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2nd DEQAR PILOT STUDY ¹

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Contents

Introduction.....	2
Theoretical and analytical framework	3
Methodology	5
Results	9
The translation of the ESG by the accreditation agency:	9
How are the ESG translated into the guidelines for programme accreditation - are they copied, edited or changed?	9
The translation of ESGs by accreditation panels.....	11
How do panels offer evidence for ESG 1.3 in the reports?.....	11
How do panels offer evidence for ESG 1.4 in the reports?.....	15
Concluding Remarks.....	18
Research Limitations and Further Research.....	19
References	21

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Introduction

In the context of introducing and sophisticating quality assurance models and systems, the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) play an important role. In the first pilot we looked at how ESG were “translated” by national quality assurance agencies and how panels assessing quality (or quality assurance) at the institutional level – in external quality assurance reports – made use of the ESG.

In our first pilot we were able to find some similarities and differences between approaches towards institutional external quality assurance. In this second pilot, we aim to delve deeper into how arguments by accreditation panels are crafted. Therefore, we address the following research questions:

- a. How are ESG translated by quality assurance agencies?
- b. How do accreditation panels translate the ESG in programme accreditation reports?
- c. How do accreditation panels offer support/evidence for their findings with respect to (1) encouraging students to take an active role in creating the learning process (ESG 1.3) and (2) consistently applying pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle” (ESG 1.4)?
- d. Are there differences – with respect to the findings under b and c – between countries and types of institutions?

Theoretical and analytical framework

In the context of the Bologna Process, a fair amount of attention has been paid to the development of the quality assurance in higher education. One of the primary objectives of the ESG is to provide a common framework for quality assurance across Europe. The appearance of these standards and guidelines in 2005 must be understood in the context of the action lines of the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). One of the action lines pertained to ‘the Promotion of European co-operation in quality assurance with a view to developing comparable criteria and methodologies’ (Bologna Declaration, 1999: 2). Whereas this may have sounded relatively vague at that time, considerable effort in the ensuing years has led to further specification and operationalization. At the 2003 Bologna meeting in Berlin, the ministers asked the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) to develop ‘an agreed set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance’ and to ‘explore ways of ensuring an adequate peer review system for quality assurance and/or accreditation agencies or bodies’ (Berlin communique, 2003). A collective effort of four consultative members of the Bologna Process (European Students’ Union, ENQA, European University Association and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) led to a proposal, accepted by the responsible Ministers at the 2005 Bologna meeting in Bergen.

The ESG for internal and external quality assurance (part 1 and 2 of ESG, respectively) and for external quality agencies (part 3 of ESG) provide a source of assistance and guidance to both higher education institutions 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, 2009, Prikulis et al., 2011).

Whereas the general national policy developments regarding the ESG is well-documented (e.g. Commission/EACEA/Eurydice, 2018), there is much less known about the actual application of ESG in practice, for instance in external quality assurance reports. This pilot study therefore addresses – zooming in on two particular ESG elements pertaining external quality assurance at the programme level – one main research question: how are the ESG translated in programme accreditation reports?

The ESG cover a broad spectrum of quality issues, we therefore focus on the ESG related to student-centred learning and the phases of the student ‘life cycle’. More specifically, we are interested in exploring how these ESG are interpreted, used and applied by programme accreditation panels.

We believe it is useful to see the actual application of ESG in domestic context from a translation perspective (Czarniawski and Sevón, 1996a, Czarniawski and Sevón, 2005). The translation perspective is rooted in Scandinavian institutional theory and posits that the concept of translation offers insight in the how and why of dissemination of policies and practices. Key point is that policies, or more generally ideas, are not static entities or fixed-form objects (Røvik, 2016), but are – during their travels from one country to another or from one policy domain to another – subject to interpretation, editing, adaptation and translation (see e.g. Westerheijden and Kohoutek, 2014 for applications in higher education, Stensaker, 2007). Erlingsdottir et al. (2005, p. 48) use the terms unpacking (an idea is translated to fit a new context) and reembedding (an idea is translated locally into a new practice) to further delineate stages in the travel of an idea. As Johnson and Hagström (2005) put it succinctly, the travel (of a policy) is ‘... an imitation process where meaning is constructed by temporally and spatially disembedding policy ideas from their previous context and using them as a model for altered political structures in a new context’. Imitation is hence not slavishly mimicking, but a performative process (Sevón, 1996).

Organisations and individuals have the imaginative and adaptive capacity to translate ideas according to their understanding, traditions, needs and means (Czarniawski and Sevón, 1996b, Czarniawska, 2008, Czarniawska and Joerges, 1995, Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005). Their active engagement with policies may range from reproduction (copying) to modifying (addition and omission) to radical change (alteration) (Røvik, 2016). Sahlin-Anderson (1996) captures these engagements under the central notion of ‘editing’, suggesting that features of the idea may be omitted, the underlying logic may be altered and/or reformulated.

Applying these notions to the translation of ESG, we see the translation process in two stages. First of all, quality assurance agencies translate the ESG in their own domestic context, copying or editing them. Second, accreditation panels use ESG (or elements thereof) in their actual review and assessment practices. These panels are guided by the framework of the quality assurance agency in which the ESG figure, either explicitly or more implicitly.

Contrary to the first pilot study where we looked both into how national quality assurance agencies translated the ESG in their domestic context and how panels use the ESG in their institutional external quality assurance reports; in this second pilot we look mainly at the second stage of the translation process and at how review panels make use of the ESG in their reports. Still, in order to better understand this ‘second stage’ of the translation process, we will look at how the quality assurance agency translates the ESG in its ‘standards and guidelines’.

Methodology

To change the focus somewhat from the first to the second pilot, we analyse at reports at the programme level in the light of ESG 1.3 and 1.4 (ESG, 2015) (See Table 1).

We explore both standards and the more detailed guidelines, though we are aware that guidelines are not 'mandatory'. Nevertheless, and as we aim to develop an in-depth and comprehensive analysis we believe that is also important to look into the guidelines, as they "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. ESG 1.3 and ESG 1.4

ESG 1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment

Standard:

Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.

Guidelines:

Student-centred learning and teaching plays an important role in stimulating students' motivation, self-reflection and engagement in the learning process.

This means careful consideration of the design and delivery of study programmes and the assessment of outcomes.

The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching:

- respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths;
- considers and uses different modes of delivery, where appropriate;
- flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods;
- regularly evaluates and adjusts the modes of delivery and pedagogical methods;
- encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher;
- promotes mutual respect within the learner-teacher relationship;
- has appropriate procedures for dealing with students' complaints.

Considering the importance of assessment for the students' progression and their future careers, quality assurance processes for assessment take into account the following:

- Assessors are familiar with existing testing and examination methods and receive support in developing their own skills in this field;
- The criteria for and method of assessment as well as criteria for marking are published in advance;
- The 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;
- Where possible, assessment is carried out by more than one examiner;
- The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances;
- Assessment is consistent, fairly applied to all students and carried out in accordance with the stated procedures;

A formal procedure for student appeals is in place.

Placements include traineeships, internships and other periods of the programme that are not spent in the institution but that allow the student to gain experience in an area related to their studies.

ESG 1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Standard

Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student "life cycle", e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.

Guidelines

Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems.

It is vital to have fit-for-purpose admission, recognition and completion procedures, particularly when students are mobile within and across higher education systems.

It is important that access policies, admission processes and criteria are implemented consistently and in a transparent manner.

Induction to the institution and the programme is provided.

Institutions need to put in place both processes and tools to collect, monitor and act on information on student progression.

Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility.

Appropriate recognition procedures rely on:

- institutional practice for recognition being in line with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention;
- cooperation with other institutions, quality assurance agencies and the national ENIC-NARIC centre with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country.

Graduation represents the culmination of the students' period of study.

Students need to receive documentation explaining the qualification gained, including achieved learning outcomes and the context, level, content and status of the studies that were pursued and successfully completed.

Bearing in mind that there may be considerable differences in quality assurance approaches by disciplines, it makes sense to focus on one single discipline. We will look at one scientific area: engineering, at the level of the bachelor degree². The unit of analysis will therefore be the set of study programme accreditation reports of public and private higher education institutions. We aimed at a diverse sample with countries inside and outside the EHEA but we had two major limitations: a) availability of a sufficient number of reports that follow the ESG 2015; b) availability of reports in English. We look at diversity at the level of countries and institutions and across elements of ESGs. However, all the reports are assessed by one single agency: *Akkreditierungsagentur für Studiengänge der Ingenieurwissenschaften, der Informatik, der Naturwissenschaften und der Mathematik* (ASIIN). The presence of one single agency in the research was not intentional (in fact is perceived as a major limitation) and resulted from the limitations of the database at the time that the research started.

² The choice of this particular study area was mainly due to 'data availability'. We also 'tried' other areas, as we aimed at homogeneity with regard to the area of the bachelor programme, but we did not have the necessary data to carry on the research. Moreover, as we chose only reports written in English, the research was (even more) limited.

We carry out a content analysis of the programme accreditation reports from 5 countries available in the DEQAR database³. We analyse reports from Cyprus, Indonesia, Kazakhstan, Slovenia and Spain, which are diverse countries with regard to their higher education systems⁴. In each country, we choose three reports. To further diversify the sample, in each country, we select (as much as possible) different institutions with respect to legal foundation (private versus public), size and location (See Table 2).

Table 2. Sample

Countries	Sample - Type of HEI	Designation
Cyprus	2 Private Universities	Cyp_FoundUni_CivilEng
	1 State Foundation University	Cyp_PriUni_EleEng
		Cyp_PrivUni_SofEng
Kazakhstan	2 Public Universities	Kaz_PubUni1_EleEng
		Kaz_PubUni2_MecEng
		Kaz_PubUni2_EleEng
Slovenia	1 Public University	Slo_PubUni_EleEng
		Slo_PubUni_ApEleEng
		Slo_PubUni_CivEng
Spain	1 Public University	Spa_PubUni_IndEng
	1 Public 'Polytechnic University'	Spa_PubUni_MecEng
		Spa_PubPol_InfEng
Indonesia	1 Public University	Ind_PubUni_GeoEng
		Ind_PubUni_MatEng
		Ind_PubUni_MecEng

In general, the reports are similar with regard to structure, length and general ideas behind the panel composition. The reports have a similar structure, as they assess all the 'standards and guidelines' defined by ASIIN (as one can explore in Table 3). The length of the reports is also similar, except when the reports assess more than one programme which happens in several reports in all the countries. In these cases, the reports are naturally longer.

With regard to the composition of the panels follow ASIIN's procedure. The peer panels were composed of members nominated by ASIIN, by a representative of the ASIIN headquarter, by a student peer and by national academics or experts. The panel members were academics and/or

³ We started by defining the criteria for the selection of countries, which was 'programme level', 'English reports', 'bachelor degree', 'Engineering related areas', 'diversity of countries and HE systems' and 'countries inside and outside the EHEA'. 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 the best possible sample of reports, also taking into account that we established that our sample would have the same number of reports in each of the countries. Taking into account the above mentioned 'inclusion criteria', we selected 5 countries and 3 reports per country.

⁴ Some programmes are assessed in the same report. In other words, in our analysis there are 'clustered reports' which assess more than one programme (some of them even assess bachelor and master programmes, though the latter are not under analysis in this study). This is especially worth mentioning as it might influence and even 'justify' some lack of differences within the results.

experts (outside academia). Nonetheless, Spain is peculiar with regard to the composition of the panels. The panels were composed not only of members nominated by ASIIN but also of members nominated by AQU Catalunya⁵ (mostly experts from Spanish higher education institutions), a local student, a representative of the ASIIN headquarter and a representative of AQU Catalunya headquarter.

Similarly to Pilot 1, in the first stage, we analyse some of dimensions of ESG 1.3 and 1.4 and we have made a 'text search' in all the reports of the five countries under analysis (See Table 2).

As we did in Pilot 1, 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 'interpretations' and 'translations' of the ESG. The text search, which is an exhausting search for different words and expressions covering the two standards and the different guidelines, was performed using NVivo content analysis software.

Thus, we choose to analyse the following words and expressions related to:

- a) student-centred learning, teaching and assessment (ESG 1.3): student's assessment, flexibility / adaptability (of curricula, pedagogical methods, students' needs, etc.), placements (traineeships, internships), students' complaints, students' motivation, student-teacher relationship, students' autonomy, student-centred learning and students' appeals;
- b) the different phases of the student 'life-cycle' (ESG 1.4): admission, progression, support/guidance to students (and their progression), recognition, Lisbon Recognition Convention, national quality assurance (related to recognition), student 'life cycle', ENIC-NARIC, non-formal and informal learning.

Naturally, the numbers support our analysis but have to be read carefully as the concepts and expressions have to be understood within the context of the report.

In the second phase, we develop a deeper analysis and explore how the dimensions are addressed in the reports. Particularly, we analyse how the panels present evidence for their findings related to the dimensions of both standards and guidelines of ESG 1.3 and 1.4.

We choose to analyse the reports having in mind a '*scale of evidence*', in which i) *explicit or total evidence* means that it is clear that a certain dimension, or more broadly, a certain standard or guideline is addressed; ii) *partial or implicit evidence* means that the dimension, standard or guideline is addressed but not in an explicit way, or because it is phrased differently, or because

⁵ Àgència per a la Qualitat del Sistema Universitari de Catalunya – Catalunya Quality Assurance Agency.

there is explicit evidence for one specific concept of the dimension or the standard or guideline, but not for all elements of the dimension; and finally iii) *no evidence* at all.

Results

The translation of the ESG by the accreditation agency:

How are the ESG translated into the guidelines for programme accreditation - are they copied, edited or changed?

Though our study is mainly focused on the translation of the ESG by the panels, it is also important to understand how the agency responsible for the assessment and accreditation processes translate the ESG in its specific guidelines, as it might influence how panels copy, edit and present evidence for the ESG in the reports.

According to ASIIN, its quality seal complies with the European Qualifications Framework and the ESG (ASIIN, 2015). ASIIN develops a set of requirements and highlights to which ESG they correspond, as we can see in the table below, where we only underline (in bold) the requirements, which according to ASIIN, correspond to ESG 1.3 and 1.4⁶.

Table 3. ASIIN requirements for programme accreditation

ASIIN Requirements	Corresponding ESG
1. The degree programme: concept, content & implementation	
1.1 Objectives and learning outcomes of a degree programme (intended qualifications profile)	ESG 1.3
1.2 Name of the degree programme	
1.3 Curriculum <i>The curriculum allows the students to achieve the intended learning outcomes in order to obtain the degree. The overall objectives and intended learning outcomes for the degree programme are systematically substantiated and updated in its individual modules. It is clear which knowledge, skills and competences students will acquire in each module.</i>	ESG 1.3
1.4 Admission requirements <i>In terms of admission, the requirements and procedures are binding, transparent and the same for all applicants. The admission requirements are structured in a way that supports the students in achieving the learning outcomes. There are clear rules as to how individual admission requirements that have not been fulfilled can be compensated. A lack of previous knowledge must, however, never be compensated at the expense of degree quality.</i>	ESG 1.4
2. The degree programme: structures, methods and implementation	
2.1 Structure and modules <i>All degree programmes must be divided into modules. Each module is a sum of teaching and learning whose contents are concerted. With its choice of modules, the structure ensures that the learning outcomes can be reached and allows students to define an individual focus and course of study (student mobility, work experience etc.). The curriculum is structured in a way to allow students to complete the degree without exceeding the regular course duration. The modules have been adapted to the requirements of the degree programme. They ensure that each module objectives helps to reach both the qualification level and the overall intended learning outcomes. All working practice intervals or internships are well-integrated into the</i>	ESG 1.3

⁶ file:///C:/Users/maria/Downloads/0.3_Criteria_for_the_Accrediation_of_Degree_Programmes_2015-12-10.pdf

<i>curriculum, and the higher education institution vouches for their quality in terms of relevance, content and structure. There are rules for recognising achievements and competences acquired outside the higher education institution. They render the transition between higher education institutions easier and ensure that the learning outcomes are reached.</i>	
2.2 Work load and credits <i>The estimated time budgets are realistic enough to enable students to complete the degree without exceeding the regular course duration. Structure-related peaks in the work load have been avoided. A credit point system oriented on the amount of work required from students has been devised. The work load comprises both attendance-based learning and self-study. This includes all compulsory elements of the degree.</i>	ESG 1.4
2.3 Teaching methodology	
2.4 Support and assistance	
3. Exams: System, concept and organisation <i>Exams are devised to individually measure to which extent students have reached the learning outcomes defined. Exams are structured to cover all of the intended learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competences). Exams are module-related and offer students continuous feedback on their progress in developing competences. The degree programme comprises a thesis/dissertation or final project which ensures that students work on a set task independently and at the level aimed for. For each module, a form of assessment (including suitable alternatives, if any) has been defined. There are mechanisms in place which ensure that all students learn the details of what is required in order to pass the module (pre-examination elements, assignments etc.) no later than at the start of the module. Rules have been defined for re-sits, disability compensation measures, illness and other mitigating circumstances etc.</i>	ESG 1.3 ESG 1.4
4. Resources	
4.1 Staff	
4.2 Staff development	
4.3 Funds and equipment	
5. Transparency and documentation	
5.1 Module descriptions	
5.2 Diploma and Diploma Supplement <i>Shortly after graduation, a diploma or degree certificate is issued together with a Diploma Supplement printed in English. These documents provide information on the student's qualifications profile and individual performance as well as the classification of the degree programme with regard to its applicable education system. The individual modules and the grading procedure on which the final mark is based are explained in a way which is clear for third parties. In addition to the final mark, statistical data as set forth in the ECTS User's Guide is included to allow readers to categorise the individual result/degree.</i>	ESG 1.4
5.3 Relevant rules <i>The rights and duties of both the higher education institution and students are clearly defined and binding (guidelines, statutes etc.). All relevant course-related information is available in the language of the degree programme and accessible for anyone involved.</i>	ESG 1.4
6. Quality management: quality assessment and development	

Despite having different foci, different dimensions, different terminologies and not having linear translations of the ESG, ASIIN 'standards and guidelines' tend to follow the ESG. In other words, ASIIN translates the ESG in its own context, edits them, though not radically changes them.

It is also interesting to reiterate the fact of homogeneity within panels (explored above, in the methodological section). Indeed, both ASIIN's 'standards and guidelines' and the composition of the panel might even influence how panels translate the ESG and present evidence for the ESG in the reports, as we will see in the following section.

The translation of ESGs by accreditation panels

How do panels offer evidence for ESG 1.3 in the reports?

When analysing the standards and guidelines related to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment (ESG 1.3) and particularly 'assessment', we observe that (as expected) several references appear in all the reports. Specifically, there are references to the following specific assessment processes highlighted in the guidelines:

- assessment linked to the achievement of the intended learning outcomes;
- familiarity with assessment methods;
- feedback to students of their progress;
- publication of assessment criteria and methods;
- consistency and adequacy of assessment.

Though not directly mentioning the extent to which the teaching and learning process attends to the diversity of students and their needs, the reports sometimes address flexibility and/or adaptability of the curricula (in all the countries, except for Indonesia) with regard to: job market, technological demands, intended learning outcomes and/or individual learning paths.

The dimension of students' support and guidance is also addressed in all the countries, in almost all the reports, though not to a large extent.

Placements, including traineeships, internships and all the periods of the programme that are not spent in the institution are moderately addressed in the reports.

However, some important dimensions of the ESG 1.3 guidelines are scarcely addressed in the reports, namely, specific references to:

- Feedback to students;
- Students' motivation;
- Students' complaints;
- Students' needs;
- Student-teacher relationship.

Furthermore, one can observe that some dimensions and particularly expressions are absent: students' appeals, students' autonomy, students' engagement. Engagement and involvement are mostly associated with other internal stakeholders (such as staff members) and external stakeholders (such as business partners).

It is also interesting to see that one of the most central expressions characterising the most recent version of the ESG – 'student-centred learning' is absent in the reports. We are aware that student-centred learning is not necessarily used by all agencies and countries (either

because it is believed not be the best expression to define the centrality of the student in the learning process, or because it is not the most adequate expression if we think about translations from one language to another). Consequently, the fact that the expression does not appear in any of the reports, does not necessarily mean that the reports do not address it. However, when looking more deeply into the reports and if we look into how student-centred learning is described in the ESG and all the other sub-dimensions which integrate that broader concept, we can conclude that, in fact, it is not extensively addressed by panels.

This seems to show that, on the one hand, the ESG are not linearly translated, they are subject to editing and interpretation, not only with regard to phrasing and terminology (as we already observed in Pilot 1 when analysing institutional accreditation); but also to the different attention given by the panels to different dimensions (See Tables 4 and 5).

Table 4. Word frequency – Concepts related to ESG 1.3

Concepts	Assessment ⁷	Flexibility Adaptability	Placements	Students' complaints	Students' feedback	Student's motivation	Student- teacher relationship	Students' autonomy	Student centred learning	Students' engagement	Students' appeals
HEIs											
Cyp_FoundUni_CivEng	60	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Cyp_PrivUni_EleEng	60	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Cyp_PrivUni_SofEng	60	3	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Kaz_PubUni1_EleEng	66	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Kaz_PubUni1_MecEng	71	1	1	1	0	2	0	0	0	0	0
Kaz_PubUni2_EleEng	98	4	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slo_PubUni_EleEng	58	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slo_PubUni_ApEleEng	58	1	0	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	0
Slo_PubUni_CivEng	41	4	1	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Spa_PubUni_IndEng	49	2	5	0	8	0	1	0	0	0	0
Spa_PubUni_MecEng	49	2	5	0	8	0	1	0	0	0	0
Spa_PubPol_InfEng	43	0	5	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0
Ind_PubUni_GeoEng	56	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ind_PubUni_MatEng	71	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Ind_PubUni_MecEng	71	0	7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

⁷ It should be noted that, despite expressions related to 'students' assessment' being often present throughout the reports, it is 'over represented' due to the fact that in all the reports the expressions 'peer assessment' and 'self-assessment' report appears very often in the reports and those are, obviously, unrelated to student's assessment. Consequently, we should bear this in mind when reading the table.

Table 5. Examples of types of evidences for ESG 1.3 from the reports

ESG 1.3	Total or Explicit Evidence	Partial or Implicit Evidence
Assessment	<i>The school introduced and consolidated re-evaluation mechanisms and other complementary plans (tutorial plan, revision of the planning and assessment method of some subjects).</i> (Spa_PubPol_InfEng)	
Flexibility / Adaptability	<i>The curricula offer a great variety of electives, leaving sufficient options for the students to set individual and flexible focuses on certain specializations. Furthermore, the curricula are constantly being revised and adapted to the changing demands from future employers.</i> (Cyp_PrivUni_SofEng)	
Students' feedback		<i>Feedback loops with regard to the student's feedback should be closed effectively.</i> (Slo_PubUni_ApEleEng)
Placements	<i>Some of the business representatives confirmed that they offer places for internships to students which requires a steady contact with the university. They also underlined that they try to employ graduates if they performed to their satisfaction.</i> (Kaz_PubUni1_MecEng)	
Students' complaints	<i>The general willingness of professors to respond timely to student's complaints are seen as a contribution to facilitate a rich learning environment.</i> (Slo_PubUni_CivEng)	
Students' motivation		<i>Graduates are capable of self-motivation and self-improvement.</i> Cyp_PriUni_EleEng <i>Generic or transversal competences: To have motivation to be professional and to face new challenges, have a width vision of the possibilities of the career (...). To feel motivated for the quality and the continuous improvement, and behave rigorously in the professional development.</i> Spa_PubPol_InfEng
Student-teacher relationship	<i>Students seem very content with the teacher-student ratio and relationship, depicting an open atmosphere.</i> (Kaz_PubUni2_EleEng)	
Recognition	<i>Regulations for the recognition of competences and achievements acquired at other universities are publicly accessible through the website and are well in place.</i> (Cyp_PrivUni_EleEng) <i>Regarding the recognition of credit points (...) there exist a number of agreements with specific universities and students could arrange learning agreements with the supervisor to make sure credit points are easily recognized.</i> (Ind_PubUni_GeoEng)	

How do panels offer evidence for ESG 1.4 in the reports?

When looking at the different phases of the student-life cycle (ESG 1.4), one can observe that they are differently addressed in the reports. One finds explicit evidence in the majority of the reports for the regulations covering the first phases of the student “life cycle” (admission and progression); the third phase (recognition) and its different sub-dimensions are differently addressed across the countries and it seems to be the one more scarcely addressed by panels; and finally, certification is addressed by the panels though using different wording, as we explain below:

A. Admission: all the reports present explicit evidence for the definition and publication of regulations in the first phase of the student “life cycle”. Nevertheless, the reports present no evidence for the induction to the institution and the programme.

B. Progression: all the reports present explicit evidence for the definition and publication of regulations in the progression phase. Most of the reports explicitly present evidence for monitoring processes on student progression.

C. Recognition: all the reports present explicit evidence for recognition regulations. The cooperation with the national quality assurance agencies with a view to ensuring coherent recognition across the country is also explicitly addressed in all the reports. However, the alignment of the institutional practice for recognition with the principles of the Lisbon Recognition Convention is only addressed in five reports in two countries (Spain and Kazakhstan).

D. Certification: the last stage of the student “life cycle” is addressed in the reports in a section dedicated to ‘diploma and diploma supplement’. Concretely, there are evidences with respect to how each institution provides the certificate explaining the qualification gained.

We conclude that some of the dimensions of the student “life cycle” as defined in the guidelines are more ‘present’ in the reports than others. Again, the ESG are subject to editing and interpretation and the panels present different evidences for the different dimensions (See Tables 6 and 7).

Globally, accreditation panels offer evidences for their findings with respect to encouraging students to take an active role in creating the learning process (ESG 1.3) and consistently applying pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle” (ESG 1.4). However, and as seen above, the panels do not offer equal evidence for all the specific guidelines. We find explicit (and also implicit) evidences for the majority of the dimensions of the standards, but for some dimensions integrating the guidelines one finds few explicit evidences and for others one finds no evidence at all.

Table 6. Word frequency – Concepts related to ESG 1.4

Concepts	Admission	Progression	Support / Guidance to Students' progression	Certification	Recognition	Lisbon Recognition Convention	National QA: recognition	Student Life Cycle	ENIC-NARIC	Non-formal and informal learning
HEIs										
Cyp_FoundUni_CivEng	6	7	26	18	2	0	2	1	0	0
Cyp_PrivUni_EleEng	6	2	13	28	1	0	1	0	0	0
Cyp_PrivUni_SofEng	6	2	13	28	1	0	1	0	0	0
Kaz_PubUni1_EleEng	9	3	16	41	2	0	1	0	0	0
Kaz_PubUni1_MecEng	9	3	16	28	1	1	2	2	0	0
Kaz_PubUni2_EleEng	23	4	17	23	9	2	1	0	0	0
Slo_PubUni_EleEng	13	1	8	18	1	0	3	1	0	0
Slo_PubUni_ApEleEng	13	1	16	29	1	0	3	1	0	0
Slo_PubUni_CivEng	7	3	8	18	6	0	2	0	0	0
Spa_PubUni_IndEng	15	15	20	24	7	5	3	1	0	0
Spa_PubUni_MecEng	15	15	22	18	7	5	3	3	0	0
Spa_PubPol_InfEng	18	9	22	18	1	1	2	3	0	0
Ind_PubUni_GeoEng	8	2	26	11	2	0	2	0	0	0
Ind_PubUni_MatEng	9	2	39	17	2	0	6	0	0	0
Ind_PubUni_MecEng	9	2	39	17	2	0	6	0	0	0

Table 7. Examples of types of evidences for ESG 1.4 from the reports

ESG 1.4	Total or Explicit Evidence	Partial or Implicit Evidence
Students' admissions requirements	<p><i>The auditors confirmed that the requirements and procedures for admission are transparent and clear.</i> (Ind_PubUni_GeoEng)</p> <p><i>The peers confirmed that the requirements and admission procedures are accessible to all students on the websites.</i> (Kaz_PubUni1_EleEng)</p>	
Progression	<p><i>The peers were of the opinion that the structure of the curricula and modules were well organized and support an effective study progress.</i> (Cyp_PriUni_SofEng)</p> <p><i>The panel appreciated that the most important documents regarding the student life cycle, more specifically progression and admission rules, had been newly translated and provided in three languages on the website.</i> (Spa_PubUni_IndEng)</p>	
Support /guidance to students' to progress	<p><i>The peers confirmed that the advice and guidance (both technical and general) on offer assist the students in achieving the learning outcomes and in completing the courses within the scheduled time.</i> (Slo_PubUni_ApEleEng)</p> <p><i>The auditors concluded that there were adequate resources available to provide individual assistance, advice and support for all students. The peers underlined that the allocated advice and guidance, namely the academic advisor assisted the students in achieving the learning outcomes and in completing the course within the scheduled time.</i> (Cyp_FoundUni_CivilEng)</p>	<p><i>The peers gained the impression, that in general there is an adequate provision of support and assistance for all study programmes.</i> (Slo_PubUni_ApEleEng)</p> <p><i>The teaching methods and instruments used supported the students in achieving the learning outcomes.</i> (Cyp_FoundUni_CivilEng)</p>
Certification	<p><i>A sample Diploma Supplement was provided for each programme under review. The panel acknowledged that the samples complied with the model used in Spain and contained – in three languages – all but one element foreseen by the European standards about the programme, the awarding institution and the individual student's performance as well as the grading system.</i> (Spa_PubUni_IndEng)</p> <p><i>The peers comprehended that after graduation a degree certificate, a transcript of re-cords and a Diploma Supplement are issued.</i> (Ind_PubUni-GeoEng)</p>	
Recognition	<p><i>Regulations for the recognition of competences and achievements acquired at other universities are publicly accessible through the website and are well in place.</i> (Cyp_PrivUni_EleEng)</p> <p><i>Regarding the recognition of credit points (...) there exist a number of agreements with specific universities and students could arrange learning agreements with the supervisor to make sure credit points are easily recognized.</i> (Ind_PubUni_GeoEng)</p>	

Concluding Remarks

In the present study we aimed to understand how the accreditation agency (in their specific standards and guidelines) translated the ESG and how accreditation panels of that agency translated and presented evidence for their findings related to student-centred learning, teaching and assessment (ESG 1.3) and to the different stages of the student 'life cycle' (ESG 1.4) in programme accreditation reports.

We conclude that globally the ESG 1.3 and 1.4 are 'present'. First, they are present in the standards and guidelines defined by the agency for programme accreditation. Second, they are present in the reports. However, they are subject to interpretation, first by the agency, which edits the ESG, though not radically changing them; second, by the panels, who also edit the ESG and present different evidences for the different dimensions inside the ESG.

In order to understand the translation of the ESG by the panels we looked at particular dimensions of both standards and guidelines, first 'quantitatively' (by performing a text search) and then we delved deeply into how the panels address the ESG and how they present evidence for their presence within the reports.

We observe that, though the panels globally address both ESG 1.3 and 1.4, the panels present different evidences for the different dimensions of both ESG. When we look into ESG 1.3, the panels offer more explicit evidences for findings related to student's assessment (mostly assessment procedures) and also (though to a lesser extent, and sometimes less explicitly) to the adaptability of teaching and learning (according to students' paths, labour market needs, etc); and more implicit or even no evidence for findings related to students' motivation, complaints, engagement, student-teacher relationship.

The same goes for ESG 1.4: the panels tend to offer more evidences for findings related to the admission (mostly admission procedures) and progression (namely procedural aspects and ways to support students to progress in their studies), and certification, than related to informal learning and recognition (particularly important European references with regard to recognition).

It seems that the majority of the reports are especially concerned with 'procedural', 'processual' and more 'general' aspects of student learning, teaching and assessment and of the student life cycle. There is much less attention to less tangible dimensions as 'student-teacher relationship' or 'student' engagement' or 'informal learning'.

Our study also aimed to understand whether there were differences between institutions and/or countries. We conclude that there are no major differences between countries and/or institutions. Similarly to what we found on domestic institutional accreditation processes, the agency guidelines seems to largely determine how panels address the assessment of study programmes.

Indeed, the lack of diversity between countries and institutions might be due to the lack of diversity in the accreditation process, with regard to the accreditation agency (one agency assessing all study programmes), the assessment and accreditation framework (one framework guiding all study programmes' accreditation processes), and the panel composition (similar panel composition in all study programmes' accreditation processes: mostly German experts and few representatives of national academics, experts and students).

Despite the lack of differences, when looking into particular dimensions for which panels tend not to present evidence, Spanish higher education institutions tend to stand out (as almost) the only ones where evidences are presented. It is for example the case of referencing the 'Lisbon Recognition Convention' or 'student life cycle'. Perhaps it is just a coincidence, but we can argue that this might be due to the fact that the accreditation panels assessing Spanish programme degrees integrate more national peers and members of the national quality assurance agency. Again, if this is true, it shows that the 'conditions' and 'characteristics' framing the accreditation process influence how panels develop the reports, address the ESG and offer evidence for it. The presence of other domestic quality assurance agencies in the sample would certainly help to understand whether our assumption is accurate.

It is also worth observing how national characteristics and elements also seem to play a role, not exactly in the way panels translate the ESG but the way they raise specific arguments due to national features. In some countries (namely Kazakhstan and Spain) the panels seem to emphasise the influence of the Government, namely of certain national rules and regulations, in particular areas of student curricula and student life cycle. Panels critically reflect on how curricular adaptations need the approval of the ministry in Kazakhstan and how the selection of the applicants for the Bachelor's programmes is made by the Ministry of Education and Science (in Kazakhstan) and by the Catalan Government (in Spain).

Research Limitations and Further Research

The main limitations of our research are methodological limitations which necessarily drive to limitations in the results and conclusions that come out from the research. The limitations of the

database (with regard to the reports available following our research criteria) in the time that we started the research influenced our final sample and, particularly, the focus on one single quality assurance agency. Indeed, our results and conclusion reflect the translation of the ESG by one QA agency performing cross-border accreditation at programme level in one study field. Naturally, it would be more interesting to have other agencies in the sample, mainly domestic agencies, in order to explore potential differences.

Indeed, we need to emphasise that the results and conclusions of our research (a qualitative study based on five country case studies, on one scientific area and one quality assurance agency) is not representative of other contexts (other agencies, other countries, other programmes).

In further research, and since the database is now much broader and richer, other domestic and cross-border agencies should be included, as well as other study programmes, in order to understand whether there are differences between domestic contexts and study areas.

It would also be interesting to change the focus of the analysis to the higher education institutions. This pilot study (similarly to the previous one) focused on the quality assurance agencies and the panels, and did not explore whether the institutions were actually applying the ESG. It would be pertinent to look into the likely institutional differences in that regard.

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