Quality assurance carried out in compliance with the ESG 2015 is one of the three commitments that characterise the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), alongside the three-cycle degree structure and credit transfer procedures in line with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Overall, the EQUIP activities have demonstrated that there has been a discernible shift in the interpretation of the initial ESG, stakeholders in the EHEA have a common understanding of quality assurance. Furthermore, while not all actors are familiar with the ESG and their relevant preparations and approaches, many of their challenges in meeting the expectations of the ESG are shared across different countries and stakeholder groups.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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