

Report of the ESG revision Steering Group to the BFUG Board

Action taken based on the outcomes of survey of the BFUG on additional changes to the revised ESG

Context

The ESG revision steering group, composed of the E4 and other three stakeholder organisations Business Europe, Education International, and EQAR, presented their proposal for the revised ESG at the BFUG meeting in Athens, on the 9-10th of April. The presentation was followed by a long discussion during which several countries expressed their agreement to the proposal. At the same time, further suggestions for changes were received from some countries, and the European Commission.

The BFUG decided that the steering group would be asked to make written proposals on how to integrate the proposed changes into the ESG and carry out a survey of the BFUG members to gain an understanding of the level of consensus on the proposed changes. As agreed by the BFUG, the purpose of this exercise was not to collect further comments or suggestions, but to identify areas of consensus for the suggestions made during the BFUG in Athens.

The ESG Steering Group met on 25th of June to go through all the responses received and to make additional changes to the document taking into account the inputs received through the survey. By the deadline of 6th June 2014, 29 responses had been submitted to the survey. Further 7 responses had been started but not completed. 15 out of 29 respondents agreed that the revised ESG could be accepted without further changes. Eleven of the respondents provided specific additional suggestions. The actions taken on the different suggestions and the outcomes of the overall survey are described below.

The ESG revision Steering Group agreed in its meeting that substantial changes should not be integrated at this stage based on suggestions by one country alone and that it would not be reasonable or practical to change standards fundamentally unless requested by a significant number of BFUG members. At the same time, the group has made important efforts to integrate textual changes wherever possible and reasonable.

Three proposed reformulations: outcomes of the survey and the ESG revision SG deliberations

- 1. The ESG draft can be adopted with the integration of the following changes (additions have been marked in red):**
 - a. Employment information – Guidelines to standard 1.8**

"Therefore, institutions provide information about their activities, including the programmes they offer and the selection criteria for them, the intended learning outcomes of these programmes, the qualifications they award, the teaching, learning and assessment procedures used, the pass rates, **graduate employment information**, and the learning opportunities available to their students."

1. a. Employment information – guidelines to standard 1.8 - " GRADUATE EMPLOYMENT INFORMATION"		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
This change is necessary for us to accept the proposal	24.1%	7
We could accept this change to be made	72.4%	21
We would have major difficulties accepting the proposal if this change was made	3.4%	1
<i>answered question</i>		29
<i>skipped question</i>		8

Based on the outcome of the survey, the group decided to integrate the proposed change with two small modifications: 1) move the addition to the end of the sentence and 2) add furthermore the word "relevant" into the text → "learning opportunities available to their students as well as relevant graduate employment information".

b. QA of traineeships – guidelines to standard 1.9

"They include the evaluation of:

- 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 changing needs of society;
- The students' workload, progression and completion;
- The effectiveness of procedures for assessment of students;
- The student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme;
- **The quality and relevance of traineeships included in the curricula**
- The learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme"

b. QA of traineeships – guidelines to standard 1.9 " THE QUALITY AND RELEVANCE OF TRAINEESHIPS INCLUDED IN THE CURRICULA."		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
This change is necessary for us to accept the proposal	17.2%	5
We could accept this change to be made	79.3%	23
We would have major difficulties accepting the proposal if this change was made	3.4%	1
<i>answered question</i>		29
<i>skipped question</i>		8

Based on the outcome of the survey, the group decided to integrate the quality assurance of traineeships into the document.

However, the Group decided to:

- use the term “placement” instead of “traineeship” for its wider meaning. The term is explained in a footnote.
- Include the reference to placements **into the guidelines of Standard 1.2 rather than 1.9.** Integrated placements, where they exist, should be already part of the programme design and inclusion into standard 1.2 ensures that there are defined LOs for the placements, and that the placements are relevant for the education of the students. Standard 1.9 in its turn covers the evaluation of all elements of a programme, as defined under standard 1.2.

c. Involvement of employers in QA – Guidelines to Standard 2.4

“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, **employers/professional practitioners.**”

1. c. Involvement of employers in EQA - guidelines to standard 2.4		
Answer Options	Response Percent	Response Count
This change is necessary for us to accept the proposal	24.1%	7
We could accept this change to be made	65.5%	19
We would have major difficulties accepting the proposal if this change was made	10.3%	3
answered question		29
skipped question		8

Based on the outcome of the survey, the group decided to integrate the proposed change.

- Some respondents asked furthermore that the reference to employers should be made in the standard rather than the guidelines. However, three countries would have difficulties to accept even the change in the guidelines, and several others, as well as many of the involved stakeholder organisations would not accept the change in the standards. Therefore, the Steering Group considers the present formulation an adequate compromise between those who do not want the reference at all and those who want it in the standard. It should also be noted that Business Europe is well satisfied with the formulation as above.
- One country proposed to add “where appropriate” before employers in the standard as a compromise solution. However, the steering group wishes not to take this suggestion on board as formulations like “where appropriate” lead to difficulties when the ESG are being interpreted and implemented.

NB. It is important to underline that nothing in the ESG impedes any country which considers the involvement of employers in all QA procedures indispensable to make it compulsory in their own national contexts.

Executive summary

The group had received feedback that the executive summary is not a real executive summary in the formulation provided to the BFUG in April. The Group has agreed not to have an executive summary, because the document is short and the key parts have already been stressed through the layout (bold text). The list of standards will be provided in an annex for easy reference.

Other suggestions received through the survey

An overarching request was received from Sweden asking to reformulate all guidelines as examples. The Steering Group decided not to take this proposal up. The content and focus of the guidelines had been changed in the present draft in order to respond better to the needs of the users as identified in the MAP-ESG project. Furthermore, the function of the guidelines is explained under II, and the Steering Group thinks that the present formulations adequately reflect the definition of the guidelines.

Achieved learning outcomes

Several comments received were related to increased focus on the achieved learning outcomes in the document.

- A suggestion was received to modify the standard 1.2 as follows: “[...] Programmes should be designed so that they match the objectives set for them and *that their learning outcomes correspond with the relevant academic and professional requirements* and with the correct level descriptors in the national qualifications framework and, consequently, with the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.” The Group decided not to take this proposal up. There is a concern that “relevant academic and professional requirements” is not clearly defined and that the reference to QF is more appropriate – and sufficient - in this context.
- To give sufficient focus to outcomes the group decided to modify the guidelines to standard 1.3. as follows (third bullet point of the second set): “The assessment allows students to demonstrate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved. Students are given feedback, which, if necessary, is linked to advice on the learning process;”
- A suggestion was received to modify the standard 1.9 as follows: “... to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them, *including the learning outcomes*, and to respond to the needs of students and society”. The group considered that the proposed addition did not bring anything new to the standard, as learning outcomes are already part of the “objectives set for them”.

Fitness for purpose

Following the feedback, the group decided modify the second sentence of the guidelines to Standard 1.4 as follows: “It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.”

Access

- Following on suggestions received, the group decided to add to the guidelines of Standard 1.4 (second paragraph) “access policies” → “It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner.”

Information on student progression

- The following modification suggestion to the guidelines of Standard 1.4 had been received: “Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and manage information on student progression and follow them up by addressing the underlying causes of dropout”.
- The Group agreed that ensuring follow-up was very important and thus agreed to change the word “manage” to “act on” → “Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression”.

Sufficient number of staff

- In respect to standard 1.5 a request had been received to include requirement for “sufficient amount of staff”. The group considered such a focus not to be in line with modern QA practice and policies, as well as not in line with the Council Conclusions of May 2014.
- At the same time, the Standard 1.6 on learning resources and student support includes already a reference to “appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities”.

Flexible learning

- In respect to standard 1.6 a request had been received to add a reference to “the growing need for flexible learning” into the standard. The group considered, however, that the flexible learning had been adequately referred to in the section on the scope of the ESG (p. 7). In addition, the group considers flexible learning a way to offer a programme (i.e. part of the scope) rather than a means to increase quality per se.
- Flexible learning is also covered through the reference to adequate support to different student groups under guidelines to standard 1.6.

Support of EQA to HEIs in enhancing quality

- The following suggestion had been received to modify the standard 2.1: “External quality assurance should address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG *and support institutions in raising their quality standards, ensuring feedback into their strategic decision-making*”. The Steering Group’s view is that each jurisdiction has to decide the process in each national context and those processes define how they support HEIs.
- The group understood the concern that EQA should always support improvement and agreed that while the change into standard 2.1 would not be appropriate, the concept could be integrated by modifying the guidelines to standard 2.2 as follows (second paragraph):
“The aims, objectives and implementation of the processes will
 - bear in mind the level of workload and cost that they will place on institutions;
 - take into account the need to support institutions to improve quality;
 - allow institutions to demonstrate this improvement;

- result in clear information on the outcomes and the follow-up.

The relevance and meaning of standard 2.1 (and 3.1)

- Some of the comments received indicated that it is not sufficiently clear that standard 2.1 covers the entire Part 1 of the ESG. It is important to underline that the entire Part 1 is relevant for an agency in developing its own criteria for EQA.
- The group agreed to explain on p. 9 the inter-linkages between the different parts more in detail as follows: "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. External quality assurance in Part 2 recognises the standards for internal quality assurance in Part 1 thus ensuring that the internal work undertaken by institutions is directly relevant to any external quality assurance that they undergo. In the same way Part 3 refers to Part 2. Thus, these three parts 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."
- In the guidelines to Standard 2.1 the group agreed that the current wording "external quality assurance takes account of standards of Part 1" did not make link sufficiently clear. This has now been modified to read: "To ensure the link between internal and external quality assurance, external quality assurance includes consideration of the standards of Part 1."

Personal development as one of the purposes of HE

- Following a recommendation from a respondent, the group agreed to integrate a reference to supporting personal development on p.7.

Academic fraud

- A proposal had been received to add explicit reference to academic fraud into the guidelines. The group considers however that the issue of academic fraud is covered by the reference to academic integrity under guidelines to standard 1.1.

Student complaints

- The group agreed to modify the guidelines to standard 1.3 to ensure more focus to adequate procedures for student complaints: the last bullet point of the guidelines will make reference only to appeals (in relation to assessment), while a separate bullet point is added to the first list of points in the guideline: "proper way of dealing with student complaints".

Annexes:

Revised ESG with track changes – June 2014

Revised ESG clean – June 2014