

IMPLEMENTING QUALITY AND ACCREDITATION IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN FIVE EUROPEAN COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT: *The national Quality Assurance Agencies of most European countries have developed accreditation criteria considering the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). The paper reports the findings of a comparative study of the national accreditation criteria for programme evaluation which are in use in five European countries, namely Greece, Denmark, Austria, Britain and Ireland. The official published documents available on the Agencies' websites were reviewed and analyzed. The paper presents and discusses the variation of the criteria additions and omissions from the ESG model for each individual case. The reported comparisons show that a 'general model' is followed since the agencies of the five countries operate in substantial compliance with the ESG. However, each country places emphasis on different criteria.*

KEYWORDS: Quality Management, Quality Assurance, Higher Education, European Standards and Guidelines, accreditation criteria, national systems

INTRODUCTION

Quality has been an important policy issue and a focus of practice in the public sector (Tsimboukidou, Dionysopoulou and Mylonakis, 2013) in general and in higher education research. Quality management procedures in higher education have been explored and implemented in the forms of quality assurance (QA) and quality enhancement (QE) (Lomas, 2004; Manatos et al, 2017). Quality assurance is used to describe the processes that seek to ensure that the learning environment (including teaching and research) meets an acceptable threshold of quality. As it has been argued, QA is about making judgments against defined criteria, whereas QE is less bounded, enabling a more complex discourse providing more interpretive space (Fillipakou and Tapper, 2008 cited in Elassy 2015). The introduction of quality management concepts in Higher Education (HE) is seen as an externally driven process related to increased demands for accountability and efficiency in the sector (Brookes and Becket, 2007). In the European HE area, where mobility of skillful and competent citizens is encouraged and European societies become increasingly knowledge-based, the role of quality assurance is seen as crucial for the higher education systems and institutions (ESG, 2015).

Following the Lisbon strategy and the Bologna process each EU member country was encouraged to develop a national system for QA in HE using as a reference document the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance although they are not defined as standards for quality (ESG, 2015) instead " they provide guidance, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in H.E" (ESG, 2015, p6). However, it has been argued that the ESG

neglect the core university processes, such as research and scholarship and mainly focus on teaching and learning and on support services (Manatos et al. 2017).

The ESG encompass principles for managing the assurance of quality in HE, both internally and externally and for Quality Assurance Agencies. The standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance include ten criteria. These criteria are expected to inform the procedures of quality assurance and accreditation of programmes. Program accreditation, as well as institutional accreditation, constitutes quality practices in higher education.

The paper aims to present and discuss the ways in which the criteria for internal quality assurance standards and guidelines of ESG are reflected on the programme accreditation criteria of HE in five European HE systems. The research is based on the accreditation documents of Greece, Denmark, Austria, Britain and Ireland as these are prepared by the national Quality Assurance Agencies for Higher Education. The idiosyncrasies of each national system are explored and the additions and omissions from the ESG model are critically presented and discussed.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The ESG (2015) is a formal policy document of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) adopted and endorsed by ministers in charge of HE (ENGA et al, 2017). The document provides foundation principles for the QA activities in the EHEA. According to the document the focus is on quality assurance of learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment, research and innovation. Emphasis is placed on accountability and enhancement. These two principles are seen as important elements that create trust in the higher education institution's performance. A quality assurance system that is successfully implemented should be able to provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the higher education institution's activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations for improvement (enhancement). Quality assurance and quality enhancement are inter-related set of principles that can support the development of a quality culture known and ideally embraced by all stakeholders including the students and academic staff to the institutional leadership and management (ESG, 2015).

Specifically, the ESG purposes and principles are a) to set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level; b) to enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area; c) to support mutual trust, d) to facilitate recognition and mobility within and across national borders; e) to provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA. The aim of ESG is to ensure that the quality assurance agencies in the EHEA adhere to the same set of principles and model the processes and procedures to fit the purposes and requirements of their contexts. The quality assurance principles in the EHEA advocate that a) higher education institutions have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance; b) quality assurance responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students; c) quality assurance supports the development of a quality culture; d) quality assurance takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society (ESG, 2015).

At the same time the document states that the ESG purposes provide a framework where different institutions, agencies and countries can implement the guidelines in different ways. The EHEA is characterised by its diversity of political systems, higher education systems, socio-cultural and educational traditions, languages, aspirations and expectations. This makes a single monolithic approach to quality and quality assurance in higher education inappropriate. It is recognized that a broad acceptance of the standards is a precondition for creating a common understanding of quality assurance in Europe.

Furthermore, the compliance of HE institutions with ESG is necessary in order to register by the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR). The listed agencies in EQAR have demonstrated in an external review by independent experts that they comply substantially with the ESG" (EQAR, webpage). The last decade EQAR and ENQA organisations have separately examined and judged the compliance of Quality Assurance Agencies with the ESG. It is worth noting that both organisations use the threshold of *substantial* compliance rather than *full* compliance with all the standards. (ENQA, 2011).

The present study explores and compares five national quality assurance systems against the internal quality assurance standards and guidelines (ESG 2015) as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance 2015

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)	
Standards and Guidelines for Internal Quality Assurance	
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.
1.2 Design and approval of programmes	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, and 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
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	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
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	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.
1.5 Teaching staff	Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff
1.6 Learning resources and student support	Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.
1.7 Information management	Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.
1.8 Public information	Institutions should publish information about their activities,

	including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	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.
1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance	Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.

Source: http://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf

RESEARCH METHODS

The study follows a qualitative research methodology. It is based on qualitative content analysis of official documents which they were retrieved from publicly available resources. Specifically, official reports, documents and on-line published information of the National Accreditation agencies of the five countries have been reviewed for the years 2016-2017. Additionally, review reports of ENQA and EQAR have been explored for the same period.

The Higher Education area of Greece, Denmark, Austria, Ireland and the UK include a variety of institutions. The five countries present diversity in their education systems, however, as member states of the European Union they are encouraged to adopt a systematic approach about internal quality assurance and programme accreditation.

The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) in the five selected educational systems

GREECE

The Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency (HQA) is an independent body which is centrally responsible for quality assurance in tertiary education in Greece. The objectives of the HQA is to promote the guidelines for the procedure of evaluation in Higher Education as well as to oversee, coordinate and support all evaluation procedures in higher education institutes (<http://www.adip.gr/en/index.php>). HQA is a member of ENQA since 2015 (<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/members/full-members>). Greece became a Governmental Member of EQAR in 2017.

Table 2. Greece - HQA Accreditation criteria

HQA - General criteria for accreditation of programmes of study	
1.	The academic profile and orientation of the programme of study
2.	The learning outcomes and expected qualifications are in accordance with the National Qualifications Framework
3.	The structure and organisation of the programme of study
4.	The quality and efficacy of the teaching especially as documented in student evaluation reports
5.	The suitability of the qualifications of the teaching staff

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6. The quality of the research work being done by the academic unit
 7. The degree of association between teaching and research
 8. The labour market demand for the acquired qualifications
 9. The quality of the support services such as administrative services, libraries and student welfare services.
 10. Academic development strategy
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Source: <http://www.adip.gr/en/accreditation-docs.php>

Table 3. Greece - HQA Template structure and content of the Department's proposal for Academic Curriculum Accreditation

Academic Accreditation of a study programme - HQA		
No.	Criterion	Description
1.	History	1.1. Creation of a new programme of study 1.2. Previous accreditations /evaluations 1.3. Internal procedures 1.4. Current situation
2.	Description of the programme of study	2.1. Title of the programme of study 2.2. Aim and subject of the programme of study 2.3. Learning outcomes of the programme of study 2.4. Linking the aims of the programme of study with the labour market 2.5. Compatibility with the European and international environment 2.6. Structure of the programme of study
3.	Outline of courses on the programme of study	
4.	Organisation of the educational work	4.1. Staffing of the academic unit 4.2. Synoptic table of teaching staff 4.3. Table of assignment of teaching staff and courses 4.4. Teaching 4.5. Improvement plans
5.	The academic unit's research	
6.	Infrastructure - Support services	6.1. Infrastructure used by the academic unit to support teaching 6.2. Use of information and telecommunications technology 6.3. Support services
7.	Administration and academic development strategy	7.1. Administration of the academic unit 7.2. Strategic planning 7.3. Collaborations of the academic unit with social/cultural/productive bodies 7.4. International dimension of the programme of study

7.5. Additional resources - Viability

8. Tables
9. Curriculum vitae of the members of the teaching and research staff (DEP/EP) and other teaching staff
10. Appendices
 - A. Qualifications Framework of the European Higher Education Area
 - B. Guide to Writing Course Learning Outcomes
 - C. Contents of Course Catalogue

Source: <http://www.adip.gr/en/accreditation-docs.php>

The standards used by the Hellenic Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agency meet nine standards and guidelines of ESG. The criterion about "*cyclical external quality assurance*" has not been addressed. This criterion was part of the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance of ESG (2005) and has now moved to the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance of ESG (2015). This leads to the assumption that there needs to be an update of the Hellenic accreditation criteria on this respect.

DENMARK: The Danish Accreditation Institution (AKKR)

The Danish Accreditation Institution is an independent agency which accredits institutions in Higher Education and higher education programmes. It aims to ensure quality and relevance in the field of Higher Education (<http://en.akkr.dk/>). AKKR is a member of ENQA since 2010 (<http://www.enqa.eu/index.php/enqa-agencies/members/full-members/>). Denmark has been a Governmental Member of EQAR since 2008. It is noted that for accrediting Danish higher education institutions or programmes or Danish education programmes offered abroad: the agency can use its own criteria ([http://www.eqar.eu/register/map.html?tx_pxdeqar_pi2\[ciid\]=14#container_agencies_by_country_14](http://www.eqar.eu/register/map.html?tx_pxdeqar_pi2[ciid]=14#container_agencies_by_country_14)). In December 2016, the AKKR has received approval of its application for renewal of inclusion on the Register. In ENQA's report for the Agency, the focus is placed on the ESG Part 3 (Quality assurance agencies) and ESG Part 2 (External quality assurance).

Table 4. Denmark - AKK Programme Accreditation

Accreditation criteria for existing programmes (AKKR)		
No	Criterion	Description
1.	Demand and relevance	The programme is relevant in relation to the demand on the labour market. Elaboration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>graduates find relevant employment or further education; the institution is engaged in an ongoing dialogue with potential employers and other relevant stakeholders with the aim of assuring the programme's relevance for the labour market.</i>
2.	Knowledge base	The programme builds on the type of knowledge base required by the ministerial rules for the specific type of programme. Elaboration: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>the programme is attached to a relevant academic/professional</i>

		<p><i>environment, where teachers generally live up to the qualification and competence requirements for the programme,</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>the programme is based on the newest knowledge and is organised by teachers who take part in or have active contact with relevant research or development environments,</i> • <i>students are exposed to the relevant knowledge base, e.g. through inclusion in activities related to it</i>
3.	Goals for learning outcomes	<p>There is a connection between programme content and goals for learning outcomes.</p> <p>Elaboration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>the programme's goals for learning outcomes live up to the relevant type description in the Danish qualification framework for higher education programmes,</i> • <i>there is a connection between the programme's structure, learning objectives and admission criteria in relation to the goals for learning outcomes.</i>
4.	Organisation and completion	<p>The organisation and practical completion of the programme supports the achievement of the goals for learning outcomes.</p> <p>Elaboration:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>the programme is organised in such a way that students can achieve the programme's goals for learning outcomes within the prescribed period of study, with an aggregate workload corresponding to the programme's scope in terms of ECTS points,</i> • <i>teaching on the programme is pedagogically competent,</i> • <i>the programme is organised in such a way that it is possible to complete one or more components of the programme or the local provision of a programme abroad within the prescribed period of study,</i> • <i>components of the programme completed outside the institution, including work placement, clinical courses and parts of the programme completed abroad, are included as integral components of the programme so that student learning at the institution and components completed outside the institution supplement each other.</i>
5.	Internal quality assurance and development	<p>The quality assurance of the programme complies with the European standards and guidelines for the internal quality assurance at higher education institutions and functions well in practice.</p> <p>Elaboration:</p> <p>The institution ensures that:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>quality assurance and development of programme organisation and completion is undertaken on a continuous basis, including</i>

the collection, analysis and use of relevant information and student evaluation of teaching,

- *evaluation of the programme involving potential employers and other relevant stakeholders is undertaken on a periodic basis,*
- *programme components that are completed outside the institution, including work placement, clinical courses and programmes completed abroad are included in systematic quality assurance,*
- *programme facilities and material resources are relevant for the realisation of goals for learning outcomes.*

Source: <http://en.akkr.dk/guides/existing-programmes/>

The standards used by the Danish Accreditation Institution meet nine standards and guidelines of ESG. There is no provision about meeting the criterion about "*cyclical external quality assurance*". With the view that this criterion has only been introduced in the latest version of ESG (2015) in the internal quality assurance section, it is no surprise that it has not been included in the 2013 version of Danish programme accreditation documents which were available on the internet at the time of our research.

UNITED KINGDOM: Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education

The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) is the independent body entrusted with monitoring, and advising on, standards and quality in UK higher education (<http://www.qaa.ac.uk/en>). The Quality Code for Higher Education is used to assure the standards and quality of UK higher education. The Quality Code is set out in three Parts (Setting and maintaining threshold academic standards, Assuring and enhancing academic quality, Information about higher education provision). The content of the Quality Code is shown in Table 4. QAA is an ENQA member since 2000. The United Kingdom has been a Governmental Member of EQAR since 2015.

Table 5. The UK Quality Code for Higher Education

Criterion	Description
Part A: Setting and Maintaining Academic Standards.	Chapter A1 - UK and European Reference Points for Academic Standards Chapter A2 - Degree-Awarding Bodies' Reference Points for Academic Standards Chapter A3 - Securing Academic Standards and an Outcomes-Based Approach to Academic Awards
Part B: Assuring and Enhancing Academic Quality	Chapter B1: Programme Design, Development and Approval Chapter B2: Recruitment, Selection and Admission to Higher Education Chapter B3: Learning and Teaching Chapter B4: Enabling Student Development and Achievement Chapter B5: Student Engagement

Chapter B6: Assessment of Students and the Recognition of Prior Learning
 Chapter B7: External Examining
 Chapter B8: Programme Monitoring and Review
 Chapter B9: Academic Appeals and Student Complaints
 Chapter B10: Managing Higher Education Provision with Others
 Chapter B11: Research Degrees

Part C: Information about Higher Education Provision

Indicators of sound practice

- Information for the public about the higher education provider
- Information for prospective students
- Information for current students
- Information for students on completion of their studies
- Information for those with responsibility for academic standards and quality

Source: <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/assuring-standards-and-quality/the-quality-code>

QAA's overall performance against the standards of the ESG is uniformly high (Enqa, Panel report QAA, 2013).

AUSTRIA: Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria

The Agency for Quality Assurance and Accreditation Austria (AQ) is responsible for carrying out accreditation procedures for private universities and universities of applied sciences (FH) in Austria (as well as abroad) which require accreditation as a prerequisite for state recognition (Public universities are not required to be accredited in Austria). AQ Austria has specific quality requirements on accreditation of the Universities of Applied Sciences which were adopted in May 2015 (AQ 2015). The assessment areas for programme accreditation include six criteria as shown in Table 5. AQ Austria is a member of ENQA since 2012. Austria has been a Governmental Member of EQAR since 2008.

Table 6. Assessment areas for programme accreditation - AQ Austria

Assessment Criteria for the assessment areas (AQ)	
No.	Criterion
1.	Degree programme and degree programme management
2.	Staff
3.	Quality assurance
4.	Funding and infrastructure
5.	Applied research and development
6.	National and international co-operation

Source: https://www.aq.ac.at/en/accreditation/dokumente-verfahren-fh/FH-AkkVO2015__en_ende.pdf?m=1446128994

The programme accreditation criteria of Austria comply with most of the standards and guidelines of ESG (2015) but less emphasis has been placed on *Information management*.

IRELAND: Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)

Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is an independent state Agency responsible for promoting quality and accountability in education and training services in Ireland. In the area of quality assurance, the agency is also responsible for reviewing the effectiveness of quality assurance in further and higher education and training providers in Ireland (<http://www.qqi.ie/Articles/Pages/About-Us.aspx>) QQI validates programmes of education and training. In the case of HE, this is largely restricted to private providers (<https://www.eqar.eu/register/reporting-and-renewal/substantive-change-report.html>). The Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines published by the QQI agency identifies eleven core areas in which providers are expected to have quality assurance procedures in place (QQI, 2016b). These policies and criteria apply to all programmes (Table 7). Additionally, specialised validation policies and criteria apply for the validation of programmes of education and training (QQI, 2016a). The criteria are written as statements that are expected to be true if the provider's programme of education and training is to be validated and implemented (QQI, 2016a) as shown in Table 8. QQI has been a member of ENQA since 2014. Ireland has been a Governmental Member of EQAR since 2008.

Table 7. The Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines - Ireland

The Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines - Ireland	
No	Criterion
1.	Governance and Management of Quality
2.	Documented Approach to Quality Assurance
3.	Programmes of Education and Training
4.	Staff Recruitment, Management and Development
5.	Teaching and Learning
6.	Assessment of Learners
7.	Supports of Learners
8.	Information and Data Management
9.	Public Information and Communication
10.	Other Parties Involved in Education and Training
11.	Self-Evaluation, Monitoring and Review

Source: QQI (2016b)

Table 8. The Core Validation Criteria - QQI

The Core Validation Criteria - QQI	
No.	Criterion
1.	The provider is eligible to apply for validation of the programme.
2.	The programme objectives and outcomes are clear and consistent with the QQI Awards sought
3.	The programme concept, implementation strategy, and its interpretation of QQI Awards standards are well informed and soundly based (considering social, cultural, educational, professional and employment objectives)
4.	The programme's access, transfer and progression arrangements are satisfactory.
5.	The programme's written curriculum is well structured and fit-for-purpose.

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6. There is sufficient qualified and capable programme staff available to implement the programme as planned.
 7. There are sufficient physical resources to implement the programme as planned.
 8. The learning environment is consistent with the needs of the programme's learners.
 9. There are sound teaching and learning strategies
 10. There are sound assessment strategies
 11. Learners enrolled on the programme are well informed, guided and cared for.
 12. The programme is well managed
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Source: <http://www.qqi.ie/Pages/Home.aspx>

All QA guidelines (Core and Policies) that pertain to HEI form a comprehensive account of criteria that incorporate the provisions of ESG 2015.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The comparative study (Table 9) reveals that the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in European Higher Education (ESG, 2015) about internal quality are generally well reflected in the certification/accreditation criteria in the case of the five-national quality in HE systems. This can also reflect the fact that respective Quality Assurance Agencies (QAA) are members of ENQA and/or EQAR and therefore they all *substantially* comply with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015). The comparative analysis showed some similarities between countries.

It has been observed that Greece and Denmark have not included the "cyclical external quality assurance" criterion in their internal evaluation/accreditation process. This is probably because this criterion was introduced to the internal quality assurance standards in the latest version of European Standards and Guidelines published in 2015 (ver 3.1). This criterion is not, however, totally new, as in the previous version of ESG (2005) the criterion of cyclical external quality assurance was included in the *external* quality assurance standards (EQUIP, 2016). The agencies will need to adapt their criteria to the latest version of the ESG and include the standard concerning the "cyclical external quality assurance" to their accreditation criteria about the internal quality assurance.

The QAAs of the UK and Ireland have developed a comprehensive set of criteria by core and complementary policies which incorporate fully the ESG (2015). It is worth noting that the British Quality Assurance Agency is one of the oldest members of ENQA (joined in 2000) a fact shows that it is an experienced organisation around Quality Assurance.

In the case of Austria, the design of programme accreditation meets the standards and guidelines of ESG. However, the criterion concerning "*Information management*" is not assessed.

Table 9. Comparative Analysis of the five national accreditation systems with the ESG Model

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)										
	1.1.	1.2	1.3	1.4	1.5	1.6	1.7	1.8	1.9	1.10
GREECE*	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
DENMARK*	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	x
U.K*	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√
AUSTRIA*	√	√	√	√	√	√	x	√	√	√
IRELAND*	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√	√

* *Electronic versions of accreditation criteria as found on the official webpages of the Accreditation Agencies of the five countries. Date of last access at 30/7/2017*

The ESG may not have become the single common framework across European HE institutions but, as our research shows, there is some impact on harmonisation of key policies and procedures. It is evident from the preceding analysis that the accreditation criteria in the five countries are to largely in compliance with the European standards and Guidelines (ESG, 2015). There are still some exceptions evident which should be further explored in a future research. ENQA members consider and prefer to use the ESG as a reference point (ENQA, 2011) rather than as a set of strict criteria to which there should rigidly comply. It is recognised that the ESG are generic principles which can be adapted to various political, national and cultural contexts and respect institutional diversity which characterises EHEA (ENQA, 2011).

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