

## **Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area**

Draft initial proposal

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## **Foreword**

*To be written in the end of the process*

## **Executive Summary**

*To be written in the end of the process*

## **I. Context, scope, purposes and principles**

### ***Setting the context***

Higher education, research and innovation play a crucial role in supporting social cohesion, economic growth and global competitiveness. Given the desire for European societies to become increasingly knowledge-based, higher education is an essential component of socio-economic and cultural development. At the same time, the demand for better skills and competences is growing.

Broader access to higher education is an opportunity for higher education institutions to make use of a new richness of diverse individual experiences. Responding to diversity and growing expectations for higher education requires a fundamental shift in its provision; it requires a more student-centred approach to teaching and learning, embracing flexible learning paths and recognising competences gained outside formal curricula. Higher education institutions themselves also become more diverse in their missions, mode of educational provision and cooperation, including growth of internationalisation, digital learning and new forms of delivery.<sup>1</sup>

The role of quality assurance in a rapidly changing environment is to provide public assurance that the qualifications achieved by students and their experience of higher education remain at the forefront of institutional missions as well as national and international policies. It also provides a means for reflection and improvement.

A key goal of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance across borders and among all stakeholders. They have played an important role in the development of national and institutional quality assurance systems across the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), cross-border cooperation and provision of quality assurance. Engagement with quality assurance processes, particularly the external ones, allows European higher education systems to demonstrate quality and increase transparency, thus helping to build mutual trust and better recognition of their qualifications, programmes and other provision.

Moreover, the ESG are used by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which is responsible for the register of quality assurance agencies that substantially comply with the ESG. The EQAR provides clear public information on those quality assurance agencies operating in Europe that have successfully applied to be included in the register.

### ***Scope and Concepts***

The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance to evaluate the processes in practice. The ESG are not as such standards

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<sup>1</sup> Communication from the European Commission: Opening up Education: Innovative teaching and learning for all through new Technologies and Open Educational Resources, COM(2013) 654 final, [http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/doc/openingcom\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/education/news/doc/openingcom_en.pdf)

for quality, nor do they prescribe how these processes could be designed, but they provide guidance, covering the areas, which are vital for successful quality provision of higher education. They describe a major part of a comprehensive infrastructure, which comprises of different elements (such as qualifications frameworks, ECTS, diploma supplement), related to quality of programmes and degrees (e.g. learning environment).

Due to the diversity in higher education provision, the ESG need to be at a reasonably generic level in order to ensure that they are applicable to all forms of provision.

The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance processes related to teaching and learning in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research. **The ESG apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery.** While some of the standards refer to programmes of study that lead to a formal qualification, the ESG are also applicable to higher education provision in its broadest sense and to transnational, cross-border provision.

Higher education aims to fulfil multiple purposes; including preparing students for active citizenship and for their future careers, creating a broad advanced knowledge base and stimulating research and innovation<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, stakeholders<sup>3</sup>, who may prioritise different purposes, can view quality in higher education differently and quality assurance needs to take into account these different perspectives. *Quality*, whilst not easy to define, is mainly a result of the interaction between teachers and students and institutional planning processes. Quality assurance activities should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for purpose.

At the heart of all quality assurance activities are the twin purposes of *accountability* and *enhancement*. Taken together, these create trust in the higher education institution's performance. A successfully implemented quality assurance will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public on the quality of the higher education institution's activities (accountability) as well as providing advice and recommendations on how the higher education institution might improve what it is doing (enhancement). Quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus inter-related. This can support the development of a *quality culture* that is embraced by all: from the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management.

**The term 'quality assurance' is used in this document to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e. assurance and enhancement activities).**

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<sup>2</sup> Recommendation Rec (2007)6 by the Council of Europe's Committee of Ministers on the public responsibility for higher education and research, [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/News/pub\\_res\\_EN.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/highereducation/News/pub_res_EN.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise specified, in the document stakeholders are understood to cover all actors within an institution, including students and staff, as well as external stakeholders such as employers and external partners of an institution.

### ***ESG: purposes and principles***

The ESG have the following purposes:

- **They set a common framework** for quality assurance systems at European, national and institutional level;
- **They enable the improvement of quality** of higher education in the European higher education area;
- **They support mutual trust**, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;
- **They provide information on quality assurance** in the EHEA.

These purposes provide a framework within which the ESG may be used in different ways by different institutions, agencies and countries. The EHEA is characterised by its diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations. This makes a single monolithic approach to quality and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate and broad acceptance of all standards are pre-condition for creating common understanding of quality assurance in Europe. However, at the European level, the ESG provide the criteria against which quality assurance agencies and their activities are assessed<sup>4</sup>. This ensures that the quality assurance agencies in the EHEA adhere to the same set of principles and the processes and procedures are modelled to fit the purposes and requirements of their contexts.

The ESG are based on the following four **principles for quality assurance in the EHEA**:

1. Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance;
2. Quality assurance processes respond to the diversity of HE systems, institutions and programmes;
3. Quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture;
4. Quality assurance processes involve stakeholders and take into account the expectations of all stakeholders and society.

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<sup>4</sup> Agencies that apply for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) undergo an external review for which the ESG provide the criteria. Also the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) relies on compliance with the ESG when it comes to granting quality assurance agencies full membership status in the organisation.

## **II. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education**

In this section, quality assurance processes have been divided into three parts for easy reference:

- Internal quality assurance in higher education institutions
- External quality assurance of higher education
- Quality assurance agencies.

It should be kept in mind, however, that the three parts are intrinsically interlinked and together form the basis for a European quality assurance framework. They work on a complementary basis in higher education institutions as well as in agencies and also work on the understanding that other stakeholders contribute to the framework. As a consequence, the three parts should be read as a whole.

The standards set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA and should, therefore, be taken account of and adhered to by those concerned, in all types of higher education provision.<sup>5</sup>

Guidelines explain the importance of the standards and provide information to assist higher education institutions, agencies and governments in the implementation of the standards in their individual context.

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<sup>5</sup> The Standards make use of the common English usage of “should” which has the connotation of prescription and compliance, while the Guidelines make use of the common English usage of the indicative to describe how standards might be implemented.

## ***Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance within higher education institutions***

### **1.1 Policy and processes for quality assurance**

**Standard:**

**Institutions should have a public quality assurance policy that reflects institutional vision and strategy, thus linking it to strategic management of the institution. The policy should be put into practice through the quality assurance processes, managed by appropriate structures. Stakeholders<sup>6</sup> should be involved in the development and implementation of policy and processes.**

**Guidelines:**

Policies and processes are the main pillars of a coherent institutional quality assurance system. The system forms a cycle for continuous improvement and contributes to the accountability of the institution. It supports the development of quality culture in which all stakeholders assume responsibility for quality at all levels of the institution. In order to facilitate this, the policy and processes have a formal status and are publicly available.

Institutions will want to ensure that their quality assurance policy reflects the relationship between research and teaching & learning in the institution and takes account of both the national context in which the institution operates and the institutional context. Such a policy supports

- The institution's strategy for assuring and enhancing its quality;
- The organisation of the quality assurance system;
- Departments, schools, faculties and other organisational units as well as those of institutional leadership, individual staff members and students to take on their responsibilities in quality assurance;
- Processes that ensure academic integrity and freedom;
- Processes to guard against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff;
- The involvement of external stakeholders in quality assurance;
- The ways, in which the policy is implemented, monitored and revised.

The institution will want to translate the policy into practice through a variety of internal quality assurance processes that allow participation across the institution. It will want to ensure that these processes result in information that facilitates decision-making in the institution (see also standard 1.7).

The higher education institution will want to have reliable mechanisms to ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors or partners, if some or all of the elements in its activities / study programmes are subcontracted to or carried out by other parties.

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<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise specified, in the document stakeholders are understood to cover all actors within an institution, including students and staff, as well as external stakeholders such as employers and external partners of an institution.

## 1.2 Design and approval of programmes<sup>7</sup>

**Standard:**

**Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes. The programmes should be designed so that they match the objectives set for them. The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.**

**Guidelines:**

Study programmes are at the core of the higher education institutions' teaching mission. They provide students with both academic knowledge and skills including those that are transferable, which may influence their personal development and may be applied in their future careers. When designing their programmes, institutions will want to ensure that:

- Programmes are designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes.
- Students are involved in the design of the programme.
- External expertise and reference points are taken into consideration.
- Programmes are designed so that they lead to a coherent programme of study which enables smooth student progression.
- The use of different modes of delivery is carefully planned and the expected student workload is defined (e.g. in ECTS).
- The formal approval of the programme is independent of the designing or teaching entity.

## 1.3 Student-centred learning

**Standard:**

**Institutions should embed student-centred learning approaches in their programmes. The way in which the programmes are delivered should encourage students to take an active role in co-creating the learning process.**

**Guidelines:**

Student-centred learning plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process. For institutions, the implementation of the student-centred teaching and learning requires a considered approach to designing (see also standard 1.2) and delivering study programmes.

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<sup>7</sup> The ESG apply to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery, while they refer to programmes of study that lead to a formal qualification. The term "programme" in these standards refers to higher education provision in its broader sense, including provision that is not part of a programme leading to a formal qualification.

When implementing student-centred learning, institutions will want to ensure the following aspects:

- Respecting and attending to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths;
- The flexible use of a variety of pedagogical methods to support the learning needs of students;
- Regular feedback on the methods used to evaluate and adjust the pedagogical methods;
- Encouraging a sense of autonomy in the learner, while assuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher;
- Promoting mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship.

#### **1.4 Student admission, progression and completion**

**Standard:**

**Institutions should have pre-defined, published and consistently applied regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, assessment, recognition and certification.**

**Guidelines:**

Ensuring the smooth progress of students in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems. Admission, assessment, recognition and completion procedures, along with the actual academic programme and student support provided, play an important role in this regard, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.

Institutions will want to provide all prospective students with information, including selection criteria that allows them to make informed decisions on applying to a programme (see standard 1.8). Institutions will want to ensure that admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner. Following admission to the institution induction processes provide an introduction to the institution and the programme.

Assessment, whether formative or summative, has a profound effect on the students' progress and on their future careers. Institutions will want to ensure that:

- Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field;
- The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance;
- The achieved learning outcomes are compared to the intended learning outcomes. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process;
- Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner;
- The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances, e.g. illness;
- Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures, documented and subject to checks within the quality assurance processes;

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility. In order to ensure appropriate recognition procedures, institutions will want to:

- Ensure that institutional practice for recognition is in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
- Cooperate with other institutions and the national ENIC/NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' period of study. Institutions will want to provide the students with documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.

### 1.5 Development of teaching staff

**Standard:**

**Institutions should have fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of all staff that allow them to assure themselves of the competence of their teachers.**

**Guidelines:**

The teacher's role is essential in creating a high quality student experience and enabling the acquisition of knowledge, competences and skills. The diversifying student population and stronger focus on learning outcomes require student-centred learning and the role of the teacher is, therefore, also changing (see standard 1.3).

Higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their staff and for providing them with a supportive environment that allows them to carry out their work effectively. Therefore institutions will want to ensure that they:

- Set up and follow clear, transparent and fair processes for staff recruitment, appointment, promotion and dismissal that recognise the importance of teaching;
- Offer opportunities for and promote the professional development of teaching staff, which takes into account the outcomes of staff evaluation exercises, including peer review and student feedback;
- Encourage scholarly activity to strengthen the link between education and research;
- Encourage innovation in teaching methods and the use of new technologies;
- Recognise excellence in teaching through academic promotion criteria and public awards.

### 1.6 Learning resources and student support

**Standard:**

**Institutions should ensure that learning and student support resources are adequate, readily accessible and appropriate.**

**Guidelines:**

Students rely on a range of resources to assist their learning, that vary from physical resources such as libraries and IT facilities to human support in the form of tutors, counsellors and other advisers. These support services will want to take into account the needs of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed, international students as well as students with disabilities), methods, taking into account shift towards student centred learning (see standard 1.3).

Institutions will want to organise their support activities and facilities in a variety of ways depending on the institutional context. However, they will want their internal quality assurance processes to ensure that all resources are fit for purpose, accessible, and that students are informed about the services available to them. The role of support services is of particular importance in facilitating the mobility of students within and across higher education systems.

In delivering the support services the role of support and administrative staff is crucial and institutions will want to ensure that they are qualified and have opportunities to develop their competencies.

### 1.7 Information management

**Standard:**

**Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.**

**Guidelines:**

Reliable data is crucial for informed decision making. Institutions will want to use this information to know what is working well and what needs attention. They will want to ensure that they have processes in place to collect and analyse information about their programmes and activities, feeding into their internal quality assurance processes.

The kind of information gathered will depend, to some extent, on the type and mission of the institutions but institutions will want to pay attention to the following:

- Profile of the student population;
- Student progression, success and drop-out rates;
- Students' satisfaction with their programmes;
- Learning resources and student support available;
- Employability of graduates;
- The institutions' own key performance indicators or equivalent.

Various methods of collecting information will be used. It is important that students and staff are involved in providing and analysing information and planning follow-up activities.

### 1.8 Public information

**Standard:**

**Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.**

**Guidelines:**

Information on institutions' activities is useful for prospective and current students as well as for graduates, other stakeholders and the public.

Therefore, institutions will want to provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates and the learning opportunities available to their students.

### 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

**Standard:**

**Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve their objectives and respond to the needs of students and society. The outcomes of these processes should be public and should lead to continuous improvement of the programme.**

**Guidelines:**

Study programmes need to be monitored, reviewed and revised regularly with the aim of ensuring that their provision is appropriate and to consider improvements that might be necessary due to new developments in research and the changing needs of students and society.

All activities concerning the monitoring and improvement of study programmes aim at creating a supportive and effective learning environment for students. Therefore, institutions will want to ensure that processes for the continuous improvement of study programmes are implemented, carried out and monitored regularly. This includes evaluating:

- The content of the programme in the light of the latest research in the given discipline thus ensuring that the programme is up to date;
- The use and effectiveness of different modes of delivery;
- The students' workload, progression and completion;
- The student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme;
- The learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme.

The information collected is analysed and the programme is adapted to ensure that it is up-to-date. Revised programme specifications are published.

### 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

**Standard:**

**Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.**

**Guidelines:**

External quality assurance in its various forms can verify the effectiveness of institutions' internal quality assurance processes, act as a catalyst for improvement and offer the

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institution new perspectives. It will also provide information to assure the institution and the public of the quality of the institution's activities. Therefore, institutions will want to participate in a cyclical external quality assurance process that takes account of the requirements of the legislative framework in which they operate.

Quality assurance is a continuous process that does not end with the external feedback or report or its follow-up process within the institution. Therefore, institutions will want to ensure that the progress made since the last external quality assurance activity is taken into consideration when preparing for the next one.

## ***Part 2: Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance of higher education***

### **2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance**

**Standard:**

**External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG.**

**Guidelines:**

Quality assurance in higher education is based on the institution's responsibility for the quality of their programmes and other provisions; therefore it is important that external quality assurance processes recognise institutional responsibility for quality assurance. To ensure the link between internal and external quality assurance, external quality assurance will want to take account of Part 1. The standards in Part 1 may be addressed differently, depending on the type of external quality assurance.

### **2.2 Designing processes fit for purpose**

**Standard:**

**All external quality assurance processes should be defined and designed specifically to ensure their fitness to achieve the aims and objectives set for them, while taking into account relevant regulations. Stakeholders should be involved in the design and continuous improvement of processes.**

**Guidelines:**

Having commonly agreed and clearly defined aims for external quality assurance ensures its effectiveness and objectivity.

The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions, the need to ensure that they enable institutions to demonstrate improvement and the need for clear information as a result of the process.

The system for external quality assurance might operate in a more flexible way if institutions are able to demonstrate the effectiveness of their own internal quality assurance processes, and if those processes properly assure quality and standards.

### **2.3 Processes**

**Standard:**

**External quality assurance processes should be reliable, useful, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published. These processes include:**

- a self-assessment or equivalent;
- an external assessment normally including a site visit by a group of experts, including student member(s);
- the publication of the experts' full report, including formal outcomes;

- **a consistent follow-up.**

**Guidelines:**

External quality assurance processes that are carried out professionally, consistently and transparently will ensure their acceptance and impact. Thus, any resulting outcomes from external quality assurance processes are evidence based.

External quality assurance processes do not end with the publication of the report. The report by the experts provides clear guidance for institutional action. Agencies have a consistent follow-up process for considering the action taken by the institution. The nature of the follow-up will depend on the design of the external quality assurance process.

At the core of external quality assurance is the wide range of expertise provided by peer experts, who contribute to the work of the agency through input from various perspectives, including those of institutions, academics, students and professional practitioners. In order to ensure the value and consistency of their work, they

- Are carefully selected;
- Have appropriate skills and are competent to perform their task;
- Are supported by appropriate training and/or briefing;
- And their independence is ensured by implementing a mechanism of no-conflict-of-interest.

The agencies will want to consider adding a further dimension in external quality assurance by involving international experts, i.e. in peer panels.

## 2.4 Criteria for formal outcomes

**Standard:**

**Any formal outcomes or judgements made as the result of an external quality assurance activity should be based on explicit published criteria that are applied consistently, irrespective of whether the process leads to a formal decision.**

**Guidelines:**

Formal outcomes, such as decisions, commendations and recommendations, have a significant impact on institutions and programmes that are evaluated and judged. In the interests of equity and reliability, quality assurance agencies will want to ensure that:

- Outcomes are based on published criteria which are interpreted consistently;
- The outcomes of external quality assurance processes request and rely on sufficient evidence.

## 2.5 Reporting

**Standard:**

**Full reports by the experts should be published, clear and accessible to the academic community, external partners and other interested individuals. If any formal outcome is based on the reports, it should be published together with the report.**

**Guidelines:**

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The report by the experts is an important outcome of the external quality assurance process. Its content is the basis for the institution's follow-up action of the external evaluation and it provides information to society regarding the activities of an institution. So, for action to be taken on account of the report, it needs to be clear and concise in its structure and language and to cover:

- Context description (to help locate the higher education institution in its specific context);
- Description of the procedure, including experts involved;
- Evidence, analysis and findings;
- Conclusions;
- Features of good practice, demonstrated by the institution;
- Recommendations for follow-up action.

The preparation of a summary report may be useful.

Institution being given the opportunity to make factual comments on the report will constitute an integral part of the external quality assurance process.

### 2.6 Complaints and appeals

**Standard:**

**Complaints and appeals processes should be clearly defined as part of the design of external quality assurance processes and communicated to the institutions.**

**Guidelines:**

In order to safeguard the rights of the institutions and ensure fair decision-making, external quality assurance is operated in an open and accountable way. Nevertheless, there may be misapprehensions or instances of dissatisfaction about the process or formal outcomes. Institutions need to have access to processes that allow them to raise issues of concern with the agency. Agencies will want to handle such issues in a professional way by means of a clearly defined process that is consistently applied.

A complaints procedure allows an institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out.

In an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

### ***Part 3: Standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies***

#### **3.1 Activities, policy and processes for quality assurance**

**Standard:**

**Agencies should undertake external quality assurance activities as defined in Part 2 of the ESG on a regular basis. They should have clear and explicit goals and objectives that are part of their publicly available mission statement. These should translate into the daily work of the agency. Agencies should ensure the involvement of stakeholders in their work.**

**Guidelines:**

So to ensure the meaningfulness of the external quality assurance, it is important that institutions and the public trust agencies. The agencies will want to describe and publish the goals and objectives of their quality assurance activities, the nature of interaction with relevant stakeholders in higher education, especially the higher education institutions, and the context of their work.

A variety of external quality assurance activities are carried out by agencies to achieve different objectives. Among them are evaluation, review, audit, assessment, accreditation or other similar activities at programme or institutional level that may follow different sets of procedures. When the agencies also carry out other activities, they will want to make a clear distinction between external quality assurance and their other fields of work.

#### **3.2 Official status**

**Standard:**

**Agencies should have an established legal basis and should be formally recognised as quality assurance agencies by competent public authorities.**

**Guidelines:**

In particular when external quality assurance is carried out for regulatory purposes, institutions need to have the security that the outcomes and consequences of this process are accepted within their higher education system, by the state, the stakeholders and the public.

#### **3.3 Independence**

**Standard:**

**Agencies should be independent and act autonomously. They should have sole responsibility for their operations. Third parties should not influence the formal outcomes of their processes.**

**Guidelines:**

Autonomous institutions need independent agencies as counterparts. Independence is important to ensure that any procedures and decisions are solely based on expertise and not on stakeholders' interests.

In considering independence of an agency the following are important:

- Organisational independence: official documentation (e.g. instruments of government or legislative acts) guarantees the agency's independence from higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholders;
- Operational independence: the definition and operation of the agency's procedures and methods as well as the nomination and appointment of external experts are undertaken autonomously and independently from third parties such as higher education institutions, governments and other stakeholders;
- Independence of formal outcomes: while experts from relevant stakeholder backgrounds, particularly students, take part in quality assurance processes, the final outcomes of the quality assurance processes remain the responsibility of the agency.

Agencies will want to make clear that anyone contributing to their work (e.g. as expert) knows that while they may be nominated by a third party, they are acting in a personal capacity and not representing their constituent organisations when working for the agency.

### **3.4 Internal quality assurance and professional conduct**

**Standard:**

**Agencies should have in place processes for internal quality assurance related to defining, assuring and enhancing the quality and integrity of their activities.**

**Guidelines:**

The agencies need to be accountable to their stakeholders. Therefore, agencies will not only want to uphold high professional standards and ensure integrity in their work, they will also seek to review and improve their activities so to ensure that their services to institutions and society are optimal. Agencies will want to undergo an external review at least once every five years.

Therefore the agency will want to ensure that

- It has a policy for the assurance of the quality of the agency, made available on its website;
- Its policy, mission and goals are reflected in its processes;
- It has processes to establish the status and recognition of the institutions with which it conducts external quality assurance;
- All persons involved in their activities are competent and act professionally and ethically;
- It increases its expertise by including international members in agency committees;
- It has in place internal and external feedback mechanisms that lead to a continuous improvement within the agency;
- It has reliable processes to ensure the quality of any activities and material produced by subcontractors, if some or all of the elements in its quality assurance procedure are subcontracted to other parties.

- When working in different frameworks, it will
  - adhere to the core values of European Higher Education Area as demonstrated for instance in the Bologna Communiqués;
  - communicate, as appropriate, with the relevant authorities of those jurisdictions where they operate.

### 3.5 Thematic reflection and analysis

**Standard:**

**Agencies should regularly publish reports that describe and analyse the general findings of their external quality assurance activities.**

**Guidelines:**

In the course of their work, agencies gain information on programmes and/or institutions that can be useful beyond the scope of a single process, providing material for structured analyses across the higher education system. These findings can contribute to the reflection on and the improvement of quality assurance policies and processes in institutional, national and international contexts.

The agencies will want to consider including a research and development function within their activities, so that a thorough and careful analysis of this information will show developments, trends, areas of good practice and of persistent difficulty.

### 3.6 Resources

**Standard:**

**Agencies should have adequate and appropriate resources, both human and financial, to carry out their work.**

**Guidelines:**

It is in the public interest that agencies are adequately and appropriately funded, given higher education's important impact on the development of societies and individuals. The resources of the agencies enable them to organise and run their external quality assurance activities in an effective and efficient manner. Furthermore, the resources enable the agencies to improve, to reflect on their practice and to inform the public about their activities.