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## 1<sup>st</sup> DEQAR PILOT STUDY <sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

The pressures of society for greater accountability led governments and higher education institutions (HEIs) to implement organised quality assurance systems in higher education all over Europe. The European standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance within universities (part 1 and 2 of ESG, respectively) and the European standards for external quality agencies (part 3 of ESG) provide a source of assistance and guidance to both HEIs in developing their own quality assurance systems and agencies undertaking external quality assurance, as well as contribute to a common frame of reference, which can be used by institutions and agencies alike (ESG, 2005; Prikulis, Rauhvargers, & Rusakova, 2011).

Our main research questions are:

- i) Whether the ESG related to programme's design, approval and monitoring are present in institutional external quality assurance reports;
- ii) Whether quality assurance agencies are translating the ESG differently when performing institutional audits of HEIs. Particularly, we aim to understand *how* quality assurance agencies are translating the ESG, their main concepts and dimensions, and how audit panels are applying the national guidelines for institutional external quality assurance reports and how they are approaching the ESG.

## The implementation and translation of the ESG

The implementation of the ESG is not linear. The literature shows us that implementation, not only in higher education but also in other contexts, is a complex and sometimes contradictory process, influenced by policy development at several levels: European, national, regional and institutional (EC, EACEA & Eurydice, 2015, 2018; Gornitzka, Kyvik, & Stensaker, 2005; Prikulis, Rusakova, & Rauhvargers, 2013; Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014).

Ideas (as the ESG) are not static entities; they are interpreted, adapted and translated (Stensaker, 2007; Westerheijden & Kohoutek, 2014). Ideas travel, and when they travel they may be rejected, accepted, resisted or contested. In other words, in one way or another they may change in the process from formal policy formulation to actual application. Organisations have the imaginative and adaptative capacity to translate fashionable ideas according to their understanding, traditions, needs and means (Czarniawska, 2008; Czarniawska & Joerges, 1995; Czarniawska & Sevón, 2005; Czarniawski & Sevón, 1996).

Organisations (and thus quality assurance agencies) provide their own meaning and make sense of ideas (such as the ESG). In such an adaptative and dynamic context, the ESG may have different functions and have different interpretations.

## Methodology

We develop a content analysis of the institutional external quality assurance reports from 4 different countries available on the DEQAR database<sup>2</sup>, in order to understand how quality assurance agencies translate the ESG for external quality assurance. The unit of analysis is the institutional external quality assurance reports as it enables a more comprehensive analysis on the issues under analysis; consequently the programme external quality assurance reports are excluded.

The research is focused on two versions of the ESG, the former version from 2005 and the revised version from 2015, and particularly on the specific standards and guidelines related to programmes' design, approval and monitoring: ESG 1.2: '*approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards*' (ESG, 2005) and ESG 1.2 '*design and approval of programmes*' and 1.9 '*on-going monitoring and periodic reviews of programmes*' (ESG, 2015) (See Table 1 and 2). The rationales behind the methodological choices are the following:

- i) Collecting a diversified and balanced sample, with reports produced before and after the revision of the ESG, so the research can analyse previous reports in the light of the former ESG and most recent reports in the light of the revised ESG;
- ii) Understanding the dimensions of education planning, development and monitoring in relation to learning outcomes, to qualifications frameworks and to the expectations and needs of students and the society.

Aiming to develop an in-depth and comprehensive analysis we explore both standards and the more detailed guidelines. While "the *standards* set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA (...), the *guidelines* explain why the standard is important and describe how standards might be implemented (and) set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the actors involved in quality assurance" (ESG, 2015, p. 7). Table 1 and 2 contain the ESGs of 2005 and 2015.

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<sup>2</sup> We started by defining the criteria for the selection of countries, which was 'diversity of countries and HE systems' and, using the DEQAR database, we 'pre-selected' a sample of 'possible' countries. Then we searched in the database which of our 'pre-selected' countries had a good sample of reports, with regard to quantity and diversity of higher education institutions (considering the types of institutions existent in each country - universities, universities of applied sciences, colleges, private institutions, public institutions, etc.). Since we also wanted to analyse reports before and after the revised ESG, we searched the database and looked for reports before and after May 2015 (which was a limitation, as only a few countries have uploaded reports after that time). Taking into account the above mentioned 'inclusion criteria', we selected one report per type of higher education institution in each country and (whenever possible) we tried to select institutions with different sizes and from different locations.

Table 1: ESG 1.2 (2005)

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<b>ESG 1.2 - Approval, monitoring and periodic review of programmes and awards</b>
<b>Standard:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Institutions should have formal mechanisms for the approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards.</li></ul>
<b>Guidelines:</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated.</li><li>- The confidence of students and other stakeholders in higher education is more likely to be established and maintained through effective quality assurance activities which ensure that programmes are well-designed, regularly monitored and periodically reviewed, thereby securing their continuing relevance and currency.</li><li>- The quality assurance of programmes and awards are expected to include:<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- development and publication of explicit intended learning outcomes ;</li><li>- careful attention to curriculum and programme design and content;</li><li>- specific needs of different modes of delivery (e.g. full time, part-time, distance learning, e-learning) and types of higher education (e.g. academic, vocational, professional);</li><li>- availability of appropriate learning resources;</li><li>- formal programme approval procedures by a body other than that teaching the programme;</li><li>- monitoring of the progress and achievements of students;</li><li>- regular periodic reviews of programmes (including external panel members);</li><li>- regular feedback from employers, labour market representatives and other relevant organisations;</li><li>- participation of students in quality assurance activities.</li></ul></li></ul>

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Table 2: ESG 1.2 and 1.9 (2015)

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**ESG 1.2 - Design and approval of programmes**

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**Standard:**

- Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programmes.
  - The programmes should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes.
  - The qualification resulting from a programme should be clearly specified and communicated.
  - The qualification should 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:**

- Programmes are designed with overall programme objectives that are in line with the institutional strategy and have explicit intended learning outcomes.
  - Programmes are designed by involving students and other stakeholders in the work.
  - Programmes benefit from external expertise and reference points.
  - Programmes reflect the four purposes of higher education of the Council of Europe.
  - Programmes are designed so that they enable smooth student progression.
  - Programmes define the expected student workload, e.g. in ECTS.
  - Programmes include well-structured placement opportunities where appropriate.
  - Programmes are subject to a formal institutional approval process.
- 

**ESG 1.9 - On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes**

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**Standard:**

- Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society.
  - These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme.
  - Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.
- 

**Guidelines:**

- Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes aim to ensure that the provision remains appropriate and to create a supportive and effective learning environment for students.
  - 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 learning environment and support services and their fitness for purpose for the programme.
  - Programmes are reviewed and revised regularly involving students and other stakeholders.
  - The information collected is analysed and the programme is adapted to ensure that it is up-to-date.
  - Revised programme specifications are published.
-

We analyse the institutional external quality assurance reports from Croatia, Estonia, Finland and Portugal, which are very ‘dissimilar’ countries with regard to their higher education systems. Indeed, our choice aims assure a most dissimilar and diversified sample. In each country, we choose one report per type of HEIs, and since the types of HEIs vary between countries, we have a different number of reports analysed in each country. To further diversify the sample, in each country, we select (as much as possible) different HEIs in terms of legal foundation (private versus public), size and location. In total, we analysed 17 reports (6 in Croatia, 4 in Estonia, 3 in Finland and 4 in Portugal) (See Table 3).

Table 3: Types of HEIs per country and composition of the research sample

Countries	Types of HEIs	Sample	Designation
Croatia	Public universities	1 Public university	CR_Pub_Uni
	Private universities	1 Private university	CR_Pri_Uni *
	Public polytechnics	1 Public polytechnic	CR_Pub_Pol
	Private polytechnics	1 Private polytechnic	CR_Pri_Pol
	Public colleges	1 Public college	CR_Pub_Col
	Private colleges	1 Private college	CR_Pri_Col *
Estonia	Public universities	1 Public university	EST_Pub_Uni
	Private universities	1 Private university	EST_Pri_Uni *
	Public universities of applied sciences	1 Public UAS	EST_Pub_UAS *
	Private universities of applied sciences	1 Private UAS	EST_Pri_UAS
Finland	Universities (foundation and non-foundation)	1 (non-foundation) university	FIN_Uni
		1 Foundation university	FIN_Foun *
	Universities of applied sciences	1 UAS	FIN_UAS *
Portugal	Public universities	1 Public university	PT_Pub_Uni *
	Private universities	1 Private university	PT_Pri_Uni *
	Public polytechnics	1 Public polytechnic	PT_Pub_Pol
	Private polytechnics	1 Private polytechnic	PT_Pri_Pol

\*Reports produced after the publication of the revised ESG

As mentioned above, in each country we analyse reports produced before and after May 2015 (the time of the publication of the revised version of the ESG), preferably (and wherever possible) after the end of 2015, having in mind that agencies need time to understand, absorb and embed the changes. We are not expecting that the most recent reports translate all the changes brought by the revised ESG. Still, we expect them to be gradually incorporated and embedded by the agencies in their institutional audits, and that such degree of maturity and embeddedness are reflected, not necessarily in the audit areas (which, as stated above, remain the same), but at least in the approach to certain ‘dimensions’ and ‘themes’ which are particularly reinforced in the revised ESG.

The revised version did not change substantially with regard to programme design and monitoring. Both versions highlight the need of HEIs to develop mechanisms for design, approval, periodic review and monitoring of their programmes and awards. Notwithstanding, the revised version not only puts more emphasis on the standard (developing two new ESG, instead of one: ESG 1.2 related to programme design and development and ESG 1.9 related to

programme monitoring), but also brings new features and stresses the importance of new dimensions, namely: qualification frameworks, involvement of stakeholders, society and students' needs and expectations.

It is also important to stress that we are not evaluating how institutions follow the ESG, but how agencies are translating them in their institutional external quality assurance reports. This means that we consider 'evidence' of the application of the ESG even when a report claims that a certain standard or guideline is absent in the HEI.

We choose to particularly analyse what we considered to be the most 'representative', 'important' and simultaneously least 'ambiguous' concepts and dimensions of the ESG and we have made a 'text search' in all the reports of the four countries under analysis. We include not only the words and expressions used in the ESG, but also other possible synonyms and variants of such words and expressions, in an attempt to incorporate all the possible national and institutional 'interpretations' and 'translations' of the ESG.

In order to answer to our main research question: a) we carried out a quantitative analysis, by looking at the frequency of the concepts in the text, which can be interesting but rather limitative; b) we subsequently present a deeper analysis and explored *how* the concepts are approached in the reports.

The general goal is to understand how institutional external quality assurance reports make use (of) and translate the ESG. First, we choose to analyse words and expressions related to: learning outcomes, approval procedures, participation of stakeholders, progress of students and periodic monitoring and review; in all the reports. Second, we look into three 'new' dimensions highlighted in the revised version of the ESG: qualifications framework, needs of stakeholders and student workload.



## Results

### A common commitment to compliance ...

The very first general remark is that the influence of the ESG in the institutional external quality assurance reports of the agencies is unquestionable. One may take into consideration that all the agencies are ENQA members and that means that they have demonstrated to meet the criteria for membership. They are also registered on EQAR and all quality assurance agencies that wish to be included in the Register need to demonstrate that they operate in substantial compliance with the ESG. While the standards in part 1 may be addressed differently depending on the type of external quality assurance carried out, the agency is expected to systematically include all standards of Part 1 of the ESG in their criteria and procedures used to evaluate, accredit institutions or programmes.

Indeed, the 'commitment to compliance' with the ESG is strongly underlined by the agencies:

*"The Agency for Science and Higher Education and the Accreditation Council's committee have created an enhanced re-accreditation model for the new higher education institutions re-accreditation cycle starting in 2017. The new model has been aligned with the amended ESG and includes the modified standards for the quality assessment of universities and their constituent units as well as polytechnics and colleges" (ASHE, 2018).*

*"The standards and guidelines for institutional accreditation were defined while taking into account the legislation of the Republic of Estonia regulating higher education, national strategies, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area and other international agreements" (EKKA, 2018, p. 1).*

*"A central premise in the planning of the audit model has been the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education Area (ESG), which emphasises the student-centred approach, as well as learning and research as the basis for planning, implementing and developing education. In the student-centred approach, students are encouraged to take an active role in the learning process" (FINEEC, 2018).*

*"The Agency adopted, in 2012, a set of reference points (standards), formulated in terms of statements that characterise a system of internal quality assurance well established and in line with the European standards and guidelines (ESG) and the legal requirements applicable. In July 2016, after a consultation process, the reference points were adapted to the new version of the ESG adopted at the ministerial meeting in Yerevan, in May 2015" (A3ES, 2016, p. 3).*

Having this in mind, it is not surprising that the ESG appear in institutional external quality assurance reports of the HEIs.

... translated into different 'forms'

A prior analysis of the 'form' of the reports, even before going deeper into their content, shows that despite the common 'ESG compliance discourse', agencies have been interpreting and translating the ESG differently, namely in the length, the focus and the models of institutional external quality assurance reports.

The length of the reports, as well as their level of detail varies considerably. While Finnish reports are the longest and most detailed, deeply exploring the audit areas; Portuguese reports are the shortest, presenting very brief and summarised information.

The focus of the reports is also different. In Portugal and in Finland, the institutional external quality assurance is focused on the internal quality assurance systems of HEIs. In Estonia and in Croatia, the reports evaluate the HEIs as a whole, without a clear focus on quality assurance.

There are also differences between countries with regard to the areas addressed by the reports. All the countries have two models for the institutional external quality assurance reports: one used in the audit cycles until 2017 or 2018; and a new one, developed for the most recent audit cycles, which are now underway. The areas for institutional audit present similarities between countries, which seem to imply an influence of the ESG, but there are also significant differences.

In Croatia, while two of the audit areas concern 'study programmes' and 'students' there is a considerable level of detailed information about these two areas, namely about: learning outcomes; student workload; alignment of study programmes with defined learning outcomes; alignment of assessment of assessment with qualification level; assessment criteria; competences of graduates (See table 4).

Table 4: Areas for institutional external quality assurance in Croatia <sup>3</sup>

<b>Areas (Earlier cycles)</b>	<b>Areas (New cycle: 2017)</b>
Institutional management and quality assurance	
Study programmes	Internal quality assurance and the social role of the higher education institution
Students	Study programmes
Teaching staff	Teaching process and student support
Scientific and professional activity	Teaching and institutional capacities
International cooperation and mobility	Scientific/artistic activity
Resources: administration, space, equipment and finances	

<sup>3</sup> In Croatia, the Agency for Science and Higher Education (ASHE) carries out the re-accreditation of HEIs. All public and private universities, polytechnics and colleges financed from the national budget have to undergo a periodical re-accreditation every 5 years. The first cycle started in the 2010/2011 academic year and evaluates six main areas and in 2017 ASHE initiated a new re-accreditation cycle which presents a new set of standards and each standard is associated with a set of detailed guidelines (ASHE, 2017).

In Estonian reports, information regarding programme design and monitoring is mostly present in the areas of the reports dedicated to ‘organisational management and performance’ and ‘teaching and learning’. The reports present the main areas followed by a set of requirements with which HEIs must comply with (similarly to the guidelines of the ESG). The compliance or non-compliance is then described in detail in the reports and since there are strong similarities between ‘the requirements’ of the Estonian model for institutional external quality assurance and the ‘guidelines’ of the ESG, it is relatively simple to identify the presence of elements of the ESG in the reports (See Table 5).

Table 5: Areas for institutional external quality assurance in Estonia<sup>4</sup>

<b>Areas (Earlier cycles)</b>	<b>Areas (New cycle: 2018)</b>
Organisational management and performance	Strategic management Resources
Teaching and learning	Quality culture Academic ethics
Research, development and/or other creative activity	Internationalisation Teaching staff
Service to the society	Study programme Learning and teaching Students assessment Learning support systems Research, development and/or other creative activity

In Finland, the reports present a substantial amount of information concerning the dimensions approached in ESG 1.2 and in ESG 1.9. It is also worth highlighting that even when a standard or guideline is missing in the section dedicated to degree education, frequently it is integrated in the session dedicated to examples of degree education, in which the report analyses in detail a couple of degree programmes chosen by the HEI (See Table 6).

Table 6: Areas for institutional external quality assurance in Finland<sup>5</sup>

<b>Areas (1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> round)</b>	<b>New areas (3<sup>rd</sup> round: 2018-2014)</b>
Quality policy of the HEI	HEI creates competence
Strategic and operations managements	
Development of the quality system	
Quality management of HEI’s basic duties:	HEI promotes impact and renewal
- degree education	
- research development and innovation activities as well as artistic activities	HEI enhances quality and well-being
- societal impact and regional development work	
- optional development target;	Learning HEI
Samples of degree education: degree programmes	
The quality system as a whole	

<sup>4</sup> In Estonia, HEIs have an obligation to undergo institutional accreditation at least once in seven years by the Estonian Quality Agency for Higher and Vocational Education (EKKA). In February of 2018, the four main accreditation areas have evolved into twelve new “standards for institutional accreditation” (EKKA, 2018).

<sup>5</sup> In Finland, audits of the quality assurance systems of HEIs have been implemented since 2005. All Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences participated in the first audit round that ended in 2012. The second audit round continues until 2018. The third audit round will go from 2018 to 2024 and is based on a new audit model based on four areas (FINEEC, 2017).

Unlike Finnish reports, which despite evaluating the quality assurance systems of the HEIs go considerably beyond the analysis of quality assurance in HEIs, Portuguese institutional reports especially evaluate how different areas are approached by the quality assurance system. Moreover, the reports appear to be less detailed with regard to the dimensions we aim to analyse here. Particularly, the reports are less focused on programme development and monitoring and more on the teaching and learning processes in a broader sense. One must add that the reports seem to be much focused on ‘procedural aspects’, i.e. the procedures followed by the HEIs with regard to the development and implementation of a quality assurance system (See Table 7).

Table 7: Areas for institutional external quality assurance in Portugal<sup>6</sup>

<b>Areas (certification of quality assurance systems)</b>	<b>Areas (institutional accreditation: 2018)</b>
Definition and documentation of the institutional policy for quality	Educational, scientific and cultural project; organisation and management
Scope and effectiveness of the procedures and structures for quality assurance:	Teaching
- in teaching and learning	
- in research and development	Teaching staff
- in the interaction with society	
- in the policies for staff management	Scientific and technological activity
- in the support services	
- in internationalisation	National collaboration policies
Relationship between the quality assurance system and the governance and management bodies of the institution	Internationalisation policies
Participation of internal and external stakeholders in the quality assurance processes	Facilities
Information system	Social services
Publication of information relevant to external stakeholders	Information for the outside
Monitoring, evaluation and continuous improvement of the internal quality assurance system	
Internal quality assurance system as a whole	

Despite our research not including reports based on the new models for institutional external quality assurance, it is worth noticing how the models have changed differently. The most illustrative examples are, perhaps, Croatia and Finland. The revised model in Croatia seems to present what we could define as a *direct translation of the ESG*, defining a set of standards and guidelines (similarly to the ESG) where it is clearly explained to which ESGs certain domestic standard corresponds. In Finland, the new model seems to be a ‘*deviation*’ from a *linear translation* of the ESG, as it presents a different, one could even say a ‘creative’ model (based

<sup>6</sup> In Portugal, the Portuguese Assessment and Accreditation Agency (A3ES) performs audits of internal quality assurance systems of HEIs which volunteers to participate in the audit. The certifications of HEIs’ internal quality management systems are based on the audit of 8 areas. Following the trends of other European partners, A3ES has started institutional accreditation of all HEIs in 2018, with a different focus and new criteria (A3ES, 2017).

only on four broad dimensions) exploring the capacity of HEIs to promote competence, impact, quality and well-being (See tables 4 and 6).

Another 'visible line' in the comparison between the 'old' and the 'new' models is the ways of dealing with the inclusion of scientific/artistic activities or research. This topic was long debated in the 2015 revision of the ESG: *"The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. In addition institutions have policies and processes to ensure and improve the quality of their other activities, such as research and governance"* (ESG, 2015: 7). The research activities are included in the reports in Croatia, Estonia and Portugal, and not in Finland (although maybe through the area of 'HEI impact and renewal'). This seems to be a major change due to the ESG 2015.

### ... translated into different contents

These differences between countries are then translated into the content, style and language of the reports. A first quantitative approach to the results, particularly a basic ‘word frequency analysis’ helps to understand the differences between the reports, particularly the differences in the integration of certain dimensions highlighted in the ESG. Naturally, this analysis is limited: i) not only because some words and expressions (such as monitoring, review or approval) are not necessarily related to the ESG, ii) but also because despite trying to integrate different synonyms, other interpretations of the concepts might have escaped us. Only a deeper analysis of the statements, can tell us, first, what the ‘real’ frequency of certain ESG’s dimensions and concepts is; and second, how these dimensions and concepts are actually approached in the reports. Still, despite the mentioned ‘methodological limitations’, this quantitative analysis indicates that the ESGs (some particular dimensions and concepts) appear in the reports, to different extents (See Table 8).

Table 8: Word frequency in Croatia, Estonia, Finland and Portugal

Concepts	Learning outcomes	Approval procedures	Stakeholders' participation	Students' Progress	Monitoring & review	Qualifications framework	Stakeholders' needs	Students' workload
HEIs								
CR_Pr_Col_2015	5	0	30	3	41	0	6	8
CR_Pub_Col_2005	6	0	18	3	43	0	7	11
CR_Pr_Uni_2015	2	0	11	5	33	0	2	3
CR_Pub_Uni_2005	15	1	12	1	37	1	5	0
CR_Pr_Pol_2005	9	0	5	3	17	0	9	11
CR_Pub_Pol_2005	0	0	9	1	15	0	3	5
EST_Pr_UAS_2005	3	1	45	14	56	0	92	1
EST_Pub_UAS_2015	3	0	114	8	138	0	87	3
EST_Pri_Uni_2015	33	1	113	24	173	3	92	27
EST_Pub_Uni_2005	6	0	63	13	109	0	87	4
FL_Fond_2015	15	2	186	37	365	3	20	13
FL_UAS_2015	21	0	278	34	435	5	15	11
FL_Uni_2005	10	1	179	27	431	0	29	5
PT_Pr_Uni_2015	0	2	25	11	113	0	8	0
PT_Pub_Uni_2015	0	3	38	4	113	0	5	0
PT_Pri_Pol_2005	1	0	31	5	124	0	13	0
PT_Pub_Pol_2005	1	4	10	2	71	0	4	2

The **participation of stakeholders** in the design and monitoring of programmes is one of the most frequently applied concepts. In Croatia, the participation and involvement of the different stakeholders (internal and external) is approached at different levels and extends in the different areas (in strategic documents, in institutional management and quality assurance, in programme development and revision) and frequently underscored in the concluding remarks, where the reports stress the advantages, disadvantages and recommendations for improvement. In Estonia, the area of teaching and learning and, particularly, of study programme development evaluates whether 'development activities related to study programmes are systematic and regular, and different stakeholders are involved in the development of study programmes'. The subarea of support processes for learning also evaluates whether 'students are periodically asked for feedback on learning and support processes (the organisation of studies, assessment, counselling, etc.)' and whether 'the results of surveys are taken into account in improvement activities'. The area of service to society also evaluates the engagement of the institute with society. In Finland, the engagement of internal and external stakeholders in the quality management system, globally and in programme development, in particular, is strongly highlighted in Finnish reports. Portuguese reports evaluate the 'participation of internal and external stakeholders in the quality assurance processes'. When approaching 'the comprehensiveness and efficiency of quality assurance processes and structures in teaching and learning', the reports sometimes evaluate the participation of stakeholders.

The concept of **monitoring and review** appears very frequently though many times the term is not related to programme review and monitoring but to other monitoring or audit processes (for example, developed by the expert panel). In Croatia, the periodic reviews of programmes are extensively addressed. In Estonia, reports address the monitoring of different areas of the institutions, through institutional monitoring 'plans' or 'systems', but also the monitoring of programmes, in particular. In Finland, monitoring practices are frequently described as 'holistic' practices developed by the quality management system of the institutions, but also as specific practices at the level of degree education, and at the level of specific programmes. Similarly to what one can find in Finland, the Portuguese reports address the monitoring of the internal quality assurance system and the monitoring processes of degree education, exploring which internal structures and stakeholders are involved and in which study cycles the monitoring processes are implemented.

The concept of **learning outcomes** is mostly visible in Estonia, Finland but also in Croatia. In Estonia, the audit of learning outcomes is integrated in the second 'standard' for institutional external quality assurance - teaching and learning - particularly in the 'sub-standard' 'student

academic progress and student assessment'. Indeed, one of the guidelines is precisely 'Student assessment supports learning and is in line with learning outcomes'. As the guideline states, the audit is particularly focused on whether learning outcomes are in line with student assessment. Sometimes, the reports also refer to learning outcomes on the sub-standard "effectiveness of teaching and learning, and formation of the student body". In Finland, learning outcomes are approached in the report, particularly (though not exclusively) when the report evaluates the quality management of degree education and then deeply when it evaluates samples of degree education. In Croatia, the reports define the concept learning outcomes as well as the alignment of learning outcomes with students' assessment.

The concept of **student progress** is more frequently used in Finnish and Estonian reports. In Estonia, the area of teaching and learning often addresses student progress, particularly: completion and drop-out rates (and strategies to address them); modes to track students' progress; monitoring and support of student progress. The reports particularly evaluate 'student academic progress and student assessment' and whether 'student academic progress is monitored and supported.' In Finland, the progress of students is significantly addressed in institutional external quality assurance reports. They address: completion rates and strategies to improve them; feedback, revision and monitoring of students' progress; and the role of students in defining their progress.

The concept of **approval procedures** is rarely addressed in the reports. In Estonia and in Finland, only one report in each country clearly refers to the processes for approval of programmes. In Portugal, there is a reference to procedures for the approval of courses (their development or restructuring), of research collaborations and of third mission activities.

With regard to the 'new' dimensions of the revised ESG, we observe that the concept of **qualifications framework** does not appear frequently. In Croatia, one report from a public university addresses the European qualifications framework. In Estonia, one report from a private university evaluates whether education meets the requirements of the National Qualifications Framework. In Finland, qualifications frameworks are mentioned in two reports (one foundation university and one university of applied sciences), however, in one of the reports, the reference only appears in one of the appendices which describes the Finnish higher education system and, particularly, the adoption of a National Qualification Framework in 2017. A report from 2015 highlights the conformity of the university's programmes with the European Qualifications Framework, as the national one had not been adopted yet at the time. In Portugal, one report makes a brief reference to the alignment of the courses with the learning outcomes



and the qualifications frameworks, with no particular mentioning to the National and or the European framework.

The concept of **student workload** only seldom appears in the reports. Most of the reports tend to merely describe the number of ECTS of the programmes, though some reports go beyond that and discuss whether they reflect a realistic student workload.

The dimension of **stakeholders' needs and expectations** is highlighted mainly in Estonia and less so in Finland, which is not surprising since in Estonia all the areas for institutional external quality assurance have explicit requirements related to stakeholders' needs (even before the revised ESG). One of the requirements for 'organisational management and performance' is that "the development plan and the related action plans of a higher education institution arise from the concrete purposes that are built on its mission, vision and core values, and that consider the country's priorities and society's expectations." The area of 'teaching and learning and particularly' the subarea of 'study programme development' has two requirements highlighting the need to consider students, external stakeholders and society's needs and expectations: i) 'a higher education institution bases its new study programmes on its purposes and the needs of the labour market, and takes into account the strategies of the country and expectations of the society'; ii) 'graduate satisfaction with the quality of instruction and employer satisfaction with the quality and suitability to the requirements of the labour market of graduates are surveyed and analysed; the results are considered in the development of study programmes.' The area of 'research and development' also evaluates whether 'a higher education institution monitors the needs of society and the labour market and considers them in planning its RDC activities", despite this requirement being not further assessed in none of the reports. Finally, the area of 'service to society' evaluates, for example, whether *'a higher education institution contributes to the enhancement of community welfare by sharing its resources (library, museums, sports facilities, etc.) and/or by organising concerts, exhibitions, performances, conferences, fairs and other events.'* In Finland, reports address students' needs, staff satisfaction, society's needs (essentially in the section of the report dedicated to the audit of the 'societal impact and regional development work'), and the labour market requirements. In Portuguese reports, the needs of stakeholders, particularly of students and other internal stakeholders are addressed, almost exclusively through references to satisfaction surveys with regard to several support services.

## Concluding remarks

Globally, our research responds positively to both our main research questions. On the one hand, the research concludes that the ESG related to programme design, approval and monitoring are present in institutional external quality assurance reports. A quantitative analysis to the frequency of ESG's concepts and dimensions confirms that the ESG 'appear' in the reports, though to different extents across countries.

On the other hand, quality assurance agencies interpret and translate the main concepts and dimensions from the ESG differently, when performing institutional audits of HEIs. The differences are reflected in the 'form' of the reports, in particular, in the length, the focus and the guidelines for the reports. Indeed, quality assurance agencies have different foci and formulate different guidelines for institutional external quality assurance. The differences are also reflected in the 'content' of the reports and in the way audit panels apply the national guidelines and approach ESG's main concepts and dimensions in the reports. Either with regard to the 'form' or with regard to the 'content' of the reports, the approach to the ESG can range from *'direct' and 'linear' translation* to *'alternative' and 'deviating' interpretations*.

Under an umbrella of 'standardisation' and 'homogenisation' it is then interesting to notice how the quality assurance agencies translate and interpret the ESG, developing their own national guidelines, and how the audit panels apply such guidelines in the reports.

In this process, the guidelines defined by quality assurance agencies seems to be playing the major role, as the translation of national regulations to the level of the specific institution does not present significant variety (within the countries). Contrary to our expectations, one could not find significant differences, particular patterns or trends between types of institutions (private vs public, colleges vs universities, polytechnics or universities of applied sciences vs universities, foundations vs non foundations). Apparently all the audit panels follow the same guidelines and report in a similar way, which suggests that the national guidelines for institutional external quality assurance determines or at least strongly guide how the ESG are translated in the reports. It is interesting to notice the focused translation of the ESG into specific subjects that seem to be important in the national higher education policy, such as, internationalisation, specifically dealt with in Estonia and Portugal.

It is interesting to notice the different degrees of interpretation (ranging from closer to further interpretations) of the ESG and the different approaches to particular items coming from QA developments after the ESG 2015, such as 'impact'. The closest use of the ESG can be found in

Croatia and Estonia, while in Portugal there are some items strongly linked to the national higher education policy (such as national and international collaboration policies). The more open interpretation is clearly visible in Finland. This leads to the conclusion that the translation of the ESG in the national quality assurance's framework for institutional review is quite nationally 'coloured'.

An argument for these differences may be that some European higher education systems are very well advanced in terms of quality assurance and, consequently, the balance in terms of checking whether requirements are fulfilled is moving more towards whether there is a quality assurance system in place, which is the case in Finland. One interpretation might be that Finland is trusting its institutions with their quality assurance systems and that the "only thing" that institutions have to explain is how they organise such systems. In a country like Estonia or Croatia, there may be more concerns about the quality and the quality assurance systems of their institutions (possibly due to the rise of private universities and colleges). Consequently, there are more concerns about their quality and HEIs have to be accountable with regard to what they are doing with their quality assurance systems. Portugal seems to be in the first stage of a quality assurance 'process' and also in a first stage of 'trusting' their HEIs with regard to their quality assurance. That might explain why the reports are so focused on procedural aspects and on checking whether HEIs are integrating quality assurance processes in their main activities, their management and their governance. Though further explanations for the differences could be explored, it looks like the more years an European quality assurance agency exists in a country, the more "open" the ESG are dealt with.

In addition, a global comparative analysis of the reports before and after the publication of the revised version of the ESG, indicates that there are no major differences in the way both approach the ESG. As all the reports under analysis (either before or after 2015) are based on the same 'models', the absence of substantial differences is not surprising. Thus, the reports after 2015 within the same country do not tend to approach the dimensions underlined by the ESG 2015 more; though it is simultaneously interesting to observe that the 'emerging dimensions' in the revised ESG were already approached by the reports produced before the revision. This might suggest that the quality assurance agencies 'anticipated' these dimensions and their importance for the external audits of higher education institutions; but also that there is a sort of combination of bottom-up and top-down logics, if we consider the different 'levels' into play: the macro-European and the meso-national levels, not to mention the micro-institutional level. This means that not only the European level and particularly the ESG, 'inform' and 'influence' the national level and the quality assurance agencies, but that the opposite may

simultaneously be true. We believe that an analysis of future institutional external quality assurance based on the redesigned models will tell us whether these models and the subsequent reports reflect the changes and revisions in new ESG.

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