

While several open questions still remain to be answered, and the focus groups of the second phase of the QA FIT project will address them, the overall picture described by the results of NUSes show a clear paths for improving the impact and relevance of the European cooperation in quality assurance of higher education and specifically the ESGs for the future.