

Are the European standards for quality assurance relevant for institutions outside the European Higher Education Area?

Observations from the evaluations carried out by the Institutional Evaluation Programme

By Elena Cirlan

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Abstract

Quality assurance, including cross-border quality assurance is a powerful tool for the internationalisation of higher education. Since its launch in 1994, the Institutional Evaluation Programme has been carrying out cross-border institutional evaluations. These have an international philosophy at their core. This study examines whether the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) are relevant for higher education institutions outside the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). It concludes that the ESG capture universal principles for quality assurance of learning and teaching in higher education and are relevant to higher education contexts outside the EHEA.

1 Introduction

The Context

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) were first adopted by the European ministers in charge of higher education in 2005, and then in their revised version in 2015. The ESG are standards that outline the key features of quality assurance and are applicable in all European Higher Education Area (EHEA) countries, for all types of quality assurance processes—including cross-border quality assurance¹ —and all modes of study or places of delivery. As the ESG cover both internal and external quality assurance processes, their impact has been significant. The Trends 2010 and 2015 studies by the European University Association (EUA) found that the most important developments that shaped institutional strategy of universities were the Bologna Process, quality assurance reforms and internationalisation: their order of importance varied between these two studies, but the top three developments remained the same in both (Sursock et al., 2010; Sursock, 2015).

In the 17 years of their history, the ESG have become a key feature of the European quality assurance framework, and they enjoy high degrees of acceptance across the sector. The European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), established in 2007, further strengthens the European quality assurance framework: quality assurance and accreditation agencies in Europe need to be externally reviewed every five years to ensure their continued compliance with the ESG, and if successful, they may be included in the register. EQAR may also be used by institutions to select a quality assurance agency other than their own national agency for their external reviews.

Although the ESG were first created to support the interoperability and common understanding of mainly national quality assurance processes across Europe, their use has also enabled the expansion of cross-border quality assurance within the continent. Cross-border quality assurance has become a political priority of the EHEA, as it allows institutions to select the agency that best suits their needs, regardless of where, in the EHEA, it is located. According to data from EQAR, in 2021, 30 out of the 49 agencies in the register reported performing external quality assurance activities in a country other than the one in which the agency is based (EQAR, 2021). Some quality assurance agencies, such as the Institutional Evaluation Programme (IEP), carry out only cross-border quality assurance by definition, as the programme is not rooted in any particular national higher education system. The evaluation principles, criteria and methodology remain the same, regardless of the country in which IEP carries out its evaluations. This is applicable also to evaluations that take place outside of the EHEA. Indeed, all EQAR registered agencies are expected to apply the same methods and criteria for all higher education reviews, independently of the geographical location of the evaluated institution, to guarantee that all reviews respect the ESG.

Taking into consideration the longstanding tradition of IEP in operating internationally, the following sections will focus on the experience of this quality assurance agency in order to determine whether the ESG capture universal principles of the quality assurance of learning and teaching in higher education and whether they are relevant and applicable to higher education contexts outside the EHEA.

The Institutional Evaluation Programme

IEP has a long history of conducting institutional evaluations, dating back to before the ESG were even adopted by the EHEA ministers. It was launched in 1994 by the Conférence des Recteurs Européens

¹ External QA activities of a QA agency carried out in a country other than the one in which the agency is based or primarily operates.

(one of the predecessor associations of the EUA). IEP is an independent quality assurance agency and was first listed in EQAR in 2009 on the basis of an external review report that confirmed it was operating in compliance with the ESG. Since its foundation, IEP has carried out more than 440 evaluations in 50 countries, 12 of which were non-EHEA.

The mission of IEP is to support higher education institutions and systems in developing their strategic leadership and capacity to manage change through a process of voluntary institutional evaluations. IEP evaluates an institution's internal quality assurance system, its results and its effectiveness. It focuses on how the institution fosters the development of an institutional quality culture and examines this as a transversal topic across all the main areas of institutional activity covered by the evaluations (i.e. governance and decision-making, quality culture, teaching and learning, research, service to society and internationalisation).

To ensure that its methodology² is applied consistently and that the topics referring to the ESG Part 1³ are covered consistently in all evaluations, IEP provides a set of guidelines for institutions and evaluation teams, as well as a report template that gives guidance on what to include in each section and instructions on covering each topic of the ESG Part 1. The report template was first implemented in 2013, and was further elaborated in 2015 as a result of a study that examined the extent to which IEP evaluation reports addressed Part 1 of the ESG (Bochajczuk, 2015). It should be noted that the same guiding questions (including reference to the ESG) and report template are used when IEP conducts evaluations outside the EHEA.

2 Methodology

Sample

This study examines five IEP evaluations conducted in the period between 2016 and 2020 in countries located outside the EHEA. This specific timeframe was chosen so that the sample of reports would be based on the ESG 2015. All the reports are the result of an initial evaluation⁴.

The evaluations took place in five different countries located in western and central Asia, south and central America and the east Mediterranean region, covering a range of profiles: three of the institutions were private and two public and the size of the institutions varied from four to 13 faculties.

A total of ten reports, including five self-evaluation and five final reports, were analysed. The data were complemented by 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with 12 evaluation team members and one institutional representative.

Data analysis

All reports and interviews were subject to content analysis aiming to determine (1) whether the standards of the ESG 2015 Part 1 are relevant to higher education contexts outside the EHEA, (2) which standards are challenging to comply with, (3) which of the challenges relate to using Part 1 of the ESG and (4) which challenges relate to following procedures in line with Part 2⁵ of the ESG.

² The IEP methodology is further explained in chapter four of this study.

³ The ESG Part 1 refers to standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, and specifically, the internal work undertaken by higher education institutions to assure the quality of their provision and processes.

⁴ Initial evaluation is a comprehensive evaluation for institutions that have not had an IEP evaluation before, or had one more than three years ago.

⁵ The ESG Part 2 refers to standards and guidelines for external quality assurance, and specifically, for quality assurance agencies when carrying out evaluations, reviews or audits.

IEP has been externally evaluated by an independent review panel and found to be in compliance with the ESG in the processes and standards it uses to evaluate institutions (van den Bosch et al., 2019). Considering that IEP applies the same methodology to all evaluations, including those carried out at institutions outside the EHEA, the hypothesis that the ESG Parts 1 and 2 are relevant to these higher education contexts has been formed. Therefore, the deductive content analysis approach, which is based on an existing hypothesis and moves from the general to the specific (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109), was applied. As a result, the ten standards of the ESG Part 1 and seven of Part 2 formed the content categories. Standards 1.2, 1.4 and 1.6 of the ESG Part 1 were divided into several content categories because they refer to more than one aspect. As a result, there were 24 content categories in total.

Limitations

Some limitations to the data of the study must be noted; namely, that only one institutional representative was interviewed. As a result, data representing institutional views on the aspects discussed in this paper are limited.

Furthermore, it is important to note that although all the reports follow a common template and are checked by the IEP secretariat, the teams conducting evaluations operate independently in deciding which areas and aspects are covered in the reports. Considering that IEP evaluations cover six areas with a major focus on governance, institutional decision-making and management, and that there is a maximum number of pages an IEP report can have, the evaluation teams may decide to focus on the major issues that could be improved while leaving out those areas where the institution showed strong evidence of good practice. As a result, there may be missing information referring to specific standards in the final reports.

3 Findings

Overview

The results of the content analysis show that the final reports generally contain more references to the ESG Part 1 than the self-evaluation reports (see Figure 1). There are two likely reasons for this finding. The first is that, according to the aims underlined by the institutions outside the EHEA in their registration forms, their primary aim was not to be evaluated against the ESG but to have an overall institutional evaluation that would help them reflect on their activities through a 'European lens' and obtain a quality label that would boost international recognition and visibility. Furthermore, they wanted an improvement-oriented institutional evaluation that would support the development of their decision-making, learning, teaching and research practices, and quality assurance procedures.

The second reason is that IEP evaluation teams put a strong emphasis on the ESG because according to their broad experience, the ESG are fundamental for the development of quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education.

According to the data, seven out of 17 content categories referring to Part 1 of the ESG were covered in all self-evaluation and final reports. It can thus be inferred that the five standards these categories refer to are relevant to higher education contexts outside the EHEA. Furthermore, four content categories were covered in all final reports but not in all self-evaluation reports, and six were covered only in some self-evaluation and final reports. This indicates that the other five ESG standards of Part 1 can be considered somewhat relevant to non-EHEA higher education contexts. Data from interviews concurred with these findings.



Fig. 1: References to the ESG Part 1 in self-evaluation and final reports

4 Standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies

Examining relevance of the IEP methodology

Part 2 of the ESG relates to the criteria used by quality assurance agencies to externally evaluate higher education institutions. This chapter examines how IEP evaluation methodology is used and applied for evaluations outside of the EHEA. Data were gathered from interviews with 12 evaluation team members and one institutional representative. All interviewees unanimously agreed that following procedures in line with the ESG standards Part 2 is perfectly relevant when conducting evaluations of higher education institutions outside the EHEA. However, it was highlighted that this is achieved because IEP methodology is context sensitive, and IEP evaluations do not result in any judgement related to ESG compliance.

Standard 2.1 Consideration of internal quality assurance

The ESG standards focus on "quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation" (ESG, 2015, p. 7). IEP evaluations go significantly beyond the ESG. They focus strongly on management and decision-making mechanisms and how the institution operates as a whole. An IEP study found that the top area of impact of IEP evaluations on evaluated institutions is governing and decision-making (Dakovic & Gover, 2018, p. 9). A subsequent study found that this is the area with the highest proportion of recommendations by IEP teams (Cirlan & Gover, 2019, p. 7).

Standard 2.2 Designing methodologies fit for purpose

IEP evaluations are enhancement-oriented. This goes hand in hand with the voluntary nature of the programme; the fact that IEP is not geared towards passing judgements, accrediting, ranking or comparing institutions; and IEP's mission to support higher education institutions and systems in developing their strategic leadership and capacity to manage change. IEP applies the same methodology and evaluation approach to all institutions it evaluates, regardless of their geographical location. These aspects of IEP methodology allow IEP to examine the aims and vision of the institution with respect to the context in which it operates.

Standard 2.3 Implementing processes

The IEP evaluation process follows the same steps for all institutions. The evaluation consists of a selfevaluation phase carried out by the institution, site visit(s) to the institution by the evaluation team resulting in the delivery of the oral report, a written report setting out the findings and recommendations, and a follow-up phase during which the evaluated institution submits to IEP a progress report.

IEP puts significant emphasis on the self-evaluation phase and considers it the most important part of the evaluation process. Moreover, in line with the voluntary nature of IEP evaluations and the principle of institutional autonomy, institutions are free to decide for or against the implementation of IEP recommendations.

Standard 2.4 Peer-review experts

IEP has a steady pool of experts from which it draws its evaluation teams. The same rules for team composition are followed for evaluations within and outside the EHEA, with all teams having a student member. IEP teams consist of members from different European countries, none of whom are from the country where the institution is situated. Despite this, an IEP study found that IEP experts correctly captured and interpreted national system-level features most of the time and brought additional value to evaluations by incorporating a European perspective into the challenges the evaluated institutions faced (Dakovic & Loukkola, 2016, p. 10).

Data from interviews indicate that the further a higher education system was from the EHEA, the more time teams required to understand its legislative aspects, system structures and the way it operated, as systems may differ considerably from European models. For evaluations conducted in countries outside the EHEA, it was helpful to have a member of the team who either spoke the language of the country, which helped with translating laws and regulations, or had strong connections to the geographical region of the institution and some insight into the cultural context and the particularities of the system.

Standard 2.5 Criteria for outcomes

The IEP methodology is mission-driven; thus, the institution's own mission and goals are taken as the starting point for the evaluation. The evaluation process reviews the fitness of purpose of the mission and goals, and the fitness of purpose of the policies and practices that the institution has in place for meeting its mission and goals.

The four key questions that stand at the basis of IEP evaluations, together with a set of sub-questions, cover all areas of institutional activities, and they form the criteria used in IEP evaluations. These criteria are applied consistently to all the evaluations conducted by IEP.

Standard 2.6 Reporting

All IEP evaluation reports, including those resulting from evaluations in systems outside the EHEA, are published on the IEP website. All reports follow the same structure, which is set out in the template for writing the report. Most of the data that IEP teams gather is qualitative and derives from interviews with institutional representatives. The inherent subjectivity of the reports and proposed recommendations are generally accepted by evaluated institutions, and all of them recognise the reports' accuracy.

Standard 2.7 Complaints and appeals

IEP has a clear procedure for complaints and appeals that is published on its website.

In conclusion, IEP methodology is consistently applied to all evaluations, regardless of their geographical location, and no major issues were identified by the interviewees.

5 Standards and guidelines for higher education institutions

ESG Part 1 that are relevant to higher education contexts outside the EHEA

Standards 1.1, 1.5, 1.6, 1.9 and 1.10 were covered in all self-evaluation and final reports. Therefore, it can be concluded that they are relevant to all higher education institutions, including those located outside the EHEA. As the reports elaborate not only on the positive achievements, but also the existing gaps and aspects that need further work, the extent to which these standards are met varies.

Standard 1.1 Policy for quality assurance

IEP evaluations place strong emphasis on the institutional responsibility for quality assurance and focus on the holistic approach of the institution. An important element in assuring the quality of education is the policy for quality assurance, which is usually included in the institutional strategic plan. All interviewees emphasised that the existence and adequacy of this policy, the extent to which stakeholders are involved in its development and implementation, and the appropriateness of structures and processes varied and depended greatly on several aspects; namely, the institutional management's understanding of quality assurance, institutional autonomy, the maturity of the internal quality assurance system, and the existence and support of external quality assurance bodies.

In systems where the external quality assurance system was mature, higher education institutions received substantial support and guidance regarding internal policies, structures and processes that assure quality and foster quality culture. Conversely, when external quality assurance was in its infancy or non-existent, support and guidance was scarce and inconsistent, and internal quality assurance processes tended to be unsystematic and based on informal approaches.

Institutional management plays a crucial role in steering discussions around quality assurance, implementing adequate policies and structures, and fostering institutional quality culture. This is the reason why IEP reports cover this aspect not only in the chapter dedicated to quality culture, but also in the governance and decision-making, teaching and learning, research, service to society and internationalisation chapters.

Standard 1.5 Teaching staff

Considering the ever-changing nature of societal and labour market needs and developments, as well as research advancements, recruiting competent staff and organising continuous professional development is crucial. The EUA Trends 2015 report, for example, defined staff development as a pivotal aspect of improving learning and teaching (Sursock, 2015, p. 97). Similarly, the presence of an institutional human resources policy comprising appropriate recruitment procedures, systematic performance and workload evaluation practices, and clear promotion paths is an area of focus in IEP evaluations.

All interviewees indicated that national laws and strategies, institutional autonomy, cultural context, financial and human resources, and the profile of the institution play a central role in the extent to which this standard is met.

Standard 1.6 Learning resources and student support

Funding models differ across higher education systems. Institutional internal priorities regarding the allocation of funds to institutional core activities such as learning and teaching, and the level of autonomy granted to institutions when it comes to internal allocation of funds, also varies. In some

systems, higher education institutions have limited possibilities to move funds between predefined funding categories, whereas in others, they have greater independence. Consequently, these aspects may create favourable conditions for, or hinder the development of, learning and teaching activities and support structures.

IEP evaluation teams carefully consider these particularities and often propose recommendations on how institutions could diversify their income. They also assess the adequacy of support services and information centres, institutional facilities (including laboratories, libraries and study areas), equipment and learning resources, as well as evaluating the accessibility and quality of information and scholarship support. The interviewees emphasised that the support culture differs among institutions, and in many instances, this depends on the status of the institution in the given system and/or the level of competitiveness within the system.

Standard 1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes

Standard 1.9 is tightly linked with standards 1.1 Policy for quality assurance, 1.7 Information management and 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance. It derives from the institutional quality assurance policy that sets the quality assurance structures, processes and regularity, as well as from data collected and analysed systematically, and it is boosted by external quality assurance regulations and evaluations.

Although this standard is considered generic, reasonable and has been covered in all the selfevaluation and final reports, interviewees indicated that in cases where internal quality assurance was in its infancy and a quality assurance agency was lacking, monitoring and formal processes related to the periodic review of programmes was also lacking or varying across the institution. Some programmes would go through an internal review as a preparatory phase for accreditation or because they were offered in partnership with another international institution and had to be accredited in that system.

Standard 1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance

Much like in the case of the previous standard, interviewees indicated that cyclical external quality assurance depends greatly on the higher education system and whether this system has an external quality assurance body. Furthermore, the extent to which the system is influenced by the practices of the neighbouring regions has an important role as well. In most of the cases, the ministry of education provided the legal framework and accredited the institutions and their programmes. However, it was noted that these accreditation activities may lack well-defined structure and be unsystematic, or conversely, they may be very bureaucratic, overly detailed and focused on accountability rather than enhancement.

Institutions that collaborate with their international counterparts, either as founding or strategic partners, or as providers of joint programmes, tend to undergo external quality assurance evaluations in line with the standards and requirements of the partner institution's system, be it in line with the ESG or other standards.

In systems where external quality assurance is missing, some institutions choose to have their programmes accredited by international accreditation agencies. Others follow the International Organisation for Standardisation (ISO) in many of their daily activities and obtain ISO certification.

ESG Part 1 that are partly relevant to higher education contexts outside the EHEA

The data of this study show that the standards 1.2, 1.3, 1.4, 1.7 and 1.8 were not fully covered in all self-evaluation and final reports. This finding, however, does not imply that these standards are not relevant to higher education systems outside the EHEA. It rather indicates that there are elements of these standards that refer specifically to the EHEA tools or cultural context and therefore cannot be translated to systems outside the EHEA. It may also indicate that the evaluation teams identified no issues regarding these aspects or that they were not considered to be important or relevant in the given institutional context.

Standard 1.2 Design and approval of programmes

This standard was divided into four content categories; namely, 1.2.1 Design and approval of programmes (general procedures); 1.2.2 European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS); 1.2.3 Learning outcomes; and 1.2.4 National qualifications framework for higher education. All ten reports addressed the general procedures related to the design and approval of programmes (content category 1.2.1), but as shown in Table 1 below, the other three content categories were only partly covered.

The ECTS, learning outcomes and national qualification frameworks for higher education are tools that have been developed and implemented within the EHEA. As higher education institutions operate according to the country's or region's policies and standards, translating the EHEA tools to an institution from a non-EHEA country that either makes use of its own credit system or does not have a national qualifications framework may not be considered relevant. However, higher education institutions have an increasingly international outlook, and may collaborate tightly both with other institutions situated in their geographical proximity and those with which they have historical ties, including institutions from the EHEA countries. These partnerships lead to institutions adopting regulations and tools that then facilitate student mobility and automatic recognition. Consequently, the transferability and use of these tools to institutions outside the EHEA may depend on whether or not they have connections with and are oriented towards the EHEA.

Standard 1.3 Student-centred learning and teaching

This standard was almost fully covered by the final reports and partly by the self-evaluation reports (see Table 1). Data from interviews support this finding, confirming that this standard is applicable to higher education systems outside the EHEA, and that it is actually at the core of an authentic quality culture.

In many instances, this concept was either called something different or was unknown, and it required explanation. The culture and broader societal context, the institution's traditions and history, institutional priorities and perceptions of the student's role, as well as the available financial and human resources and training opportunities, have a great impact on how this standard is understood and the extent to which it is implemented. In some institutions, the top-down approach is very strong, and even though students are involved in institutional governance and decision-making, they do not have the right to vote.

Standard 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

This standard was divided into four content categories: 1.4.1 Student admission, 1.4.2 Progression, 1.4.3 Recognition and 1.4.4 Certification. These phases of the student 'life cycle' are similar in all higher education institutions, regardless of geographical location. Therefore, it is largely perceived that institutions have in place the necessary strategies, tools and structures to meet this standard. IEP

evaluation teams focus more on the student admission and progression phases and less on recognition and certification. In IEP reports, recognition may be discussed only in the context of study mobility periods and their recognition by the home institutions, but not on a larger scale. The reason for this may be that as a cross-border evaluation, IEP evaluation often takes place in parallel to the obligatory, national external quality assurance arrangements that would inevitably cover the aspects of certification and recognition.

Standard 1.7 Information management

This standard is almost fully covered in the reports, apart from one self-evaluation report. Data derived from interviews concur with these findings and indicate that this standard is generic and relevant for higher education institutions outside of the EHEA.

Similar to other standards, the level to which this standard is met depends greatly on the maturity of the quality assurance system; the existence of an external quality assurance agency; financial resources; the presence of skilled, qualified and experienced staff; and finally, the determination and approach of institutional management regarding strategic decision-making. IEP focuses considerably on this standard, and particularly on how it is embedded in the institutional quality culture.

Standard 1.8 Public information

This standard is fully covered in the IEP final reports but not in all self-evaluation reports. All interviewees consider this standard fully applicable to higher education systems outside the EHEA, as today all institutions have an official website informing the public about their main activities. Institutions that dominate their geographical area experience little or no competition and do not usually place high emphasis on the public communication aspect. Also, given the cultural context in some areas, institutions do not share the view that they need to market the institution, inform the public and attract students.

Content category	Coverage: self-evaluation	Coverage: final reports
	reports (<i>n</i> = 5 reports)	(<i>n</i> = 5 reports)
1.2.2 ECTS (credit system)	2	4
1.2.3 Learning outcomes	3	5
1.2.4 National qualifications framework for higher education	0	1
1.3. Student-centred learning and teaching	3	5
1.4.1 Student admission	4	4
1.4.2 Progression	3	4
1.4.3 Recognition	4	3
1.4.4 Certification	2	2
1.7 Information management	4	5
1.8 Public information	3	5

Table 1: ESG Part 1 content categories and their coverage in the self-evaluation and final reports

6 Conclusion

In conclusion, this study shows that all of the standards of the ESG Part 1 are generic enough for, and relevant to, higher education contexts outside the EHEA. The ESG capture universal principles of the quality assurance of learning and teaching in higher education. However, some elements of standards 1.2, 1.3 and 1.4 cannot be fully translated to higher education systems outside the EHEA, as they refer to tools or concepts that have been developed and implemented within the EHEA.

The compliance level of the ESG standards Part 1 relies greatly on their systematic application. A systematic approach to internal quality assurance was missing at the institutions outside the EHEA. This can be explained by the fact that in these systems, internal quality assurance mainly focuses on preparations for accreditation evaluations. A noticeable difference was, however, noted in institutions geographically closer to the EHEA that collaborated with EHEA quality assurance agencies or developed programmes in collaboration with international institutions and thus applied the ESG.

Higher education institutions across the world face similar challenges. Consequently, similar obstacles hinder the fulfilment of the ESG Part 1. Among the main ones found by this study were lack of financial and human resources, limited levels of institutional autonomy, lack of expertise in internal quality assurance, lack of an external quality assurance body and some cultural aspects.

In addition, this study found that following procedures that are in line with the ESG Part 2 is entirely feasible, but the evaluation methodology plays a crucial role in assuring this. IEP methodology is applicable to any higher education institution regardless of its geographical location, and IEP evaluations go far beyond the ESG because the scope of IEP evaluations captures all the main institutional activity areas. Furthermore, since IEP evaluations do not result in any judgement, IEP methodology allows the evaluation teams to flexibly interpret the ESG and to propose applicable, relevant and useful recommendations.

Generally, institutional staff in higher education institutions outside the EHEA may not know the ESG well. In such instances, the evaluation teams need to explain what the ESG mean using vocabulary that is applicable to the context of the institution. Therefore, it is important that a member of the team either speaks the language of the country or understands well the cultural context and the particularities of the higher education system. By conducting cross-border evaluations, IEP transfers the expertise and knowledge of international experts, as well as the European standards, to other geographical areas.

Evaluating higher education institutions in countries outside the EHEA requires quality assurance agencies to be consistent in their application of the ESG, but at the same time, their methodology must allow for the flexibility to respond to the needs of the higher education institution.

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