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Embedding of ESG Part 1 into IQA systems– EIQAS project survey’s results on ESG Part 1 and IQA: state of arts and challenges

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Abstract:

According to “The European Higher Education Area in 2015. Bologna Process Implementation Report”, data on progress in internal quality assurance were “necessarily limited”. Therefore EIQAS “Enhancing Internal Quality Assurance Systems” Erasmus+ project responded to this information gap in higher education area. In 2014 project partners from Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia decided to map the stage of IQA development in their countries and their readiness to follow revised ESG 2015. In this paper, we discuss main conclusions from the cross-country research that was based on the survey’s findings on Part. 1 ESG & IQA as well as further reviews with QA coordinators. The survey was conducted in 2015 in four projects’ countries that have different history and maturity of IQA development. Whereas the current stage of IQA evolution could be considered as the function of overall progress of QA at the national level, project partners decided to cooperate towards the enhancement of IQAs through the capacity building of HEIs and QA agencies.

Our major findings are as follows: firstly, most surveyed HEIs implemented IQAS during the last decade, primarily as a tool for quality assurance of learning and teaching. The ESG, both 2005 and 2015, were used as a general framework. Secondly, awareness and understanding of ESG standards, as well as level of their implementation, considerably varies across HEIs, their units and fields of studies. Thirdly, numerous barriers in implementing ESG were identified. The

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integration of all ESG standards in a consistent and comprehensive IQA system is one of the main challenges. Fourthly, better cooperation with internal and external stakeholders is needed as well as more intensive dialogue between QA agencies and HEIs. Besides, the level of state intervention into quality assurance processes should be much lower.

Key words: *ESG, ESG 2015, Internal Quality Assurance System, EIQAS Project*

Introduction

In 2005, ministers responsible for higher education in Europe adopted the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance* in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) prepared by the E4 Group, namely ENQA (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education) in cooperation with ESu (European Students' union), EuRASHE (the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education) and EuA (European university Association). In 2012-2015, ESGs were revised to "improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope" since their adoption. EQAR (European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education) and Education International and Business Europe also joined the initial E4 group. This resulted in the adoption of new Standards and Guidelines (ESG 2015) by the ministers in the ministerial Conference in Yerevan in May 2015.

Quality assurance in higher education activities should be based on successful implementation of an internal quality assurance system, which provides information on the quality of the institution's activities and provides guidance and recommendations on how to improve these activities. Quality assurance and quality enhancement are thus interconnected, generating trust in the higher education institution's performance.

It is assumed that ESG 2015 apply to all higher education institutions (HEIs) of the EHEA, regardless of study cycle or place of delivery, as a model and a reference document for internal and external quality assurance. A key goal of ESG 2015 is to contribute to a common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching among all stakeholders. The focus of the ESG is on quality assurance related to learning and teaching in higher education, including the learning environment and relevant links to research and innovation. According to ESG 2015, quality assurance should ensure a learning environment in which the content of programmes, learning opportunities and facilities are fit for their purpose.

In this article, we try to answer the question on the usability of ESG standards in building and enhancing own IQA systems, then difficulties in their interpretation and barriers of implementation. In answering these questions we refer to the results of a survey conducted in 178 HEIs in Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Slovenia. We start by presenting the brief information on EIQAS project and the research methodology, next we review the implementation (and challenges) of each ESG standards (chapter 1). And finally we provide the main conclusions.

EIQAS project:

“Enhancing internal quality assurance systems” (EIQAS) was an Erasmus+ Strategic Partnership project approved for funding in autumn 2014. EIQAS was a joint initiative of national QA agencies and Rectors’ Conferences and/or HEIs. Partners of the project were: Polska Komisja Akredytacyjna, Konferencja Rektorów Akademickich Szkół Polskich, Agência de Avaliação e Acreditação do Ensino Superior, Conselho Reitores das universidades Portuguesas, universidade do minho, nacionalna agencija RS za kakovost v visokem solstvu, univerza v novi Gorici, univerza v ljubljani, nacionalna Agencija za Ocenjavane i Akreditacija. First of all, the partners were chosen to represent both QA agencies and HEIs in order to integrate external and internal QA perspectives. the project had two main objectives. Firstly, it aimed to support HEIs in further development of their internal quality assurance (IQA) systems by enhancing their awareness and understanding of ESG Part 1. Secondly, it aimed to support national agencies in further development of their methodologies for external assessment of IQA systems at HEIs, thus addressing one of the standards of ESG Part 2.

EIQAS is the project specifically designed to support the development of IQA, bringing together both national QA agencies and HEIs. It produced four main intellectual outputs: a reference framework for comparative analysis of participating agencies’ methodologies for the assessment of IQA as part of EQA; a comparative report on their methodologies; Guide to IQA featuring more detailed practical guidelines on ESG Part 1 and best practice examples and Student Guide to ESG Part 1. the project was directly targeted at all HEIs, QA agencies and their external experts, including students, in the participating countries. Indirectly, the project addressed QA agencies and HEIs in other countries of the European Higher Education Area thanks to dissemination activities.

EIQAS was expected to have immediate impact on its target group including project partners and participants and non-participating HEIs in terms of enhanced awareness and understanding of ESG Part 1 and innovative practice in IQA. In the case of partners and participants, it was achieved through their direct involvement in, and contribution to, project activities, in particular work carried out in the WPGs and training events. For non-participating HEIs, this ‘enhanced capacity’ effect was achieved thanks to the Guide to IQA and the Students’ Guide to ESG available to all and used by HEIs when developing their IQA systems, and through dissemination activities. more details about EIQAS project at: <http://www.eiqas.com>.

EIQAS survey on ESG Part 1 & IQA:

Pursuing the first objective of EIQAS, the survey aimed to collect data on the whole progress that HEIs had made in the implementation of their IQA systems, the extent to which (elements of) Part 1 ESG were integrated into their IQA systems, and the problems HEIs had faced and/or might face when integrating the ESG into

their IQA systems. The survey findings fed into an EIQAS training Seminar on IQA and the ESG for HEIs that was held in Warsaw in June 2015. Together with suggestions and conclusions from the seminar, they were also used to develop the above-mentioned Guide to IQA which will be available to all HEIs concerned.

Since EIQAS was a forward-looking project, the survey was based on the BFuG-endorsed draft of the revised ESG, which, to a large extent, overlaps with the 2005 version. As ESG were approved in May 2015, HEIs were not expected to have the new ESG elements in place, though some might have integrated such or similar elements into their IQA systems regardless of the ESG.

The questionnaire was designed to provide mainly quantitative data as a basis for an in-depth and qualitative analysis during the EIQAS training Seminar on ESG & IQA. It comprised 40 questions. General questions about IQA systems covered, in particular, the period when a HEI started implementing its system and the main motivation behind the decision to do so, the scope of the system, progress in its implementation across the institution and problems encountered, beneficial changes resulting from its operation, general links with the ESG and activities undertaken to raise internal awareness of the ESG. These were followed by detailed questions about procedures, processes and/or other arrangements covered under each of Part 1 ESG. HEIs were also requested to identify the ESG which had been or could be most difficult to implement, and those where they would need more clarification and guidelines.

The survey was conducted online between the 3rd of February and the 3rd of March 2015. A total of 178 HEIs responded to the survey questionnaire. The majority of respondents come from Poland (116), then Portugal (42), Slovenia (11) and Bulgaria (9) (see Figure 1).

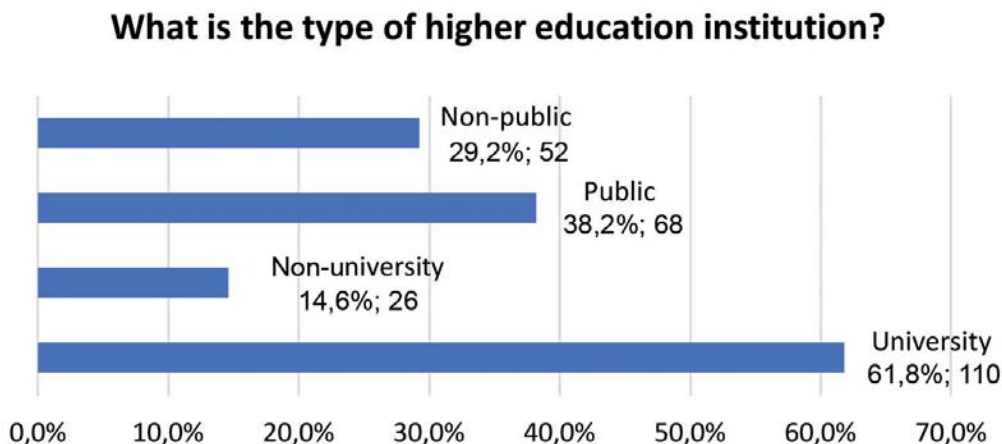
Figure 1: No of Invited HEIs v. No of Responding HEIs

Country	Total number of HEIs	Invited HEIs to fill in the survey questionnaire	Percentage of invited HEIs in total number of HEIs	Number of responding HEIs
Bulgaria	52	11	21%	11
Poland	431	431	27%	116
Portugal	108	108	39%	42
Slovenia	56	9	16%	9

Source: Cross-country report, 2015

The majority of respondents came from university type HEIs (61,8%) and from public sector (38,2%) while only 14,6% of respondents were from non-university HEIs and 29,2% from non-public sector (Fig.2).

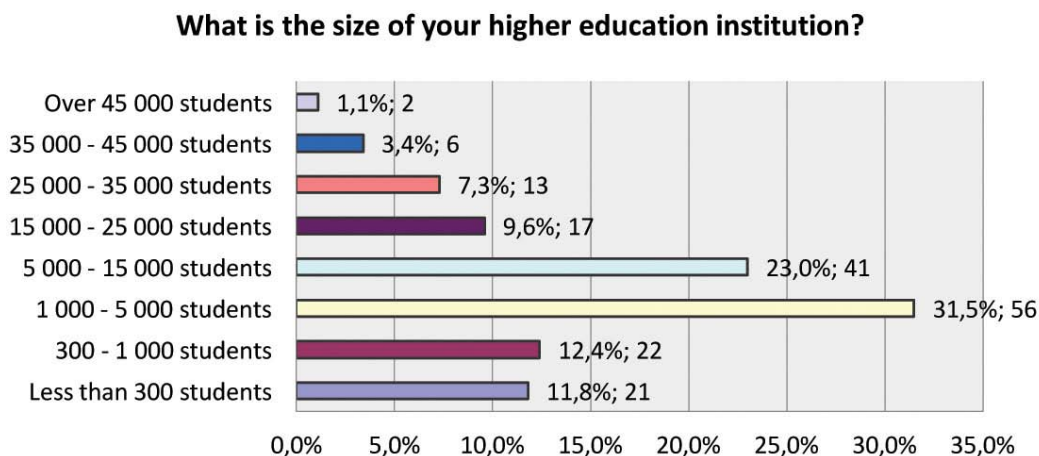
Figure 2



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

HEIs with the number of students ranging from 1000 to 5000 and from 5000 to 25 000 constituted the majority of respondents. Details on the size of the HEIs participating in the survey are shown below:

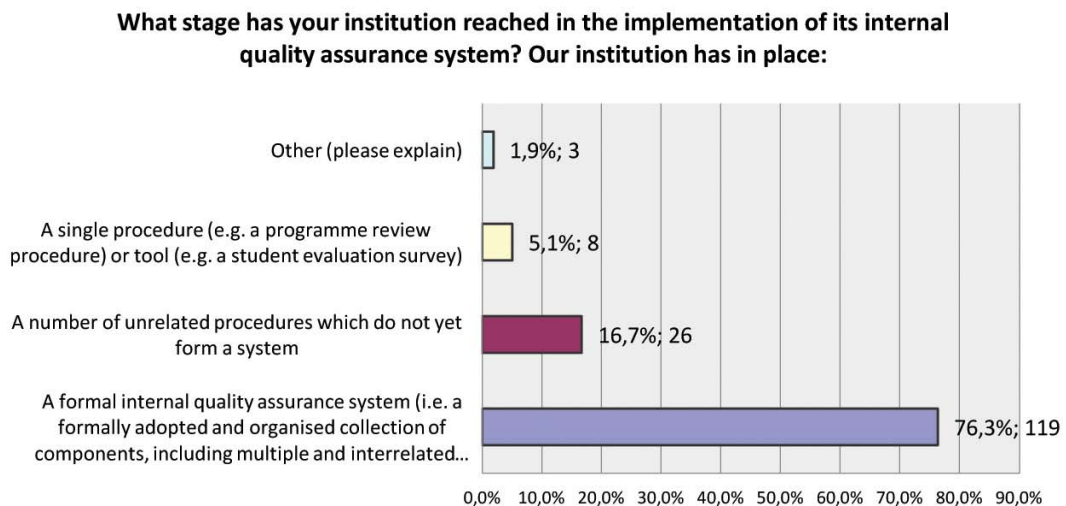
Figure 3



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

When we asked about the stage of implementation of IQAs, the majority of responding HEIs (76,3%) confirmed that their IQA systems have reached the formal implementation. The remaining 16,7% declared that they have a number of unrelated procedures which do not yet form a system and 5,1% have only a single procedure or tool. The “Other” answers showed that implementation of IQAs or their procedures are still in progress. 22 out of 178 respondents skipped the question.

Figure 4



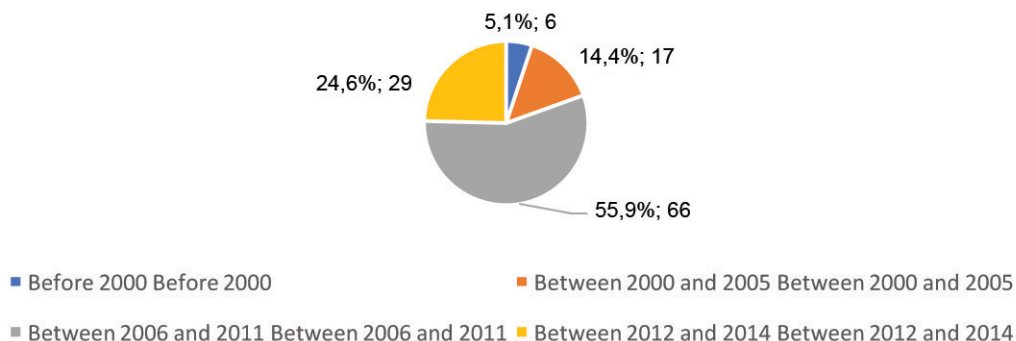
Source: Cross-country report, 2015

In most of the cases (55,9%) IQAs were established between 2006 and 2011 and were mainly prompted by national requirements (46,6%) (e.g. in 2007 requirements came into force in Poland, in 2006 in Slovenia QA agency SQAA was founded, or in 2009 in Portugal QA agency A3ES was established). It is worth to be mentioned that in Bulgaria, in contrast to the other partner countries, 100% of responding HEIs declared that they established IQAs on their own decision and between 2006-2011 all had IQAs in place. On basis of survey results we can also observe further intensive development of formal IQA systems between 2012 and 2014 (24,6%) which could be caused by e.g. further legislative changes at the same time in Poland and at the same time relevant requirements for IQA.

The breakdown of responses is presented below (still 60 out of 178 respondents skipped the questions):

Figure 5

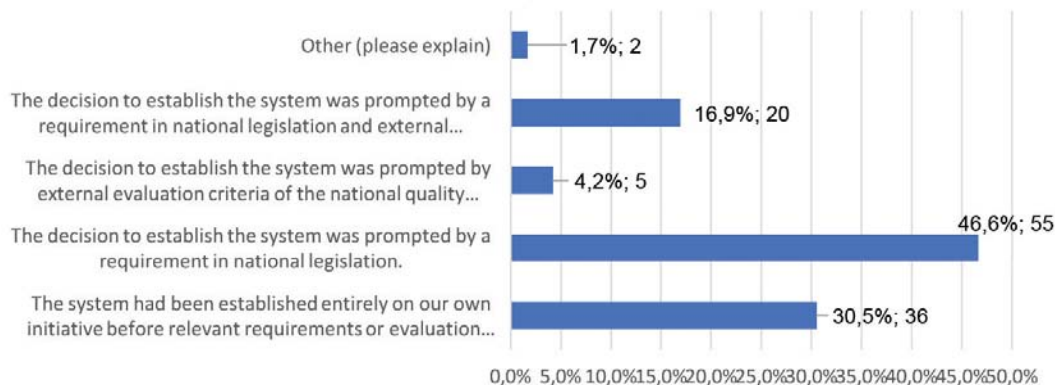
When did your institution start establishing a formal internal quality assurance system?



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

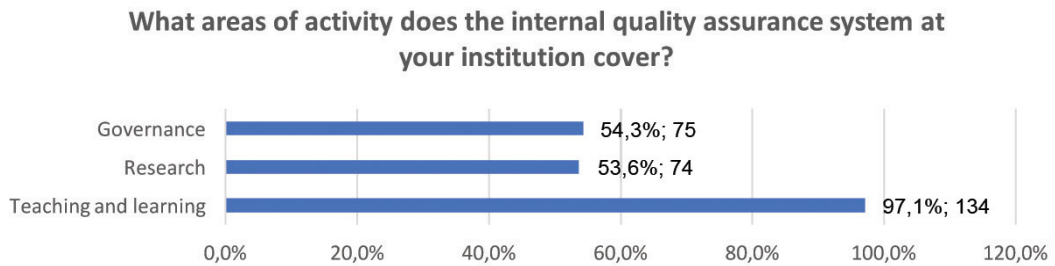
Figure 6

What prompted your institution to establish a formal internal quality assurance system?



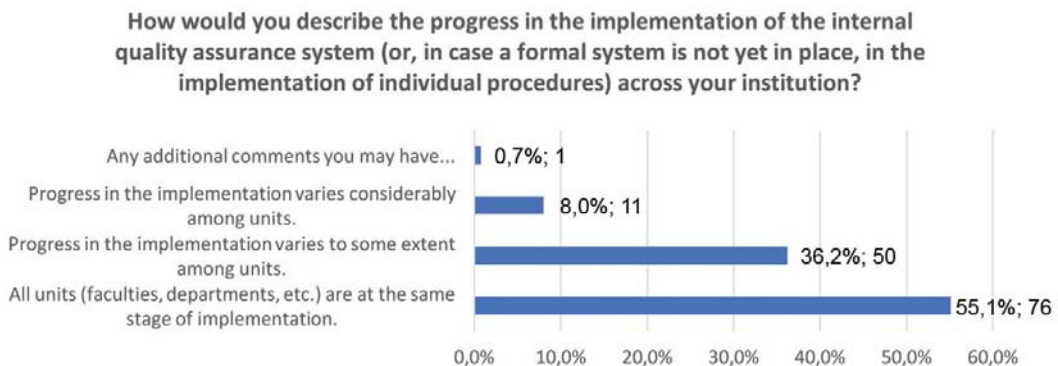
Source: Cross-country report, 2015

In 97.1% of cases the IQA systems cover teaching and learning activity, while research and governance is covered only in 53.6% and 54.3 % of responses. A great number of HEIs (29%) also decided to skip the question. Although there were only 138 answered questions and 40 skipped questions about the covered areas, the results confirm what the common sense is. Research and governance are not usually included in the IQA systems. There is clearly much room for improvement in this area in most of the HEIs, even in those that have their IQA systems more consolidated.

Figure 7

Source: Cross-country report, 2015

more than half of responding HEIs confirmed that IQA system covers all units (faculties, departments, etc.), while in 36,2% of the cases the progress of implementation varies to some extent or in 8% considerably. 22% of responding HEIs decided to skip the question. The detailed level of implementation of the IQA system in individual units of the HEIs is shown below:

Figure 8

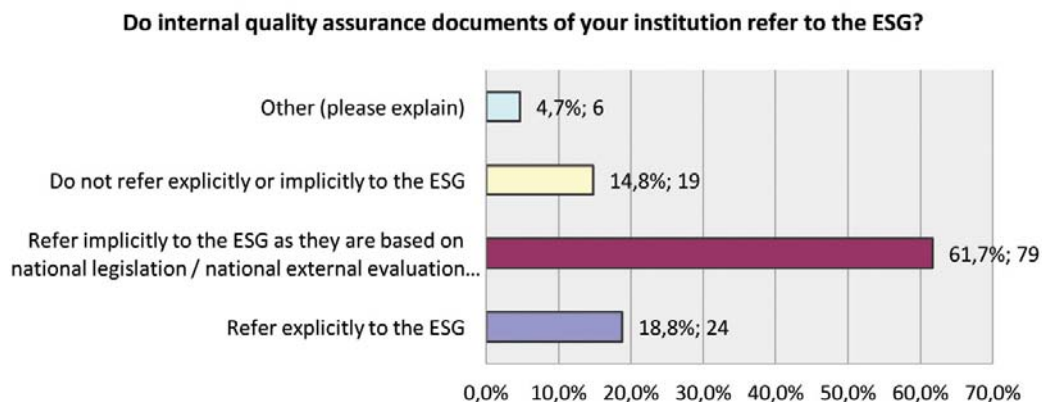
Source: Cross-country report, 2015

Respondents from all countries identified slightly different main groups of problems even though there were some commonalities in individual answers (e.g. lack of qualified staff, involvement of stakeholders and bureaucracy when developing or implementing their IQA systems. In all countries respondents observe rather similar beneficial qualitative and quantitative changes or innovative practices introduced on the basis of evidence collected through the internal quality assurance system).

According to the majority of responding HEIs (61.7%), IQA documents refer indirectly to the ESG as they are based on national legislation/national external evaluation criteria in which the ESG are integrated. At the same time 50 respondents out of 178 decided to skip the question, which might indicate some problems in that

area or law awareness of ESG Part 1 components. The IQA systems of responding HEIs vary with regards to their reference to the ESG, as it is shown below:

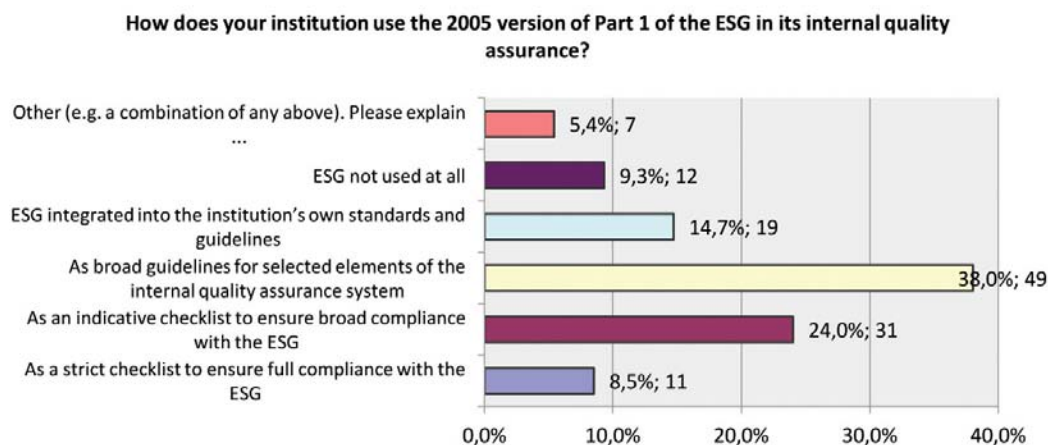
Figure 9



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

most of the HEIs (38%) use the current version of ESG as broad guidelines for selected elements of the internal quality assurance system. The rest of the HEIs use the ESG as an indicative checklist to ensure broad compliance with the ESG (24%), or they have integrated the ESG into their own standards and guidelines (14.7%). Over 9.3% HEIs use no ESG at all.

Figure 10



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

Only 31.5% of HEIs organised training events or seminars specifically dedicated to the ESG (e.g. in Bulgaria none of the responding HEIs organized any training events or seminar specifically devoted to the ESG). The majority of HEIs (38.6%)

held training events and seminars on internal quality assurance where the ESG were not explicitly discussed. 51 out of 178 decided to skip the question.

Findings:

Over the past two decades, HEIs in the four countries have witnessed pronounced and dynamic development of IQAs. In all the countries, external bodies responsible for QA were established. moreover, some crucial changes were introduced to laws on higher education systems, which in some cases imposed legal requirements to establish IQA systems. HEIs have adopted more systematic approaches to IQA and to the formalisation of solutions to this issue. At present, HEIs have IQA systems in place, whose functioning varies greatly between individual faculties/units and fields of study. Certain lack of consistency and sophistication can be attributed to rather low level of awareness of quality management principles among internal stakeholders, especially teaching staff, and their reluctance to change. Quality managers still meet internal and external obstacles in developing adequate IQAs, but at the same time they provide many good examples of activities undertaken in that area and observe beneficial qualitative and quantitative changes. Besides, frequent changes of legal requirements cause dissatisfaction among those involved in IQA at managerial and operational levels. HEIs often declare difficulties related to bureaucracy, which can be considered a sensitive issue in the higher education and quality assurance system at the moment.

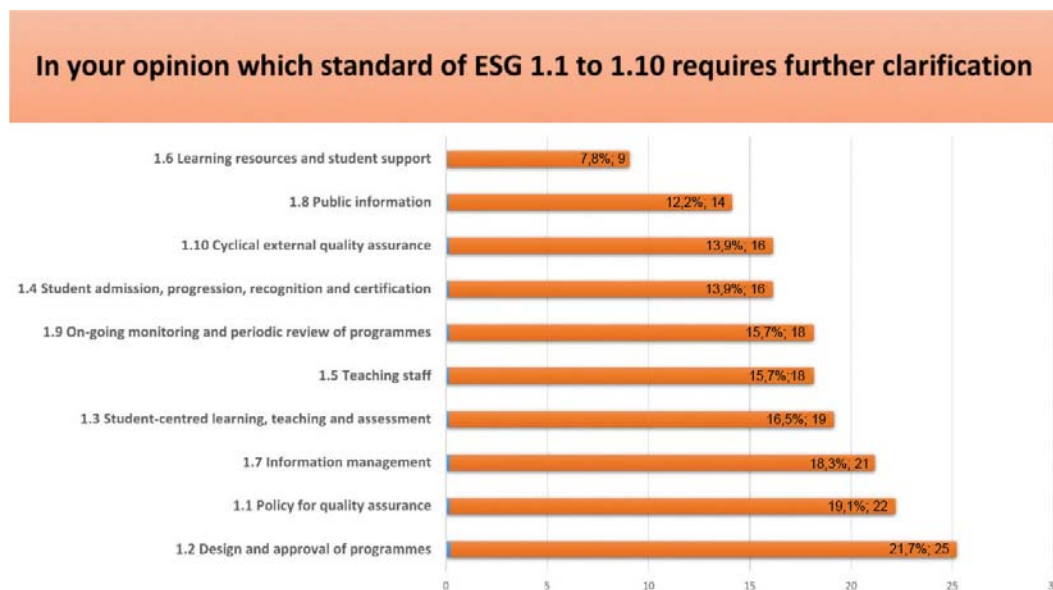
The development of those systems and their effectiveness is monitored on an ongoing basis and evaluated by QA agencies. All agencies in partner countries have been externally reviewed for the purpose of full membership of ENQA. The continuous improvement of the agencies' external quality assurance systems is a priority for their future operations.

As for the progress in ESG implementation made so far and measured on the basis of the survey results, it is not feasible to perform a comparative study with the previous period, as no similar study has been conducted in the four countries. moreover, it is not possible to establish any correlation between the implementation of individual ESG standards at HEIs and its timing. It has only been confirmed that intensive development of IQA took place between 2006 and 2011 and after 2011. All ESG standards correspond to different activities of HEIs, which was reflected in the survey results and examples given by the respondents. ESG are treated rather as a broad framework for further IQA activities.

As for the revised ESG 2015, the results of the survey showed that HEIs are willing and ready to follow them, despite the short history of IQA systems development in some countries and the degree of their advancement. Some HEIs, which were aware of beneficial changes in quality management and of the importance of quality culture, decided to introduce and develop IQA systems on their own initiative, without external pressure. Nevertheless, further clarifications of individual standards and their popularisation is highly required, since the majority of respondents still identify internal and external obstacles in applying revised ESG. the results of the survey

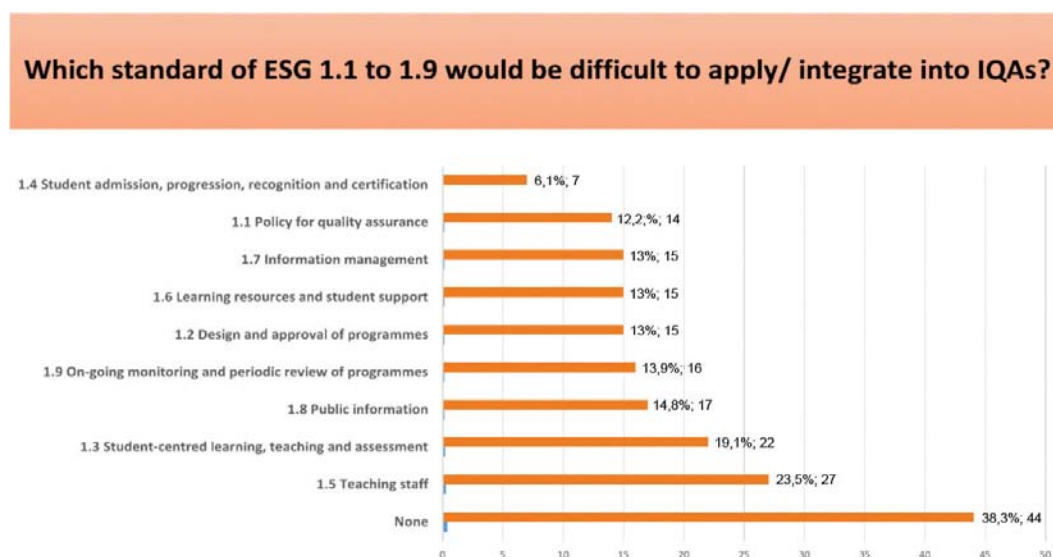
and the need for further support in IQA enhancement expressed by HEIs should result in activities at the national level (policy makers, QA agencies, conferences of rectors) as well as at the European level (ESu, EuRASHE, EnQA etc.).

Figure 11



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

Figure 12



Source: Cross-country report, 2015

ESG 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 (ESG 2015, 11).

Approximately 60% of the HEIs that responded to the survey have a published policy for quality assurance and external stakeholders were involved in both the development and implementation of the policy. In most cases quality strategic goals are directly incorporated by HEIs into strategic plans and they do not develop separate documents for their quality assurance policy. Cooperation with external stakeholders shows an increasing tendency for the last few years and confirms the response of the HE sector to the labour market needs. This standard corresponds to the procedure for initiating, discussing, implementing, as well as assessing QA strategy and/or policy. The institution's policy for QA must be visible and planned for all dimensions of HEIs operation (teaching, learning, research, collaboration with environment, strategic planning, involvement of internal and external stakeholders etc.).

The main challenges to the implementation of a given standard include:

- Placing accountability and enhancement under one roof of internal quality assurance;
- tailoring internal quality assurance systems to the needs and expectations of stakeholders;
- Designing clear, realistic and measurable quality goals;
- Developing quality culture that is visible at all levels and embedded in academic tradition;
- Involving external stakeholders is pivotal for the development and implementation of quality assurance policy;
- Complex and flexible structures for quality assurance and management;
- Resistance of academic staff to be involved in quality assurance;
- Fostering internal discussion on quality assurance across a HEI;
- Developing common quality-taxonomy among all stakeholder groups;
- Overcoming prejudice towards cooperation with external stakeholders;
- Operationalisation of quality assurance policy;
- Regular monitoring of quality assurance policy implementation.

ESG 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 (ESG 2015, p. 11).

the procedure for design and approval of programmes is not followed in all fields of study in all the HEIs of the four countries of the project. While the approval procedure does not generate a problem for respondents, the designing procedure is declared as a weakness. nevertheless, the majority of programmes are designed in line with institutional strategies, mission statements and vision and refer to the National Qualification Framework. The involvement of external stakeholders in the procedure of design and approval still requires more attention. External stakeholders include, for example, alumni, graduates, employers from the business or public sector, other business partners, mentors, etc.

the main challenges to the implementation of a given standard include:

- Over-regulation and frequent changes of national legislations; overwhelming bureaucracy and lack of autonomy of HEIs are regarded as the main obstacles in some countries;
- Difficulties with the definition and validation of intended learning outcomes and difficulties with involving external stakeholders are also relevant. There is a distance between HEIs and external stakeholders at different levels. They have different aims, different timelines and they speak different languages. It is not only perceived in a sense of real distance, but also as cultural and understanding difference. Both groups communicate in different languages and it is necessary to develop a common understanding. there is a need for appropriate “wording” to define I.O. as HEIs and external stakeholders “speak different languages”;
- Random design of the programmes without internal consistency between course design can form a barrier;
- Effective communication between HEIs and all stakeholders should be enhanced;
- HEIs should establish a cyclical link between Standard 1.2 and 1.9 (to obtain relevant feedback).

ESG 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. (ESG 2015, 12).

Students are systematically involved in IQA activity, and student-centred learning, teaching and assessment is said to be well understood by HEIs all over the four countries. However, the actual implementation of this range of issues in the revised ESG should be more fully addressed.

Fairness and consistency achieved through the procedure of student assessment was quite misunderstood by most HEIs and over 62% respondents decided to skip the question.

The main challenges in the implementation of given standard are recognized in:

Goals and paradigm shifts

- Increased motivation and engagement of students in the learning process;
- Higher efficiency of study process;
- Empowering students for their future life, by developing interpersonal and intercultural competences etc. and above all, the ability to learn how to learn in various settings (ESu 2015, 31);
- making l&t a core priority of HEIs (often neglected in view of the importance of the research activities);
- Promoting mutual respect between students and teachers;
- Acknowledging students are not empty vessels waiting to be filled with knowledge (ESu 2015, 1);
- “Putting the students in the driver’s seat of their learning experience and facilitating the process of learning to learn” (ESu 2015, 1);
- viewing students as co-producers of knowledge and part of the academic society (ESu 2015, 1).

Principles of SC1 (ESu 2015, 5–7):

- SC1 requires an ongoing reflexive process (clashes with SC1 as a standard);
- SC1 does not have a “One-Size-Fits-All” Solution;
- Students have different learning styles;
- Students have different needs and interests;
- Choice is central to effective learning in SC1;

- Students have different experiences and background knowledge;
- Students should have control over their learning (e.g. involvement in curricular development);
- SC1 is about enabling, not telling;
- Learning needs cooperation between students and staff.

ESG 1.4. Student admission, progression, recognition and certification

Institution should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of students “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification. (ESG 2015, 13).

Standard 1.4. addresses student’s life-cycle, from admission to progression, recognition and certification. HEIs apply consistent regulations concerning student admission, recognition and certification in the four countries. At present, the development of regulation on the recognition of non-formal and informal learning pose a great challenge for the development of IQAs. The recognition of progression in joint programmes and foreign qualifications are the most critical issues in the frame of this standard.

The main challenges in the implementation of given standard are recognized in:

- Adopted procedures should cover efficiently all phases of a student life cycle, not just admission and graduation;
- monitoring the academic progress of students along the study programme is essential to establish a functional alumni network, to assure the collaboration with external organizations as potential employers and national Academic Recognition Information Centres (EnIC/nARIC);
- With regard to formal, informal and non-informal education, a substantial level of efforts should be made to develop standards to evaluate and recognize these learning processes in situ and in mobility- students are important internal stakeholders therefore should be included in all these processes through appropriate protocols.

ESG 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 (ESG 2015, 13).

In the four countries participating in EIQAS project, teaching staff is assessed on a regular basis since, in some cases, it is required by national regulations. The remaining activities which include professional development opportunities provided to teaching staff, incentives to encourage the professional development of teaching staff, incentives to encourage the use of new technologies in teaching, or mechanism for rewarding teaching achievements vary greatly among units and fields of study. The main problem is linked to the regular monitoring of teaching staff satisfaction.

The main challenges of the implementation of a given standard include:

- Insufficient knowledge/skills in the scope of LO (learning outcomes) and innovative pedagogy/teaching;
- Limited, if any, incentives – more frequently demotivation (e.g. no raise or even decrease in salary);
- Problems with teaching staff assessment rules/criteria:
 - difficulty in defining criteria for effectiveness/excellence in teaching,
 - focus on research – little recognition for excellence in teaching,
 - limited transparency,
 - uniformity (disciplines differ with regard to teaching styles).

ESG 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 (ESG 2015, 14).

The implementation of ESG 1.6. varies greatly among different fields of study and units through the four countries. At present, all of responding HEIs provide academic, financial and personal advice to students. Besides, they have in place a mechanism for informing students about the support and services available. At the same time there are still HEIs which declare that they do not have a mechanism for assessing the adequacy and accessibility of learning resources or student support, or do not have in place procedures to ensure that administrative staff is properly qualified to deliver support services.

The main challenges in the implementation of given standard are recognized in:

- The popularisation of higher education resulting in an increased demand for resources supporting education, students and doctoral students. An increase in the number of education process participants and the need for the equal and active inclusion of all people receiving an education requires focussing on groups with special needs which, in turn, necessitates higher and higher expenditure;

- Economic and political limitations are the reason why HEIs find it challenging to establish contact and enter into strategic cooperation and partnership with appropriate organisations and companies, including other HEIs and the social and economic environment, in order to raise the quality of resources and support provided in the process of education;
- the need for designing and implementing effective solutions including the planning, monitoring, evaluation and improvement of resources and support offered to students and doctoral students.

ESG 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 (ESG 2015, 14).

the majority of HEIs have a formal mechanism for analysing and using data collecting for quality assurance enhancement purposes (e.g. key performance indicators, profile of the student population, student progression, success and drop-out rates, students' satisfaction with programmes etc.) It shows a fairly good observance of standard requirements by HEIs.

the main challenges in the implementation of given standard are recognized in:

- low compatibility between changing and different informational systems (and also different databases);
- lack of awareness of the importance of analysing data for the purpose of improving the internal quality system (IQA system);
- lack of adequate and sufficient response/feedback from stakeholders (Alumni, employers etc.);
- Inadequate fragmentation of data-collection, data-analysis and data-interpretation (collecting data, analysing data, identifying facts);
- Identified poor response rate from the stakeholders.

ESG 1.8. Public information

Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible (ESG 2015, 15).

HEIs in these four countries provide full information about the programmes they offer, including admission criteria, full curricula, syllabuses etc. However, some

of them declare that some legal requirements (data protection law) might hinder public information activities.

the main challenges in the implementation of a given standard are recognized in:

- Distinguishing the marketing activities from the public information;
- Assuring objectivity and accuracy in the information published;
- Providing transparent information about the programmes while protecting intellectual property rights (i.e. syllabi, course composition, etc.);
- Reassuring public confidence in reliability of the information provided.

ESG 1.9. On-going monitoring and periodic reviews 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 (ESG 2015, p. 15).

Standard 1.9 is strongly linked with Standard 1.2. the most important critical issue is also the involvement of the external stakeholders in the on-going monitoring and periodic reviews of programmes all over the four countries.

the main challenges to the implementation of a given standard include:

- Lack of funding that affects the implementation of the standards, since the institutions are understaffed and lack financial resources;
- Low levels of engagement and motivation of students (in certain cases also staff) are perceived as an obstacle;
- Lack of understanding of the objectives of the process.

ESG. 1.10. Cyclical external quality assurance

Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis (ESG 2015, 15).

According to the HEIs of the four countries, the external evaluation methodology of quality assurance agencies could be improved in the aspect of the criteria and methodology of assessment, time and quality-related costs, trainings of experts, as well as further support and consultancy. The complex and multi-area impact study on influence of EQA on IQA could improve the knowledge of quality assurance agency and its adjustment to relevant expectations and needs.

the main challenges of a given standard's implementation are as follow:

- Interest in the analysis of EQA's impact on IQA is still very limited;
- legislative framework may disturb the efficiency and relation between EQA and IQA processes;
- Bridging the gap between EQA and IQA is still relevant and poses a challenge to HEIs and QAAs.

Final Conclusions:

Creating modern and ESG-based IQA systems is a relatively new phenomenon in the analyzed countries. there are still about one-fourth of the surveyed universities that did not provide any evidence confirming existence of systemic solutions in quality assurance. For most HEIs the impetus for the development of IQA systems were external requirements rather than their own needs. The systems mainly cover teaching and learning processes, but only to some extent research and university governance. the overall level of awareness and usability of ESG in the construction of IQAS is relatively high, as it constitutes a reference point for 80% of universities. there is considerable variation in the implementation of ESG standards across universities, their units and fields of studies. not all ESG standards are equally understandable, and the main difficulties in their implementation relate primarily to those which determine the effectiveness of the learning and teaching processes (standard 1.5 and 1.3). In spite of the fact that 38,3% of responding HEIs do not have difficulty in integrating the revised standards for ESG in their local IQA systems, the remaining HEIs are still identifying a number of internal and external obstacles which might prevent full compliance with the ESG standards such as stakeholders' reluctance, insufficient resources, organizational deficiencies, ambiguity of legal regulations, lack of financial support, weak support from external quality assurance providers etc.

The survey results showed the need for further improvement of EQA at national level. this can be achieved by a stronger involvement of external stakeholders in the development of assessment criteria and procedures, a rethinking of the pilot procedures approach, introducing the process of clarification and information supported by the consultancy services of the agency, systematic approach to experts' training, internationalization of assessment procedures and delivering an impact study on EQA versus IQA. the reduction of legal restrictions hindering creation and functioning IQAS is needed.

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