Quality Assurance Fit for the Future

Analysis of Ministry Survey Responses

Paper by EQAR[1], September 2023

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This paper is developed by the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education ((EQAR) and published in the context of the QA-FIT project. It is designed to provide information on the state of play of quality assurance and to feed into discussions regarding the future development of the EHEA quality assurance framework, however it does not represent a formal policy position by the authors or any partner of the project consortium.

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Introduction

Since its inception in 1999, the Bologna Process has been focused on advancing the provision of high-quality higher education. The 2005 Bergen summit introduced the European register of quality assurance agencies and adopted the first version of the ESG. In 2008 (following the London summit) EQAR was founded (based on the proposed operational model of the E4) as an independent Register for managing quality assurance agencies working in line with the ESG. Taking into account the progress that has been made in quality assurance as well as in other Bologna action lines (such as qualifications frameworks, recognition, the use of learning outcomes etc.) a revised version of the ESG was adopted by ministers in 2015.

The ESG's universal applicability- acting as a unifying force that bridges diverse educational contexts – in the past 18 years has been widely acknowledged in the past 18 years. As the academic landscape experiences transformative shifts due to emerging trends like micro-credentials, sustainability imperatives, evolving academic values, and digitalization, novel challenges arise that demand fresh perspectives on quality assurance within the European higher education landscape.

The aim of the Erasmus+ co funded Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA FIT) project is to comprehensively assess the state of quality assurance within the EHEA. The project, led by ENQA, in partnership with EQAR, ESU, EUA, EURASHE, including as well a number of national organisations /authorities as partners i.e. IUA, FINEEC, ANOSR and MESG[2] (associate partner) set out to critically evaluate whether the ESG are ready for the future and to ascertain whether an expansion of their scope is warranted. Furthermore, the project endeavoured to solicit diverse viewpoints concerning the future trajectory of quality assurance within the EHEA.

In the first phase of the project, EQAR together with the E4 and several other QA-FIT project partners prepared a set of surveys to ministries, higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and students. These surveys are part of a comprehensive mapping exercise to collect concrete evidence on the scope and implementation of internal and external quality assurance policies and practices, and to address emerging issues beyond the current scope of the ESG.

In the subsequent phase of the QA FIT project a number of webinars, focused group discussions and cross-cutting analysis will deepen the discourse surrounding potential revisions to the ESG. The final publications expected in June 2024 will consolidate the collective wisdom gathered from diverse stakeholders, shedding light on the ramifications of the project's outcomes for the future trajectory of quality assurance policy within the EHEA —most notably, its transformative influence on the future iterations of the ESG.

2 Please see here further information about the project: https://www.eqar.eu/about/projects/qa-fit/

Characteristics of the survey respondents (Q5, Q6, Q7, Q24)[3]

The QA FIT survey for ministries was addressed to all 47 governmental members of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). Responses were collected between 7 November 2022 and 24 January 2023. A total of 36 valid responses were received during this time, which represents 78% of the total possible answers (see Figure 1).

91% of the survey respondents (33/36) are EQAR governmental members. Two of the remaining countries were in the process of applying to (and have since joined) EQAR as governmental members (Sweden & Iceland). One country answered they have budgetary concerns regarding their agency's membership. EQAR members only include stakeholders and governmental organizations, agencies may not be members, but only registered in EQAR. This might shows a possible misunderstandings on the difference between agency registration and governmental membership in EQAR.

When looking at the respondents' personal level of experience in the field of quality assurance, most have between 4 and 20 years of experience (85% of respondents) and almost half of them have between 10 to 20 years of experience (47% of respondents).

In terms of ESG familiarity, respondents are either 'very familiar with the ESG and they use it routinely in their work' (41%) or they 'have read the ESG, but rarely consult it in their work' (55%). One single respondent had never used the document for work purposes and only had some idea of the content of the ESG.

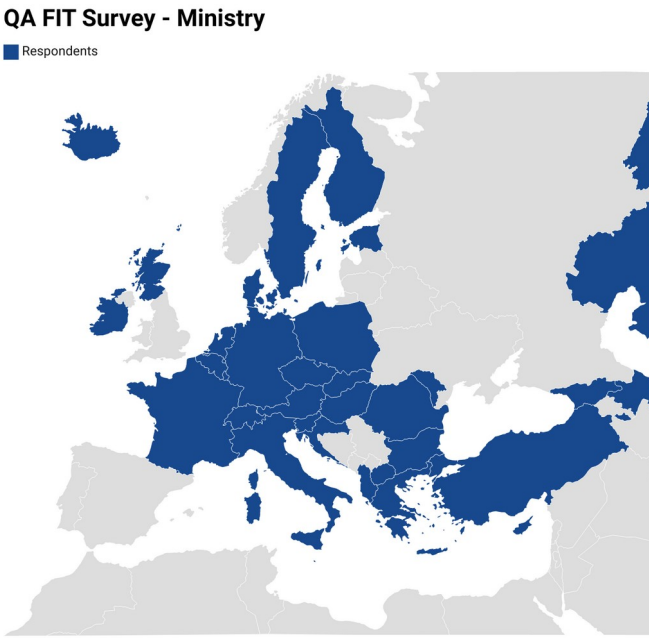


Figure 1. Map of survey respondents

National framework for quality assurance

1.1 Defining the purpose of higher education (Q10)

In ranking the purposes of higher education according to the importance in their national context, the majority (58%) of respondents chose '*preparing students for their future careers e.g., contributing to their employability'* followed by '*creating a broad advanced knowledge base'* (ranked as first option by 22% of respondents, and second by 31% of respondents)

3 To view each question and answers (i.e., Q1, Q2 etc), see Annex: QA FIT Survey for Ministries

Supporting student's personal development and *preparing students for active citizenship* came in third and fourth in terms of priority (see Figure 2).

The preference for the '*preparation of students for their future careers (employability)*' comes in contrast with the least ranked preference of '*student's personal development and active citizenship*'. This approach might indicate that governmental policies will more likely cater to the former than the latter option.

A number of representatives of the ministries further commented that each of the listed aims is an important driver to invest in higher education and that they can be mutually supportive.

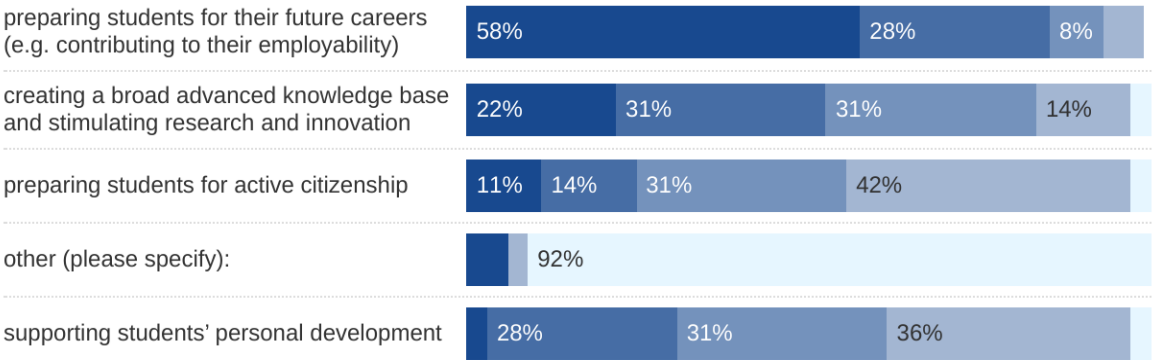


Figure 2. Ranking the purpose of higher education (1 highest priority -dark blue, 5 lowest priority light blue, single priority choices)

1.2 Defining the quality of higher education (Q11)

The quality of higher education is defined by ministries in their national higher education system within strategic documents, policies etc., according to 23 out of 36 (64%) respondents. The definition of quality in higher education in such documents is, however, often described in terms of activities such as monitoring, evaluation, certification etc. and rarely defines quality directly (exception in the answer provided by France, see below). The definition is generally operationalised in terms of regulations set for the higher education institution and the national quality assurance body(-ies).

Some examples (selection of answers where a definition was provided):

***Georgia**: According to the Law of Georgia on Higher Education quality assurance is defined as "internal and external assessment procedures, the implementation of which facilitates the improvement of education quality at higher education institutions".*

***Romania**: The quality of education is the set of features of a study programme and of its provider, by which the beneficiaries' expectations, as well as the quality standards are met*

***Germany**: The quality of higher education is defined by the criteria of the Specimen Decree*

***Croatia**: The goal of quality assurance in the system of higher education, scientific and artistic activity is to continuously ensure and improve the quality of the work of higher education institutions and scientific institutes, teaching, scientific and artistic and professional work of teachers, scientists and associates, professional work of employees of professional services at higher education institutions and scientific institutes and monitoring the quality of study programs and studies at the university, in accordance with European and international quality assurance standards in the field of higher education and scientific activity.*

***France**: Institutions are required to monitor and manage the quality of all their activities and to take all measures for effective internal self-evaluation and its follow-up (art. 9, DÉCRET DU 7 NOVEMBRE 2013 DÉFINISSANT LE PAYSAGE DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR ET L'ORGANISATION ACADÉMIQUE DES ÉTUDES). Furthermore, the characteristics of the quality of HE are given via the QA Agency set of standards which shares: A higher education study programme is assessed "**of quality if it is relevant, shows internal coherence (i.e. pedagogical alignment of its learning outcomes, its sequence of teaching and learning activities and its assessment methods and is equitable and efficient**". In addition, the study programme needs to be guaranteed by adequate QA policies and processes that give voice to internal and external stakeholders and that aim at continuously enhancing the programme".*

1.3 Purpose of the external quality assurance processes (Q13)

The responses from the survey to the ministries show a **strong lean towards the accountability of quality assurance processes** i.e., the principal outcome for QA in their HE system seems to be a decision granting permission for the institution or programme to operate and open new study programmes. The responses further show that a positive outcome of a QA activity provides the right to use the 'university' title and award university-level degrees, or allows the HE institution to access funding or state educational grants. This shows a further emphasis put on the accountability side of quality assurance. The enhancement role for external QA (e.g., formative advice on strengthening and enhancing quality) is nevertheless present in over half of the countries, showing a mix of accountability and enhancement approaches.

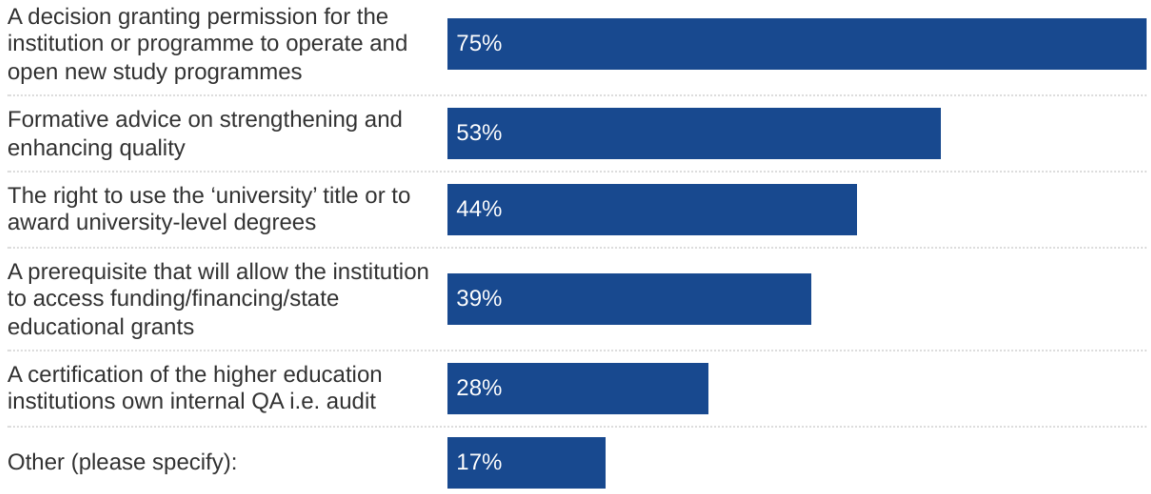


Figure 3. Outcome(s) of an external QA activity in the HE system (multiple choice answers)

1.4 External quality assurance of higher education institutions (Q8, Q9)

29 of the 36 higher education systems (80%) apply the same external QA requirements for all types of higher education institutions. Four higher education systems (Austria, Luxembourg, Croatia, France) employ different external QA processes depending on the profile of the educational establishment i.e., different external QA requirements may apply for academies or universities of art, music and dance; for university colleges or universities of applied sciences; for private higher education institutions, or for alternative education providers.

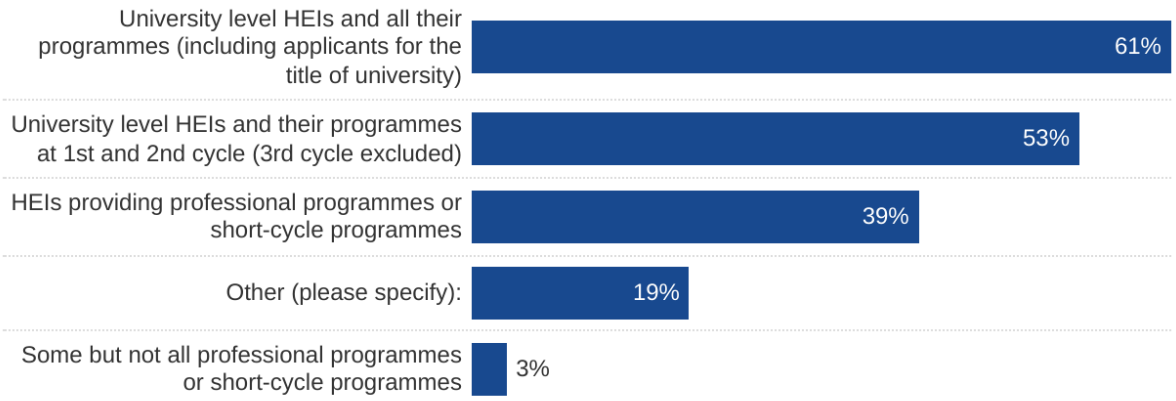


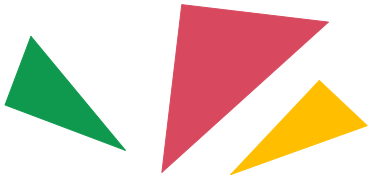
Figure 4. Coverage of the external QA system (multiple choice answers)

External QA processes and requirements are established at national level for most higher education institutions (and their study programmes). Two-fifth of the countries answered that external QA procedures are also established for higher education institutions providing professional or short-cycle programmes (see Figure 4).

1.5 Designing national external quality assurance processes (Q12, Q15, Q16)

The responses from the ministries to the QA FIT Survey show (see Table 1) that the national law (on HE) sets the framework for quality assurance review processes (e.g. self-assessment, external assessment, site visit, reporting, follow-up, timing) (86%), for the establishment (89%) and governance of a QA agency (78%) as well as the involvement of students in external QA (64%) and appeals processes (61%). Other secondary national regulation i.e. ministerial orders, government decisions or resolutions further define and elaborate on these regulations for QA.

QA agencies retain a large responsibility in developing their own regulations (83%) and appeals processes for external QA (64%), in defining the criteria for decision making (72%) and ensuring the involvement of students in external QA (69%). QA agencies are also the ones who most often initiate and design new external QA review policies and processes (see Table 1 and Figure 5) within their national higher education system (78%).



The standards for internal QA are defined by higher education institutions (72%) but also to a large extent by QA agencies (64%) as well as a result of the adopted laws (58%) and other national regulations (42%).

QA regulation	Laws	Ministerial orders / secondary national regulation(s)	QA agency's own methodology or regulation	HEIs internal policies	Other
Regulation for QA review processes (self-assessment, external assessment, site visit, reporting, etc.)	86%	56%	83%	n/a	11%
Standards for internal QA	58%	42%	64%	72%	6%
Criteria for decision-making (benchmarks, including weighing of standards)	44%	44%	72%	n/a	11%
The establishment of QA agency(-ies)	89%	28%	8%	n/a	6%
The governance structure of quality assurance agency(-ies)	78%	39%	44%	n/a	14%
External QA appeals processes	61%	22%	64%	n/a	8%
Student involvement in external QA	64%	42%	69%	n/a	6%

Table 1. Quality assurance regulation

The process for initiating and designing external QA review policies and processes may entail (Q16) various actors, committees and stages of implementation.

- In Italy, the Ministry issues a decree with the criteria and methods and indicators for accreditation, while the national agency develops the guidelines related to the design study courses.
- In Hungary, external QA review policies can be proposed by the national authorities or the QA agency. The initiative is examined by the ministry, discussed in a social consultation and then approved by Parliament.
- In Moldova, the initiative for regulatory changes starts with a proposal from stakeholders involved in QA, then it passes through the review process, where public

authorities, institutions and other interested stakeholders share their input. The regulatory change is then amended by Government Decision.

- In Sweden, the agency responsible for QA works independently in designing the policies for external QA. The process of updating or designing new policies entails a collaboration and detailed discussions with HE institutions.
- In Austria, a working group including all relevant stakeholders is established by the Ministry to discuss questions regarding the further development of quality assurance in higher education (and higher education laws). Based on these discussions, the draft laws are prepared by the Ministry and finalised after a public review process.

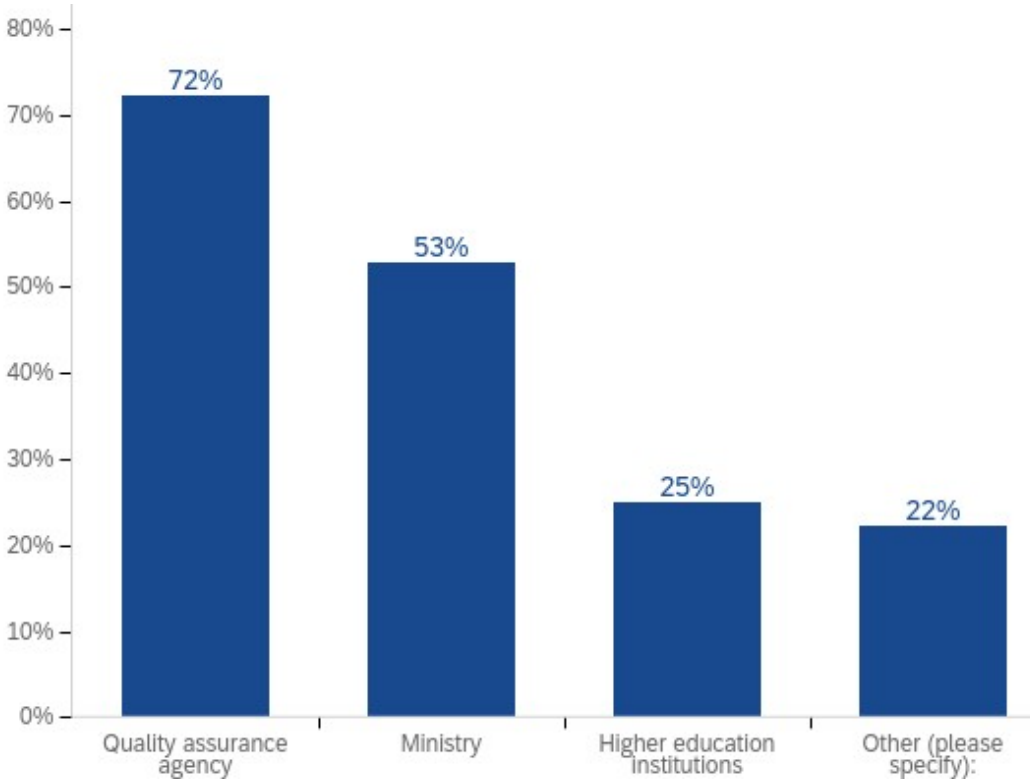
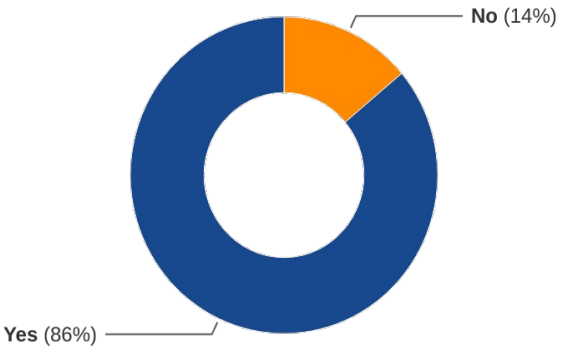


Figure 5. The responsibility in designing external QA review policies and processes (multiple choice answers)

1.6 Changes in national external quality assurance systems (Q14, Q17, Q18, Q25)

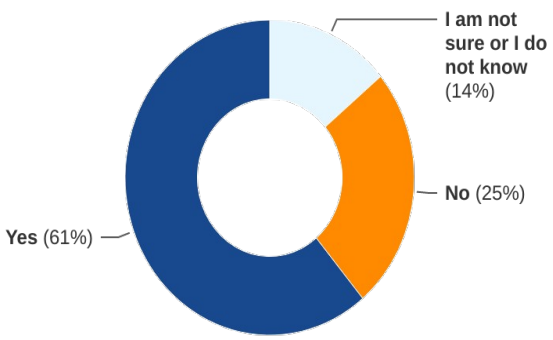
Most of respondents agreed (61%) that external QA results have contributed significantly to changes in their countries' policies after 2015. A quarter (25%) of respondents reported that they did not see substantial differences (see Figure 6).

Countries further commented that the revised ESG have been a determining factor in the development of policy changes in their QA legislation but not the sole component.



Have the external QA approaches or criteria been revised in your higher education system in the last 10 years?

Figure 7. External QA approaches and criteria revised in the past 10 years



Have external QA results contributed to any significant change in your countries policies since 2015?

Figure 6. Changes in countries' policies after 2015

The external QA results have led countries to introduce new (cluster) accreditation models, to review their provisions on the organisation of the quality assurance bodies, to transition from a centralised planning in education management to a greater autonomy of institutions, to facilitate the cooperation in the development of joint degree programmes, to change the system of financing in higher education (introducing a performance-related approach) etc.

Some changes put a greater emphasis on the institution's approach to using data, that could inform its decision-making, the analysis of its strengths, challenges and priorities.

The survey results also show that in the past 10 years, external QA approaches and criteria have been revised in the majority (31 of 36) of EHEA countries' (see Figure 7). Only five countries responded that no changes had been carried out in their QA system.

In 42% of cases (see Figure 8), these changes occurred after the review of the effectiveness or impact of one or multiple external QA cycles. The change in the external QA approach and criteria came as a result of other national specific factors i.e., due to a decision of the federal constitutional court (Germany), following discussions and changes enacted in the national education law, following the external review of the educational system etc.

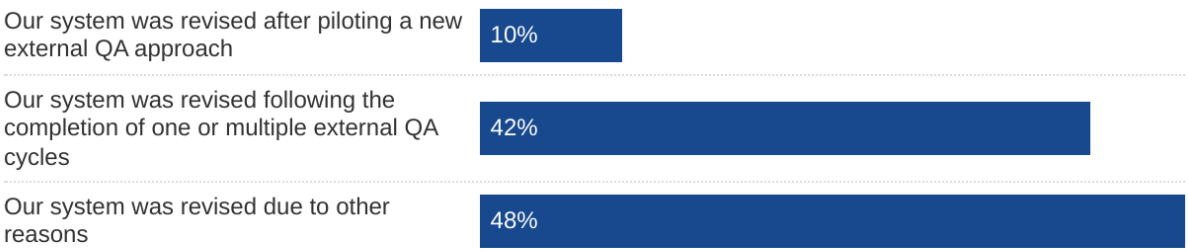


Figure 8. Possible reasons leading to a change of the external QA approach and criteria

An overwhelming majority of respondents (94%) agreed that the development and implementation of QA had a positive impact on their higher education system (see Figure 9).

Some mixed results were reported by two respondents due to concerns related to a too strong a focus on quantitative rather than qualitative elements in one case; the other respondent noted that some quality assurance indicators remained rather underdeveloped i.e., related to social dimensions and fundamental values.

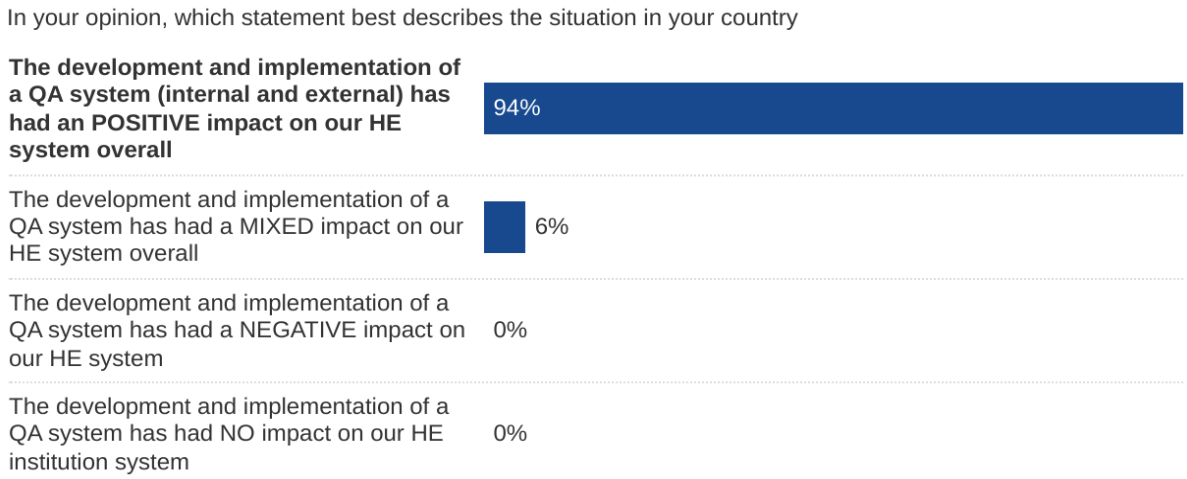


Figure 9. Impact of an external QA system on the HE system overall

European Framework for quality assurance

1.7 Purpose of a European Framework for quality assurance (Q23)

When considering the relevance of a European QA framework, over 80% of respondents found it *very important* that such a framework increases the transparency and trust between HE systems, facilitates mutual trust in the HE qualifications and study programmes, as well as the recognition of studies and provides common standards for QA in HE. The encouragement of innovation and experimentation in higher education was viewed as *less important* by a higher number of respondents compared to the other options (see Figure 10 below).

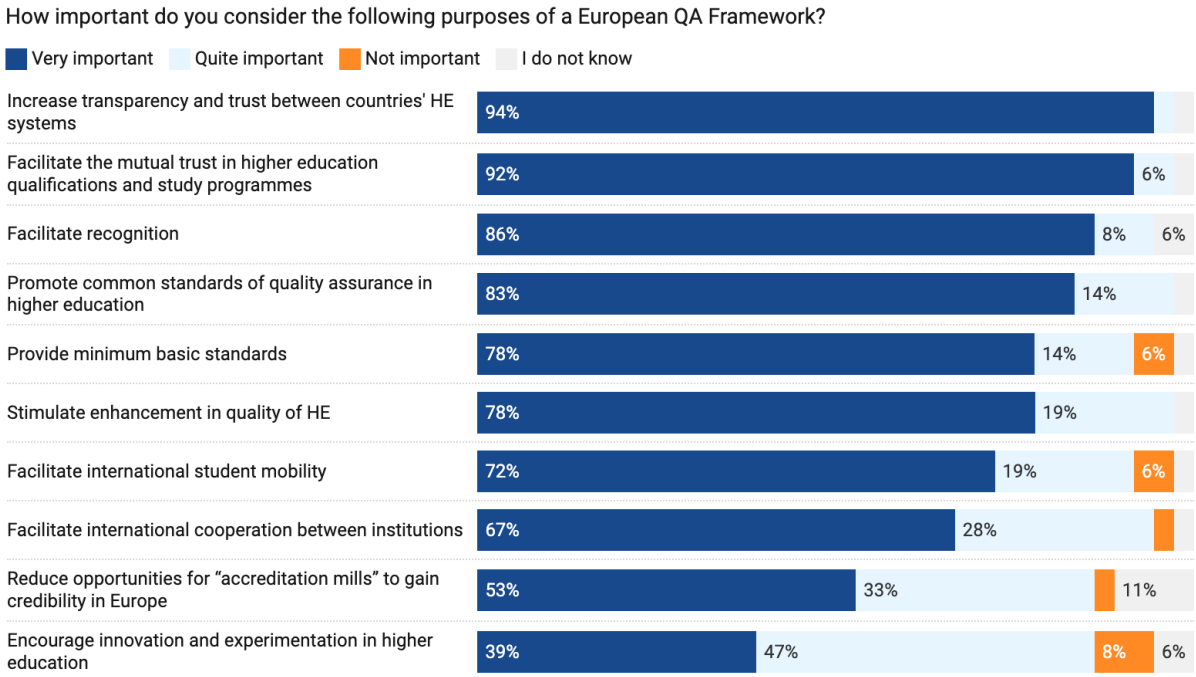


Figure 10. Importance of the European QA Framework's purposes

The lower importance attached to "encourage(-ing) innovation and experimentation" might be a result of the fact that this could be a relevant design principle rather than a purpose in itself – i.e., the European QA Framework has the purpose to increase transparency and trust, etc., but should do so in a way that does not stifle innovation and experimentation.

While normative integration of any sort may lead to a limitation of the flexibility, standards are seen as necessary to increase transparency and trust, event if it comes with a cost i.e., less innovation or experimentation. Guidelines, might however may make up for that in acting as a tool for innovation through enhancement.

It is noticeable that some pairs of closely related purposes (Facilitate recognition – Facilitate international student mobility; Increase transparency and trust between countries' HE systems – Facilitate international cooperation between institutions; Promote common standards of quality assurance – Reduce opportunities for "accreditation mills") received different responses. This might be due to a difference in how respondents understood these purposes, and where the focus should lie first

1.8 Current and future perspective on the ESG (Q26, Q27, Q28)

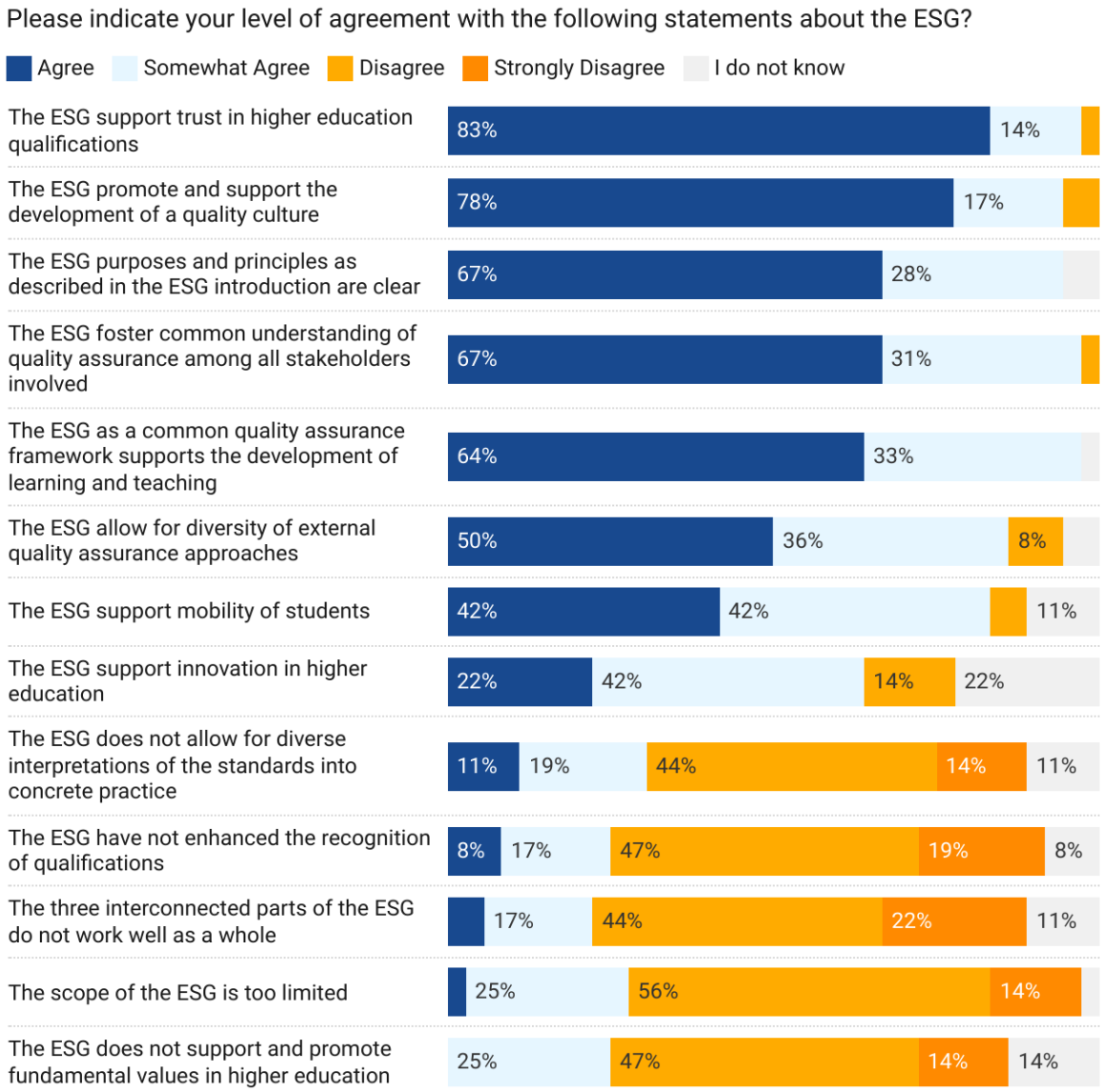


Figure 11. Current perspectives on the ESG

The majority of those surveyed agree that the ESG support trust in higher education qualifications, promote and support the development of a quality culture, that they foster common understanding of quality assurance among stakeholders, that they support the development of learning and teaching, that they enhance the recognition of qualifications and promote fundamental values in higher education.

The ministry representatives find that the three parts of the ESG work well together, that its purposes and principles are clearly laid out, that the ESG allows for a diverse interpretation of the standards into concrete practice.

Regarding the scope of the ESGs, one in four respondents finds it too limited, while 70% disagree or strongly disagree with this statement.

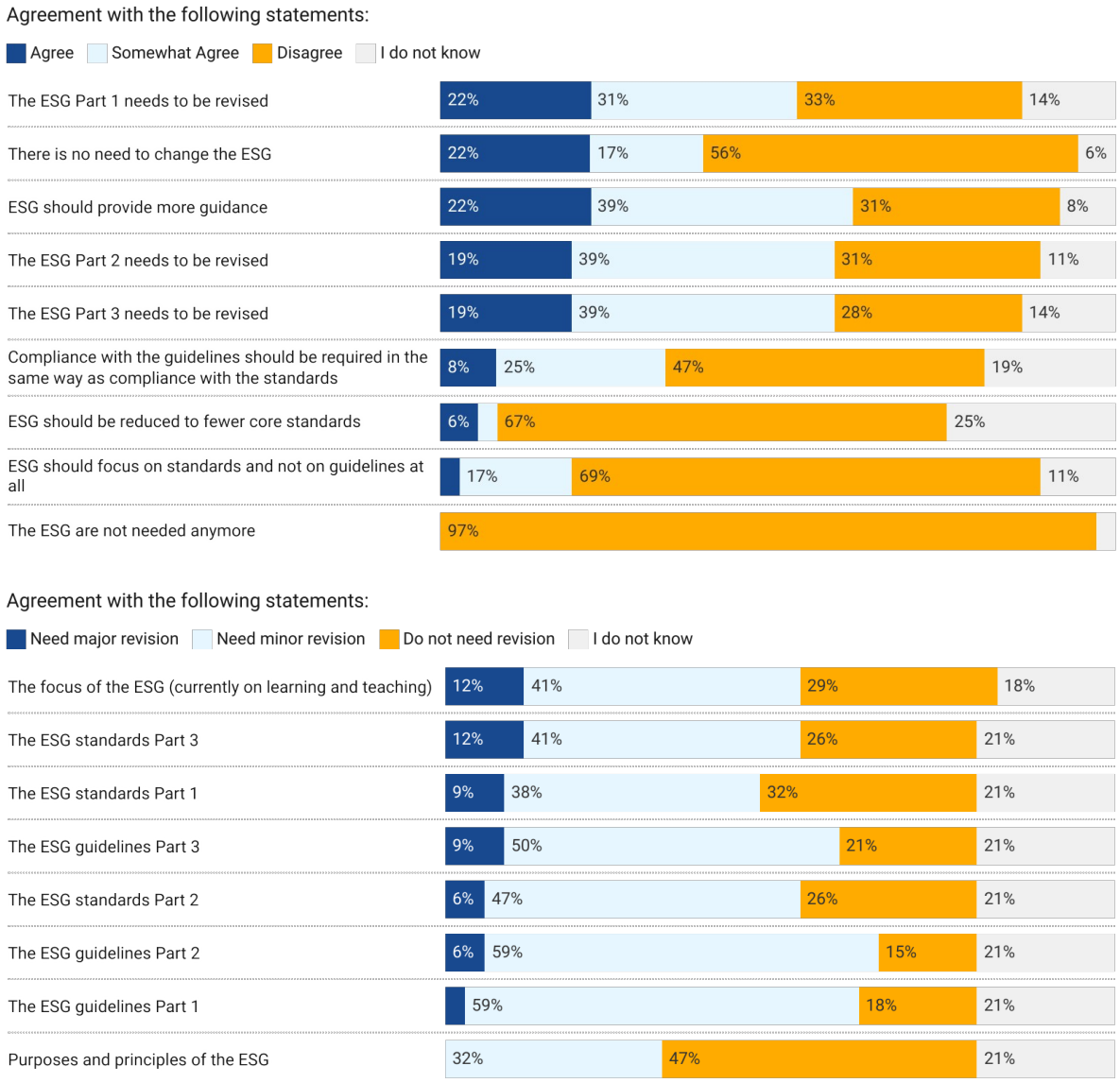


Figure 12. Future perspective on ESG revision

97% of respondents agree that the ESG are still needed (one respondent answered 'I do not know') and a large majority (67%) disagrees to reducing the ESG to a few core standards or to having a focus on standards and not at all on guidelines (69%).

Considering the future perspective of the ESG, most of the ministry representatives agree that some form of minor or major revision of the current ESG is needed (see Figure 12). Quite a few (18% to 21%) respondents chose 'I do not know' on whether the ESG and its parts should be revised, probably due to a need for further reflection on this proposal.

The main view is that **mostly minor revisions would be needed to the ESG guidelines** (a view shared by over 50% of respondents) and that several (minor and major) revisions would be needed to the ESG standards (in particular ESG Part 3 and Part 2). While the majority would agree to **some revision on the focus of the ESG** (currently on teaching and learning), 47% of respondents do not find a need to change the purposes and its principles.

1.9 Scope of the ESG (Q29)

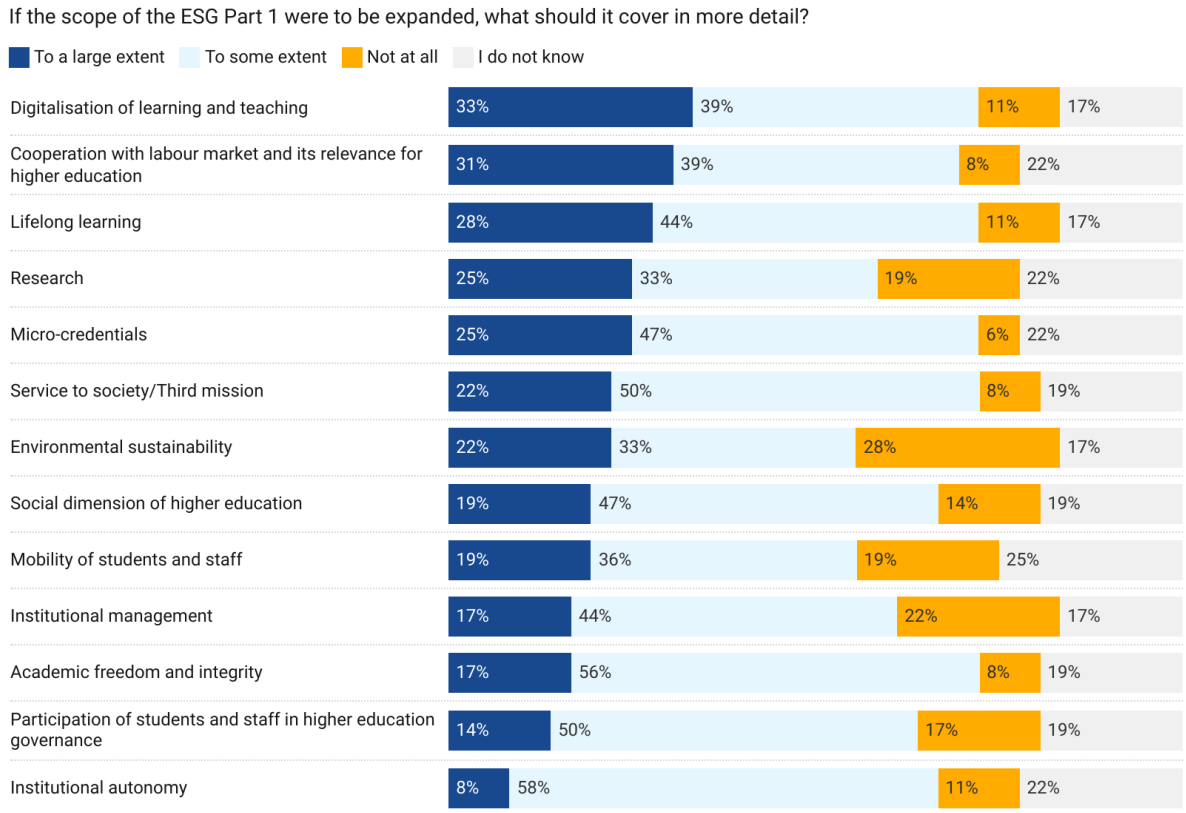


Figure 13. Perspective on extending the scope of ESG Part 1

In expanding the scope of the ESG Part 1 (see Figure 13), respondents choose a high number of following features. By order of preferences (considering *to a large* and *to some extent* options combined) the following features were selected: **academic freedom and integrity (73%), the digitalisation of learning and teaching (72%), micro-credentials (72%), lifelong learning (72%), service to society/third mission (72%), cooperation with the labour market and its relevance for HE (70%), institutional autonomy (66%), social dimension of HE (66%), participation of students and staff in HE governance (64%), institutional management (61%) and research (58%)**. A relatively high number of respondents (17% to 25%) abstained (marked 'I do not know') in providing an answer to this question.

In their further commenting on the aspects that should be further explored in the possible revision of the ESG, respondents also brought into focus the internationalisation of higher

education institutions as well as the internationalisation in the work of quality assurance agencies (going beyond ESG Part1), the integration of AI tools in the governance and work of higher education institutions as well as related issues concerning data privacy and data protection.

1.10 QA of social dimension (Q19, Q20)

Representative of governments were also surveyed on the extent to which social dimension aspects are addressed (either fully or partially) as part of the quality assurance of their higher education system.

The results show that the *involvement of disadvantaged groups in the elaboration and monitoring of social dimension policies*, *data collection on social dimension indicators* and *the involvement of higher education institutions in providing need-based grants and scholarships* are generally less addressed (see chart below) compared to policies to support access for students with disabilities in HE and psychological services and student well-being (see Figure 14).

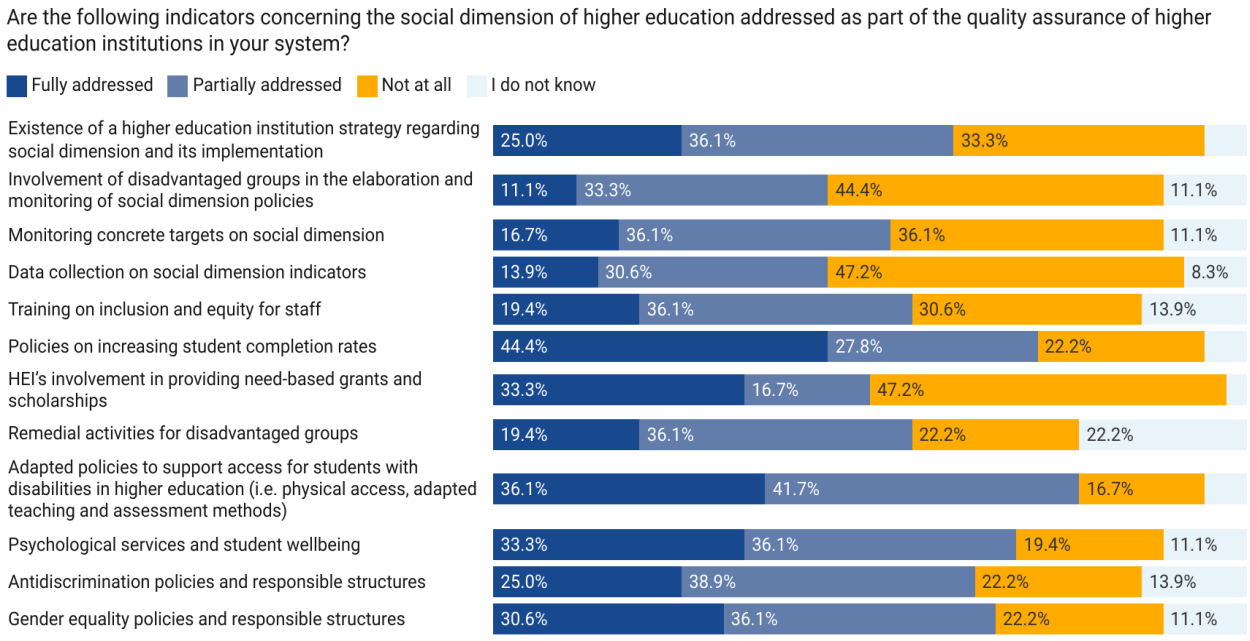


Figure 14. Indicators on social dimension addressed as part of QA

Asked whether other bodies in the countries' education systems evaluate the social dimension in higher education (referring to the indicators from the previous graph), 17 out of 36 ministries answered positively, while in the other 19 cases the country did not have another body evaluating the social dimension in HE.

The majority of respondents believe that the social dimension of higher education should be addressed under Part 1 of the ESG i.e., 19.5% agree the social dimension should be

addressed "to a large extent" while 47% of the ministries agree this should be addressed "to some extent" and for only 14% it should not be addressed. A further 19.5% did not know whether social dimension should be addressed under Part 1 of the ESG (see also Figure 13).

1.11 QA of fundamental values (Q21, Q22)

When asked whether quality assurance should directly evaluate whether fundamental values are respected in HE, the majority of the ministries answered positively (61%), while 19% answered negatively and another 19% did not know (see Figure 15).

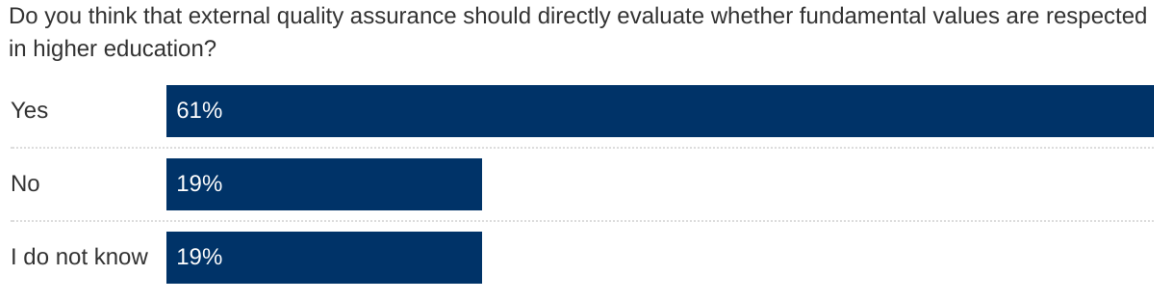


Figure 15. If fundamental values should be addressed by QA

Asked to what extent different fundamental values are already addressed through external QA processes in their countries, the majority of ministries answered "to a large extent", in particular referring to *student and staff participation in HEIs's governance, and institutional autonomy.* In at least a third of the responding countries other aspects of fundamental values are addressed to some extent (see Figure 16).

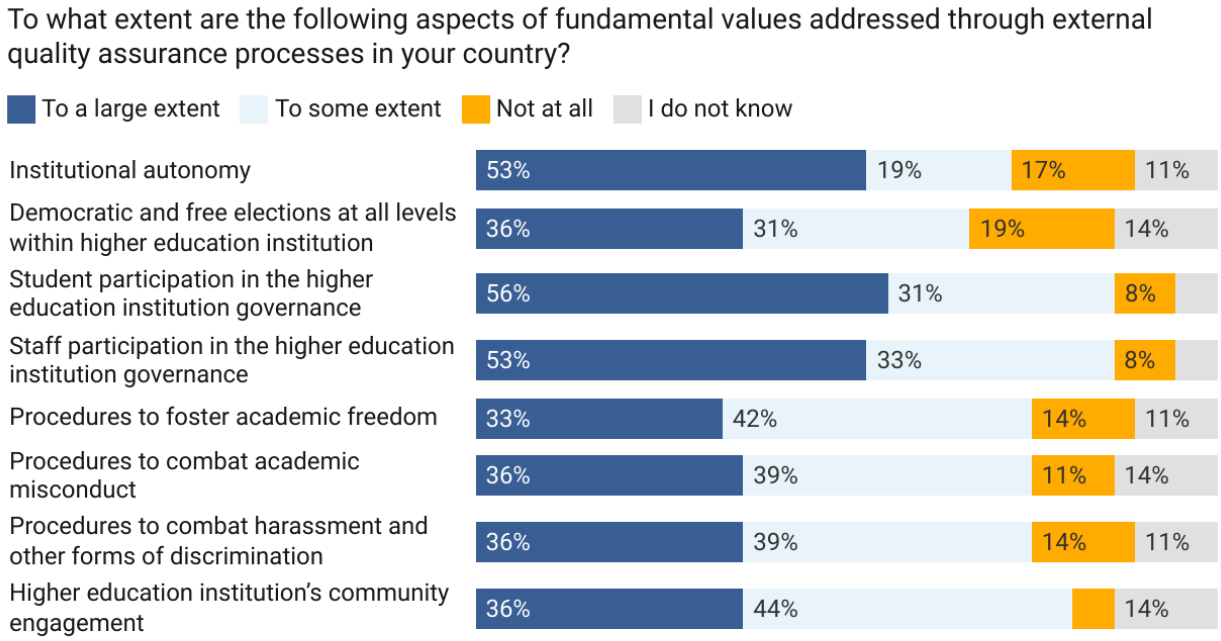


Figure 16. To what extent are fundamental values addressed by QA

1.12 European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes (Q30)

The implementation of the European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes (EA) (for higher education systems that require a programme level external QA), presumes a number of changes in the regulation/legislative framework that would allow:

- all institutions cooperating in the joint programme (national and other non national HE institutions) to select a suitable quality assurance agency from the list of EQAR registered agencies;
- the selected agency to be able to use the Standards (part B) and the Procedure (part C) of the EA to carry out one single evaluation or accreditation of the entire joint programme;
- the result and procedure to be accepted, as part of its external quality assurance at programme level.

When asked whether the legal framework allows the use of the European Approach for the QA of Joint Programmes, 75% of respondents answered that this possibility exists in their system (see Figure 18). However, six of those who answered yes, are countries that are classified [4]as not allowing the use of the EA in the knowledge base of legal frameworks maintained by EQAR. Therefore a further verification was carried out with each of the six respondents). The mistaken responses might indicate a misunderstanding in the implementation of the EA, where exceptions are provided in the HE system, but using the European Approach is not readily available to all higher education institutions.

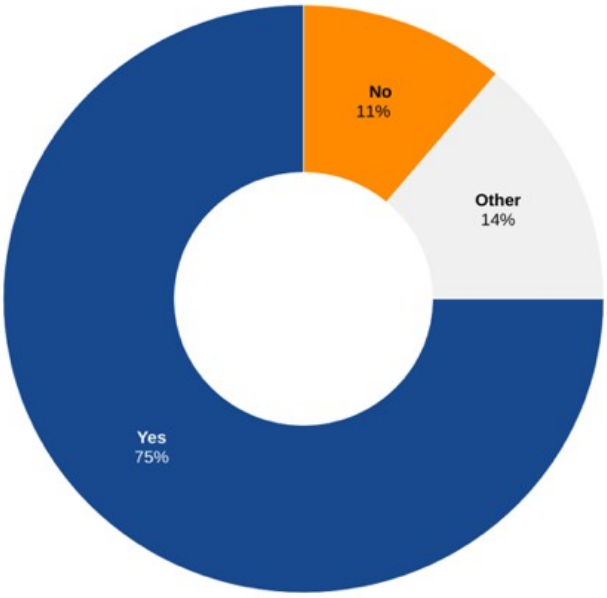


Figure 17. Does the country's legal framework allow for the use of the EA for the QA of Joint Programmes?

1.13 Cross-border QA (Q31)

Signatories of the Ministerial Communiqués of Berlin (2003), Bucharest (2012), Yerevan (2015) and Paris (2018) have recognised and underlined higher education institutions' responsibility for assuring the quality of education and their right to choose a suitable EQAR-registered quality assurance agency for their compulsory external quality assurance in line with national requirements.

4 See EQAR's knowledge base https://www.eqar.eu/kb/joint-programmes/national-implementation/

In the QA FIT survey, ministry respondents were asked whether higher education institutions in their countries may choose a suitable EQAR-registered agency as part of the mandatory external QA requirements.

Sixty-one percent (61%) of respondents answered that this possibility is given to (all or some) higher education institutions in their country. The data largely corresponds with EQAR's mapping of the openness to cross-border QA within the EHEA i.e. where 20 higher education systems recognise EQAR-registered agencies as part of the national external QA requirements, and 13 other higher education systems recognise foreign QA agencies based on their own framework[5].

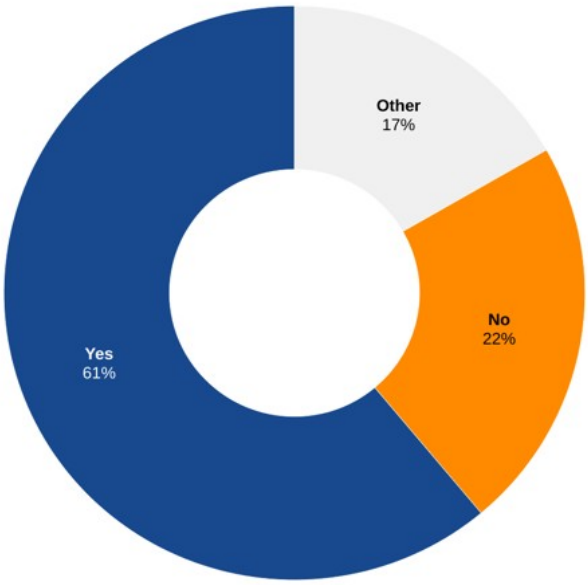


Figure 18. Does the legal framework allow HEIs to choose a suitable EQAR-registered agency as part of the mandatory external QA of the HE system?

DEQAR data[6] further shows that 91% of all EHEA signatories (43 of 47 countries) have experienced a form of cross-border QA with an EQAR-registered agency, however the recognition of the external QA procedure happens in less than 1 in 5 procedures. Most external QA activities are carried out as voluntary/add-on to the existing national QA procedure, showing a duplication of efforts and that the use of a procedure aligned with the ESG is not sufficient basis for cross-border QA.

1.14 QA of transnational education TNE (Q32)

In their Ministerial Conference in Rome (2020), the EHEA members committed to ensuring that external quality assurance arrangements cover transnational higher education with equal standards to those used for domestic provision. According to the answers provided to the QA FIT survey, the legal framework in 44% of the higher education systems does not include provisions that would ensure that external QA covers the transnational provision offered abroad by their own country's higher education institutions. Some respondents however explained that their country do not have higher education provision abroad.

5 See EQAR's knowledge base https://www.eqar.eu/kb/cross-border-qa/mapping-system-openness-to-cbqa/

6 See further DEQAR statistics on cross-border QA: https://www.eqar.eu/kb/cross-border-qa/drafting-cross-border-external-qa-activities/

Other countries stated that while the may not have a provision within their legal framework, the transnational provision is in practiced addressed through the regular institutional QA exercise carried out by the quality assurance body.

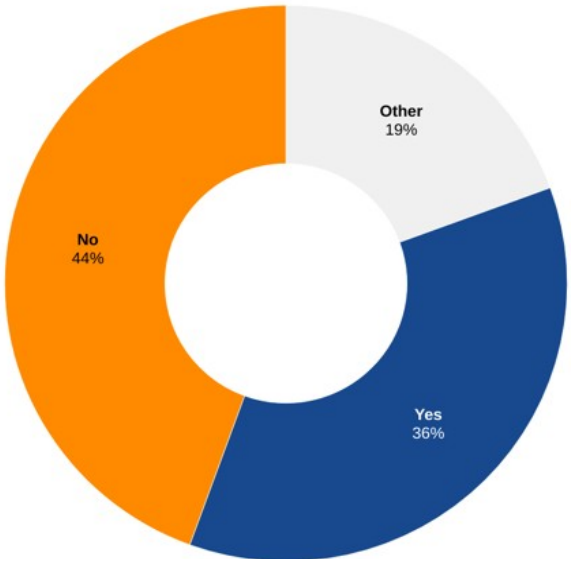


Figure 19. Does the country's legal framework have provisions to cover the QA of TNE offered abroad?

1.15 QA of University Alliances (Q33)

Reflecting on the quality assurance of the university alliances, a large majority of respondents agreed that the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes should be used in the evaluation of programmes offered by such alliances.

A third of respondents view the evaluation of each institution within the alliance sufficient with no need for an evaluation at alliance level, while 22% disagree with such an approach. 14% of respondents view the evaluation at alliances level as a way to replace a national evaluation.

Given that the respondents were confined to a limited number of statements, the scope of consideration would deserve further follow-up, also in light of the current developments related to the European Degree.

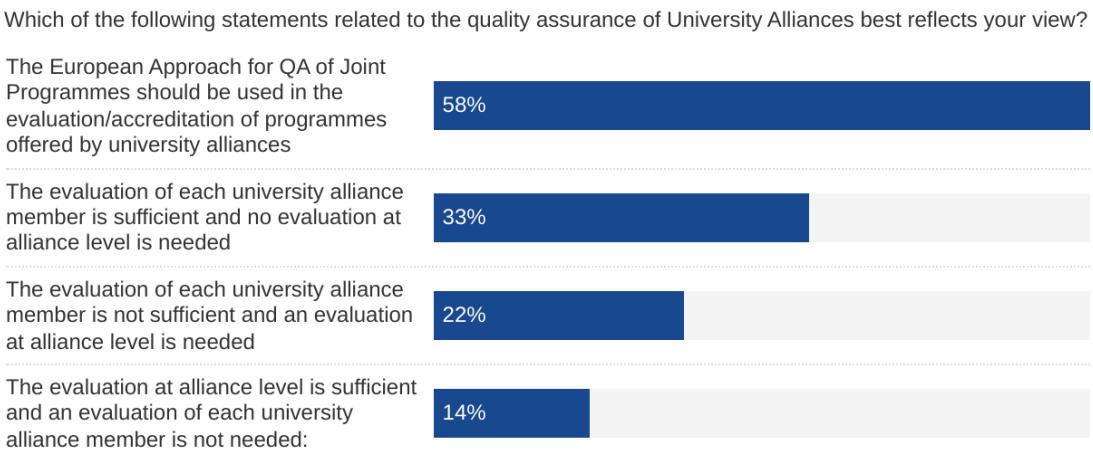


Figure 20. Agreements with statements related to the QA of University Alliances (multiple choice answers)

Conclusion

The analysis of Ministry survey responses provides valuable insights into the current state of quality assurance in higher education within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and their perceptions regarding its future trajectory.

The results underscore the significance of the ESG in fostering transparency, trust, and a shared understanding of quality assurance practices among member countries. Respondents emphasised that the principal outcomes of quality assurance activities are decisions granting permission for institutions or programs to operate, awarding university titles, and facilitating access to funding or state grants. While enhancing quality remains a focus, the survey underscores the prevalence of accountability-driven objectives in these processes.

The survey findings highlight the strong emphasis on preparing students for future careers (contributing to their employability), thus calling attention to the alignment of higher education with labour market needs.

However, the comparatively lower priority assigned to student personal development and active citizenship raises questions about the balance between the aim of graduate employability and a more holistic approach to higher education.

The majority of respondents find the ESG's current structure and principles effective, providing clarity and flexibility for implementation. It is noteworthy that while the ESG has been instrumental in guiding quality assurance, there is a call for minor to major revisions to address emerging trends and challenges such as digitalisation, micro-credentials, and the social dimensions of higher education.

The recognition that quality assurance should encompass fundamental values and the social dimension of higher education suggests an evolving understanding of the holistic role of universities in society.

The desire to expand the scope of the ESG to include elements such as academic freedom, digitalisation, micro-credentials, and societal engagement reflects a need to adapt quality assurance frameworks to the changing landscape of higher education.

The commitment to cross-border quality assurance, recognition of transnational education, and the QA of university alliances, as demonstrated in the survey responses, signals a concerted effort to foster the internationalisation of QA in higher education across the EHEA following an agreed framework that would deserve further follow-up. In the discussion on the future of quality assurance progresses, the collective wisdom gathered from diverse stakeholders will be crucial in shaping the future iterations of the ESG and ensuring that quality assurance remains fit for promoting the progress of higher education within Europe and beyond.