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Short bio: Eltjo Bazen has been working in quality assurance (QA) of higher education (HE) since 2011. He currently works as Senior Advisor QA at HU UAS Utrecht (NL). He has been trained and is active in several roles around quality and QA, both in HE and in other sectors. He is President of the Dutch Network for Quality Management, advisor for several organizations, chair of auditing panels and is EQAR Register Committee member. Moreover, he is (self appointed) ESG ambassador to the Netherlands.

Though he loves innovative ideas and experimenting, his firm belief is that the best way to improve is openness and the willingness to learn from each other, whether it be on programme, institutional, system or sector level.

Eltjo has degrees in Philosophy, Business Management and Quality Management. His activities in QA are a perfect combination of his love for education and the fields of philosophy and management.

Paper

Title: Additions to the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) and their Underlying Visions of Quality

Abstract

This research aimed to gain more understanding of quality and quality assurance in higher education. Not the implementation of the obligatory ESG by quality assurance agencies (QAAs) was looked at, but what other elements these QAAs incorporated into external quality assurance (EQA) activities was examined. Moreover, what these additions say about different visions of quality was studied. The main research question was - What vision(s) of quality appear(s) from the additions to the ESG, made by QAAs in their EQA activities of higher education, how widely is/are this/these vision(s) spread and how well do they fit to the ESG and its underlying vision of quality? The concept of visions of quality was operationalized by the Concept of the Four Quality Paradigms (Van Kemenade & Hardjono, 2019). The paradigms in quality management are the empirical paradigm, the reference paradigm, the reflective paradigm and the emergence paradigm. These paradigms, in this order, are thought to be able to accommodate contexts ranging from tame to wicked (Rittel & Webber, 1973). A combination of desk research, questionnaires and expert interviews was used to gather data. The results show a fairly close fit between the ESG and the additions made by the QAAs to them. The deviation that is visible between underlying visions of quality of the ESG and the additions made by the QAAs, is a very interesting one that seems to be relevant to developments in higher education. QAAs tend to make more additions that

are capable of dealing with contexts that are more wicked. That QAAs feel the need to make these additions suggests that the ESG themselves are not fully adequate for dealing with this type of contexts. For this reason, it is advised that this aspect will be included in the current discussions around the upcoming revision of the ESG.

Introduction

Adopted in 2005 by the European ministers responsible for education, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (usually referred to as *European Standards and Guidelines* or ESG) were established that same year as a key outcome of the Bologna Process (EHEA, 2024). The ESG was designed to support both internal and external quality assurance processes, providing a solid foundation for institutions to enhance their educational offerings and for external bodies to assess and improve institutional performance. A renewed version was adopted in 2015 (Bologna process, 2015).

The ESG prescribe with which standards must be complied in internal quality assurance (in part I) and in external quality assurance (part II). Part I might be thought of as the content of quality assurance processes within an institution or program, where Part II is about the way in which quality is assessed externally. In Part III of the ESG, standards for quality agencies are established.

The 49 member states of the EHEA are expected to implement the ESG by embedding them into their national quality assurance frameworks (EHEA, 2005). In the process of adopting the ESG into national legislation, the quality assurance agencies (QAAs) which carry out this task are not just bound by the ESG, but also consider national circumstances. These circumstances might be political or social pressure, but it could also be that QAAs have a more elaborate idea of what constitutes educational quality and optimal quality assurance than those laid down in the ESG.

This paper is presenting research, the goal of which was to map the quality assurance standards that are added to the ESG by specific QAAs. Furthermore, the goal was to determine whether the added standards are indicators of a difference in the vision of quality and quality assurance in higher education between the ESG and the QAA that added these additional standards, what the other vision of quality is and with which quality paradigm this vision aligns.

The importance of this research lies in expanding the knowledge of what is seen as the quality of higher education in Europe. An expanded view is relevant for all who work in upholding, improving or evaluating quality in institutions. As an external result, the results of this research can be used to advise the relevant stakeholders and ministers in their process toward a new revision of the ESG, planned for the years 2025 and 2026.

The main question for this research was: 'What vision(s) of quality appear(s) from the additions to the ESG, made by QAAs in their higher education EQA activities, how widely is/are this/these vision(s) spread, and how well do they fit the ESG and its underlying vision of quality?' The sub questions can be found in Annex 1.

Review of the literature

An initial literature search led the author to conclude that there is no published research that focuses on the question of what QAAs are used in addition to the prescribed minimum. The author read between 60 and 70 abstracts from publications. A takeaway from the literature research included that ideas on what constitutes quality in higher education from a broad range, from ownership (Greere & Riley 2013), through internationalization (Prchal & Messas 2015) to education as a public good (Bendixen & Jacobsen 2017), and that ideas on what should be part of quality assurance have an

almost as broad range of possibilities pleaded for, such as risk management (Sarrico & Amaral 2013), employability (Kolster, Westerheijden & Frederiks 2014), excellence recognition (Wipf et al. 2015), and lay persons as members of evaluation panels (Berthiaume, Van Ouytsel & Duykaerts 2015). Other research on the implementation of the ESG that has been published has mainly focused on the effects of the ESG on internal (institutional) QA. Examples include Westerheijden & Kohoutek (2014), Gover, Loukkola & Sursock (2015), and Zhang et al. (2019). This led to the conclusion that this research is almost certainly the first of its kind to look at the additions made to the ESG by agencies when developing their EQA activities.

Theoretical framework

A relative new way of looking at the differences between concepts of quality is accepting the value of each concept in its own mindset and context. Van Kemenade & Hardjono (2018) present four different mindsets or paradigms in the thinking of quality, the Concept of Four Quality Paradigms (CFQP). This research has taken the work of Van Kemenade and Hardjono as a meta-theory that does not describe quality but describes different visions of quality. The CFQP presented in their work will function as possible visions of quality to be ascribed to the additional standards found.

First, there is the Empirical Paradigm in which quality is conformance to set requirements (as put forward by Crosby; Crosby, 1979). This thinking is based on technicality and objectivity and has the motto 'to measure is to know.' Quality knowledge is objective and is expressed in quantities.

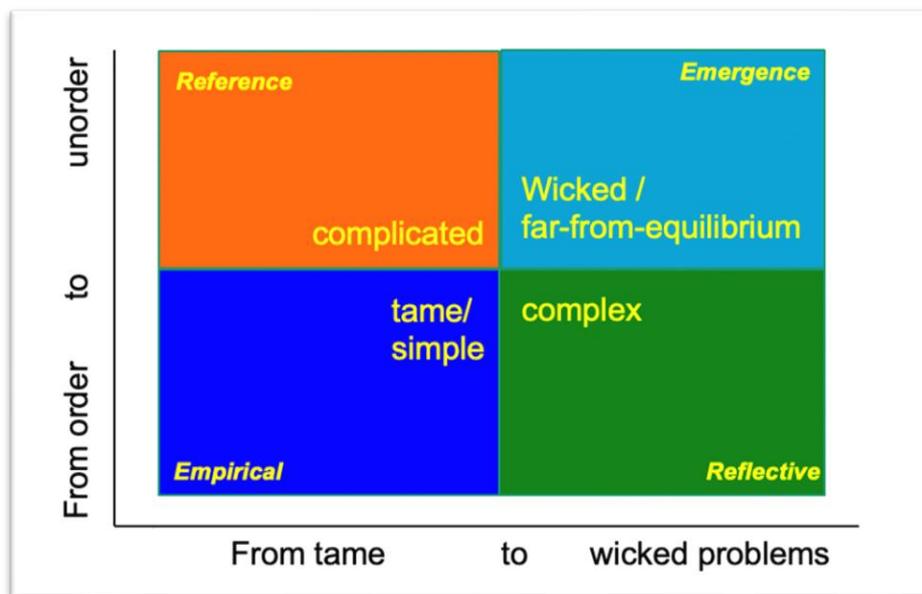
The second paradigm is the Reference Paradigm in which quality is fitness for use (as described by Juran, 1974). The starting point here is not reality as is, but convictions on how reality should be. Quality knowledge is the proponent of proving that an organization meets a norm, deduced by showing observable cases.

The third paradigm is the reflective paradigm, in which quality is subjective (as illustrated by Pirsig). It is accepted that different realities exist, with their own perceptions and interpretations. Quality knowledge is found in stories, conversations, and meetings, which makes peer review an extremely fitting instrument in this paradigm.

The fourth paradigm is the Emergence Paradigm in which quality can only be defined for a limited period of time, intersubjectively. It is based on pragmatism ("The truth is what works") and defines quality in a dialogue of all stakeholders, knowing that quality can be different tomorrow.

The latest development in the CFQP is how the different paradigms fit to differences in complexity of the context. Work on this aspect is done by Van Kemenade (Van Kemenade, in production). For describing the state of the context, Van Kemenade refers to the scale from tame to wicked problems, as used by Rittel and Webber (Rittel & Webber, 1973). The empirical paradigm is of best use in a context of relative simplicity with tame problems. When the situation is more complicated, the reference paradigm is more fitting. The reflective paradigm is a good fit for complex situations. When problems get wicked and the context chaotic, the emergence paradigm thrives. The horizontal axis in Figure 1 shows this.

Figure 1: Paradigms and the Scale of Tame to Wicked Problems (Van Kemenade, 2025)



Methods

Desk Research and Questionnaire

This research was built using different methods, in order to make the findings more meaningful. The research started with desk research, looking at institutional external quality assurance activities, as designed by quality assurance agencies across the European Higher Education Area. These frameworks were checked against the ESG, resulting in a list of additions made by agencies, either to the content of external quality assurance (ESG part 1) or to the procedures used in the external quality assurance activities (ESG part 2). Parallel to the desk research, the agencies responsible for these frameworks were asked what they themselves see as additions they made to Parts 1 and 2 of the ESG. In this way of researching the same aspect in two distinct and parallel ways, the findings are more reliable. A questionnaire was made to ask the agencies what they thought that the additions to the ESG in their EQA activity frameworks were.

Of the 56 EQAR registered agencies with 91 different EQA activities at the institutional level, 23 activities remained eligible for this study after all considerations (institutional, not domain specific, ex-post, national, English documentation available, one per country) had been taken into account (EQAR, 2024). For the questionnaire 14 responses were received. This means a response of just over 60%. Annex 2 lists the EQA activities and agencies included in this research.

Interviews

In addition to desk research and questionnaire, experts were interviewed to categorize the findings of desk research and questionnaire. The criteria for the experts to be invited are that they are independent, have thorough knowledge of, and extensive experience in working with the ESG. Six independent experts participated in the third phase of this research. To make sure that the experts have the same understanding of the CFQP a standardized explanation was prepared and shown to the experts. For this categorization, the framework of the CFQP, as described by Hardjono and Van Kemenade (2021), was used. For categorizing, the online tool Mural was used. For optimal support of

the experts, the interviewer operated the online tool, being directed by the experts. The output was recorded in the form of print screens.

Results

The first sub-question was 'What standards are added on top of the mandatory ESG standards by QAAs in their frameworks?' The following additions were found to be used by quality assurance agencies in their external quality assurance activities more than once, see annexes 3 and 4 for the full tables.

Table 1: Table of additions to the standards of ESG part 1 (found more than once) and the number of their appearance

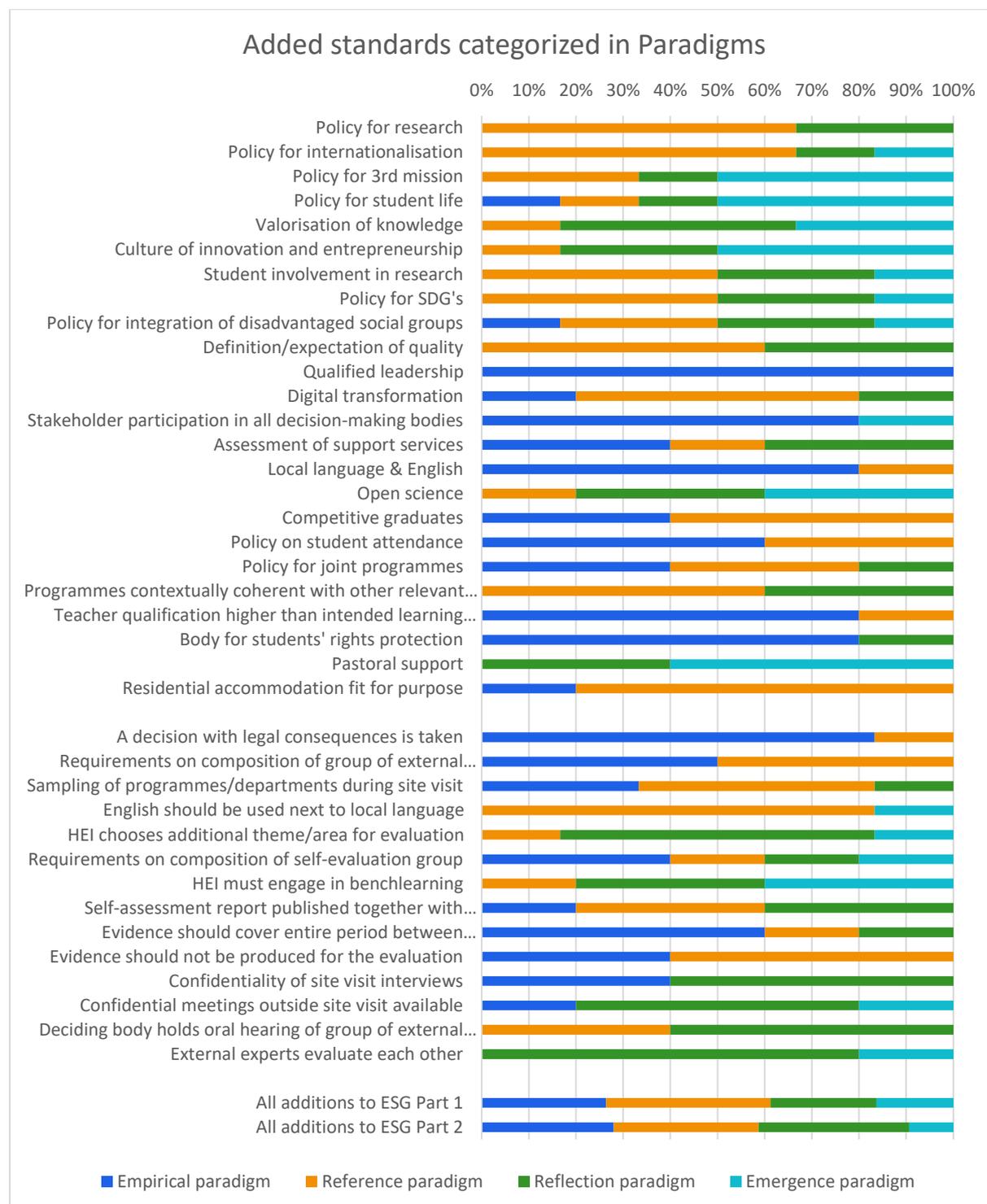
Additions to the standards of ESG part 1	Number of agencies using this addition
Policy for research	11
Policy for Internationalization	7
Policy for the 3rd mission	6
Policy for Student Life	5
Valorization of Knowledge	3
Culture of innovation and entrepreneurship	2
Student involvement in research	2
Policy for SDGs	2
Policy for the integration of disadvantaged social groups	2

Table 2: Table of additions to the standards of ESG part 2 (found more than once) and the number of their appearance

Additions to the standards of ESG part 2	Number of agencies that use this addition
A decision with legal consequences is made.	18
Requirements on the composition of the group of external experts	13
Sampling of programs/departments during site visit	4
English should be used in addition to the local language	3
HEI chooses an additional theme/area for evaluation.	2

The second sub-question was 'How could the added standards be categorized?' From the work of the experts, the following categorization was made. For the summarization of additions per part of the ESG a weighed approach was used, in which often-found additions weighed more heavily than seldomly-found additions.

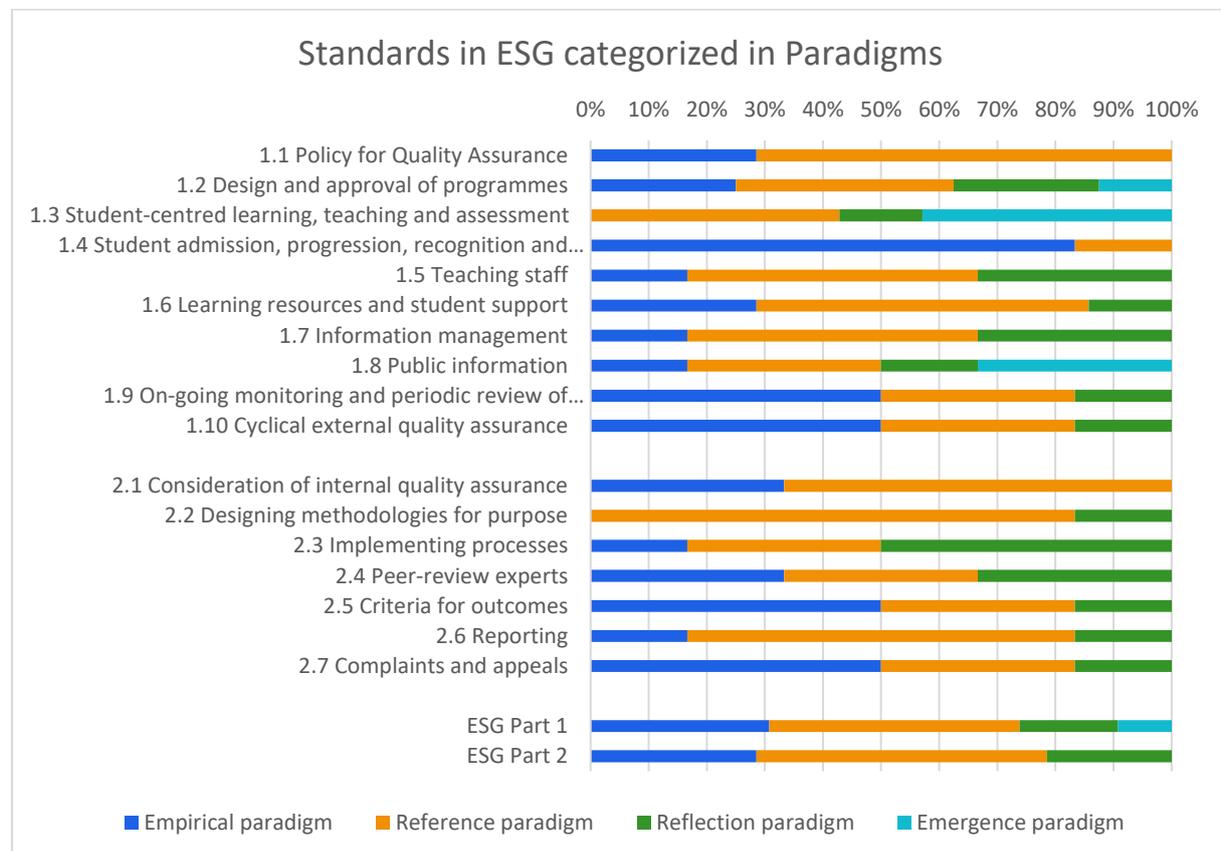
Figure 2: Added standards categorized using CFQP



The third sub-question was 'Are there patterns visible in added standards, such as thematic or regional?' In order to detect a pattern of additions, the additions found were plotted onto geographical maps of Europe. Overall, from these maps no clear patterns could be deduced on regional trends in specific additions to the standards of ESG part 2. The same goes for the fourth sub-question ('What do the patterns in the added standards indicate about differences in vision of quality?').

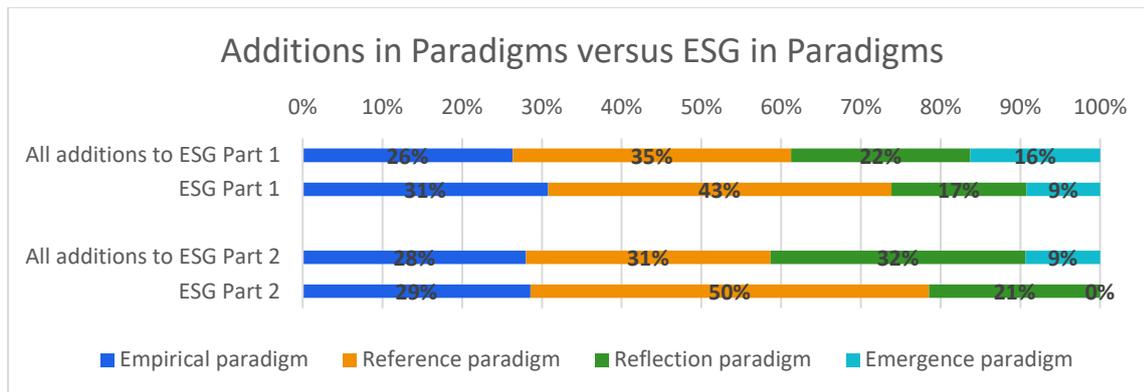
The fifth sub-question ('How can the standards of the ESG be categorized, according to their visions of quality?') can be visualized using the results of experts. It can be concluded that the empirical and reference paradigms are dominant. The emergence paradigm is least represented, in ESG part 2 not at all. The resulting categorization can be seen in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Standards in ESG categorized using CFQP



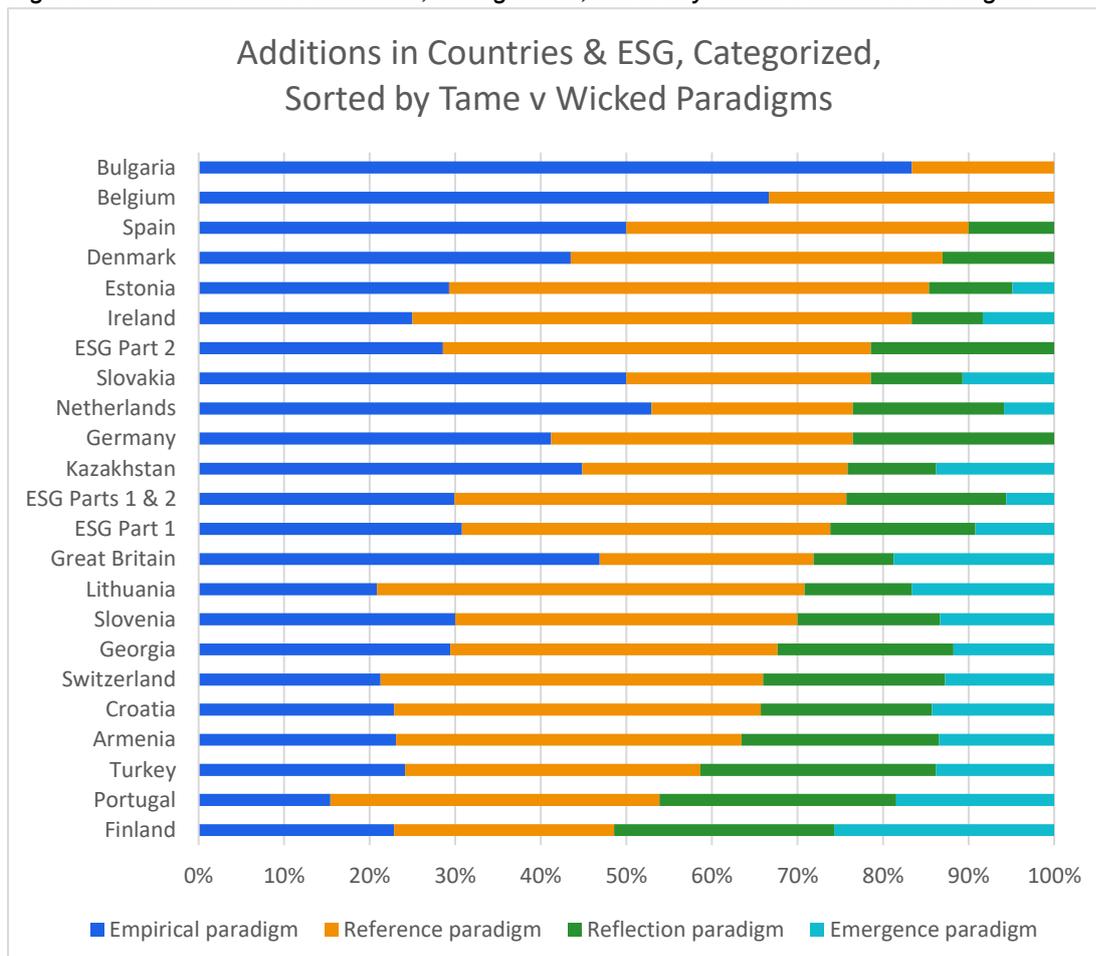
On the sixth sub-question ('How do the additions to the standards and their underlying vision of quality, on the one hand, relate to the ESG and their underlying vision of quality themselves, on the other hand?') there are some interesting results visible, as can be seen in figure 4. The additions found occur slightly less in the Empirical Paradigm than in the standards of the ESG. For the Reference Paradigm the additions were found to fit significantly less than the standards of the ESG. The additions found fit significantly better in the Reflection Paradigm than the standards of the ESG. And for the Emergence Paradigm finally the additions found fit better than the standards of the ESG fit to it.

Figure 4: Additions categorized v ESG categorized using CFQP



The fact that the same pattern holds for both part 1 and part 2 of the ESG is an indication that this pattern indeed demonstrates differences in quality vision. The agencies making their frameworks tend to hold beliefs that quality should fit more on the side of 'wicked' context or more fluid concepts of quality where quality is dependent on professionalism and circumstances than on strict prescriptive systems. To gain more insight into the tame versus wicked use of additions, countries have been ranked according to their percentages. One can say that the Finnish and Portuguese QAAs might be leading in the use of additions that fit wicked problems. The resulting list can be seen in Figure 5. For clarity, the ESGs have been added to this list, as part 1 and part 2 separate, and the ESG as a whole.

Figure 5: Additions found and ESG, Categorized, sorted by Tame v Wicked Paradigms

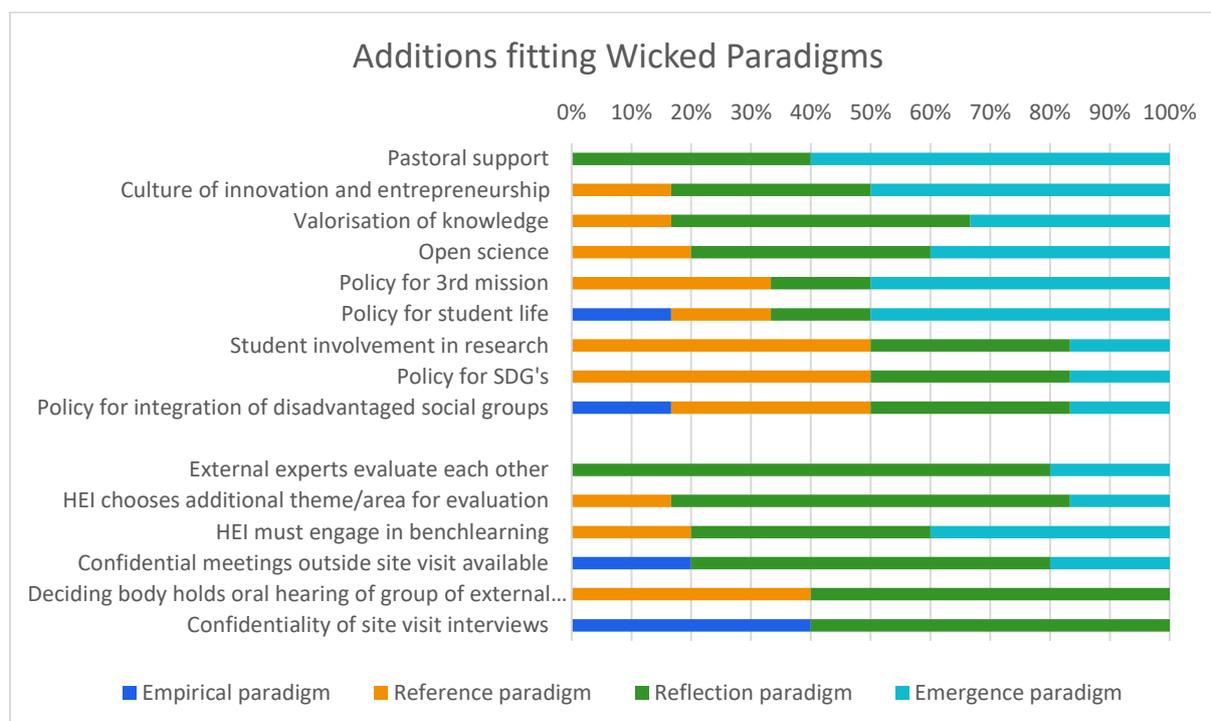


Conclusions

Having all the sub-questions answered, the main question can be returned to. The main question of this research was: What vision(s) of quality appear(s) from the additions to the ESG, made by QAAs in their EQA activities of higher education, how widely is/are this/these vision(s) spread, and how well do they fit to the ESG and its underlying vision of quality?

Using all the answers to the sub-questions, the answer to the main research question is that the ESG and their underlying vision of quality on the one hand and the EQA activities from QAAs and their underlying visions of quality on the other show a quite close fit. A deviation in underlying vision of quality from the underlying vision of quality of the ESG is visible when all additions, and their relative appearance, are observed together. The additions made by QAAs in their EQA activities of higher education to the obligatory ESG show a veering off to the side of the paradigms that fit in a wicked context, being the reflective and emergence paradigms. Examples of additions found that fit well in these paradigms are shown in figure 6, with additions to ESG part 1 shown in the upper half and to ESG part 2 on the lower half of the figure.

Figure 6: Additions fitting Wicked Paradigms



This means that regarding the vision on quality, quality is understood by the QAAs as somewhat more dynamic and contextual than the ESG understand quality. That there is no one answer to the issues at stake. That more stakeholders, both inside and outside of the institutions, play a role in making quality. And that consequently quality instruments need to be less structured.

Discussion, Limitations and Recommendations

The perspective of tame versus wicked problems in higher education is an insightful way to understand how well the EQA activities of QAAs are geared toward assuring the quality of education. It might be concluded that the QAAs feel that the higher education they need to assure the quality of is further on the scale to wicked problems than the ESG can accommodate. Wicked problems are

associated with high-complexity situations in which there are not just unclear answers, but it might even be the case that it is not clear what the right questions are. If that is the case in European higher education, which is certainly an option, quality assurance should be aligned with this context. This can be observed throughout Europe, so it stands to reason that the ESG as a European framework would be aligned with this as well. In the ESG revision process that is currently underway, this aspect deserves serious consideration.

Limitations

Because of constraints in number of words for this paper, the section discussing the limitations of this research has been left out of this version. Please contact the author for the full version.

Recommendations and further research

Although the insights gained from this research might seem modest, both QAAs, stakeholder groups, and ministries can use the outcomes of this research in their own thinking on the fundamentals of what quality is, and how it can and should be assured. The results could have an interesting effect on the ESG revision process that is currently underway.

Quality Assurance Agencies are recommended to engage in a process of reflection, in order to answer the question where the context of their national higher education stands on the scale of tame to wicked problems. Following that reflection, agencies are recommended to turn to introspection and check how well their EQA activities are geared toward what they found.

As requested by the ministers responsible for higher education (of the member states of the European Higher Education Area) in the Tirana Communiqué (EHEA, 2024), the ESG will undergo a revision in the coming years. A revised version of the ESG is planned to be accepted by the ministers in 2027. The recommendation for the actors in this revision process is to consider changing standards to be more adjusted to wicked problems.

As further research it would be very interesting to perform a qualitative check with quality assurance agencies to see what the reasons and arguments were for including the additions found in their EQA activities.

Other suggestions for further research are directed to the theoretical basis used in this research. The Concept of the Four Quality Paradigms is still being developed. When using the theory, the authors encountered several aspects that might require further work. The first is the allocation of paradigms to certain types of context or certain types of problem. There is no clear connection yet to the scale of tame to wicked problems. For practical use, it would be good if the concepts were brought in connection with practical tools. This would make it possible for quality officers in any organization to find a better fit between their context and the set-up of quality instruments in terms of roles and tools. The CFQP and the scale from tame to wicked problems might be connected to the Cynefin framework. This framework developed to support decision making by Snowden and Boone (Snowden & Boone, 2007) seems like it could be a close fit to the combination of concepts of paradigms and tame-to-wicked. Making this connection could make it easier to take the step to practical tools, since this framework is already quite well known in the quality assurance community.

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