

Quality Assurance Fit for the Future

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European University Association asbl

Avenue de l'Yser 24

Rue du Rhône 114

1040 Brussels

Case postale 3174

Belgium

1211 Geneva 3, Switzerland

+32 (0) 2 230 55 44

+41 22 552 02 96

www.eua.eu · info@eua.eu

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1. Introduction

High-quality higher education provision has been one of the key aims of the Bologna Process since its start in 1999, and in 2020, the Ministers responsible for higher education in the countries of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) confirmed their commitment to quality assurance (QA) and the implementation of the European quality assurance framework, including the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area \(ESG\)](#). Today, cooperation in quality assurance within the EHEA has significantly increased, becoming one of the most successful outcomes of the Bologna Process, and the ESG are widely recognised as a valuable and indispensable common framework for developing shared criteria and methodologies.

As the ESG have proven themselves as an effective and widely implemented tool, there have been calls to widen their scope following recent developments and trends impacting higher education or emerging within the sector (e.g. micro-credentials, sustainability, academic values, digitalisation, etc.) that pose new challenges for quality assurance¹. It is in this context that the QA-FIT project was launched in June 2022. The goal of the project is to map the state of play of quality assurance in the EHEA, and explore how the ESG have been used by actors at different levels (European, national, regional, institutional) and how they are responding to the emerging needs and trends. The project also aims to critically evaluate the fitness for purpose of the ESG and the possible need to extend their scope, as well as to gather perspectives on the future of quality assurance in the EHEA.

The 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 so-called E4 organisations (the authors of the 2005 ESG), i.e. the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Students' Union (ESU). The project also includes the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (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 Romania (ANOSR), and the Ministry of Education and Science of Georgia (associated partner).

The first phase of the project looked at how the ESG have been adapted to different (national and institutional) 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 gather quantitative data was designed for each stakeholder group (institutions, QA agencies, students, and national authorities). EUA and EURASHE were in charge of surveying higher education institutions (HEIs) operating in the EHEA, and disseminated the questionnaire among their members between December 2022 and January 2023. The questionnaire included questions on internal quality assurance (IQA), external quality assurance (EQA), the ESG, and the future of European quality assurance. 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 perspectives of HEIs 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 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 a potential 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 ESG.

¹ See "The ESG in the changing landscape of higher education. Statement by the E4 Group, August 2020".

2. Characteristics of the survey respondents

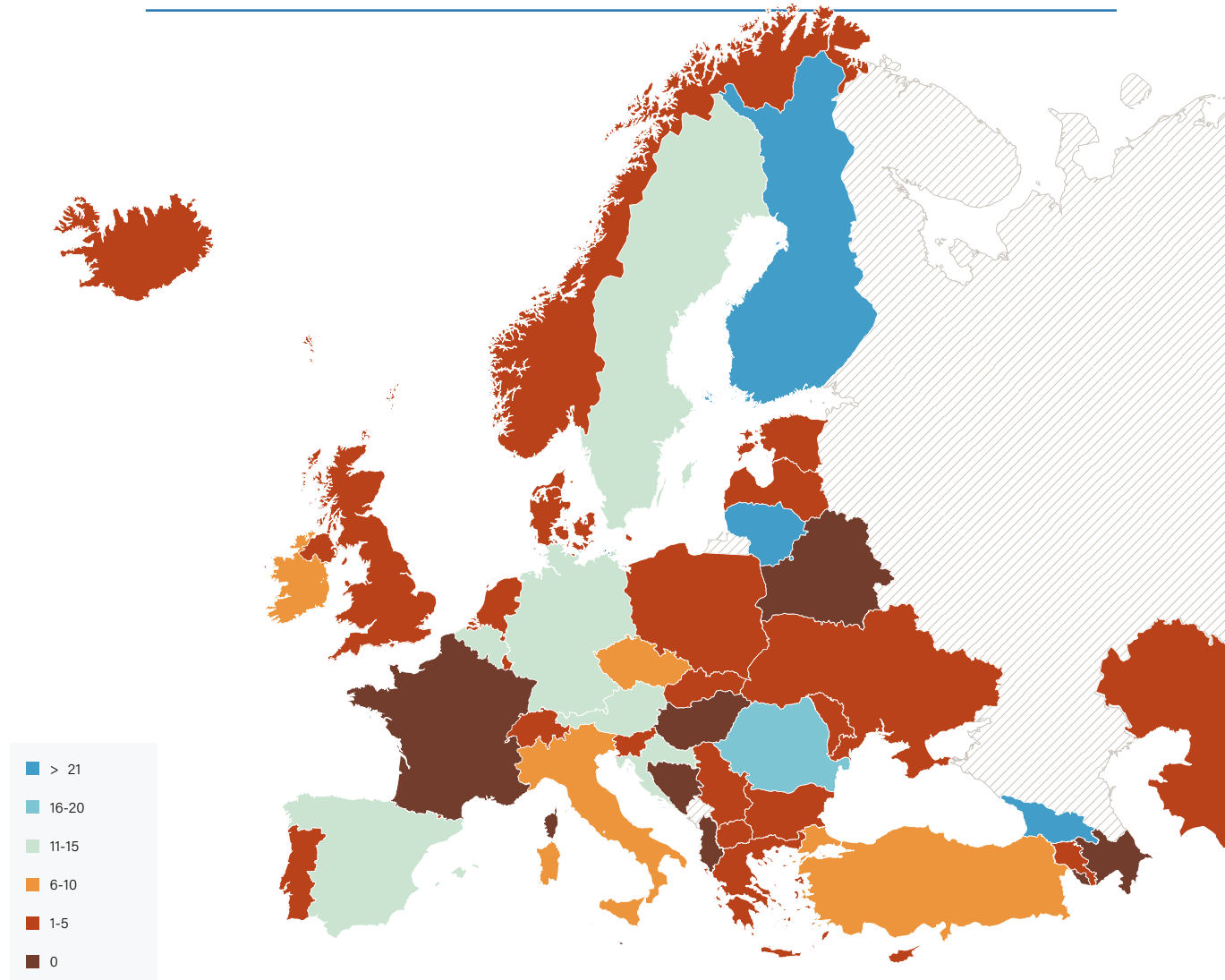
2.1 Geographical distribution of the respondents

A total of 260 valid responses were received from 41 countries of the EHEA (out of a total of 49). Although this indicates that the data collected covers almost the entire area, it is to be noted that none of the HEIs in the following countries replied to the survey: Albania, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Bosnia and Herzegovina, France, Hungary, Liechtenstein, Malta, and the Holy See.

The geographical distribution of respondents is very uneven and varies greatly within the same European region, as figure 1 shows. For example, Nordic countries submitted a high number of responses, but only one Danish institution completed the survey, whereas twenty-one Finnish institutions did so. This implies that, although no European region is over-represented, some smaller countries are, while some larger countries are under-represented or not represented at all.

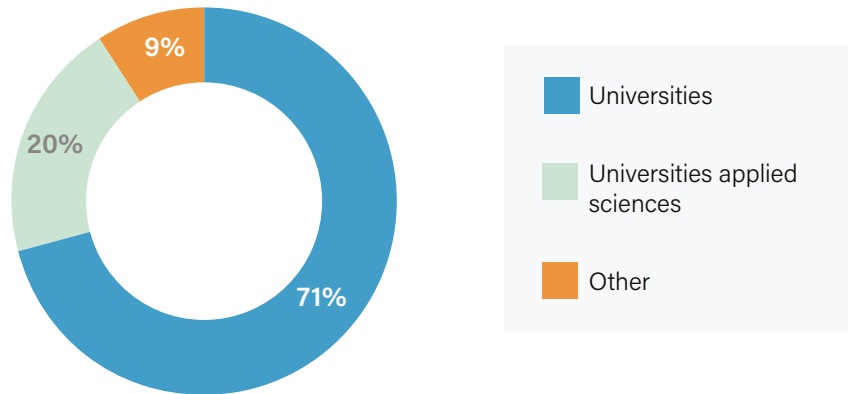
However, whenever a country or region was over- or under-represented in the data collected about a specific issue, this has been highlighted in the paper.

Figure 1: map of EHEA with numbers of responses from each country



2.2 Types of institutions represented by the respondents

Figure2: table of institutions responding to survey



As reported in figure 2, the vast majority of responses came from universities (185), followed by universities of applied sciences (51), and other HEIs (24) – the latter ranging from university colleges to teaching universities and institutions delivering adult education. Most of the responding institutions were public (194), a minority were private not-for-profit (35), and only a small minority were private for-profit (18). Just a few responses (13) came from either foundation universities, or institutions that reported mixed ownership or had another kind of legal status. The majority of the responding institutions (184) train their students up to the doctoral or third-cycle equivalent level. Finally, 150 responding institutions are members of a European University Alliance (almost 58% of all respondents).

In the introduction to the survey, respondents were encouraged to organise an internal consultation at their institution and to respond collaboratively. In most cases (69%), the survey was completed by the QA manager or equivalent (e.g. vice-rector for quality, quality coordinator, etc.). Their answers to questions about internal and external quality assurance generally show a good level of understanding of the subject, while questions about the ESG registered higher numbers of blanks and “I don’t know” answers. This is likely due to the fact that academics and administrative staff in higher education institutions (HEIs) do not always have detailed knowledge of the ESG since they normally follow national legislation and other specific/sectoral regulatory frameworks.

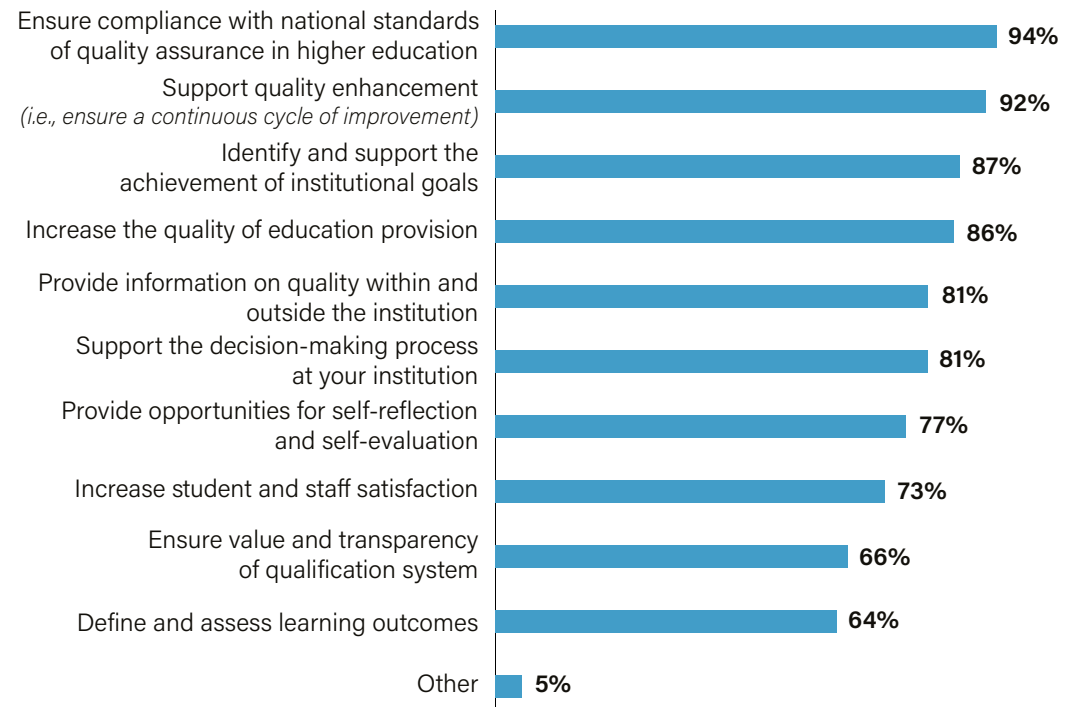
3. Internal quality assurance

3.1 Role and structure of IQA processes and stakeholders' engagement

The first part of the survey investigated the state of play of internal quality assurance in the EHEA through specific questions about its development, implementation and scope at the institutional level. The data collected clearly shows that, overall, existing QA processes appear to be in line with the expectations of the ESG, where standard 1.1 states that institutions should have "a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management". The majority of responding institutions describe their approach to internal quality assurance in one (27%) or in multiple documents (56%), while a minority do not have a separate QA policy statement but rather address QA in other documents (12%). Very few respondents indicated alternative approaches to documenting internal quality assurance, such as, for example, "guidelines for the use of the evaluation results". In 2010, another EUA survey on quality culture² found that 93% of the respondents had an institutional strategic plan or equivalent document for quality assurance. Although various differences between the two surveys do not allow a straightforward comparison,³ it should be noted that internal quality assurance is now addressed in some way by all responding institutions.

As shown in figure 3, internal quality assurance serves a number of purposes, although its two main roles are ensuring "compliance with national standards of quality assurance in higher education" and supporting "quality enhancement".

Figure 3: Primary role of internal QA



² The survey took place in spring 2010 as part of EUA's project "Examining Quality Culture in Higher Education Institutions" (EQC). See Loukkola, T. and Zhang, T. 2010, 'Examining Quality Culture: Part 1 - Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education Institutions', p. 20.

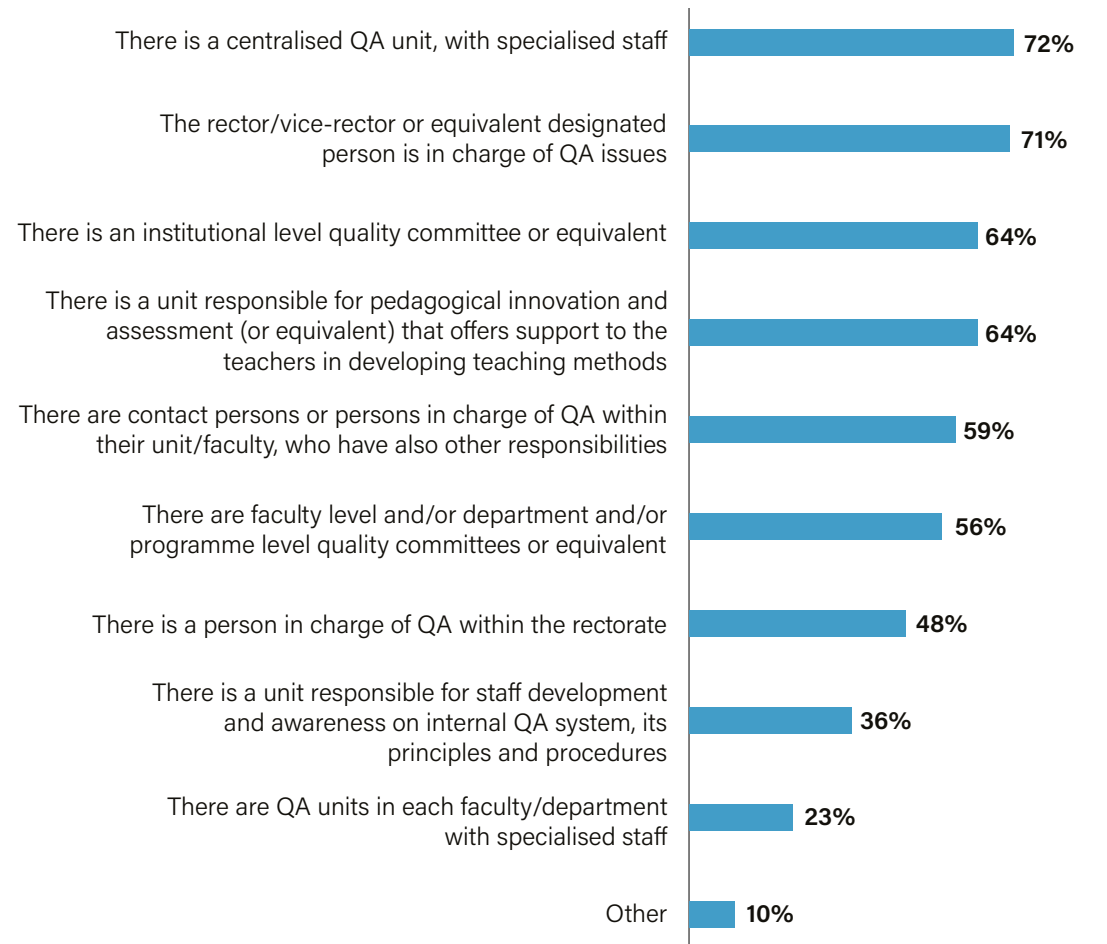
³ The data collected in 2010 only referred to EUA members and not to EURASHE members; the geographical coverage was also different from the survey analysed in this paper.

Most respondents (70%) indicated that their internal QA system was introduced in accordance with the “requirements of the national QA agency/ministry/other QA agency and of the ESG”, while around 40% indicated that their system is based only “on requirements of the national QA agency”. This does not imply that in 40% of cases internal QA is not in accordance with the ESG, but merely that this may not be obvious to the respondents. As already indicated in section 2.2, respondents to this survey may not be familiar with the ESG and thus not realise that, in most countries of the EHEA, the national criteria for internal QA of higher education institutions (HEIs) have been evaluated as being in line with the ESG.

When comparing these results with those of the above-mentioned 2010 EUA survey, a significant difference emerges because at the time, only 52% of respondents based their internal QA on the requirements of the national QA agency. Furthermore, while in 2010, 41% of respondents declared that the institutional leadership decided on the concept and provided instructions for the introduction of internal QA, in the current survey, this option was chosen by around half of the respondents. This seems to suggest that in the last twelve years, HEIs have made progress in adapting their internal QA to the requirements of national agencies, and that the role of institutional leadership in this respect has become even more important than before. Further investigation will be conducted during the second phase of the project to verify this hypothesis.

Institutional leadership seems to play a central role also in relation to the structure of internal QA systems where, as shown in figure 4 below, the rector or vice-rector is often in charge of QA issues. Although in many cases there are persons in charge of QA within each unit/faculty, these cannot be considered specialised QA staff as QA is not their principal duty; only in around 23% of cases do faculty-level QA units have specialised staff. This seems to confirm that the principal responsibility for internal QA processes generally lies with the institutional leadership and administration, rather than being devolved to individual faculties and departments.

Figure 4: Structure supporting internal QA



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The engagement of different actors in the design and implementation of internal QA again sees the institutional leadership in the main role, but according to the survey, academic staff, administrative staff, students, and external stakeholders are also engaged, although to varying degrees. Academic and administrative staff, as well as students, are all engaged to a high or medium degree (all above 84%), while external stakeholders are poorly engaged in 35% of cases and engaged or very engaged in 64% of cases. It seems that the relatively low engagement of external stakeholders is a transversal issue affecting universities and universities of applied sciences, and public and private institutions equally. However, among members of European University Alliances, the data is lower than average since only 52% report that external stakeholders are very engaged or engaged in internal QA. It is noticeable that a minority of institutions (18) declared that they have made efforts to increase the engagement of various stakeholders in QA processes since 2015, but only 3 institutions explicitly mentioned external stakeholders. However, among the 18 institutions making efforts to improve stakeholder engagement, 7 reported that they have improved employer involvement and did not mention external stakeholders. This suggests that the understanding of the concept of “external stakeholders” may sometimes be limited. In any case, engaging external stakeholders in internal QA can be challenging for institutions and higher education systems, and although it is desirable to further increase such participation, the data collected shows a rather positive trend.

3.2 Areas covered by internal QA

Higher education in Europe has three stated missions: learning and teaching, research, and service to society. While the ESG focus on learning and teaching, institutions also address the other two missions in their internal QA processes. In general, institutions seem to design their internal QA with a comprehensive approach towards their activities, as the next figure highlights. All areas of activity are covered to various degrees, and there are no areas that are not covered. However, activities related to institutions’ engagement in a European University Alliance, as well as micro-credentials, are covered somewhat less often than other elements. This is not surprising considering that both are fairly recent developments in higher education, and it may thus be considered positive that, in the majority of cases, internal QA nevertheless covers them. Interestingly, 24% of the institutions that indicated that their internal QA does not cover activities related to European University Alliances are actually part of an alliance.

Since the ESG cover all education provision, whatever the format and place of delivery, activities under the umbrella of alliances, as well as micro-credentials, should also be explicitly included in internal QA. It is possible that the institutions declaring that their internal QA does not cover micro-credentials actually mean that they are not specifically covered. In any case, this seems to confirm, as the MICROBOL project pointed out,⁴ that institutions need more guidance on the quality assurance of micro-credentials.

Institutions use different sources of guidance to design their internal quality assurance, but national QA agencies have become the primary guideline providers for all activities. For example, 88% of respondents base their internal QA of learning and teaching on “regulations and/or guidelines provided by the national QA agency”, while in 2010, the percentage was 65%. Among the respondents that do not use guidelines from their national QA agencies, Lithuania represents over 22% (while accounting for only 9% of the total survey respondents). In general, institutions seem reluctant to adopt guidelines provided by another national agency or entity, although it should be noted that in some countries, there may not be other agencies besides the national QA agency. Around 64% reported that they make use of institutional and/or sectoral developments to design their approach to QA of learning and teaching.

Coverage of research activities by internal QA has increased in the past decade. In 2010, research activities were covered in less than 80% of cases, whereas now, 95% of respondents indicated that they are covered by internal QA at least to some extent (see figure 5). Since the ESG do not provide guidance on the quality assurance of research activities as such⁵, the range of frameworks used by institutions is more varied than for learning and teaching, although guidelines provided by the national QA agency are still the most important framework used. A good number of alternative frameworks are also applied, including some sector-specific tools (some mentioned by respondents include regulations about animal well-being and indigenous Sami research ethical guidelines), and European guidelines such as the [European Charter for Researchers](#) and the [Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers](#).

⁴ See “Micro-credentials linked to the Bologna Key Commitments. Common Framework for Micro-credentials in the EHEA”, March 2022.

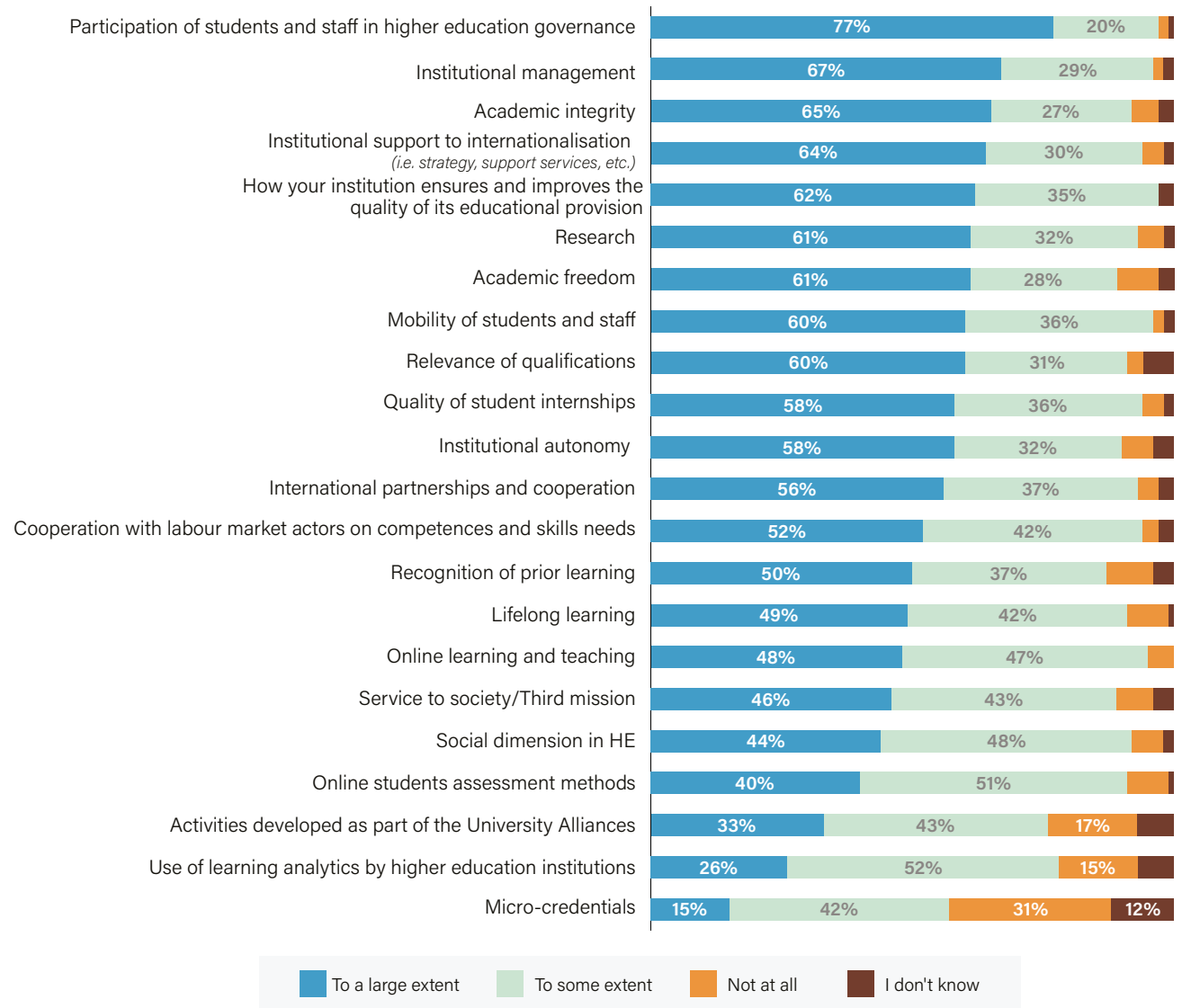
⁵ Research is, however, mentioned in the ESG on pages 7, 11, 13 and 14.

Finally, the vast majority of respondents reported that their internal QA covers the third mission, i.e. service to society. Although it is only covered extensively in around 46% of cases, the total coverage is almost 90%. This marks a significant increase from 2010, when only 48% of internal QA systems covered this aspect of higher education. Research, on the other hand, is covered extensively by internal QA mechanisms in 63% of the respondent institutions. As for learning and teaching and for research, the main source of guidance for institutions with respect to the third mission is national QA agencies. That said, “institutional/sectoral developments in services to society” also play a central role for 58% of respondents. Very few guidelines were cited by the respondents other than those suggested, and these were ISO 9001, the Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle of continuous improvement, the International University Sports Federation (FISU) Healthy Campus programme, and internal institutional guidelines.

3.3 Evolution and impact factors

Since 2015, various factors have impacted internal QA (see figure 6). Unsurprisingly, changes in national legislation have significantly affected around 84% of respondents (only a few respondents indicated that they were not affected by such changes). Bologna Process developments and the need to comply with the ESG have also had a significant impact. In particular, the impact of the ESG may be even wider than indicated by respondents since changes in national regulations are often guided by developments at the European level. For example, national QA agencies must comply with the ESG to be registered in the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR), implying that their criteria for evaluating institutions are in line with the ESG. Another major impact on institutions’ approach to quality assurance is competition,

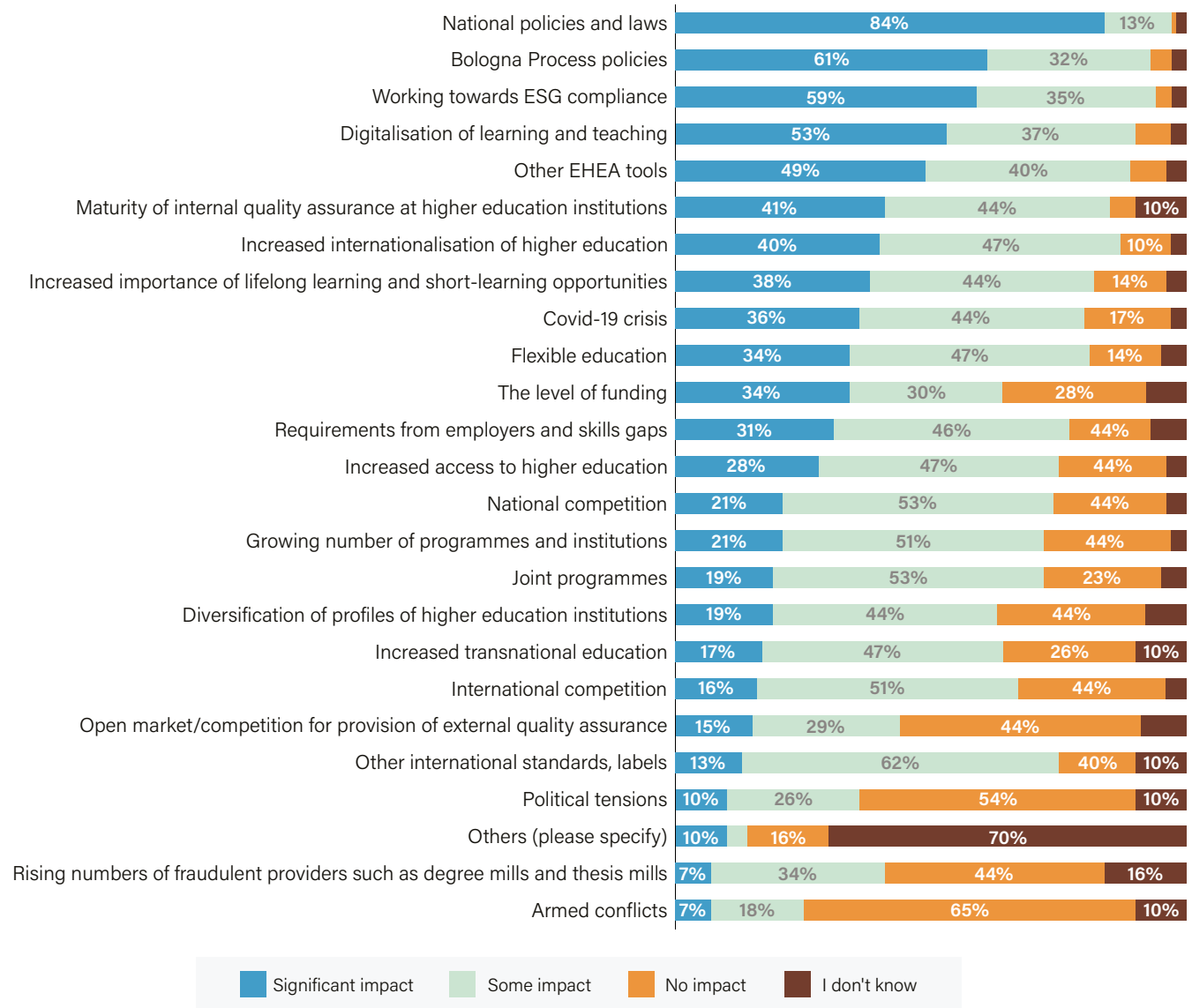
Figure 5: Areas covered by internal QA



both at national and international level, including “growing number of programmes and institutions”. On the other hand, the “rising numbers of fraudulent providers such as degree mills and thesis mills” has affected only about half of the survey respondents. A small number of respondents listed institutional changes, such as scarcity of human resources and increased staff awareness, among the factors that have impacted their internal QA approach.

Regardless of what factors have influenced the development and implementation of internal QA since 2015, for most respondents (83%), establishing an internal quality assurance system has had a positive impact on their institution, while for around 16%, it has had a mixed impact. Only one respondent lamented a negative impact. Some respondents reported that the implementation of an internal QA system has allowed them to collect feedback more efficiently and regularly, thus improving the quantity and quality of data available for decision-making and helping foster cooperation between stakeholders. In a few cases, internal QA has facilitated preparation for national quality assurance or accreditation processes, and some respondents also mentioned its positive impact on transparency, the exchange of good practices, and the achievement of the institution’s strategic goals. On the other hand, a good number of respondents lamented that the implementation of internal QA systems was initially challenging, and that it has significantly increased the workload for administrative and academic staff. Although in most cases internal QA has had a positive impact on institutions despite procedures being complex and time-consuming, some stated that its costs exceed its benefits due to insufficient human and financial resources. A few respondents suggested that the adjustment of national regulations to meet the ESG requirements should have decreased other bureaucratic demands in order to ensure the sustainability of the system.

Figure 6: Impact levels



4. External Quality Assurance

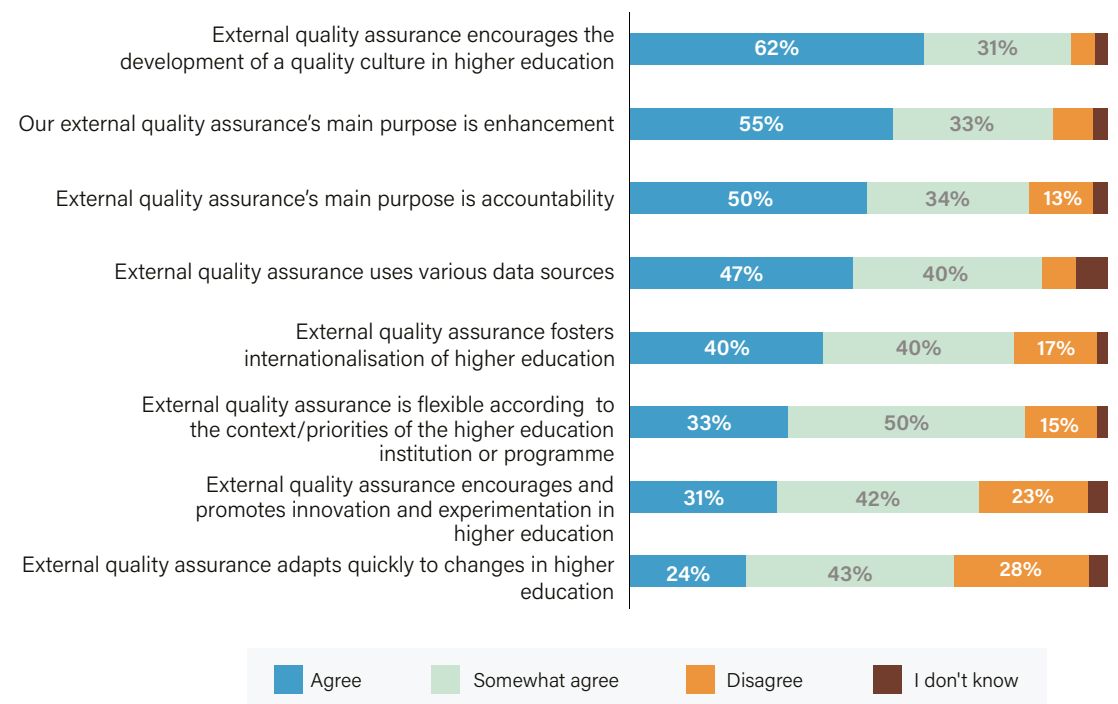
The questions included in the second part of the survey addressed the higher education institutions' (HEIs') perception of the external quality assurance (EQA) system in place in their context. The EQA processes are the core external mechanisms that assess the functioning of the internal procedures at the institutional level, including the development of study programmes, learning and teaching activities, and structural developments. During the analysis of the survey responses, it became clear that the general perception of the HEI respondents was that the existence of an external QA system is fulfilling its general role of being an "external eye" for their institutional reality and that, in most cases, the external perspective leads to an evaluation that can guide the institution in implementing their mission and further developing their day-to-day work. Respondents also highlighted different good and bad practices from their national EQA systems. Some institutions underlined that the processes were generally enhancement-oriented and well organised, but that they were also demanding on institutions. At the same time, the respondents also brought up the perception of processes as bureaucratic and overwhelming.

4.1 Scope and role of EQA

Part 2 of the ESG covers the aspects that external QA should address in the review processes, and among higher education institutions, there is a general understanding of its scope and role regarding the functioning of the processes. However, there may be slight differences and focuses on aspects of the scope and role depending on the culture in the respective countries, the maturity of the QA system, and the orientation towards standards and/or guidelines in the local context. Figure 7 shows the institutional perception of external QA and its primary purposes.

According to the institutions, the three primary purposes of external QA are 1) the development of a quality culture (93% of respondents "highly agree" and "somewhat agree"); 2) enhancement of quality at the institutional level (88%); and 3) provision of (public) accountability (84%). On the other hand, as shown in figure 7, the highest disagreements about the role of external quality assurance were seen in the following areas: flexibility according to the context and priorities of the HEI (28%); promoting innovation and experimentation (23%); and fostering internationalisation (17%).

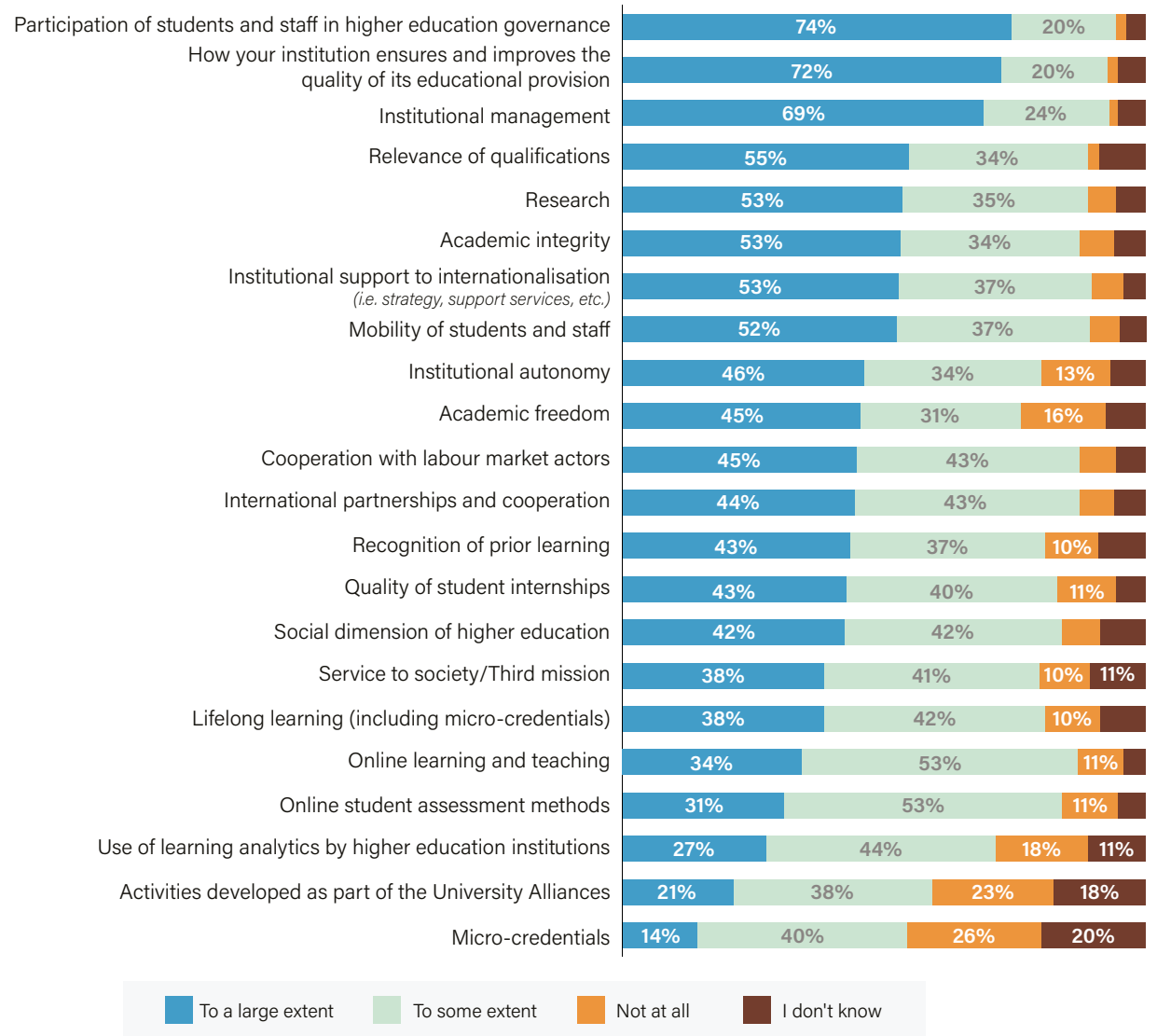
Figure 7: External QA procedures



The survey also allowed to gain insight into the institutional perception of what has shaped and impacted changes within the countries' external QA systems since the last ESG revision in 2015. The aspects with the most significant impact on higher education are 1) national policies and laws (84%); 2) the Bologna Process policies (70%); and 3) working towards ESG compliance (68%). These factors are crucial in shaping higher education's QA landscape, as they provide the framework for institutions to operate within and ensure that they are aligned with national and international standards. The Bologna Process, in particular, has been instrumental in promoting a harmonised European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The EHEA tools placed fourth in the list of transformative elements, with 50% considering their impact as "significant" and a further 34% saying they had "some impact". Many factors gained a substantial share of "some impact" responses, indicating that various events, agendas, and circumstances of the eight years since the last revision of the ESG were, to some extent, had an impact on national EQA systems. On the other hand, respondents stated that an open market or competition in EQA (30%), rising numbers of fraudulent actors, such as diploma mills and thesis mills (27%), and the emergence of micro-credentials (25%) did not have an impact on EQA systems. It is worth noting that respondents displayed significant hesitance to these questions through their use of the "I don't know" option.

The respondents expressed their perception of the scope of their country's external quality assurance system and the extent to which various areas were covered. It is worth noting that even though the ESG is the guiding framework for the national systems, the national regulations and standards are, to some extent, open. These regulations and standards may cover various topics depending on factors such as the culture in the national higher education system, the maturity of the QA system in the country, and the political priorities existing in a particular region. A breakdown of these topics is shown in figure 8.

Figure 8: Areas covered by external QA



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The highest-rated aspects, which in the respondents' view EQA covers "to a large extent", were 1) the participation of students and staff in QA (74%); 2) ensuring and improving the quality of education provision (72%); and 3) institutional management (69%). On the other hand, the aspects with the lowest emphasis and the highest proportion of "not at all" responses were micro-credentials (26%) and activities of the European University Alliances (23%), which is not unexpected due to the early stage of development of these initiatives. Joining the bottom three was the use of learning analytics by HEIs, with 18% responding "not at all" and 44% responding "to some extent".

A further question addressed in more depth whether EQA covers other specific areas, namely research and service to society, or the third mission of higher education. Respondents who answered that these two areas are covered "to a large extent" or "to some extent" were asked further questions to identify which specific aspects of those areas were considered. In terms of research, respondents answered that external QA most often considers the quality management of research, the societal impact of research, and the responsible conduct of research, including research ethics. Regarding service to society, all of the multiple choice answers were chosen nearly equally: engagement with industry, engagement with society, activities related to technology transfer, and innovation and continuing education.

4.2 External reviews, motivation and added value of EQA

In the survey, institutions were asked if they had undergone an external quality assurance evaluation in the last five years, or had registered to do so in the next twelve months. Out of 260 responding institutions, 241 planned to undergo an external evaluation. For the majority (222), the review was mandatory under their national external quality assurance system. Thirty-one respondents stated that the review was carried out by an agency located in another country, i.e. it could be defined as a cross-border review. In the minority of cases (19), the review was undertaken voluntarily, i.e. not required by the national or regional regulatory framework.

The question on the key reasons for an institution to engage in external assessment showed different motivations. The most common reason amongst the respondents was that external QA is mandatory for them. However, it is evident that while the processes are mandatory, they are also considered by

respondents as being adequate and leading to quality enhancement. The part of the external quality assurance process that aligns with part 2 of the ESG, which consists of peer learning, interaction, and external assessment, was highly valued by the respondents. All aspects of the external review process were considered useful by institutions, especially conducting self-assessment and receiving external feedback. EQA processes are also seen as contributors to institutional development through the involvement of internal stakeholders.

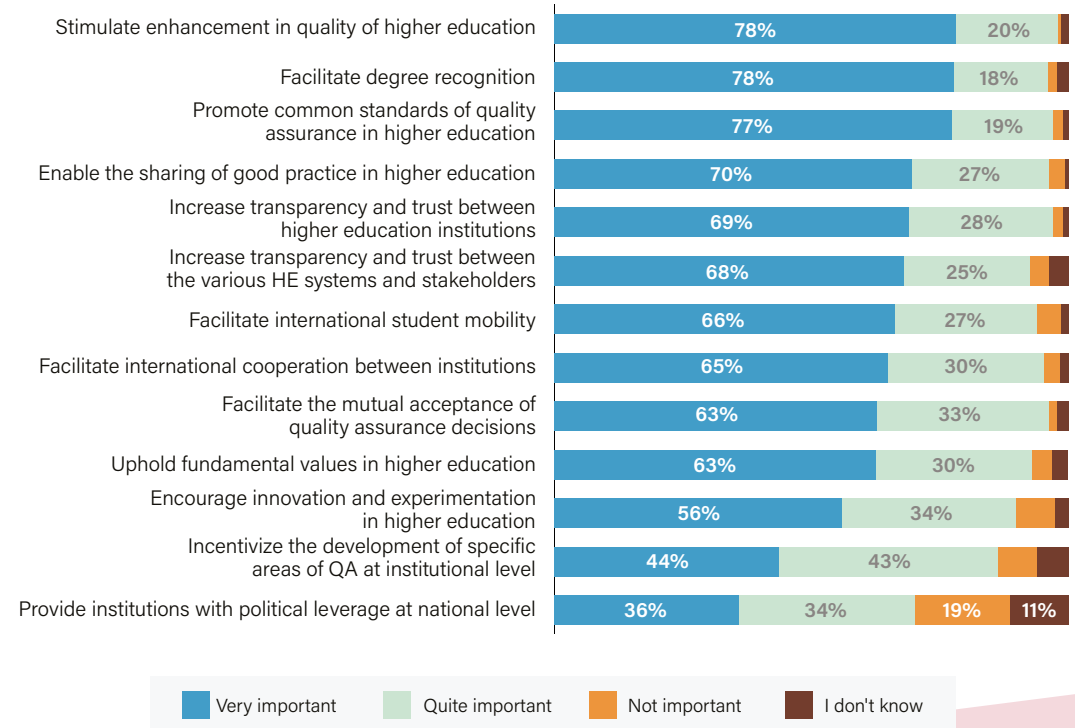
The survey provided insight into the state and scope of the implementation of recommendations arising from the EQA processes. In most cases, recommendations have already been implemented by the institutions or the implementation is ongoing. Most of the "other" responses state that "all suggested recommendations were implemented" or that "implementation requires a holistic approach and therefore touches upon many of the options mentioned in the questionnaire". To understand the scope of the recommendations suggested by the external review panels, the respondents were asked about the areas for improvement and the scope of the feedback received. The efforts to implement recommendations were highest when these were related to academic freedom, academic integrity, qualification framework, student-centred learning, and recognition.

When asked for information about why recommendations were not being implemented, institutions responded that the key reasons were institutional constraints in terms of time and human resources, budget constraints, or non-applicability of the recommendation within the institutional context. Another reason stated was disagreement with the recommendations.

Institutions were also asked about the importance of different current or prospective purposes of the European framework for quality assurance. HEIs pointed out the three aspects that held the highest importance for them, namely 1) stimulating enhancement of quality in higher education (78% "very important"); 2) facilitation of degree recognition (78% "very important"); and 3) promotion of common standards in higher education (77% "very important"). If, however, the "quite important" responses would be also counted, institutions appear to value other purposes almost as much (see figure 9).

Additionally, respondents pointed out other purposes of the EQA not mentioned in the question. In particular, the further implementation of the Bologna tools, such as the Diploma Supplement and ECTS system, supports the larger purpose of facilitating international transparency and cooperation between HEIs. Another respondent mentioned that any upcoming QA framework must take into account the creation of new European University Alliances, which implies cross-border QA approaches between universities belonging to the same alliance. Some also mentioned that the European QA framework should not be extended and set new quality standards, accountability must remain minimal, limited to building trust (among students, the public, and politicians) and supporting mobility (students and staff) in the European area. There is also concern regarding standardisation for the sake of standardisation, when the autonomy of HEIs and academic freedom must remain paramount, over and above the quality approaches to be implemented.

Figure 9: Importance of purposes

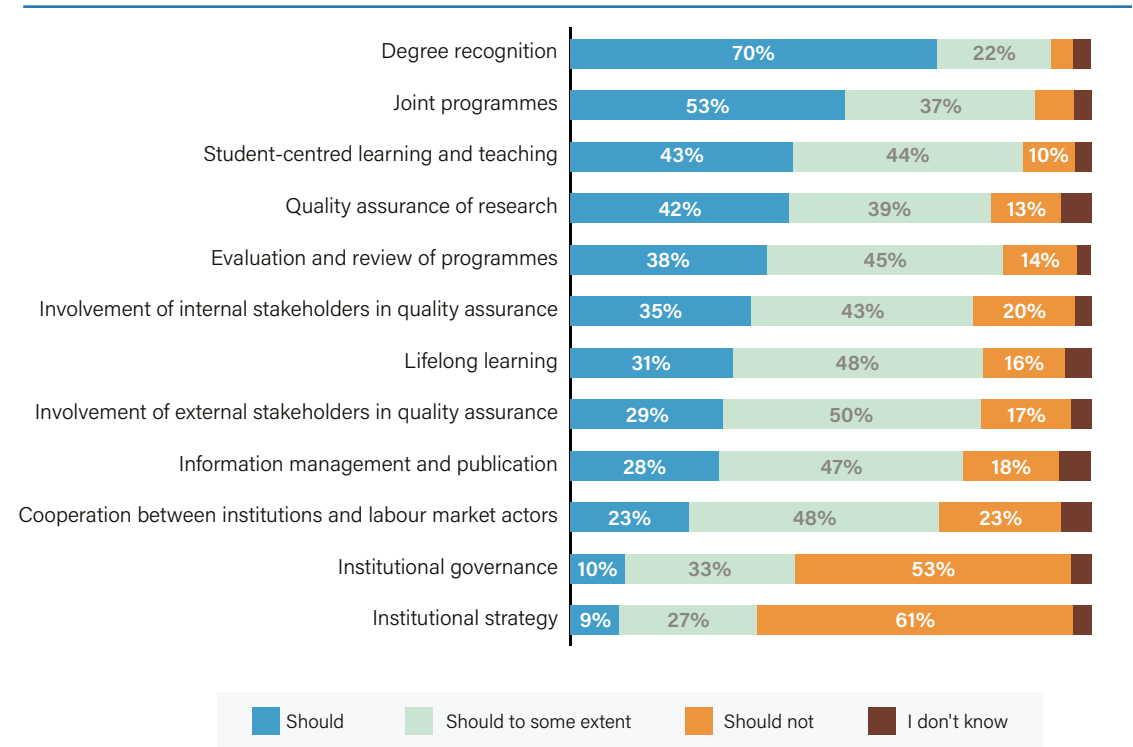


5. Institutional perspectives on the ESG and their content

The last part of the survey concerned higher education institutions' (HEIs') perception of the ESG and their content, and offers insights into what external quality assurance processes should be looking at within the desired scope of EQA at the European level. The discourse on the potential revision of the ESG has sought to find a balance between, on the one hand, retaining the cohesive framework guiding the national systems to achieve a certain uniformity across EHEA and, on the other hand, adding new components such as new tools, priorities and even the politically aligned topics like the sustainability education and digitalisation. It is therefore important to understand which aspects and topics would be of the highest and lower interest to institutions. This part of the paper presents the institutions' perception of the expected scope of the European QA, and their perception of the ESG and their effectiveness.

As shown in figure 10, the most positive answers from the respondents regarding their willingness to include certain topics in the QA framework related to degree recognition (70% "should" and 22% "should to some extent") and the functioning of the joint programmes (53% "should" and 37% "should to some extent"). Respondents were more hesitant about the latter, but were still positive about the inclusion of topics such as lifelong learning, stakeholder involvement in QA, or QA of research. At the other end, respondents were clear about their strong disagreement with the potential direction of the EQA in assessing institutional governance and institutional strategies. The highest number of "should to some extent" answers was noted in relation to lifelong learning and the cooperation with labour market actors, however these aspects depends heavily on the profile of the institutions and their mission. In the latter parts of the survey, a specific question about aspects related to part 1 of the ESG was asked. In addition to the above-mentioned topics, environmental sustainability, micro-credentials, and academic freedom and integrity were mentioned as a potential expansion of part 1 of the ESG.

Figure 10: QA regulated at European level

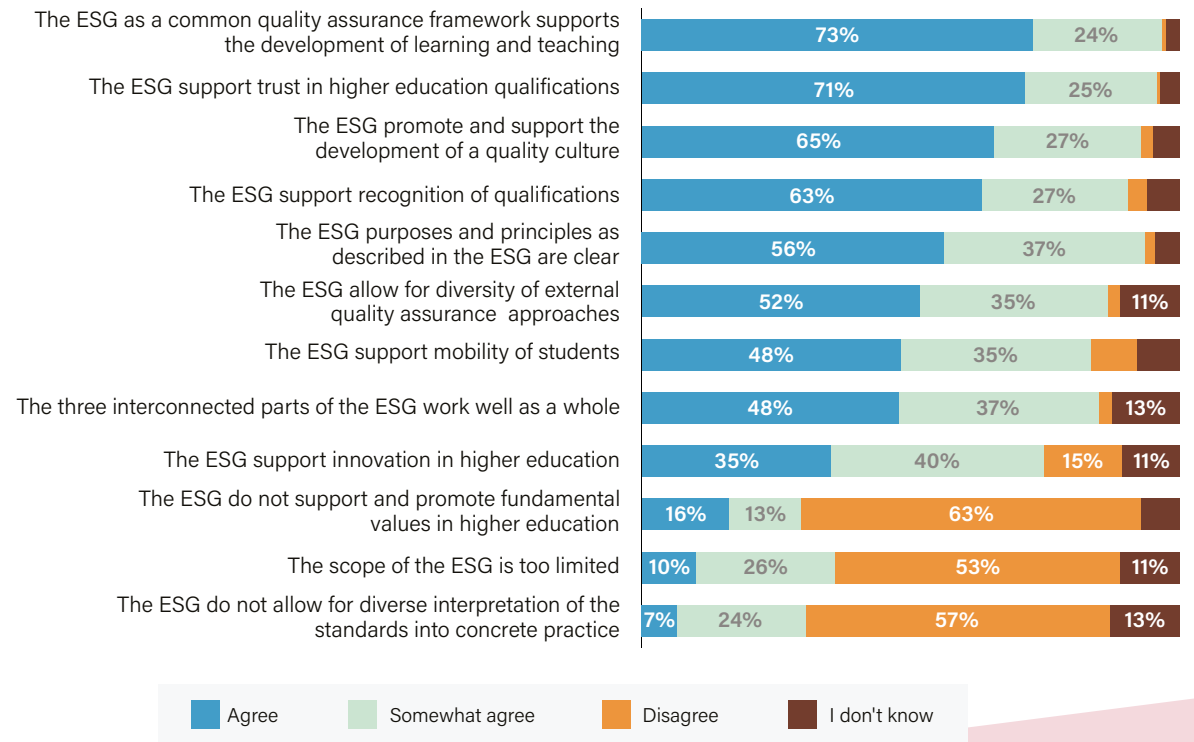


The subsequent questions in the survey explored respondents' point of view on the ESG framework and sought more detail about the perception, effectiveness, and scope of the revision of certain parts of the ESG – both the standards and the guidelines.

In terms of perception, figure 11 shows that institutions see the ESG as a common QA framework supporting the development of high-quality learning and teaching, trust in higher education qualifications, and the development of a quality culture. They support the topics related to the recognition of qualifications and the diversity of external quality assurance approaches. A bit more hesitance could have been noticed when it comes to the innovation in higher education. At the same time, the majority of stakeholders (57%) disagree with the statement that the ESG does not allow for diverse interpretation of the standards into concrete practice.

When looking at the effectiveness of the ESG, it can be seen in figure 12 that the most highly appreciated functions of the framework are the provision of guidance in both external and internal QA, as well as fostering a common understanding of quality assurance among stakeholders and increasing trust between institutions at the European level.

Figure 11: Agreement with ESG statements

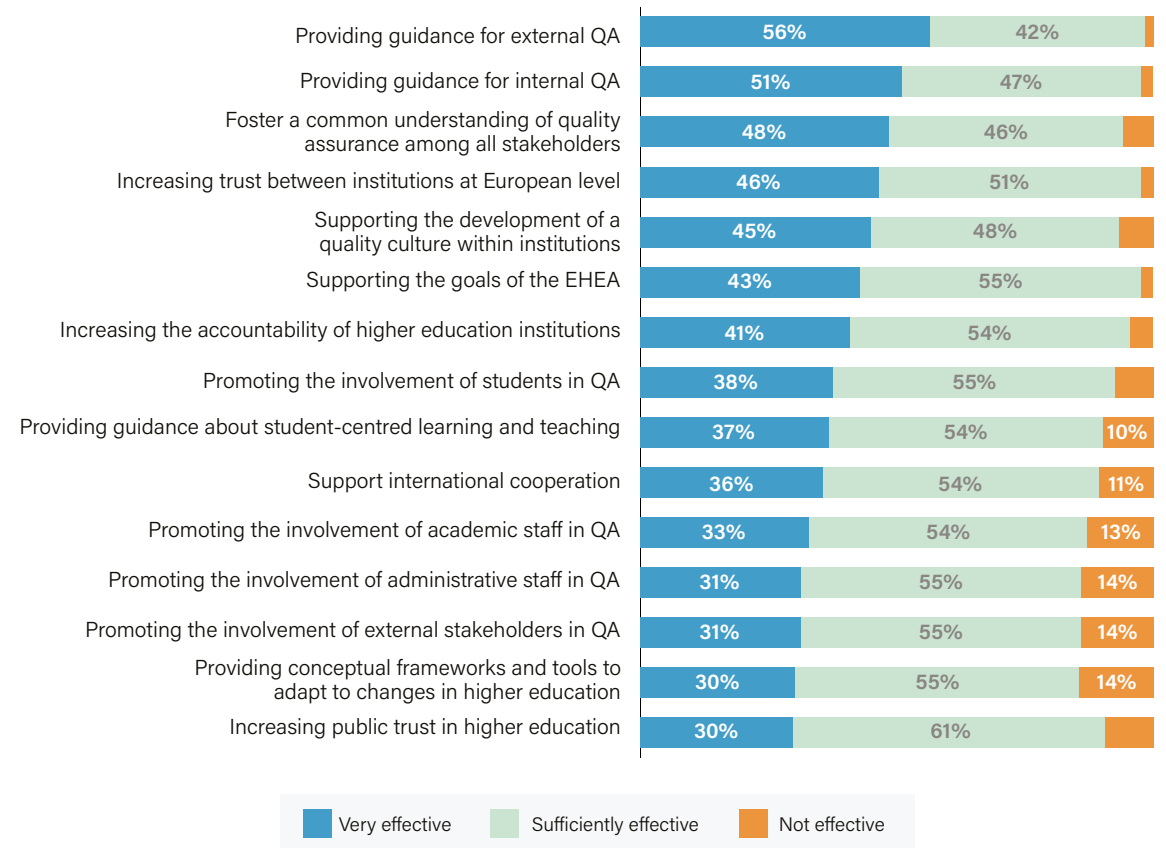


The “Sufficiently effective” option was ticked for the majority of areas, with the highest responses for the role of the ESG in increasing the public trust in higher education, providing tools to adapt to changes, and promoting the involvement of stakeholders in QA, in particular external stakeholders and academic and administrative staff.

Lastly, the survey asked institutions about their perception of statements about the revision of the ESG. It is difficult to reach a clear conclusion from this set of questions, as there was an equal distribution across the statements presented. However, what could be stated is that the majority of institutions agreed that the ESG should provide more guidance for the relevant actors. Respondents also clearly disagreed with the ideas of reducing the ESG to a few core standards and of focusing the ESG on standards without accompanying guidelines. Above all, they nearly unanimously disagreed with the statement that the “ESG is not needed anymore”.


The assessed characteristics scored as “good” with a strong lean towards “very good”. This proves that higher education institutions value the ESG’s clarity, applicability and usefulness. The suggested changes and improvements are, in general, minor. Almost half of respondents (49%) stated that “no other manner of guidance” is expected from the ESGs. However, it is worth noting that a significant number of respondents did not state their opinion regarding the guidance (41%). Taking into consideration the answers across the questionnaire, it is possible to draw the initial conclusion that, from the point of view of the institutions, the ESG are serving their purpose.

Figure 12: Effectiveness of ESG



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Given the existence of various frameworks besides the ESG, the institutions were asked which other tools/guidance/frameworks they have been using to develop their internal quality assurance system, approaches or criteria. The following were mentioned:

- ▶ Observation
 - ▶ Plan-Do-Check-Act (PDCA) cycle
 - ▶ HCQF Student Survey
 - ▶ Total Quality Management
 - ▶ EFQM
 - ▶ CAF
 - ▶ ISO 9001:2015
 - ▶ ISO 21001:2018
 - ▶ Risk Management
 - ▶ UN Global Compact and SDGs
 - ▶ ECTS Users' Guide
- 

6. Further topics

6.1 Fundamental values

Respondents indicated a variety of tools and procedures used by their institutions to determine whether fundamental values are respected. The most popular tools are surveys to gather feedback from the different stakeholders, but a good number of institutions have also adopted specific complaint procedures, offered opportunities to report misconduct, established disciplinary/ethics committees, and referred to ombudsmen. Most institutions declared that values are embedded in one or more general documents, such as mission statements, student charters, internal guidelines for quality, etc. More specific documents are also cited by many respondents, including the Code of Ethics, Sustainable Mobility Plan, Equality Plan, etc. Efforts are being made in some cases to increase awareness of fundamental values through specific training sessions, campaigns, events and orientation meetings. Interestingly, some respondents said that they know that fundamental values are respected because they receive very few complaints, because external evaluations had a positive outcome, or because staff would react if values were not respected.

Indicators related to fundamental values are generally addressed by internal QA processes, albeit to various degrees (all indicators are addressed in more than 85% of cases). "Institutional autonomy" is addressed in almost 89% of cases, and more than half of the respondents indicated that it is addressed to a large extent. "Democratic and free elections at all levels within higher education institution" is addressed in 87% of cases, and to a large extent according to 60% of respondents. Student participation in institutional governance is addressed in over 98% of cases, and to a large extent according to 77% of respondents. Staff participation in institutional governance is addressed in 97% of cases, and to a large extent according to 75% of respondents. "Procedures fit for purpose to foster academic freedom" are addressed through internal QA in 91% of cases, and to a large extent according to 53% of respondents. "Procedures fit for purpose to combat academic misconduct" are addressed in 97% of cases, and to a large extent according to 66% of respondents. "Procedures fit for purpose to combat harassment and other forms of discrimination" are addressed in 94% of cases, and to a large extent according to 65% of respondents. "Engagement with the

institution's community" is addressed in 93% of cases, and to a large extent according to 48% of respondents.

Participation of students and staff in governance is almost always addressed by internal QA, and in the vast majority of cases, they are addressed to a large extent. Democratic elections and academic freedom, although generally addressed, are the lower scoring among the indicators proposed. A few institutions pointed out that, although they do address the indicators related to fundamental values that are cited in the survey, they do not necessarily do so through internal QA processes.

When asked if external quality assurance should directly evaluate whether academic values are respected in higher education, the majority of respondents responded affirmatively. However, a significant minority (36%) think this should not be the case, while around 15% said they did not know.

Results of the survey also confirmed that various aspects of the social dimension are covered by internal QA in the majority of institutions. In particular, the following indicators are covered to a high or to some extent in around 60% of cases:

- ▶ existence of a higher education institution strategy regarding social dimension and its implementation,
- ▶ involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies,
- ▶ monitoring concrete targets on social dimension,
- ▶ data collection on social dimension indicators,
- ▶ training on inclusion and equity for staff,
- ▶ training on inclusion and equity for students,

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- ▶ policies on increasing student completion rates,
- ▶ higher education institutions' involvement in providing grants and scholarships,
- ▶ remedial activities for disadvantaged groups,
- ▶ adapted policies to support access for students with disabilities in higher education (i.e. physical access, adapted teaching and assessment methods),
- ▶ psychological services and student well-being,
- ▶ anti-discrimination policies and responsible structures,
- ▶ gender equality policies and responsible structures.

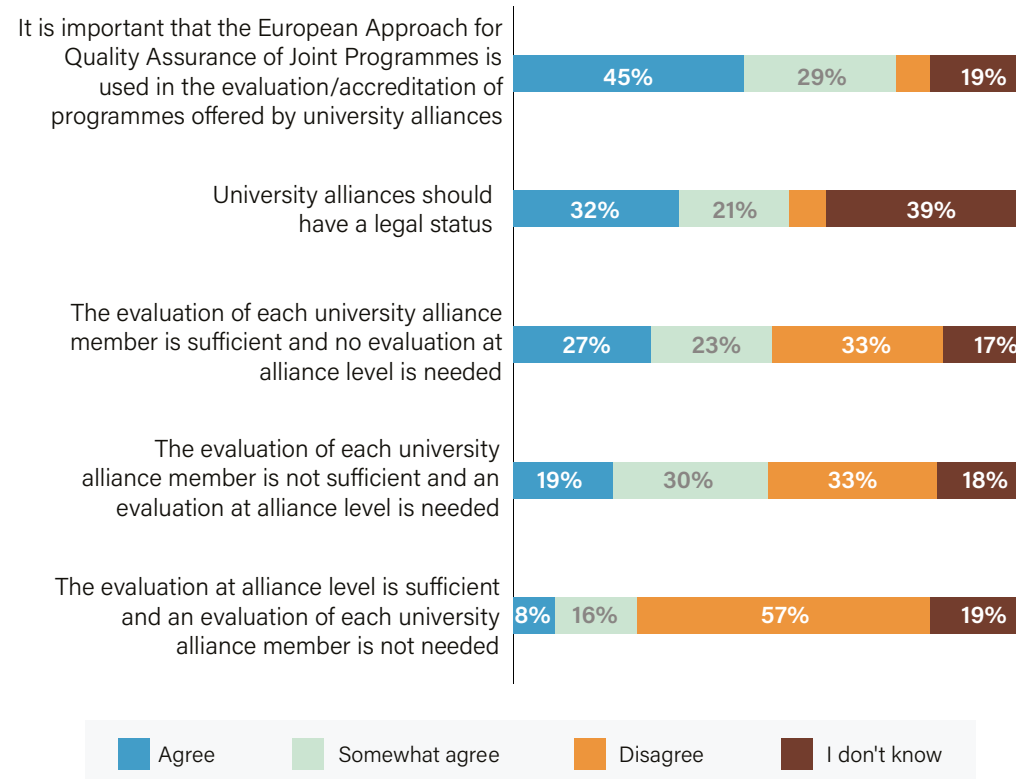
In less than half of responding institutions, no social dimension indicators are covered by internal quality assurance processes. It should be noted that, compared to fundamental values, internal QA is less involved in the evaluation of the social dimension. This also seems to be the case for external QA. "Only" 71% of respondents indicated that external quality assurance in the respective education system evaluates the social dimension in higher education by covering some of the above-mentioned indicators.

6.2 European University Alliances and Joint Programmes

Considering recent developments in the flagship [European Universities Initiative](#), the survey included a few questions about the quality assurance of European University Alliances and the Joint Programmes. As already mentioned, the majority of the institutions that responded to the QA-FIT survey (150 out of 260) are members of an alliance, suggesting that these universities may be more engaged than average in the European developments of higher education policies. In any case, the data collected shows a mix of different opinions and perceptions.

The statement most agreed with (45% "agree" and 29% "somewhat agree") was related to the need to use the existing European Approach for the Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes while developing the framework for evaluation

Figure 13: QA of alliances



and accreditation of the alliances. At the other end of responses, 57% disagreed that evaluation at alliance level is sufficient and that an evaluation of each university alliance member is not needed. Regarding the legal statute for university alliances, as the pilot projects on introducing a legal status were launched during the drafting of this paper, it could be concluded that this particular development is at too early a stage to draw clear conclusions. Members of the alliances were also asked to explain why they believe the accreditation of university alliances is needed and which organisation should grant this accreditation.

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Some of the answers addressed the following issues:

- ▶ Accreditation of university alliances should be a top priority within the alliances to ensure a gold standard to be achieved by every member for the sharing of best practices, and guidelines encompassing economic, social, ethical and environmental responsibility for continuous and constant improvement. The person in charge of the accreditation process should be chosen at the European level from the various bodies that already carry out this activity at the national level, specifically setting up a special commission.
- ▶ The current most popular modality of transnational educational cooperation (joint degrees) needs to be advanced, and accreditation of alliances could help to pave the way for better QA and development of transnational cooperation, and facilitate additional modalities of cooperation and innovation in higher education.
- ▶ Some respondents stated that they do not see the need for the accreditation of university alliances.
- ▶ Accreditation of university alliances should support the establishment of joint study programmes. Accreditation of university alliances should be based directly on the ESG and should reduce bureaucratic requirements at the national level.
- ▶ Accreditation should be done for each university separately, not for an alliance of several universities. External accreditation is mandatory and must be preceded by the internal evaluation of the universities.

Concerning the Joint Programmes offered by Higher Education Institutions, nearly 60% of the respondents (152 out of 260) stated that their higher education institutions (HEIs) offer joint programmes. The number of programmes within the institutions varies from a single joint programme offered by the institution in the case of smaller and local institutions, to more than 30 joint programmes in the case of larger and more international universities.

7. Conclusions

Since 1999, quality assurance has significantly contributed to building trust between HEIs in the EHEA, thus becoming one of the most successful outcomes of the Bologna Process. IQA processes, both internal and external, are perceived as highly beneficial by institutions, and the ESG are widely recognised as a valuable and indispensable common framework for developing shared criteria and methodologies. In order to ensure the continuous progress of the Bologna Process, it is essential that these tools can meet emerging challenges in the higher education sector.

The data collected through the QA-FIT survey and analysed in this paper clearly shows that, according to higher education institutions, the ESG are effectively serving their purpose. Nevertheless, it seems that institutions would appreciate additional guidance on some specific elements (i.e. degree recognition, micro-credentials and joint programmes) and that their inclusion in the ESG may be welcomed. On the other hand, institutions would not like to see topics such as governance and strategic management regulated through the ESG. In any case, any future change in the ESG, and in QA practices in general, should avoid adding to the workload of academic and administrative staff, and be fit for the purposes set for them.

The next phase of the QA-FIT project will further investigate potential changes in the scope and structure of the ESG, as well as the impact of internationalisation and competition on quality assurance and the role of different stakeholders in the processes.

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The QA-FIT project aims to map the state of play of quality assurance in the EHEA and to critically evaluate the fitness for purpose of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG).

More information: <https://eua.eu/resources/projects/840-qa-fit.html>



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