



European
Commission

Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education: literature review and mapping national practices

Analytical report



Education and
Training

Please cite this publication as:

Šćukanec Schmidt, N., Skledar Matijević, A, and Anić, Z. (2023). 'Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education', *NESET report*, Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union. doi: 10.2766/146281.

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Linking quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education

Literature review and mapping national practices

Analytical report

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PDF

ISBN 978-92-76-55844-6

doi: 10.2766/146281

NC-07-22-853-EN-N

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

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Executive summary

1. Introduction

This report explores the possible links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education at European level, within national higher education systems and at higher education institutions (HEIs) within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Education Area (EEA). Before explaining the possible links between these two policy areas, the report provides a comprehensive overview of the development of quality assurance, followed by an overview of the development of the social dimension within the EHEA and EEA. These overviews inform the third chapter of our analysis, which refers to the potential intersections or points of contact between the two policies, and highlight open questions that require further consideration. The fourth chapter of the report demonstrates to what extent and in which ways policymakers in selected countries have incorporated the principles of the social dimension into their national quality assurance systems and procedures. Lastly, the main conclusions are provided at the end of this report, together with policy recommendations on how quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education could reinforce each other.

2. Key terms and concepts: an overview of policy development

2.1. Quality assurance in higher education

The Bologna implementation report 2020 notes several different factors influencing the development and subsequent enhancement of quality assurance systems and processes in member countries of the Bologna process. In addition to a need to 'ensure confidence in the quality of educational provision' (EC-Eurydice, 2020) but also in HEIs, systems wanted to ensure 'a valuable return on the public investment in higher education' (EC-Eurydice, 2020:62). Since the implementation of the Bologna Process boosted the mobility of students across Europe, stakeholders in higher education have had to respond to the challenges of 'transnational education' (Prague Communiqué, 2001). In this regard, the exchange of students between countries has added another important motivation for the development of comparable criteria and methodologies – programmes and qualifications need to be assessed and assured against a common framework.

In the period between the Bologna declaration in 1999 and the second version of the European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) in 2015, the development of quality assurance at European, national and institutional levels was immense. Strategic documents, policies, official bodies and national agencies began to be developed, adopted and implemented at all three levels (European level, national level, and at the level of HEIs).

Key dates and milestones in the development of quality assurance for higher education in Europe

- 2000 Establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA). This was conceived as a membership association for quality assurance agencies for higher education from across the EHEA. The ENQA's main activities have been the provision of services and networking, as well as the sharing and dissemination of information, expertise and good practices, and involvement in projects and partnerships with stakeholders on quality assurance in higher education (ENQA, 2020).

- 2003 Definition of key principles for the European approach to quality assurance and the establishment of the 'E4' group: the ENQA, European University Association (EUA), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and the European Student Information Bureau (ESIB).
- 2005 Adoption of the first Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Over the 10 years that followed, the ESG served as a strategic document offering a common quality assurance framework at EHEA level. In 2005, each of the 40 states comprising the EHEA signed up to the ESG 2005.
- 2008 The Europe Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was established. EQAR maintains a register of national quality assurance agencies compliant with the ESG, and is a source of easily accessible and reliable information about quality assurance agencies and their activities.
- 2015 Adoption of the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015).
The changes introduced by the ESG 2015 reflected the changes that had occurred in higher education systems in the EHEA since the adoption of ESG 2005.
- 2018 EQAR launched the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), in which EQAR-registered agencies publish their reports and decisions regarding evaluations of HEIs and their study programmes.

2.2. The social dimension of higher education

The term *social dimension of higher education* was introduced by the Bologna Process in 2001, on the initiative of student representatives. Since that time, the notion of a social dimension has been embedded into the policy objectives of the Bologna Process, rather than being derived from the research that informed these policy objectives. The notion of a social dimension therefore appears in numerous ministerial communiqués of the Bologna Process, and has primarily been used within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). The latest 2020 Bologna Process communiqué from Rome strives to provide the first official definition of the social dimension in the EHEA. It takes as its starting point that 'the composition of the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA countries'. It also stresses that 'the social dimension encompasses the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity and is responsive to the needs of local communities' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b). Therefore, this definition of the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA encompasses three interconnected concepts: diversity, equity and inclusion.

EU policy documents relating to higher education, on the other hand, tend not to use the term *social dimension* and instead use the terms *diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education*. In this regard, numerous policy documents issued by the European Commission and other EU bodies over the past 20 years have declared the fostering of diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education as objectives of the highest importance.

Key dates and milestones in the development of the social dimension within the Bologna Process and the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)

- 2001 Prague Communiqué: the social dimension relates to the inclusion of underrepresented students.
- 2003 Berlin Communiqué: the social dimension relates to widening access.
- 2005 Bergen Communiqué: the social dimension relates to equitable access.

- 2007 London Communiqué: the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large (the meaning of social dimension was outlined for the first time).
- 2009 Leuven Communiqué: the social dimension relates to widening participation.
- 2012 Bucharest Communiqué: the social dimension relates to flexible learning paths and alternative access routes.
- 2015 Yerevan Communiqué: strategy for the social dimension and link to lifelong learning.
- 2018 Paris Communiqué: the need was recognised to develop a coherent policy framework for the social dimension.
- 2020 Rome Communiqué: the first official definition of the social dimension and the formulation of principles and guidelines for the social dimension. These represent a 'game-changer' for the further development of social dimension in the EHEA.
- 2021- Significant progress in the further development of the social dimension within the EHEA. The 2021-2024 BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension successfully continued the work of the previous highly effective 2018-2020 BFUG Advisory Group on Social Dimension, and by the end of 2022 created a proposal of indicators for Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension (BFUG, 2022b).

It is expected that the EHEA ministers for higher education will adopt the new EHEA architecture for the social dimension of higher education at the Tirana Ministerial Conference in June 2024 (BFUG, 2022a). This new architecture will consist of:

- the previously adopted Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension in Higher Education (in 2020),
- the indicators for the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension, with corresponding explanatory descriptors.

Recent developments relating to the social dimension of higher education within the EU and European-level organisations

In the Communication from the Commission on achieving the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 (European Commission, 2020), one of the six dimensions necessary for the further development of the EEA refers to inclusion and gender equality. Inclusion is perceived as 'a key objective to ensure accessible HEIs, open to a diverse student and researcher body, and offering more opportunities for lifelong learning'.

One of the three priorities for action set out in the European University Association's vision for 2030 ('Universities Without Walls', EUA, 2021) relates to the strengthening of universities' civic engagement, in which social inclusion, diversity and equity play important roles. The European Strategy for Universities (EC, 2022) in one of its four objectives for 2024 focuses on supporting 'universities as lighthouses of our European way of life' emphasising (1) quality and relevance for future-proof skills; (2) diversity and inclusion; and (3) democratic practices, fundamental rights, academic values and freedom of scientific research.

The European Universities initiative is also a flagship initiative of the European Strategy for Universities. Since the missions of some European Universities aim to foster diversity, equity and inclusion, the European Universities initiative represents a long-term opportunity to foster the social dimension of higher education.

3. Links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education

3.1. EHEA and EEA level

Quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and European Education Area (EEA) have reached a point in their development at which explicit links could be created between the two policies, particularly through the analysis of strategically important documents – ‘Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA’ (ESG 2015) and ‘Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA’¹ (2020). These two strategic documents, which outline the two policies at EHEA level, contain lists of points of contact that could be connected.

It should be noted, however, that ESG 2015 does not include an explicit link to the social dimension. Nevertheless, some of its standards refer to the recognition of diversity of students and their needs, flexible learning paths, non-formal and informal learning, and the importance of securing counselling and other resources to support students (which are of particular importance for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students). All of these correspond to underlying ideas of the social dimension. Thus, even though the references to the social dimension in the ESG 2015 are not direct, the concept of diversity and the need for support deriving from such diversity, as well as the necessity to respond to the needs of students and society, are visible in this document in the context of quality assurance.

Meanwhile, the Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension have sought potential points of interaction with quality assurance. Looking at the Principles and Guidelines through the lens of quality assurance reveals that there are indeed direct references to quality assurance in the principles and the guidelines for the social dimension in higher education. The EC-Eurydice (2022) report ‘Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe’ and its indicators suggest that external quality assurance procedures could motivate HEIs to create an inclusive environment that fosters diversity, equity, inclusion and responsiveness to the needs of their local communities. Furthermore, the report suggests that the social dimension of higher education could make quality assurance systems in higher education more relevant to society and more responsive to the needs of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in higher education.

However, even though the Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension perceive quality assurance mechanisms as tools to help reinforce the implementation of policies relating to the social dimension, there are concerns that ESG 2015 do not allow such connections to be made. The development of the EHEA principles, guidelines and indicators for the social dimension therefore needs to take into account the autonomy of national public authorities, quality assurance agencies and HEIs. Each of these bodies should be able to implement the agreed EHEA policies in the way most suited to their context.

At present, it is difficult to predict the future course of events, and two questions arise regarding the social dimension. First, it remains to be seen if the Principles and Guidelines will have the same strength in terms of the implementation of policy regarding the social dimension as the ESG has had in terms of quality assurance – and if so, which body/bodies will be in charge of monitoring. As yet, no system is in place for monitoring the social dimension of higher education, either at EHEA or at EEA level. In addition, there is currently no indication that a new system to support the social dimension will be created, along the lines of the quality assurance framework, which includes ENQA, EQAR and national

¹ Henceforth in the text of the executive summary, we use the abbreviation ‘Principles and Guidelines’ instead of the full name of this document.

agencies which oversee the implementation of ESG 2015. Neither is there any indication that this existing quality assurance framework will be expanded to include the task of overseeing the implementation of Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension of higher education. Only when such systems are established at EHEA and/or EEA level will national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms be developed.

The second open question refers to the ESG, and whether a possible future iteration of this document will be expanded to include standards and criteria for the social dimension. Furthermore, the upcoming 2024 Tirana Ministerial Communiqué will demonstrate whether the EHEA member states will adopt the new indicators for the principles of the social dimension of higher education, which might establish a link between the social dimension principles and quality assurance in higher education (BFUG, 2022b).

3.2. National level

The data presented in the EC-Eurydice report (2022) demonstrate that in some European countries, the existing national quality assurance systems and national social dimension initiatives have already started to communicate with one another. In some European countries, strategic documents regarding the social dimension of higher education contain references to quality assurance. Also, national standards and criteria for external quality assurance in some European countries already include references to the social dimension, and national quality agencies are evaluating the implementation of policies on the social dimension. The generic nature of the ESG allows this type of flexibility in implementation, which in turn allows national agencies to adapt their implementation of the ESG to the national context in order to respond to the present needs of national higher education systems.

3.3. Higher education institution level

The EC-Eurydice report (2022) indicates that due to the autonomy of higher education institutions, and because of the large number of HEIs in Europe, it is difficult to systematise existing practices regarding the linking of quality assurance to the social dimension at institutional level. However, this report argues that it is safe to assume that individual HEIs may have in place internal policies and practices to include the social dimension into internal quality assurance that are more developed than has been shown by the survey results at national level (EC-Eurydice, 2022).

An important point to consider at institutional level is building the capacities of staff at HEIs to address quality assurance and issues related to the social dimension. Since quality assurance, as a mature policy at the European, national and institutional level, has a stable tradition, it is safe to assume that staff at HEIs are familiar with the basic concepts of quality assurance. However, according to the EC-Eurydice report (2022), in most European countries recommendations that staff training should be provided with the aim of strengthening staff competences for the creation of inclusive learning environments at HEIs do not even exist. Based on the findings of the EC-Eurydice report regarding staff training in the area of the social dimension, it can be concluded that there is ample room for improvement.

4. Different approaches: a selection of case studies

This section looks at the extent to which particular higher education systems and HEIs support the EHEA Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension, and how this is monitored by both internal and external quality assurance processes. Using data from the EC-Eurydice 2022 report, four cases have been singled out: those of Croatia, Ireland, Catalonia and Austria, which illustrate possible approaches to the inclusion of social

dimension criteria into quality assurance frameworks at national and institutional levels. The findings of this analysis are presented in the table below.

Country / region	National strategic document for the social dimension	National / regional quality assurance standards and criteria include references to the social dimension	Examples of connecting the social dimension and quality assurance at the level of higher education institutions	Additional information
Croatia	National Plan	Yes	Yes	
Ireland	National Access Plan	Yes, some	Yes	There is a reporting procedure regarding the implementation of the National Access Plan, separate from quality assurance.
Catalonia, Spain	Regulated by national law, no separate strategic document	Yes	Yes	Quality assurance is the responsibility of Autonomous Communities (regional level).
Austria	National Strategy	No	Yes	

5. Conclusions and policy recommendations

5. 1. Conclusions

Quality assurance is a more mature policy with an established policy landscape. This consists of a stable EHEA level framework for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance; national quality assurance systems; quality assurance agencies; and institutional quality assurance processes at HEIs. The social dimension, meanwhile, has yet to develop its policy landscape through the implementation of the EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the development of pertinent indicators and descriptors that can steer and facilitate the implementation of policy on the social dimension at European, national and institutional levels.

Evidence regarding existing links between quality assurance and the social dimension at national and institutional levels leads to the conclusion that such links are both possible and welcome. The findings of the EC-Eurydice report (2022) demonstrate that the links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education have already been put to practice at national level in some European countries through external evaluation processes. For example, the cases of Austria, the Spanish region of Catalonia, Croatia and Ireland indicate that these higher education systems have already incorporated the social dimension into the national/regional standards and criteria for quality assurance in higher education, or have found other ways of linking the two policies, depending on their specific contexts. Furthermore, a number of national strategies or action plans for strengthening the social dimension of higher education contain objectives relating to national quality assurance systems.

At the level of HEIs, it is to be expected that various initiatives exist that represent direct responses to the diverse needs of the student body, which encompasses underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups. These needs are addressed through internal quality assurance procedures and institutional strategies for strengthening the social dimension. In addition, the need has become evident for training to be provided to academic and non-

academic staff at HEIs with regard to matters of both quality assurance and the social dimension.

Based on evidence of the existing links between quality assurance and the social dimension at both national and institutional levels, this report concludes that the current quality assurance policies at European level need to catch up with developments at grassroots levels (national and institutional contexts) by including explicit references to the social dimension. It is therefore important to consider the implementation of future changes to the ESG so that it will contain more explicit links to the strengthening of the social dimension of higher education. Meanwhile, the current version of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education (Rome Communiqué, 2020b) should be enlarged in the future to incorporate indicators in relation to the principles of social dimension that will establish links between the social dimension and quality assurance. These future indicators for the social dimension could signal that in some national contexts, quality assurance frameworks could be used to monitor the implementation of the principles of the social dimension.

Based on these conclusions, this report makes recommendations for further actions to link quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education. These are addressed towards three levels: 1) EHEA/EEA level; 2) national level; and 3) higher education institution level.

5.2. Policy recommendations

EHEA and EEA level	
Policy recommendation 1.1	Strengthen the policy framework at EHEA level for the social dimension of higher education
Description	The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) should adopt a new policy framework for the social dimension at the EHEA ministerial conference in 2024. This should consist of principles and guidelines, together with indicators and explanatory descriptors that contain references to quality assurance in higher education. The creation of a new policy framework at EHEA level for the social dimension should not infringe the autonomy of national public authorities, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, which should all be able to implement the EHEA-agreed policies in the way most suited to their context.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG, in consultation with the ENQA, EQAR, EUA, EURASHE, ESU and other relevant stakeholders.
Policy recommendation 1.2	Create synergies between the ESGs and the EHEA frameworks for the social dimension of higher education
Description	Consider implementing changes to the ESG so that they contain more explicit links to strengthening the social dimension of higher education.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG; ENQA, EQAR, EUA, EURASHE, ESU and other relevant stakeholders.
Policy recommendation 1.3	Include the social dimension into any future policy development referring to quality assurance in higher education at EU level
Description	Consider including the perspective of the social dimension, based on the Principles and Guidelines, into new EU policy documents for quality assurance in higher education.
Responsibility for implementation	EU – European Commission

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Policy recommendation 1.4	Maintain the continuity of BFUG/EHEA and EEA working groups focusing on the social dimension and quality enhancement
Description	The BFUG/EHEA (Working Group on Social Dimension) and the EEA working groups (Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training; Working Group on Higher Education) should continue to be active until at least 2030, in order to continuously work on strengthening links between the social dimension and other policy areas in higher education, including quality assurance.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG and the European Commission

NATIONAL LEVEL	
Policy recommendation 2.1	Consider creating synergies between national external quality assurance frameworks and national frameworks for the social dimension of higher education
Description	Consider incorporating references to fostering the social dimension into national external quality assurance standards and criteria, in line with national regulatory contexts, the ESG and BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education.
Responsibility for implementation	National quality assurance agencies
Policy recommendation 2.2	Facilitate policy dialogues on implementing the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education
Description	Engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other relevant stakeholders on how to implement the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines in order to strengthen the social dimension of national higher education systems and higher education institutions.
Responsibility for implementation	Ministries and agencies responsible for higher education, with relevant stakeholders

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION LEVEL	
Policy recommendation 3.1	Consider including the social dimension of higher education among internal quality assurance standards
Description	Higher education institutions should consider including standards and criteria that refer to the social dimension into their existing internal quality assurance procedures, if this is in line with the national regulatory framework for quality assurance in higher education. Consider using the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the ESG as guidelines on how to implement this recommendation.
Responsibility for implementation	Higher education institutions
Policy recommendation 3.2	Support higher education institution staff in addressing the social dimension and quality assurance issues
Description	Higher education institutions should aim to raise awareness about the social dimension and quality assurance among their academic and non-academic staff, and to provide training, guidance and support.
Responsibility for implementation	Higher education institutions, in cooperation with ministries and agencies responsible for higher education

1. Introduction

The importance of quality assurance processes in steering the practices and processes of and within higher education systems and institutions (HEIs) cannot be overstated. However, in addition to evaluations of and recommendations for the programmes, policies and missions of HEIs, quality assurance processes could also convey the goals and agendas of the Bologna process. Among these is the social dimension of higher education. Given this rationale, one should expect many links between quality assurance processes and the social dimension of higher education – at European level, within national higher education systems, and at the level of HEIs within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

Before we explain the possible links between these two policy areas, the second chapter of this report provides a comprehensive overview of the development of quality assurance in the EHEA. This is followed by an overview of the development of the social dimension in the EHEA. These overviews provide an explanation of the key terms and concepts involved in these two policy areas, and also inform the third chapter of our analysis, which refers to the potential intersections or points of contact between the two policies, highlighting various open questions that require further consideration. In this third chapter, we analyse to what extent existing pan-European policy documents encourage national authorities and HEIs to develop inclusive external and internal quality assurance procedures in higher education. At the same time, we have reviewed the extent to which the processes of the social dimension refer to quality assurance at national and institutional levels, and what the developments at these levels are.

In Chapter 4, we demonstrate to what extent, and in what ways, policymakers in selected countries have incorporated the principles of the social dimension into their national quality assurance systems and procedures. To do so, we present four case studies referring to Croatia, Ireland, the Spanish region of Catalonia and Austria, respectively. Lastly, at the end of this report we present its main conclusions, together with policy recommendations as to how quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education can reinforce each other.

The approach detailed above has not yet been taken by any previous report, so the present report represents a novelty in compiling a thorough account of the complex and dynamic interaction between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education in the European context/Bologna process. Its findings will thus contribute to the policymaking process at European and national levels by serving as a valuable reference and guidance for future policy developments.

2. Key terms and concepts: an overview of policy development

2.1. Quality assurance in higher education

2.1.1. Introduction

The idea of cooperation and comparisons between European national higher education systems has been present for a while. For example, in the Magna Charta Universitatum document, signed in Bologna in 1988 by the rectors of 388 universities, universities are called to 'encourage mobility among teachers and students', and to 'consider a general policy of equivalent status, titles, examinations (without prejudice to national diplomas)' (Magna Charta Universitatum, 1988:2). Ten years later, in the Sorbonne Declaration, the ministers in charge of education in France, Germany, Italy and the United Kingdom committed to 'encouraging a common frame of reference, aimed at improving external recognition and facilitating student mobility as well as employability' (Sorbonne Declaration, 1998:3).

Furthermore, when the Bologna process began, quality assurance emerged as a policy appeared the most appropriate to allow such cooperation and comparisons. However, such a recognition still fell far short of the development of a common, mutually shared European-level quality assurance framework that would offer a specific set of standards and guidelines for the implementation of quality assurance.

Quality assurance of higher education had existed in some form in a number of European countries prior to the start of the Bologna Process. 'The European Higher Education Area in 2020: Bologna Process Implementation Report 2020' mentions Denmark, France, the United Kingdom and the Netherlands as having an independent quality assurance agencies prior to the 1990s. Nevertheless, the development of national quality assurance systems across many European countries really gained momentum following the Bologna declaration in 1999. In the declaration, European ministers committed to the 'promotion of European cooperation in quality assurance', mainly in the sense of the development of 'comparable criteria and methodologies (Bologna declaration, 1999).

Various factors can be recognised as influencing or shaping the development of quality assurance and its policies and actions at European, national and institutional levels over the last 20 to 30 years. In one way or another, they have all contributed to the increasing need for the development of quality assurance processes.

The Bologna implementation report 2020 notes several factors influencing the development and subsequent enhancement of quality assurance systems and processes in the Bologna Process member countries. For example, there was certainly a need 'to ensure confidence in the quality of educational provision' (EC-Eurydice, 2020); in addition, however, HEIs and systems wanted to ensure 'a valuable return on the public investment in higher education' (EC-Eurydice, 2020:62). On the other hand, in the European University Association (EUA) publication 'Examining Quality Culture Part I: Quality Assurance Processes in Higher Education Institutions' from 2010, Loukkola and Zhang identify the increase in demand for the improvement of internal and external quality assurance processes with 'the massification of higher education'. They also identify an increase in 'investment and doubts concerning the possibility of maintaining quality' and in 'the belief in the importance of higher education in the new knowledge society' (Loukkola & Zhang, 2010:12).

Furthermore, since the implementation of the Bologna Process boosted the mobility of students across Europe, stakeholders in higher education needed to respond to the challenges of 'the transnational education' (Prague Communiqué, 2001). The new three-cycle system of higher education that came with the Bologna Process required that Bachelor's and Master's qualifications should be recognised across all of the Bologna Process member countries. In this regard, the exchange of students between countries added another important motivation for the development of comparable criteria and methodologies – programmes and qualifications needed to be assessed and assured against a common background.

Despite multiple reasons for the creation of a European framework for quality assurance, the process of quality assurance itself pursues two central objectives (in general, and not only strictly related to the Bologna Process): increasing the accountability of and enhancing HEIs. While the former relates to making HEIs accountable for the quality of the studies and qualifications they provide, the latter refers to a continuous process of quality improvements, driven by both internal and external quality assurance.

These two objectives can be found in the main strategic document concerning quality assurance at the level of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)– Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG), which refers to the 'twin purposes of accountability and enhancement' (ESG, 2015:7). Meanwhile, Schindler et al. (2015) identify four conceptualisations of quality in higher education across the literature – which can, however, be interpreted as corresponding to either of the two categories. According to the authors' findings, quality is something that makes higher education: 1) accountable (to the stakeholders); 2) purposeful (conforming to a stated mission); 3) transformative (leading to positive change); and 4) exceptional (helping to achieve distinction and excellence (Schindler et al., 2015:7). Similarly, Schindler et al. find numerous definitions or conceptualisations of quality assurance across the literature, ranging from quality assurance as a set of processes and policies that are 'performed externally by quality assurance agencies and accrediting bodies or internally within the institution', or which simply 'pertain to accountability and/or continuous improvement' (Schindler et al., 2015). The ESG, on the other hand, define quality assurance as 'all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e., assurance and enhancement activities)' (ESG, 2015:7).

It should come as no surprise that no single definition or conceptualisation exists of either quality or quality assurance in higher education. Higher education itself has different purposes, depending on the objectives of various stakeholders: preparing students for the job market, students' personal development, research, innovation, community engagement. In this regard, the quality of a study programme, the quality of an HEI or the quality of a higher education system is likely to be approached and assessed differently, depending on the purpose it is intended to fulfil in a given context. No individual quality assurance process can start before these various perspectives and specific contexts are considered and acknowledged.

2.1.2. Historical development of quality assurance in higher education in Europe during the period 1999-2015

In the period between 1999 and 2015 – that is, between the Bologna declaration and the second version of the Standards and Guidelines (ESG) – the development of quality assurance at European, national and institutional levels was immense. Strategic documents, policies, official bodies and national agencies began to be developed, adopted and implemented at all three levels (European level, national level and at the level of individual HEIs).

2000: establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA)

From a historical perspective, the first key moment in the development of a framework for quality assurance of higher education in Europe came only a year after the adoption of the Bologna declaration in 1999. To promote European cooperation in quality assurance of higher education, the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA) was established in 2000. It was conceived as a membership association of quality assurance agencies for higher education from across the EHEA.

ENQA consists of three governing bodies: 1) the General Assembly (GA), composed of the representatives of the ENQA member agencies, along with affiliates and stakeholders; 2) the Board (the main executive body); and 3) the Secretariat (which manages day-to-day operations).

By being a consultative member of the Bologna process since 2005, ENQA has been considered an important and influential actor in policymaking on quality assurance in the EHEA. In this regard, ENQA's main activities have been the provision of services and networking; the sharing and dissemination of information, expertise and good practices; and involvement, along with stakeholders, in projects and partnerships concerning quality assurance in higher education (ENQA, 2020)².

2003: definition of key principles for the European approach to quality assurance, and the establishment of the E4

The second key moment in the history of quality assurance in higher education occurred three years after ENQA was established. In the Berlin Communiqué of 2003, ministers went beyond previous communiqués, expressing that 'consistent with the principle of institutional autonomy, the primary responsibility for quality assurance in higher education lies with each institution itself and this provides the basis for real accountability of the academic system within the national quality framework' (Berlin Communiqué, 2003:3). The ministers thereby declared that the incentive for the development of the EHEA quality assurance framework was supposed to come from within each HEI – emphasising the primacy of internal quality assurance practices and policies in the development of the quality assurance system.

Furthermore, at the Berlin ministerial meeting, the ministers developed and presented four goals that should be achieved by 2005 at both national and European levels. With regard to national quality assurance systems, the ministers concluded that these should include:

- *A definition of the responsibilities of the bodies and institutions involved.*
- *Evaluation of programmes or institutions including internal assessment, external review, participation of students and the publication of results.*
- *A system of accreditation, certification or comparable procedures.*
- *International participation, co-operation and networking.*

(Berlin Communiqué, 2003:3).

Lastly, at the Berlin ministerial meeting (2003), an important conclusion was made regarding quality assurance at European level. The ministers mandated ENQA, the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher

² Although in 2004 the name of the organisation changed from the European Network for Quality Assurance into the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education, it retained the acronym ENQA.

Education (EURASHE) and the European Student Information Bureau (ESIB)³ – collectively called the E4 – to develop a set of standards, procedures and guidelines on quality assurance at EHEA level, prior to the next communiqué in Bergen in 2005.

2005: adoption of the first Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)

Two years later, at the meeting in Bergen, the ministers accepted and adopted the E4-developed document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG). Over the next ten years the ESG served as a strategic document offering a much-desired common quality assurance framework at the EHEA level. Each of the 40 states comprising EHEA in 2005 signed up to the ESG 2005.

The ever-developing context of higher education has influenced the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) to consider revisions of the ESG. In particular, the changing focus of higher education to the more student-centred learning and teaching demanded quality assurance criteria and methodologies, and thereby the ESG, as the general quality assurance framework, to adapt. Hence, in 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, the ministers once again invited the E4 to consider revisions to the ESG in order 'to improve their clarity, applicability and usefulness, including their scope' (Bucharest Communiqué, 2012:2).

2015: adoption of the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (the ESG 2015)

Three years later, after several rounds of consultation which included all relevant stakeholder organisations and national ministries, a new and improved version of the ESG was prepared for the Yerevan ministerial meeting in 2015. In the Yerevan Communiqué, the EHEA ministers responsible for higher education declared that 'enhancing the quality and relevance of learning and teaching is the main mission of the EHEA' (Yerevan Communiqué, 2015:2) and accepted the revised Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (the ESG 2015).

2.1.3. Register of quality assurance agencies in Europe established in 2008

At the meeting in Bergen in 2005, the ministers welcomed the concept of an official European register of quality assurance agencies, and mandated that the E4 group develop such a register. The establishment of a register had already been proposed by ENQA in its report on 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area' in 2005. The register aimed to allow 'all stakeholders and the general public open access to objective information about trustworthy quality assurance agencies that are working in line with the ESG' (London Communiqué, 2007:4). The following year, in 2008, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was founded in Brussels as a non-profit and independent European register of credible quality assurance agencies.

EQAR's mission statement is as follows:

- *EQAR's mission is to further the development of the European Higher Education Area by increasing the transparency of quality assurance, and thus enhancing trust and confidence in European higher education.*
- *EQAR seeks to provide clear and reliable information on quality assurance provision in Europe, thus improving trust among agencies.*

³ European Student Information Bureau (ESIB) became the European Student Union (ESU) in 2007

- *EQAR seeks to facilitate the mutual acceptance of quality assurance decision and to improve trust among higher education institutions, thus promoting mobility and recognition.*
- *EQAR seeks to reduce opportunities for 'accreditation mills' to gain credibility in Europe, thus further enhancing the confidence of students, institutions, labour market and society more generally in the quality of higher education provision in Europe.*
- *To achieve its mission EQAR, through its independent Register Committee, manages a register of quality assurance agencies operating in Europe that substantially comply with the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance (ESG).*

Source: EQAR website⁴

EQAR expanded its work in 2018 by launching of the Database of External Quality Assurance Results (DEQAR), to which EQAR-registered agencies publish their reports and the decisions of the evaluations of HEIs and their study programmes. As EQAR's website claims, the introduction of DEQAR provided a 'one-stop shop' for access to quality assurance results and reports. This, among other things, provided an easier overview of trust and transparency in the quality assurance of higher education across the EHEA.

While both ENQA and EQAR are important for quality assurance in higher education in Europe, their missions, goals and functions are different. ENQA is supposed to actively maintain and contribute to enhancing the quality of higher education at EHEA level and providing policy recommendations. EQAR, meanwhile, by maintaining a register of national quality agencies compliant with the ESG, is a source of easily accessible and reliable information on quality assurance agencies and their activities. Thus, it contributes to the transparency and reliability of the work of such agencies across Europe, and in this way directly ensures comparability in the criteria and methodologies used for quality assurance, as called for in the Prague Communiqué (2001).

EQAR was founded by the E4 (ENQA, ESU, EUA and EURASHE) together with government members, while ENQA is a membership organisation of national quality assurance agencies. In June 2020, 48 out of the 55 ENQA members were also listed on EQAR's register of quality assurance agencies.

This brief historical overview shows how the Bologna Process and common quality assurance frameworks such as the ESG are interrelated. Only with the development of a common higher education area – namely, the EHEA – could a strategic quality assurance framework be developed that was applicable to so many different higher education systems. Similarly, the EHEA, as a common higher education area, necessitated the development of a mutually shared quality assurance framework to which national agencies would adhere if they wished to foster the mobility of students and teachers, and the wider recognition of study programmes and higher education qualifications.

In 2004, ENQA decided to use the implementation of the ESG as its main criterion for membership, even though at that point the guidelines were still in draft form. Similarly, as noted before, the EQAR uses substantial compliance with the ESG exclusively as its criterion for the inclusion of national quality agencies into its register. A positive ESG review is necessary for each agency that wishes to register with EQAR, and registered agencies are reviewed every five years if they wish to continue being registered with EQAR. The register of quality assurance agencies could not have been established prior to the formation of a common EHEA quality assurance framework. In this regard, the creation of the ESG provided standards and criteria for quality assurance, while the creation of a register allowed these to be put into practice.

⁴ <https://www.eqar.eu/about/close-up/#eqars-vision-mission-and-values>

2.1.4. Purpose and scope of the ESG

The changes made in the ESG 2015 reflect changes occurring in higher education systems in the EHEA since the adoption of the ESG 2005. For example, the ESG 2015 place student-centred learning at the forefront: that is, they take students as the co-creators of the learning processes and of quality assurance activities (Gover and Loukkola, 2018). Although the ESG 2005 called for the greater involvement of students in quality assurance processes and activities, only with the ESG 2015 was this declaration integrated into internal and external quality assurance processes. Also, the ESG 2015 more clearly define the involvement of external stakeholders, the publishing of assessment results, appeals processes, as well as the role of experts in external quality assurance processes. Lastly, the ESG 2015 more clearly define the relationships between the three levels of quality assurance process: internal quality assurance, external quality assurance, and quality assurance assessments of national agencies.

ENQA was not the only quality assurance body involved in the process of creating the ESG. As acknowledged in the introduction to the first version of the ESG in 2005, contacts and contributions by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) and the Central and Eastern European Network of Quality Assurance Agencies (CEE Network) proved invaluable in the creation of the ESG. Similarly, the ESG 2015 were developed by the E4 in cooperation with Education International (EI), BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR). Furthermore, the E4 also took into account an international perspective when devising both the ESG 2005 and ESG 2015, since reliable and consistent quality assurance of higher education was recognised as one of the priorities in making the EHEA attractive for students and stakeholders from around the world (as is stated in both the ESG 2005 and ESG 2015).

Both the ESG 2005 and ESG 2015 define their **purposes** as follows:

- *The first purpose concerns setting a common quality assurance framework at European, national and institutional level (ESG, 2015:7).*
- *The second purpose states that in providing such a framework, the ESG supports improvements of quality of higher education in the EHEA.*
- *Third, the ESG supports mutual trust in the quality of study programmes allowing and facilitating recognition and mobility.*
- *Finally, the fourth purpose of the ESG is to provide general information on quality assurance in the EHEA.*

The ESG embrace four **principles** of quality assurance in the EHEA:

- *The first principle locates the primary responsibility for the quality of higher education at higher education institutions.*
- *Second, the ESG takes that quality assurance must acknowledge diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students. In the introduction to the ESG 2015, authors note that the E4 has managed to succeed in making it applicable "to all higher education offered in the EHEA regardless of the mode of study or place of delivery" (ESG, 2015:5).*
- *The third principle gives quality assurance a role to support the development of quality culture in higher education.*
- *The fourth principle states that quality assurance should consider the needs and expectations of all higher education stakeholders (internal and external).*

2.1.5. Standards and guidelines included in the ESG

Standards, as defined by the ESG (2015), are 'agreed and accepted practices of quality assurance in higher education (ESG, 2015: 9)'. Guidelines, on the other hand, are practical statements prescribing how standards should be implemented (ibid.). Thus, guidelines make standards clearer by describing why a particular standard is important in a quality assurance process. Collectively, standards and guidelines describe what constitutes a good quality assurance system, which runs through all three levels: an internal quality assurance process managed by an HEI, an external quality assurance process managed by a quality assurance agency, and the quality assurance reviews of the aforementioned quality assurance agencies⁵. The document is therefore also divided into three parts, with each part respectively providing standards and guidelines for internal or external quality assurance, or standards and guidelines for the review of quality assurance agencies.

A brief overview of each of the three parts of the ESG follows.

PART 1: standards included in the first part of the ESG

The first part of the ESG provides a framework for developing internal quality assurance processes at a particular HEI. The first part contains 10 standards and their accompanying guidelines. These standards vary from general policies regarding quality that should be integrated into a HEI's mission, to more specific policies such as those governing the quality of study programmes, learning and teaching, admission, progression, recognition and certification, staff competency, learning resources and management and publicity of information. The standards and guidelines also emphasise the importance of regularly collecting data and of evidence-based decision making. In addition, they provide recommendations for the inclusion of internal and external stakeholders into the design and implementation of internal quality assurance.

PART 2: standards included in the second part of the ESG

The second part of the ESG concerns the level of external quality assurance processes. It sets out seven standards and guidelines intended to help a quality assurance agency to develop and improve its policies and activities. These external quality assurance standards and guidelines define the relationships between internal quality assurance processes as they are stated in the first part of the ESG, and the activities, roles and responsibilities of external quality assurance. Standards from Part 2 of the ESG emphasise the importance of reliable, useful, pre-defined and consistently implemented external quality assurance processes and their publicly available reports.

PART 3: standards included in the third part of the ESG

The third part of the ESG defines the roles and responsibilities of quality assurance agencies. Here, standards and guidelines are developed which, when implemented by the quality assurance agency, should strengthen trust in the agency's work. This should be achieved, among other things, by the agency exercising full autonomy over and responsibility for its activities; by ensuring agencies are provided with sufficient resources; and by undertaking an external review of each agency at least once every five years.

⁵ Not only national agencies, but also, for example, European disciplinary agencies, can be registered with EQAR after receiving a positive ESG review. This ESG review can be carried out by the ENQA as well as other independent review coordinators.

2.1.6. Final remarks

The ESG 2005 favoured a 'generic principle to the specific requirement' (ESG, 2005:10). Therefore, the standards and their accompanying guidelines were constructed in a broad, generic way to acknowledge the historical, political, educational and general socio-cultural differences between the EHEA member countries. This resulted in the standards and guidelines focusing 'more on what should be done than how they should be achieved' (ENQA, 2005:10). This approach has not changed with the latest ESG 2015 edition.

HEIs and quality assurance agencies are intended to use the ESG standards and guidelines as reference points in carrying out their internal and external quality assurance processes. The ESG do not impose procedures or rules as to how a particular quality assurance process should be implemented. Rather, the standards and guidelines are considered a guide. As the document states, the key goal of the ESG 'is to contribute to the common understanding of quality assurance for learning and teaching across borders and among all stakeholders' (ESG, 2015:6).

As intended by their authors, the ESG apply equally to all HEIs, whatever their type, mode or place of study. Furthermore, the standards and guidelines provided for external quality assurance relate directly to the standards and guidelines provided for internal quality assurance. Therefore, what HEIs do in terms of their internal quality assurance processes is relevant and influences what agencies will do as part of their external quality assurance processes. Similarly, how agencies implement the standards and guidelines as described in Part 2 of the ESG is directly relevant to how these quality assurance agencies are reviewed (as elaborated in Part 3). In this way, all three levels of the ESG are deeply interconnected and important to another other, as they are mutually supportive and interdependent.

However, although the ESG were not supposed to operate as a checklist or a document whose provisions had to be implemented at all three levels of a quality assurance system, it can be (and indeed, often is) interpreted as a compliance tool. This situation has even been recognised in various ENQA publications. For example, in 2007, the Report to the London Conference of Ministers on a European Register of Quality Assurance Agencies states that '[c]are should be taken to make sure that the European Standards and Guidelines do not become a simple checklist for compliance purposes and that any revisions reflect the needs of higher education more broadly' (ENQA, 2007:14). In 'Mapping the Implementation and Application of the ESG' from 2011, similar worries are expressed: 'the creation of EQAR with its specific mission and use of the ESG as a compliance tool has brought additional pressure to bear in considering whether the ESG can serve the purpose for which they are being used' (ENQA, 2011:10). Hopbach, in 'Advancing quality in European higher education: celebrating 20 years of ENQA' follows this by stating that 'the ESG do not just give guidance by presenting and promoting good practice but instead are understandably considered as a compliance tool' (Hopbach, 2020:25).

Hopbach further argues that although the ESG were never meant to be a compliance tool, 'in practice we are faced with a situation whereby the stipulations of the ESG have to be complied with, and in cases where the nature of certain standards do not imply a one-size-fits-all application, a certain consensus has emerged regarding the interpretation of the standards and the guidelines' (Hopbach, 2020:26). Moreover, Hopbach continues with the observation that due to the interrelation of parts 1, 2 and 3 of the ESG, the external evaluation of a quality assurance agency 'in practice also includes an assessment of national regulations for internal quality assurance at institutional level' (Hopbach, 2020:26). Although assessment by EQAR still does not require full compliance with the

ESG, but rather that agencies should 'demonstrate that they operate in substantial compliance'⁶, this is still an interesting point.

Notwithstanding the ambiguity of their use as either a compliance tool or a guide, the ESG have contributed directly and immensely to progress in the development of quality assurance systems across the EHEA. They have contributed to the development of new quality assurance agencies in the EHEA, and influenced existing quality assurance agencies to change in order to be compliant with the ESG (Hopbach & Flierman, 2020). The ESG have also contributed significantly to the development of qualifications frameworks, in the recognition and promotion of the use of learning outcomes and the ECTS system. The special focus and attention given to quality assurance in the Bologna Process has not been diminished by the implementation of the revised ESG in 2015. Instead, this commitment has only been reinforced in the communiqués, working groups and projects that followed. In the 2018 Paris Ministerial Communiqué, ministers listed the strengthening quality assurance in higher education among the three Key Commitments essential for the functioning of the EHEA. This was reiterated in the most recent Rome Communiqué of 2020.

Bearing in mind the development of policy on quality assurance, the question arises as to whether links are possible between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education. Some standards in the ESG 2015 point to a possible link between internal quality assurance (for instance, standards 1.1., 1.2. and 1.4. in Part 1) and the principles of the social dimension. Similarly, certain principles and guidelines regarding the social dimension contain references to quality assurance (for instance, principle 7.b.; Rome Communiqué, 2020b). In the chapters that follow, we analyse more closely the extent of the links between these two policies and the possible developments that could occur in these fields in the future.

2.2. The social dimension of higher education

2.2.1. Introduction

The term *social dimension of higher education* was introduced into the Bologna Process at the initiative of student representatives in 2001. From that time onwards, the notion of a social dimension has been embedded into the policy objectives of the Bologna Process, rather than being derived from the research that has informed these policy objectives. The notion of a social dimension therefore appears in numerous ministerial communiqués from the Bologna Process, and has been used primarily within the European Higher Education Area (EHEA)⁷.

Contrastingly, EU policy documents relating to higher education tend not to use the term *social dimension* and instead use the terms diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education. In this regard, numerous policy documents issued by the European Commission and other EU bodies over the past 20 years have declared fostering diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education as objectives of the highest importance.

The latest Bologna Process communiqué from Rome strives to provide the first official definition of the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA. It takes as its starting

⁶ <https://www.eqar.eu>

⁷ The Bologna Process, launched with the Bologna Declaration of 1999, is one of the main voluntary intergovernmental processes at European level, and is nowadays implemented in the 47 States that make up the European Higher Education Area (EHEA). More information on the EHEA is available at <http://www.ehea.info/page-how-does-the-bologna-process-work>. The EHEA therefore covers a much larger geographical area than the EU and its European Education Area (EEA), with its 27 Member States.

point that 'the composition of the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA countries'. It also stresses that 'the social dimension encompasses the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity, diversity and is responsive to the needs of local communities' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b). In doing so, its definition of the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA encompasses three interconnected concepts: diversity, equity and inclusion. Henceforth in this report we therefore use the term *social dimension* to also describe the processes that relate to fostering diversity, equity and inclusion in higher education (typical for the EU and its European Education Area).

Increasing the number of individuals with higher education degrees within a population, especially by including underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, and ensuring the successful completion of their studies, contributes to the overall development of a society characterised by a greater degree of social cohesion and mutual trust, higher tax revenues, greater participation in political life and community development, and the better overall health of the population (Council conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training 2010, OECD 2021 Education at a Glance, OECD 2022). To attain these goals, it is necessary that individuals' backgrounds, socio-economic characteristics, gender, race, ethnicity and other personal characteristics must not play any role in their success in higher education. Their success should depend primarily on individuals' abilities to fulfil the requirements of the HEI.

In the subsections that follow, we provide an overview of the development of the social dimension of higher education in Europe since 2001. This covers three periods (1) the period 2001-2018; (2) the period 2018-2020; and (3) the period 2020-2024. For each of these periods, we discuss: (a) the development of the social dimension within the Bologna Process and in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), and (b) the development of the social dimension of higher education within the EU and European-level organisations.

As the sections below demonstrate, the unequal lengths of the time periods selected for this overview reflect the slow development of the notion of the social dimension during the first 18 years following its introduction in the 2001 Prague Communiqué. The most substantial developments have occurred since 2018, when the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) established a BFUG Advisory Group on Social Dimension (AG-1). By 2020, this advisory group had developed a common understanding of the concept of the social dimension within the EHEA, and developed principles and guidelines for the social dimension of higher education. Reaching those two objectives enabled the EHEA member states to structure, monitor and evaluate their national policies for the enhancement of the social dimension (BFUG, 2018).

2.2.2. The social dimension in Europe during the period 2001-2018

Development of the social dimension within the Bologna Process and in the European Higher education Area (EHEA) during the period 2001-2018

2001 Prague Communiqué: the social dimension in terms of the inclusion of underrepresented students

In the Prague ministerial Communiqué from 2001, ministers acknowledged the voices of students in the Student Göteborg Declaration and stressed the importance of solving problems relating to underrepresented students in higher education (Student Göteborg Declaration, 2001; Prague Communiqué, 2001). The ministers of the EHEA member countries therefore adopted for the first time the term *social dimension of higher education*

(Prague Communiqué, 2001). The term itself is not borrowed from an academic discussion. In fact, even after its introduction in 2001, the notion remained mainly associated with the Bologna Process (i.e. it was idiosyncratic to the documents of the Bologna Process).

2003 Berlin Communiqué: the social dimension in terms of widening access; the 2005 Bergen Communiqué: the social dimension in terms of equitable access

Following the 2001 Prague Communiqué, the social dimension referred to the importance of including underrepresented students in higher education. Subsequently, in the 2003 Berlin Communiqué it was used more broadly to refer to widening access, and in the 2005 Bergen Communiqué it was used to refer to equitable access to higher education.

Crosier and Mihai Haj (2020) claim that a precise definition of the social dimension was perhaps intentionally absent in these earlier communiqués. They provide several reasons why this could be the case. First, with the notion of the 'social dimension' undefined, countries were not committed to any specific and measurable actions. Second, the vagueness of the term allowed countries to adapt or adjust actions and measures to their specific national and/or institutional circumstances. Third, the recognition of specific national contexts with regard to underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups may have been directly responsible for the absence of a definition.

2007 London Communiqué: the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large

In the London Communiqué that followed in 2007, the meaning of the social dimension was outlined for the first time. Ministers affirmed 'the societal aspiration that the student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of our populations' (London Communiqué, 2007:5).

The introduction of the meaning of the social dimension in the London Communiqué proved to be of the utmost importance. It elevated the social dimension from being a relevant but still undetermined commitment of the Bologna Process to a necessary component of higher education policies and a key factor in strengthening social cohesion and reducing social and economic inequalities. This, as the ministers claimed in the communiqué, should be achieved by maximising the potential of all individuals. To develop a fertile ground for this, the document argued for access, participation in and the completion of studies for all students, without any social or economic obstacles associated with students' personal circumstances.

The London Communiqué obliged countries to report their national strategies, policies, action plans and measures in relation to the social dimension, so that their effectiveness could be assessed. In addition, the communiqué recognised that improvements to the social dimension could not move forward without reliable data, and reliable data could not be gathered without developing a system of comparable indicators for the social dimension.

2009 Leuven Communiqué: the social dimension in terms of widening participation

In the 2009 Leuven Communiqué, ministers reaffirmed their commitments to the conclusions and obligations from the previous communiqué and once more emphasised the importance of widening participation in higher education. The Leuven communiqué emphasised the importance of lifelong learning as one of the key aspects in strengthening the social dimension (i.e. for widening participation), and called for a special focus on the acquisition of qualifications through flexible learning paths and the recognition of prior learning. Most notably, the communiqué obliged each member country to 'set measurable

targets for widening overall participation and increasing participation of underrepresented groups in higher education, to be reached by the end of the next decade' (p.2).

2012 Bucharest Communiqué: the social dimension in terms of flexible learning parts and alternative access routes

In the 2012 Bucharest Communiqué, ministers reaffirmed the conclusions from the previous communiqué and emphasised the importance of establishing the specific measures needed to enhance the social dimension of higher education, such as 'counselling and guidance, flexible learning parts and alternative access routes, including recognition of prior learning' (pp. 1,2). In addition, this communiqué restated the need for quality data regarding the social dimension of higher education.

The call made in the Bucharest Communiqué led to the designing and launch of the project Peer Learning for the Social Dimension (PL4SD), funded by the EU Lifelong Learning Programme. This project proved to be important for the further development and enhancement of the social dimension of higher education across the EHEA. The project ran from 2012 to 2015, and comprised three elements: an online database (now defunct) gathering together the measures EHEA countries used to improve the social dimension; reviews of social dimension policies in three countries (Armenia, Croatia and Lithuania); and peer learning activities among the EHEA stakeholders. The PL4SD database contained more than 300 measures from 33 countries, as well as 155 research papers and reports. The Report of the 2012-2015 BFUG Working Group on the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning (2015) showed that only nine EHEA countries had defined attainment targets for specified groups, and recommended that each country develop a set of policy measures and national plans or strategies for developing the social dimension of higher education.

2015 Yerevan Communiqué: strategy for the social dimension and link to lifelong learning

At the 2015 EHEA ministerial meeting in Yerevan, work on the social dimension was delegated to recently formed BFUG Social Dimension and Lifelong Working Group. The Working Group came up with and endorsed the 'Strategy for the Development of the Social Dimension and Lifelong Learning in the European Higher Education Area to 2020'. The strategy was intended to provide a set of guidelines that were seen as a "'roadmap" for member countries in order to ensure that national plans or strategies are developed using systematic approach to identifying barriers into and within the higher education system based on relevant data providing evidence for action' (BFUG, 2015).

Development of the social dimension of higher education within the EU and European-level organisations during the period 2001-2018

At the same time, the Council of the European Union closely followed the progression of the social dimension and the ministerial conclusions set down in the communiqués, and in 2009 adopted the Council Conclusions of 12 May 2009 on a strategic framework for European cooperation in education and training, also known as the 'ET 2020' strategy. This strategy offered a framework for European cooperation in education and training up to the year 2020 for all levels of education, and stated four strategic objectives as its focus for action:

1. The promotion of lifelong learning and mobility;
2. The improvement of quality and efficiency of education and training;
3. The promotion of equity, social cohesion and active citizenship; and
4. The enhancement of creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship.

Although the document itself did not specifically use the term 'social dimension', its third objective proclaimed that education and training should be available for all citizens, and should enable the acquisition, updating and developing of skills needed for employment, irrespective of any personal health-related and/or socioeconomic situation. It also recognised and emphasised lifelong learning, diverse and flexible learning paths and the mobility of learners and teachers as strategies for coping with the changing economic and social circumstances at the time. The Council also committed to sharing best practices for the education of learners with migrant backgrounds, and to promote inclusion and personalised learning for those with different needs.

The social dimension (as a specific term related to and within education) was directly addressed in the subsequent Council Conclusions of 11 May 2010 on the social dimension of education and training, although this document did not refer exclusively to higher education. The document stated that education and training systems across the EU should ensure both equity and excellence. However, concerning higher education, The Council of the European Union emphasised five objectives: 1) strengthening financial support schemes for students from underrepresented and disadvantaged backgrounds; 2) introducing more flexible and diversified learning paths – the recognition of prior learning, part-time education, and distance learning; 3) with regard to disadvantaged students, focusing on needs-based funding programmes; 4) encouraging wider communities to benefit from the knowledge produced at HEIs; and 5) prompting HEIs to allow their resources to be available to adult and informal and non-formal learners (Council of the European Union, 2010).

In its Conclusions on the social dimension from 2013, the Council of the European Union fully embraced the Bologna Process definition of social dimension – stating that the 'student body entering, participating in and completing higher education at all levels should reflect the diversity of Member States' populations' (Council of the European Union, 2013:3). The Council directly invited both the Member States and the Commission to continue strengthening the social dimension of higher education by implementing various actions, such as peer learning and evidence-based policy analysis.

The European Pillar of Social Rights, proclaimed by the European Parliament, the Council of the European Union and the European Commission at the 2017 Gothenburg Social Summit, sets out in the first of its 20 principles that 'everyone has the right to quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning' (European Commission, 2017). Furthermore, the third principle refers to equal opportunities, stating that 'everyone has the right to equal treatment and opportunities regarding employment, social protection, education' (European Commission, 2017), and that 'equal opportunities of under-represented groups shall be fostered' (European Commission, 2017). The importance of this document is that it perceives inclusive education from the perspective of social justice, and as a social right of EU citizens.

2.2.3. The social dimension in Europe during the period 2018-2020

A significant step forward in the development of the social dimension within the Bologna Process and in the European Higher education Area (EHEA) in the period 2018-2020

As shown in previous section, which provides an analysis of the EHEA ministerial communiqués between 2001 and 2015, the notion of the social dimension of higher education and its related objectives in the Bologna Process were constantly changing during this period. In response to this, the ministers responsible for higher education who participated in the 2018 ministerial conference in Paris recognised the need to create a

coherent policy framework that would enable EHEA member states to systematically strengthen the social dimension of higher education in the forthcoming decade.

2018 Paris Communiqué: the need to develop a coherent policy framework for the social dimension was recognised

In line with the 2018 Paris Communiqué, in 2018 the Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) established a new BFUG Advisory Group on Social Dimension (AG-1). This group had two main objectives, to be fulfilled by 2020: (1) to develop a common understanding of the concept of the social dimension within the EHEA; and (2) to develop principles and guidelines for the social dimension of higher education that would enable member states to structure, monitor and evaluate their national policies for the enhancement of the social dimension (BFUG, 2018).

2020 Rome Communiqué: the first official definition for the social dimension and the formulation of principles and guidelines for the social dimension

The highly effective and visionary work of the BFUG Advisory Group on Social Dimension resulted in a new official definition of the social dimension in the EHEA, and in the adoption of the forward-looking strategic document 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA'⁸ by the 48 EHEA member states in 2020 (BFUG, 2020). Both the new definition and the Principles and Guidelines were included as Annex II to the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué in order to help countries with their continuous improvement of policies regarding the social dimension and their effective implementation, both at national level and at the level of HEIs.

One of the three key priorities in the 2020 Rome Ministerial Communiqué related to the building of an inclusive EHEA. This priority provides the first official definition of the social dimension. The first part of the definition takes the statement from the 2007 London Communiqué – namely, that 'the composition of the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels should correspond to the heterogeneous social profile of society at large in the EHEA countries' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b). This first part of the definition allowed the creation of policy levers for identifying underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students in higher education. The second part of the definition stresses that the social dimension encompasses the creation of an inclusive environment in higher education that fosters equity and diversity, and is responsive to the needs of local communities.

The novelty and importance of this definition is that it goes beyond simply identifying at-risk groups in higher education, and expects public authorities and HEIs to integrate the newly adopted principles of the social dimension into the core mission of higher education: learning and teaching, research, innovation, knowledge exchange and outreach, institutional governance and management, as well as into policies for empowering present and future students and higher education staff.

The new principles and guidelines of the social dimension from 2020 as a game-changer for the further development of the social dimension in the EHEA

The document 'Principles and Guidelines' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b) defines 10 principles of the social dimension of higher education for the upcoming decade of the Bologna Process, in the form of high-level statements that serve as the basis for conceptualising policies for the enhancement of the social dimension. The guidelines are recommendations intended to advise policymakers on how to implement the principles in

⁸ Henceforth, we use the title 'Principles and Guidelines' instead of the full title of the document.

practice. Therefore, this document allows the continuous improvement of social dimension policies and their effective implementation at national and regional levels, at the level of HEIs, as well as at EHEA and EU level.

The first principle is aimed at ensuring that the social dimension becomes central to higher education strategies at system and institutional levels, as well as at EHEA and EU levels. The second principle stresses that the social dimension should interconnect the principles of access, equity, diversity and inclusion with all laws, policies and practices concerning higher education, such that access to, participation in, progress through and the completion of higher education depend primarily on students' abilities, not on their personal characteristics or circumstances beyond their direct influence.

The third principle states that it is important to ensure a holistic approach to the social dimension, with the aim of creating coherent policies from early childhood education, through schooling, to higher education and throughout lifelong learning. This requires greater connectivity between the work of those responsible for higher education and other ministries and sectors that can bring about change only through a joint effort.

The fourth principle states that reliable data are a necessary precondition for the evidence-based improvement of the social dimension of higher education. Adequate capacities should be developed to collect, process and use such data to inform and support the social dimension of higher education.

As the fifth principle, effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students should help in widening access to, participation in and the completion of higher education studies. The sixth principle states that public authorities should provide sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to HEIs, allowing them to build adequate capacity to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion in higher education.

The seventh principle states that HEIs need to strengthen their capacity to respond to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body, particularly through improving initial and continuing professional training for academic and administrative staff. The eighth principle states that international mobility programmes in higher education should be structured and implemented in a way that fosters diversity, equity and inclusion.

According to the ninth principle, community engagement should be considered a process whereby HEIs engage with external community stakeholders to undertake joint activities that can be mutually beneficial. Such engagement provides a holistic basis upon which universities can address a broad range of societal needs, including those of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, while enriching their teaching, research and other core functions.

Lastly, the tenth principle requires that public authorities enter into a policy dialogue with HEIs and other relevant stakeholders regarding how the principles and guidelines can be translated and implemented, both at the level of national systems and at the level of individual HEIs.

The 10 principles represent a rounded and consolidated system for the continuous development of the social dimension in the EHEA. They refer not only to students, but also – for the first time in the EHEA – to staff in higher education. The document 'Principles and Guidelines' also contains a glossary that defines three central terms relating to the social dimension, namely 'underrepresented', 'disadvantaged' and 'vulnerable' students.

Explanatory definitions of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students from the document 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA'

(Rome Communiqué, 2020b)

Underrepresented students: *a group of learners is underrepresented in relation to certain characteristics (e.g. gender, age, nationality, geographic origin, socio-economic background, ethnic minorities) if its share among the students is lower than the share of a comparable group in the total population. This can be documented at the time of admission, during the course of studies or at graduation. Individuals usually have several underrepresented characteristics, which is why combinations of underrepresented characteristics ('intersectionality') should always be considered. Furthermore, underrepresentation can also impact at different levels of higher education – study programme, faculty or department, higher education institution, higher education system.*

Disadvantaged students: *disadvantaged students often face specific challenges compared to their peers in higher education. This can take many forms (e.g. disability, low family income, little or no family support, orphan, many school moves, mental health, pregnancy, having less time to study because one has to earn one's living by working or having caring duties). The disadvantage may be permanent, may occur from time to time or only for a limited period. Disadvantaged students can be part of an underrepresented group, but do not have to be. Therefore, disadvantaged and underrepresented are not synonymous.*

Vulnerable students: *vulnerable students may be at risk of disadvantage (see above) and in addition have special (protection) needs. For example, because they suffer from an illness (including mental health) or have a disability, because they are minors, because their residence permit depends on the success of their studies (and thus also on decisions made by individual teachers), because they are at risk of being discriminated against. These learners are vulnerable in the sense that they may not be able to ensure their personal well-being, or that they may not be able to protect themselves from harm or exploitation and need additional support or attention.*

(Rome Communiqué, 2020b:9)

Since, with the Rome Communiqué, the EHEA member states agreed for the first time in the history of the Bologna Process that these 10 principles were instrumental to the development of the social dimension, it is to be expected that the principles for the social dimension will also allow communication and cooperation with other policies within higher education, including quality assurance. The 10 principles will allow the creation of various policy instruments relating to the social dimension, many of which may be similar (or identical) to policy instruments used in other policies relating to higher education. For the first time in the EHEA, this opens opportunities to create synergies between the social dimension and other policies in higher education, through which these policies can reinforce their own policy objectives.

In this report, we explore opportunities for mutually beneficial cooperation between the social dimension and quality assurance, as an important policy in higher education, particularly within the EHEA. The principles of the social dimension also allow the creation of indicators that enable progress in the implementation of the principles to be measured at both European and national levels. The next phase in the development of the social dimension within the EHEA for the period 2020-2024 will be marked by the development of these indicators.

For the reasons stated above, it can be concluded that the creation and adoption of the Principles and Guidelines represents a game-changer in the historical development of the social dimension within the EHEA. It is essential that the adoption of Principles and Guidelines should be seen as only the beginning of a journey to holistically improve the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA. To this end, the 10 principles should not be seen as a checklist, but rather as an instrument that can help to bring about concrete and tangible change over the next decade and beyond (BFUG, 2020).

Development of the social dimension of higher education within the EU and European-level organisations during the period 2018-2020

One of the four priorities for higher education in the Communication from the Commission on a renewed EU agenda for higher education (EC, 2017) is 'building inclusive and connected higher education systems' that are 'open to talent from all backgrounds'. This means that both higher education systems and HEIs should aim to create measures to support those social groups least represented in higher education in being able to access and complete higher education 'based on their talents, not their background'. The Communication also considers that 'breaking down barriers between higher education and the rest of society' is important because it can help to develop students' social and civic competences.

Connections between higher education and society were further amplified through the rollout of the EC's European Universities Initiative, which was successfully launched during 2019. Building on the progress made during its initial phase, the initiative is now an integral part of the Erasmus+ programme. In the upcoming period, the Commission will further optimise the vision for the European Universities 'to address big societal challenges, become true engines of development for cities and regions and promote civic engagement' (European Commission, 2020b). The social dimension could be fostered through the existing European Universities alliances whose mission is to foster inclusive higher education, as already demonstrated by the alliance Young Universities for the Future of Europe⁹, for example.

The European University Association, in its report 'Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in European Higher Education Institution' (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019:44), points out that the 'lack of awareness among the university community about diversity and inclusion issues is a continuing challenge', accompanied by a 'lack of funding and other resources as well as the difficulty to identify the target groups'. The report notes that 'staff training is required, both for administrative staff as well as teaching and research staff, to raise the level of awareness and provide concrete tools and approaches for addressing diversity'. In the report, the authors stress the importance of moving 'the discourse on diversity from a challenge to be solved to a precondition for quality and excellence'. They conclude that 'a number of prominent universities have already explicitly taken this position, as they realise that through ensuring equitable treatment, they improve their learning environment as well as their research'.

As demonstrated above, during the observed period, the key documents and processes concerning higher education at European level include objectives for fostering the social dimension of higher education. However, the EUA (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019:44) claimed that only a minority of public authorities at national level had developed national action plans for strengthening the social dimension of higher education to follow up on their commitments. This points to a possible problem with the design, implementation and prioritisation of policies used during the observed period to improve the social dimension of higher education at both EU level and at national levels in the member states. One

⁹ More information is available at <https://yufe.eu/>.

solution, as proposed in the aforementioned EUA report, could be 'to strengthen the dialogue at system level between universities, policy makers, funders, public authorities and stakeholder organisations active on behalf of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups' (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019:44). According to Claeys-Kulik et al., there is a need for 'a holistic system-level approach, rather than looking at higher education institutions in isolation' (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019:44) and for the 'exchange of experience and peer learning between universities from across Europe' (Claeys-Kulik et al., 2019:44).

2.2.4. The social dimension in Europe during the period 2020-2024

Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on the social dimension of higher education in Europe during the period 2020-2022

Research shows that at-risk students were disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The NESET analytical report 'The impact of COVID-19 on higher education: a review of emerging evidence' (Farnell et al., 2021) finds that 'the crisis is exacerbating pre-existing education disparities rather than causing those disparities'. Many underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students were faced with a range of additional obstacles to accessing and participating in higher education and successfully completing their studies.

The results of the **European Students' Union survey 'Student life during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown: Europe-wide insights'** (Doolan et al., 2021) provide an overview of additional obstacles faced by students in the EHEA during the pandemic. This report presents insights on students' experiences during 2020 lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, based on responses to a questionnaire given by students studying in the EHEA in April 2020:

- almost 60 % reported that they did not always have a reliable internet connection;
- almost 70 % reported that they did not always have access to course study materials;
- almost 35 % of students often lacked a quiet place to study;
- almost 40 % of students who worked during their studies lost their jobs;
- students frequently felt frustrated, anxious and bored in their academic activities when on-site classes had been cancelled;
- lower levels of general well-being were reported by students who did not have a supportive social network. Almost 10 % of students indicated that they did not have several people they could trust to help solve their problems.

(Doolan et al., 2021)

The pandemic also had a negative impact on equity and social inclusion in pre-tertiary education, creating a knock-on effect of reducing equitable access to higher education and lowering the level of participation of at-risk students in higher education in subsequent years. The pandemic could therefore have 'long-term "scarring" effects for young people under the age of 25 – the "COVID generation" – resulting in an unprecedented decline in social mobility due to rising economic and educational inequalities' (Farnell et al., 2021).

To mitigate the negative impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education, the social dimension should become central to higher education strategies at system and institutional levels, and should be aligned with specific targets and measures to solve the challenges faced by underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students.

Significant progress in the further development of the social dimension within the Bologna Process and in the European Higher education Area (EHEA) during the period 2020-2024

In 2021, the Bologna Follow-Up Group (BFUG) established a new BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension for the period 2021-2024. The task of this Working Group is to complete the new architecture for the social dimension in Europe, initiated during the previous BFUG period 2018-2020, during which the landmark Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension were completed in 2020. The two main objectives of the 2021-2024 BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension are: (1) to define indicators for the principles of the social dimension; and (2) to develop a system to monitor the implementation of those principles (BFUG, 2021).

The 2021-2024 BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension has successfully continued the work of the previous highly effective 2018-2020 BFUG Advisory Group on Social Dimension. By the end of 2022, it had created a proposal for indicators for Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension (BFUG, 2022b). The BFUG Working Group on Social Dimension established fruitful cooperation with the European Commission/Eurydice, and agreed that it would adopt most of the indicators developed by Eurydice had for each of the 10 principles of the social dimension (EC-Eurydice, 2022). The current proposal contains between two and six indicators per principle, amounting to a total of more than 40 indicators, both qualitative and quantitative, for the 10 principles of the social dimension. The specific contribution made by the Working Group is the creation of additional explanatory descriptors for each indicator, which provide further information on how the indicator can be implemented in practice (BFUG, 2022b).

As for the development of monitoring systems in the EHEA, two systems – one at European level and another layer of systems at national level - are envisaged to monitor the implementation of the principles of the social dimension¹⁰. The European-level monitoring system has already been created by the European Commission/Eurydice and is published in the report 'Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe' (EC-Eurydice, 2022). By using the newly developed indicators for the principles of the social dimension, the report shows the level of alignment of European higher education systems with the EHEA Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension. The system's indicators will enable the creation of national systems to monitor the implementation of the principles for the social dimension of higher education (BFUG, 2022a).

It is expected that the EHEA ministers for higher education will adopt the new EHEA architecture for the social dimension of higher education at the Tirana Ministerial Conference in June 2024 (BFUG, 2022a). This new architecture will consist of:

- the previously adopted Principles and Guidelines for to Strengthen the Social Dimension of higher education (from 2020);
- the indicators for the principles of the social dimension, with corresponding explanatory descriptors; and
- the European and national systems for monitoring the implementation of the principles for the social dimension of higher education.

The architecture for the social dimension described above will represent a coherent system for the continuous development of the social dimension in the EHEA. It will also enable EHEA member states to create action plans for strengthening the social dimension at national and HEI levels, as well as to define instruments for monitoring and evaluating their implementation and to assess their impact. In addition to enabling progress in the

¹⁰ According to the information available at the EHEA web site:
http://www.ehea.info/Upload/WG%20SD%20Update_BFUG%20Brno%20meeting%207-8_11_2022_Schmidt.pdf

implementation of the principles to be measured, the proposed indicators for the principles of the social dimension (BFUG, 2022b) also represent an opportunity to establish points of contact between the social dimension and other policies in higher education.

The Eurydice report 'Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe' (EC-Eurydice, 2022) demonstrates that such links between the social dimension and other policies in higher education have already been formed by national higher education systems across Europe. The report provides examples of the connections between the social dimension and quality assurance, the financing of higher education, international mobility in higher education, community engagement in higher education, and others.

It remains to be seen whether the upcoming 2024 Tirana Ministerial Communiqué will see the EHEA member states adopting the proposed indicators linking the principles of the social dimension with quality assurance in higher education (BFUG, 2022b). For the purposes of this report, we focus on the link between the social dimension and quality assurance, which is explored further in the chapters that follow.

Table 1. A comparison of important points in the development of quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education in the EHEA

Quality assurance	Social dimension
2000 – establishment of the European Network for Quality Assurance (ENQA)	
	2001 – first introduction of the term 'social dimension' in the Prague Communiqué 2001
2005 – release of the first version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)	
	2007 – explanation of the meaning of the social dimension in the London Communiqué 2007
2008 – establishment of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR)	
2015 – release of the second version of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG)	
	2020 – adoption of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA

Development of the social dimension of higher education within the EU and in European-level organisations during the period 2020-2024

In the Communication from the Commission on achieving the European Education Area (EEA) by 2025 (European Commission, 2020), one of the six dimensions necessary to further develop the EEA refers to inclusion and gender equality. This dimension stresses that 'educational attainment and achievement should be decoupled from social, economic

and cultural status, to ensure that education and training systems boost the abilities of every individual and enable upward social mobility'. According to terms of the Communication, higher education systems should strengthen their role in supporting lifelong learning and the diversification of the student body in the period up to 2025. Inclusion is perceived as 'a key objective to ensure accessible higher education institutions, open to a diverse student and researcher body, and offering more opportunities for lifelong learning' (European Commission, 2020). Furthermore, the Communication calls for non-formal learning, including volunteering, to be fostered, valued and recognised. The Commission also stresses the importance of connectivity between HEIs and their surrounding societies, which should be reflected in the four missions of universities, as stated in the Communication: education, research, innovation and service to society (European Commission, 2020).

A strong push towards affirming universities' societal engagement in all of their missions and activities also comes from the European University Association (EUA), the umbrella organisation of European universities. One of the EUA's three priorities for action in its vision for 2030 (*Universities Without Walls*, EUA, 2021) relates to the strengthening of universities' civic engagement, in which addressing social inclusion, diversity and equity play important roles. According to the vision for 2030, this could be fulfilled through a 'dialogue with society, actively involving citizens and non-academic partners such as business, non-governmental organisations, public authorities and others' (EUA, 2021).

The European Strategy for Universities also aims to support universities in their recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic and to enable them to adapt to ever-changing conditions, particularly those caused by the energy crisis, climate change and the degradation of the environment, as well as the economic crisis caused by growing inflation and rising costs of living. Similarly, we can assume that these changing conditions will disproportionately affect underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in higher education. On a positive note, The European Strategy for Universities (EC, 2022) in one of its four objectives for 2024 focuses on supporting 'universities as lighthouses of our European way of life' by focusing on: (1) their quality and relevance for future-proof skills; (2) diversity and inclusion; and (3) democratic practices, fundamental rights, academic values and freedom of scientific research.

The European Universities initiative is a flagship initiative of the European Strategy for Universities. European Universities are transnational university alliances that are intended lead the way towards the universities of the future. Since the mission of some European Universities is aimed at fostering diversity, equity and inclusion, the European Universities initiative represents a long-term opportunity to enhance the social dimension of higher education¹¹.

However, the objective of the European Strategy for Universities that relates to fostering diversity, inclusiveness and gender equality has the fewest policy instruments in comparison with other objectives in the strategy. It comprises only three policy instruments while other objectives of the strategy have as many as 12. Such disparity demonstrates the previously mentioned potential problem with the design, implementation and prioritisation of policies to improve the social dimension of higher education in the EU – namely, that announcing a policy objective on its own is not enough, if that objective is not accompanied by a sufficient number of effective policy instruments.

¹¹ The European Commission has the ambition to support, through Erasmus+ , 60 European Universities involving more than 500 higher education institutions, by mid-2024. For more information, please refer to the web page: <https://education.ec.europa.eu/education-levels/higher-education/european-universities-initiative>

The authors of this report believe that the policy for the social dimension, with its objectives and instruments, could be improved if measurable indicators were put in place that could enable an action plan to be created, with specific targets and time limits, thus providing a basis on which to monitor progress in achieving the policy objectives for the social dimension. As explained above, the European Commission/Eurydice, in cooperation with the BFUG Working Group for Social Dimension, made an important contribution in this regard by developing and publishing indicators in 2022 that show the level of implementation of the 10 Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension in the Eurydice partner countries, within the report 'Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe' (EC-Eurydice, 2022).

The same report indicates that European higher education systems have implemented nearly 42% of the policy objectives required to meet the commitments listed in the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension (EC-Eurydice, 2022:99). The highest result can be observed in the scoreboard indicator relating to the collecting of reliable data on social dimension, while the lowest results relate to the scorecard indicators on community engagement in higher education and on policy dialogue between public authorities and relevant stakeholders concerning the implementation of the principles of the social dimension. These results show that there is a significant room for improvement in the implementation of the social dimension of higher education in Europe.

3. Links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education

As shown in Chapter 2, quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Education Area (EEA)¹² have reached a point in their development at which links can be created between the two policies, particularly through the adoption of strategically important documents namely, 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA' (ESG 2015), 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' (2020) and 'Towards Equity and Inclusion in Higher Education in Europe' (2022). The relationship between quality assurance and social dimension therefore needs to be reassessed and reconsidered.

The idea of linking the social dimension with quality assurance processes at national and institutional level has, over time, been discussed by various authors. As Loukkola (2020) puts it, the debate as to the role that quality assurance can play in promoting the social dimension of higher education is not a new one, and 'calls have been made over the years for quality assurance to address the social dimension' (Loukkola, 2020). However, the literature on the topic is scarce and most of it does not refer to the social dimension and quality assurance as defined by the Rome Communiqué, but rather to equity and quality assurance. Since the latest 2020 EHEA definition of the social dimension of higher education encompasses the notions of equity, diversity and inclusion, sources relating to equity and quality assurance can be considered relevant to an analysis of the links between the social dimension and quality assurance.

Since 2010, various sources have discussed whether the relationship between quality assurance and the social dimension could be closer. Thus, Martin (2010) poses the question of whether equity and quality assurance can indeed, as the title of her book suggests, form a 'marriage of two minds', since they emerge from two different positions within higher education and, perhaps, ultimately have different goals. As Martin comments, equity and quality assurance are 'separate policy strands on higher education agendas that use different spheres for implementation' (Martin, 2010:204).

Martin concludes, however, that despite being separate, equity and quality assurance are not antagonistic positions. She claims that even though external quality assurance systems have a different objective – namely, to ensure that certain standards are adhered to and certain criteria are met in higher education, there is 'considerable potential that [equity and quality assurance] can come together to form a more coherent partnership and mutually reinforce each other' (Martin, 2010:204). To be precise, Martin indicates that external quality assurance systems can function as a 'complementary tool for monitoring, in addition to others such as performance indicators and supervision schemes' (Martin, 2010:206).

Eaton (2021) recognises the potential outlined by Martin and claims that 'quality assurance is grounding more and more of its work in consideration of social responsibility by focusing attention especially on issues of access, equity, diversity, inclusion and inequality' (Eaton, 2021:83). Eaton goes on to state that quality reviews can be used to 'articulate and examine the social responsibility efforts of higher education' (Eaton, 2021), which will urge

¹² The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) includes 47 countries participating in the Bologna process. Therefore, the EHEA covers much larger geographical area than the EU and its European Education Area (EEA) with its 27 member states. More information on the EHEA is available at <http://www.ehea.info/> and on the EEA at <https://education.ec.europa.eu/>.

HEIs to 'take meaningful action in such areas as access, equity, diversity and inequality' (Eaton, 2021).

Uvalić-Trumbić and Martin point out that 'in order to remain relevant, QA must adapt and be responsive to changes in the higher education sector' (Uvalić-Trumbić & Martin, 2021:12). They emphasise that the 'increasing complexity of higher education sectors continues to put [quality assurance] systems under pressure' (Uvalić-Trumbić & Martin, 2021:29) to respond to the emerging needs in relation to equity, diversity and inclusion. The authors perceive the development of quality assurance as an opportunity to address the issues that had emerged (Uvalić-Trumbić & Martin, 2021). In other words, quality assurance systems are developed within a context (institutional, regional or national) and should be sensitive to the changing needs of the stakeholders and react accordingly.

Loukkola, meanwhile, argues that 'if diversity, inclusion and equity are part of an institutional vision of high quality, then internal quality assurance processes should focus on promoting them' (Loukkola, 2020). Cruz (2009) takes a more practical approach, suggesting that since quality assurance systems include mechanisms such as accreditation and quality audits, which are based on clear and transparent standards and criteria, such criteria should 'take account of relevance, democratisation, social equity, local and regional development, and the creation of public spaces for discussion' (Cruz, 2009).

As described in Chapter 2 of this report, a comprehensive quality assurance landscape exists within the EHEA¹³ and EEA, while the social dimension policy landscape is still in the making. Although there have been significant steps forward in the development of the social dimension of higher education, the two policies – the social dimension and quality assurance – are at different stages of development, so potential points of contact are still being identified, and links are still in the process of being established.

In practice, there are several points of contact at which interaction between the two policies is either possible or is already taking place. To examine these links, it is important to consider the different levels at which they can be observed. These include: 1) EHEA and EEA level, 2) national level, and 3) institutional level. Each of these levels will be described in detail in the paragraphs that follow.

3.1. EHEA and EEA level

As Martin observes, 'it can be assumed that quality assurance, in addition to its primary function of ensuring standards, could also be seen as a means to monitor and contribute to the implementation of other public policies on higher education agendas like equity.' (Martin, 2010: 24). This can be observed at EHEA level, where links are beginning to form between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education. The two strategic documents that outline these two policies at EHEA level – the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension (PAGs), and the ESG 2015 – contain lists of points of contact that could be connected. By closely inspecting the texts of the two documents, possible points of contact between quality assurance and the social dimension can be detected in each document, and possible links or paths towards linking the two policies can be indicated.

It should be noted that the ESG 2015 do not include an explicit link to the social dimension. However, some standards refer to the recognition of the diversity of students and their

¹³ The EU – in terms of both EU institutions and the national governments of Member States – accepted the quality assurance system defined by the EHEA, and its quality assurance policy has since been in line with that of the EHEA. Henceforth in this report, it should therefore be noted that when referring to the EHEA in the context of quality assurance, the EHEA also encompasses the EU.

needs, flexible learning paths, non-formal and informal learning, and the importance of securing counselling and other support resources for students (of particular importance for underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students), all of which correspond to the underlying ideas of the social dimension. In the light of this, elements of Part 1 *Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance* can be read as containing references to the social dimension of higher education. Table 2 presents an overview of the ESG 2015 guidelines and possible links to the social dimension of higher education in the corresponding text.

Table 2. Mapping 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA' (ESG 2015) on to the 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' (PAGs 2020).

ESG 2015 Standards, Part I	Possible ESG 2015 reference to the social dimension in the guidelines	Link to the PAGs
1.1 Policy for quality assurance	Guidelines pertaining to Standard 1.1 state that quality assurance policy 'supports [...] guarding against intolerance of any kind or discrimination against the students or staff'.	The first principle encompasses the intention on guarding against intolerance and discrimination: 'The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level, as well as at the EHEA and the EU level. Strengthening the social dimension of higher education and fostering equity and inclusion to reflect the diversity of society is the responsibility of a higher education system as a whole and should be regarded as a continuous commitment'.
1.3 Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment	Guidelines pertaining to Standard 1.3 state the following: 'The implementation of student-centred learning and teaching [...] respects and attends to the diversity of students and their needs, enabling flexible learning paths '. 'The regulations for assessment take into account mitigating circumstances '.	This quote emphasises the need for HEIs and the higher education system to adapt to the needs of the student (which may be diverse) rather than vice-versa. This is regarded as the core value of the social dimension, as stated in Principle 2, Guideline 1 of the PAGs: 'Legal regulations and administrative rules should allow sufficient flexibility in the design, organisation and delivery of study programmes to reflect the diversity of students' needs '.
1.4 Student admission, progression, recognition and certification	Guidelines pertaining to Standard 1.4 state the following: 'Providing conditions and support that are necessary for students to make progress in their academic career is in the best interest of the individual students, programmes, institutions and systems'.	This quote from the ESG focuses on providing support for students, leading to higher completion rates, which is in line with Principle 5, Guideline 2 of the PAGs: 'These targets should aim at widening access, supporting participation in and completion of studies for all current and future students'.
	Guidelines pertaining to Standard 1.4 state the following: 'Fair recognition of higher education qualifications, periods of study and prior	Principle 2, Guideline 2 addresses the importance of the recognition of prior learning in enhancing the social dimension: 'Public authorities

	<p>learning, including the recognition of non-formal and informal learning, are essential components for ensuring the students' progress in their studies, while promoting mobility.'</p>	<p>should promote recognition of prior non-formal and informal learning (RPL) in higher education, because it has a positive impact on widening access, transition and completion, equity and inclusion, mobility and employability'.</p>
1.6 Learning resources and student support	<p>Guidelines pertaining to Standard 1.6 state the following: 'The needs of a diverse student population (such as mature, part-time, employed and international students as well as students with disabilities) [...] are taken into account when allocating, planning and providing the learning resources and student support.'</p>	<p>Since funding is crucial to policy implementation, a similar need is recognised by Principle 6 of the PAGs: 'Public authorities should provide sufficient and sustainable funding and financial autonomy to higher education institutions enabling them to build adequate capacity to embrace diversity and contribute to equity and inclusion in higher education.'</p>
1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programmes	<p>Guidelines pertaining to Standard 1.9 state the following: 'Regular monitoring, review and revision of study programmes [...] include the evaluation of:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - [...] - The changing needs of society; - [...] - The student expectations, needs and satisfaction in relation to the programme'. 	<p>Principle 9, Guideline 2 of the PAGs refers to community engagement in higher education: 'Higher education institutions should ensure that community engagement [...] promotes diversity, equity and inclusion.'; 'Community engagement should [...] provide a holistic basis on which universities can address a broad range of societal needs, including those of vulnerable, disadvantaged and underrepresented groups, while enriching their teaching, research and other core functions.'</p> <p>Principle 7, Guideline 2 establishes a direct link with quality assurance: 'Whenever possible, external quality assurance systems should address how the social dimension, diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion are reflected within the institutional missions of higher education institutions, whilst respecting the principle of autonomy of higher education institutions.'</p>

Even though the references to the social dimension in the ESG 2015 are not direct, the concept of diversity and the need for support deriving from the diversity, as well as the necessity to respond to the needs of students and society, are clearly visible in the context of quality assurance and can be mapped onto the PAGs (2020), as shown in Table 2.

In addition, the PAGs sought further potential points of interaction with quality assurance. This is explicitly stated in Principle 7, Guideline 2: 'Whenever possible, external quality assurance systems should address how the social dimension, diversity, accessibility, equity and inclusion are reflected within the institutional missions of higher education institutions, whilst respecting the principle of autonomy of higher education institutions' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b). Examining the ESG 2015 through the lens of the social dimension leads to the identification of multiple connections, and the same process can be implemented in the opposite direction. Looking at the Principles and Guidelines through the lens of quality assurance shows that there indeed are direct references to quality

assurance in the principles, guidelines and the indicators developed by BFUG and Eurydice, whose 'goal is to help the competent authorities to improve equity in higher education' (EC-Eurydice, 2022). It should be noted, however, that the indicators from the EC-Eurydice 2022 report are not legally binding, but rather propose a possible way forward in linking the social dimension with quality assurance. To be precise, five out of 38 indicators listed in the EC-Eurydice 2022 report, formulated as questions, connect the social dimension with quality assurance in higher education (EC-Eurydice, 2022), and can be mapped on to the ESG 2015 standards and guidelines, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Mapping the 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' (PAGs 2020) on to the 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA' (ESG 2015).

Principles and Guidelines (PAGs)	Eurydice indicators (EC-Eurydice, 2022) ¹⁴ – a link to quality assurance	Link to ESG 2015, Part I
Principle 1: 'The social dimension should be central to higher education strategies at system and institutional level , as well as at the EHEA and the EU level [...].'	' Are quality assurance agencies required to monitor whether higher education institutions have any policies in place promoting social dimension, equity, inclusiveness or diversity? '	Standard 1.1, pertaining to 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.'
Principle 2: ' Legal regulations or policy documents should allow and enable higher education institutions to develop their own strategies to fulfil their public responsibility towards widening access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies '. Principle 2, Guideline 1: 'Higher education institutions should be enabled to recognise full-time and part-time studies, flexible study modes, blended and distance learning as well as to recognize prior learning '.	' Are quality assurance agencies required to address the recognition of prior non-formal and/or informal learning in higher education? '	Standard 1.4, pertaining to 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 '.
Principle 5: 'Public authorities should have policies that enable higher education institutions to ensure effective counselling and guidance for potential and enrolled students in order to widen their access to, participation in and completion of higher education studies [...].'	' Is quality assurance of psychological counselling services required by law? '	Standard 1.6, pertaining to Learning resources and student support in its Guidelines states: ' Support activities and facilities may be organised in a variety of ways depending on the institutional context. However, the internal quality assurance

¹⁴ The Eurydice report '*Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe*' (EC-Eurydice, 2022) proposes a number of simple and composite indicators for collecting and presenting the relevant data, which show the extent to which European higher education systems are aligned with the Principles and Guidelines in addressing the social dimension.

		ensures that all resources are fit for purpose, accessible, and that students are informed about the services available to them.'
Principle 7: 'Public authorities should help higher education institutions to strengthen their capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and create inclusive learning environments and inclusive institutional cultures '.	<i>'Do public authorities issue guidelines to quality assurance agencies to consider whether social dimension is addressed in the mission of higher education institutions and/or in their study programmes?'</i>	Although there is no mention of similar requirements to those stated in the Eurydice indicators, the following standard could encompass such requirements: Standard 1.9, pertaining to 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 '.
Principle 9: 'Higher education institutions should ensure that community engagement in higher education promotes diversity, equity and inclusion '.	<i>'Are there requirements for external quality assurance agencies to evaluate community engagement activities of higher education institutions focused on equity and inclusion?'</i>	

While the Principles and Guidelines, and especially the indicators for the social dimension as shown above, perceive quality assurance mechanisms as tools that can help to reinforce the implementation of social dimension policies, there are concerns that the ESG 2015 do not allow such connections to be made. The EC-Eurydice (2022) report and its indicators suggest that external quality assurance procedures could motivate HEIs to create an inclusive environment that fosters diversity, equity, inclusion and responsiveness to the needs of their local communities. Furthermore, they suggest that the social dimension could make quality assurance systems in higher education more relevant to society and more responsive to the needs of underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups in higher education, which is line with the literature review presented at the beginning of the chapter.

Nonetheless, ENQA requires greater clarity regarding the purpose of the indicators for the social dimension, as defined by EC-Eurydice (2022), Specifically, this relates to determining whether they are a set of requirements, or a set of information points that will be used to map the state of play in each country for informative purposes. ENQA also notes that national contexts are diverse, and that indicators for the social dimension 'should not infringe on the autonomy of national authorities, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions to implement agreed policies in the way most suited to their context' (ENQA, 2023).

At present, it is difficult to predict the future course of events, and two questions arise with regard to the social dimension. First, it remains to be seen if the PAGs will have the same strength in terms of the implementation of policy relating to the social dimension as the ESG has had in terms of quality assurance – and if so, which body/bodies will be in charge of monitoring? Currently, no monitoring system is yet in place, either at EHEA or EEA level. Furthermore, there are no indications that a new system to support the social dimension will be formed, similar to the quality assurance framework that includes ENQA, EQAR and the national agencies that oversee the implementation of ESG 2015. Neither is there any sign that the existing quality assurance framework will be expanded to include the task of overseeing the implementation of the PAGs. Only when such mechanisms are established at EHEA and/or EEA level will national monitoring and evaluation mechanisms be developed. The second open question refers to the ESG, and whether this document will be expanded to include standards and criteria relating the social dimension in a possible

future iteration. It remains to be seen whether the upcoming 2024 Tirana Ministerial Communiqué will see the EHEA member states adopting the proposed indicators for the social dimension, which link the principles of the social dimension with quality assurance in higher education (BFUG, 2022b).

At EEA level, there are hardly any connections between the social dimension and quality assurance. Although a number of EU strategies and programmes concerning higher education include goals that relate to the social dimension, in line with the overarching aim of creating a more inclusive society in which all students have access to quality education and training opportunities (such as the Erasmus+ programme, or the European Universities Initiative, for instance), no links have been formed between the social dimension and quality assurance. However, such links may be developed in the coming period.

3. 2. National level

According to Martin, external quality assurance mechanisms 'are a tool that can be used to monitor and implement national equity policies' (Martin, 2010:31). She further concludes that it may be 'expected that those countries with strong equity concerns and policies in place would have developed quality models and quality assurance processes which relate to national equity concerns' (Martin, 2010:32). Indeed, public authorities in some countries have operationalised equity and/or the social dimension in their national quality assurance systems. According to the EC-Eurydice report (2022), in 23 Eurydice partner countries, national quality assurance agencies monitor whether HEIs have any policies in place for improving the social dimension, while in 15 countries no such monitoring takes place. This means that in practice, over 60% of higher education systems in the Eurydice partner countries have already connected the social dimension with quality assurance.

Links had been established between the social dimension and quality assurance procedures even before the 2020 launch of the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension, through the introduction into national quality assurance standards and criteria of standards referring to the social dimension. This supports the conclusion that some national higher education systems have already acknowledged social dimension policy as a fundamentally important policy, and that there is a grassroots-level¹⁵ necessity to codify it within national quality assurance systems. Given that social dimension policy, at this point in its development, lacks appropriate policy bodies and instruments for its implementation, monitoring and evaluation at national level, a logical step to move forward has been to look for allies within existing national systems, with quality assurance being the most obvious one.

In practice, existing national quality assurance systems and emerging national social dimension initiatives have already begun to communicate, as shown by the data presented in the EC-Eurydice report (2022) and demonstrated in the case studies presented in Chapter 4 of this report. In some EU countries (for instance, in Croatia, as explained in Chapter 4), strategic documents relating to the social dimension of higher education contain references to quality assurance; national standards and criteria for quality assurance already include references to the social dimension, and national quality agencies evaluate the implementation of social dimension policy. The generic nature of the ESG allows such flexibility regarding implementation. This, in turn, allows national agencies to adapt implementation to the national context, and to respond to the current needs of the higher education system.

¹⁵ This refers to the level of higher education institutions and to the national quality assurance systems.

EC-Eurydice carried out a survey of countries in the Eurydice network with regard to the implementation of the EHEA Principles for the social dimension, for which Eurydice created indicators (some of which include references to quality assurance) and published the first results in 2022. The evidence of existing national practices presented in the report 'Towards equity and inclusion in higher education in Europe' (EC-Eurydice, 2022) demonstrates that a number of higher education systems have already established links between the social dimension and quality assurance. The results are as follows:

- The results for Principle and Guidelines 2 of the social dimension show that 15 education systems rely on quality assurance agencies to address the recognition of prior learning in higher education¹⁶ (EC-Eurydice, 2022). Although there is still plenty of room for improvement, this indicates that connections between the social dimension and quality assurance have indeed been made in some higher education systems.
- In relation to Principle and Guidelines 5 of the social dimension, the report states that 'the vast majority of European countries offering psychological counselling services also have a requirement for quality assurance to be in place' (EC-Eurydice, 2022:60). This means that the external quality evaluations check whether such services are offered by HEIs.
- Regarding Principle and Guidelines 7 of social dimension, which encompass guidelines issued by public authorities guidelines for quality assurance agencies to consider whether the social dimension is addressed in the missions of HEIs and/or in their study programmes, the report shows that 'twenty systems claim that quality assurance agencies are required to consider such issues in their external evaluations', while 'seventeen systems have no requirements for external quality assurance agencies to consider social dimension issues' (EC-Eurydice, 2022:78).
- For Principle and Guidelines 9 of social dimension, the results show that 'only seven countries (Czechia, Estonia, Croatia, Italy, Portugal, Romania and Sweden) have top-level requirements for external quality assurance agencies to evaluate higher education institutions' community engagement activities.' (EC-Eurydice, 2022:91)

Delving deeper into the report (EC-Eurydice, 2022), more direct links are shown between the social dimension and quality assurance at national level. These are presented through scoreboard indicators summarising the survey findings relating to particular Principles and Guidelines for the social dimension. In particular, the results for one principle stand out on the scoreboard:

- *Principle 1 of the social dimension – Scoreboard indicator 1: The social dimension of higher education as policy priority means that at least one strategy (or other major policy plan) related to equity in higher education is currently being implemented, that the strategy has specific and measurable targets, that social dialogue related to the strategy took place or is currently taking place, and that quality assurance agencies monitor whether higher education institutions have policies with a social dimension (equity, inclusion, diversity). According to this scoring system seven EU systems have the highest score, meaning that they meet all the criteria given above, while only three EU countries have scored zero, meaning that they meet none of the abovementioned criteria. This proves that the social*

¹⁶ The EHEA Principle 2 of the social dimension explains the importance of the recognition of prior learning (RPL) in fostering the social dimension of higher education. The principle says that the RPL has positive impact on widening access, transition and completion, equity and inclusion, mobility and employability.

dimension is an emerging policy priority in Europe and that quality assurance agencies are increasingly monitoring whether higher education institutions include the social dimension in their internal policies.

ENQA is currently coordinating the Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-FIT)¹⁷ project, which, among other activities, aims to gather evidence and explore how quality assurance is 'addressing recent and emerging developments in higher education, including activities that go beyond the focus of the ESG and that use innovative approaches' (Gover, 2023). One of these activities was a survey of quality assurance agencies, which included a question asking whether external quality assurance procedures address the social dimension of higher education. The preliminary results¹⁸ show that 24 out of 75 quality assurance agencies (32 %) address the social dimension of higher education to a large extent in their external quality assurance procedures; 40 out of 75 agencies (53 %) to some extent, while only 11 agencies (15%) do not address the social dimension at all, as shown in Figure 1.¹⁹

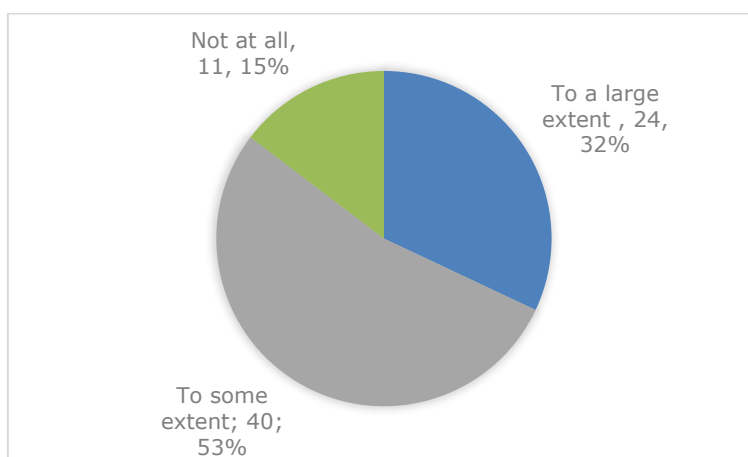


Figure 1: Quality assurance agencies that address the social dimension of higher education in their external evaluation. Source: Gover, 2023

These preliminary data confirm the findings of the EC-Eurydice (2022) report that national quality assurance systems have already formed some links with the social dimension of higher education. As Martin (2010) puts it, 'major policy concerns, such as equity, will permeate the quality models and processes used by quality assurance agencies'. The data presented above point to the conclusion that such a process is already underway at national level.

3.3. Higher education institution level

The EC-Eurydice report (2022) also indicates that, due to the large number and autonomy of HEIs, it is difficult to systematise existing practices in the linking of quality assurance with the social dimension at institutional level. However, the report argues that it is safe to assume that individual HEIs may have internal policies and practices aimed at including the social dimension into internal quality assurance that are more developed than is shown by the survey results at national level (EC-Eurydice, 2022). This is in line with Martin

¹⁷ Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-FIT) is an Erasmus+ project coordinated by ENQA, carried out in the period from 2022 to 2024. More details are available at <https://www.enqa.eu/projects/quality-assurance-fit-for-the-future-qa-fit/>

¹⁸ The source of these data is an ENQA presentation, available at http://www.ehea.info/Upload/ENQA%202023Feb07_QA%20and%20social%20dimension%20of%20HE.pdf

¹⁹ These results do not take into account the answer option 'I don't know', which accounts for one agency that responded (1.3 %).

(2010), who sees quality assurance as a 'powerful tool for inducing change at the institutional level' (Martin, 2010:31). It is therefore probable that HEIs have found ways to address issues relating to the social dimension and have included these into their internal quality assurance procedures, based on their institutional contexts.

The formation of specialised organisational units within HEIs varies depending on the internal structure of the institution. Typically, HEIs already have quality assurance units in place; however, it is currently uncertain whether HEIs will create new units specifically dedicated to implementing social dimension policies, or whether other existing units will be expanded to include these responsibilities. Therefore, it is too early to predict how the links between organisational units responsible for quality assurance and the social dimension will be formed at HEIs, because this will depend heavily on the institutional and the national context (i.e. the national higher education system and its regulatory framework).

An additional point to consider at the institutional level is building the capacities of HEI staff to address quality assurance and issues relating to the social dimension. Academic and non-academic staff are in immediate contact with students; if they lack the awareness, knowledge, skills and tools to necessary implement internal quality assurance and social dimension policies, their response to the needs of the diverse student body (the underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable students) will not be appropriate.

Since quality assurance, as a mature policy at European, national and institutional level, has a stable tradition, it is safe to assume that staff at HEIs are familiar with basic quality assurance concepts. Nevertheless, providing regular training and support is important in ensuring compliance with internal quality assurance procedures.

Likewise, HEI staff who understand the concept of the social dimension and are familiar with internal procedures relating to the social dimension are key to the successful implementation of social dimension policy at an institutional level. It is therefore necessary to strengthen their capacities of both academic and non-academic staff in the field of the social dimension through training. It is also necessary to provide guidance, support and tools that they can use in their daily contacts with underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups of students.

Such actions are in line with Principle and Guidelines 7 of the social dimension, which refer to strengthening HEIs' 'capacity in responding to the needs of a more diverse student and staff body and create inclusive learning environments and inclusive institutional cultures' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b:7). Guideline 1 of Principle 7 of the social dimension explicitly refers to improving the 'initial and continuing professional training for academic and administrative staff to enable them to work professionally and equitably with a diverse student body and staff' (Rome Communiqué, 2020b:7). The EC-Eurydice report (2022), in its section dedicated to Principle 7 of the social dimension and its guidelines, states that none of the countries surveyed have imposed obligatory training requirements to this effect. Furthermore, according to the report, most countries do not even provide recommendations that training should be provided to strengthen staff competences with regard to creating inclusive learning environments. Indeed, only seven higher education systems recognise such a need, and have recommendations in place for staff training to be provided by HEIs (EC-Eurydice, 2022).

Based on the EC-Eurydice report's findings with regard to staff training in the area of the social dimension, it can be concluded that there is ample room for improvement. It is crucial for the HEIs to provide staff training in matters of both quality assurance and the social dimension.

This chapter has provided an overview of the existing and possible contact points between the social dimension and quality assurance, on three levels: 1) the level of the EHEA and EEA, 2) national, and 3) institutional level. In the next chapter, we delve deeper into the links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education by examining case studies of different higher education systems and institutions, providing a more in-depth examination of how these levels play out in practice.

4. Different approaches: a selection of case studies

The selected case studies presented in this chapter demonstrate to what extent and in what ways national or regional authorities have incorporated the principles of the social dimension into their national quality assurance systems and procedures, based on the data available in EQAR and the Eurydice report. Our analysis focuses on existing documents relating to the external quality assurance procedures (accreditation, audit, quality labels) of selected quality assurance agencies operating in EHEA countries, to provide cases that illustrate possible approaches to the inclusion of social dimension criteria into quality assurance frameworks at national and institutional levels.

In particular, we observe to what extent specific higher education systems and HEIs support the EHEA Principles and Guidelines (specifically Principles 1, 2, 5 and 7), and how such support is monitored via internal and external quality assurance processes. The following dimensions are examined: the existence of a national strategic document, such as a national plan for the social dimension of higher education; this is followed by the existence of quality assurance criteria referring to the social dimension in national external higher education quality assurance procedures; and lastly, the way(s) in which HEIs report on the implementation of social dimension criteria, if at all.

Using data from the Eurydice 2022 report, four cases have been singled out as representing different approaches: the cases of the Croatia; Ireland; Catalonia in Spain; and Austria. These cases illustrate the multiple perspectives and the flexibility necessary to create systems that respect and respond to national contexts.

4.1. Croatia

4.1.1. National strategic document on the social dimension of higher education

In Croatia, the social dimension of higher education has been regulated by a national plan. The most recent existing plan was valid for the period from 2019 until 2021. However, for the following period, it was not replaced by a new plan specifically aimed at enhancing the social dimension of higher education. Instead, the goals stated in the document were transferred to and expanded in the 'National plan for the development of the education system until 2027', a new strategic document that encompasses the entire education system in Croatia. In the previous document, links can be observed between the social dimension and quality assurance in higher education.

The National Plan for Enhancing the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the Republic of Croatia (2019–2021) indicates that criteria relating to the social dimension should be included into the country's national higher education external quality assurance standards. Quality assurance is seen as a mechanism to support HEIs in adjusting to the needs of society, and should thus reflect the needs of vulnerable and underrepresented student groups. The plans states that '[t]he efficiency of quality assurance systems at higher education institutions is also determined based on an assessment of activities implemented by the higher education institution to encourage and enable access, provide support and monitor the success, completion rates and career development of students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups' (MZO, 2019). Therefore, Objective 6: 'include standards related to enhancing the social dimension of higher education into the quality assurance system' includes two institutional-level sub-objectives: '6.1 Improve processes for management and institutional policymaking related to increasing the availability of higher education', which refers to creating institutional strategic documents on increasing the accessibility of higher education to vulnerable and underrepresented groups and assessing the impact of these strategies; and '6.2 Improve internal quality assurance systems of

higher education institutions by promoting and assessing the higher education institutions' activities focused on supporting vulnerable and underrepresented group', which states that enhancing the social dimension of higher education is an important component of the overall quality improvement of higher education for the benefit of all students. Other activities under this sub-objective include improving social inclusiveness for both students and employees; adopting institutional acts to ensure support (financial, teaching, mentoring etc.) for students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups and monitoring their impact; and establishing bodies to ensure such support. Sub-objective 6.3 'Include standards and criteria related to the social dimension of higher education in the processes of external quality assessment of higher education institutions' refers to the system level, and includes the following activities: 1. Creating appropriate criteria and processes of external quality assessment of higher education institutions; and 2. Introducing a quality label or appropriate criteria for achievements of higher education institutions related to the social dimension of higher education and the social inclusiveness of both students and employees.

4.1.2. National quality assurance standards

A national quality assurance system is in place in Croatia, which means that all HEIs are subject to regular external quality assurance by a national agency registered on EQAR. External evaluation of higher education institutions has been implemented in its current form since 2017, in accordance with the European Standards and Guidelines 2015. The national quality assurance standards include criteria that refer to the social dimension, as suggested by the National Plan. The [Standards for the evaluation of quality of universities and university constituents in the procedure of re-accreditation of higher education institutions](#) reflect the National Plan in the following standards, by explicitly mentioning underrepresented and vulnerable groups, or a diverse student population, in elements of the standards:

- Standard I. Internal quality assurance and the social role of the higher education institution (ESG 1.1, ESG 1.7, ESG 1.8), sub-standard 1.1. The higher education institution has established a functional internal quality assurance system.
Elements of the standard:
The internal quality assurance system includes and evaluates all activities of the higher education institution (study programmes, teaching process, student support, support to students from *underrepresented and vulnerable groups*, learning resources, scientific/artistic activity, professional activity, etc.) and provides underlying documentation. (AZVO, 2017)
- Standard III. Teaching process and student support (ESG 1.3, ESG 1.4, ESG 1.6), sub-standard 3.3. The higher education institution ensures student-centred learning, and 3.4. The higher education institution ensures adequate student support.
Elements of sub-standard 3.3:
Teaching methods are adapted to a *diverse student population* (non-traditional student population, part-time students, senior students, underrepresented and vulnerable groups etc.).
Elements of sub-standard 3.4:
Student support is tailored to a *diverse student population* (part-time students, mature students, students from abroad, students from underrepresented and vulnerable groups, students with learning difficulties and disabilities, etc.). (AZVO, 2017)

However, Standard III, sub-standard 3.5, 'The higher education institution ensures support to students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups' is very specific. Elements of this standard include:

- The higher education institution monitors various needs of students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups.
- The teaching process is adjusted to the individual needs of students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups.
- The higher education institution invests resources in the support to students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups.

4.1.3. HEI-level examples

At the institutional level, when undergoing an initial accreditation or re-accreditation procedure, HEIs must prepare a report based on the national standards, which reflect the National Plan. A panel of experts reviews the report, visits the HEI and then, in their own report, provide recommendations. Examples of several findings and recommendations are presented below.

Report of the expert panel on the re-accreditation of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Rijeka, 2020

- *Although UNIRI and FFRI make significant efforts to meet the specific individual needs of students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups, most initiatives are aimed exclusively at students with disabilities. It is necessary to develop systematic help and support at the faculty level to other student sub-populations, starting with a clearer definition of the phrase 'students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups' in order to meet their specific needs.*

Report of the expert panel on the re-accreditation of the University of Applied Health Sciences in Zagreb, 2022

- *The HEI is committed to supporting students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups; for example, students with hearing and visual impairments customised tests (black ink, larger fonts, oral exams with a teaching assistant) are provided, which students confirm.*
- *During the site visit, it was observed by the expert committee, elevators at the Mlinarska location, but unfortunately none in the Ksaver location. The HEI said that plans and schedules of classes are adapted so that students that need to use the elevators do not have the need for going to the Ksaver location. The HEI demonstrates good practice by including Roma minorities into higher education. The HEI clearly demonstrates that students from vulnerable and underrepresented groups are given support whilst studying by the Heads of study programmes, study year mentors, employees of expert services and the Vice-Dean for Students.*

Report of the expert panel on the re-accreditation of the Faculty of Law Osijek, Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, 2021

- *All the information relevant for students with disabilities, including those on their rights, is available on the official website of the Office for Students with Disabilities. The website also includes information on the possibilities for seeking help or support of the University Psychological Counselling Centre on the available assistance for students with disabilities and the equipment available to students who are registered at the Office for Students with Disabilities of the Josip Juraj Strossmayer University in Osijek.*

- *The faculty is ready to make individual adjustments for students with disabilities (didactic-methodological adjustment, adjustment of the performance of classes or of the technical support).*
- *Students from this group receive financial support. Students with disabilities are entitled to accommodation in the student dormitory and are exempt from paying tuition. For students of underprivileged social-economic status, the Commission for Teaching and Students approves applications for payment of tuition in instalments.*
- *The Panel compliments the HEI ambition to install an elevator for persons with disabilities. However, at the moment students with disabilities do not have access to a big part of the main building. Also, the fact that the lectures take place at numerous locations makes it more challenging for students with reduced mobility."*
- *Recommendations for improvement:
Make all parts of the buildings accessible for students with disabilities in the shortest period possible.
Organize lectures in a way that students with disabilities can attend them all on one location.*

4.2. Ireland

4.2.1. National strategic document on the social dimension of higher education

The Republic of Ireland has a national plan for the social dimension of higher education ([National Access Plan: A Strategic Action Plan for Equity of Access, Participation and Success in Higher Education 2022-2028](#)). The current plan is the fourth iteration of such a strategic document (it follows the [National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2019](#), and the [Progress Review of 2018](#)), and is dominantly student-centred. Special attention is given to defining *priority groups*, which encompass underrepresented students, vulnerable students, students who have experienced disadvantage and who face challenges in accessing higher education. Thus, three main groups have been identified: socio-economically disadvantaged students, members of the Irish Traveller and Roma communities, and students with disabilities (including intellectual disabilities). There is an awareness that a combination of factors is possible, and that students may experience disadvantages resulting from various causes.

The Plan includes five student-centred goals: inclusivity, flexibility, clarity, coherence and sustainability. The following goals reflect the social dimension of higher education:

- Goal 1: Inclusivity defines an inclusive environment.
- Goal 2: Flexibility is aimed at supporting access and participation 'in a way that aligns with [the student's] individual needs and circumstances.' (HEA, 2022). This may include part-time and remote or hybrid learning models and recognises that students may enter higher education at different stages in life and through diverse individual study paths.
- Goal 3: Clarity refers to clear, user-friendly and accessible information on access to higher education, as well as to all forms of support.
- Goal 4: Coherence refers to the existence of coordinated support structures, which 'focus on student success and positive outcomes'. (HEA, 2022)
- Goal 5: Sustainability refers to securing the resources needed to provide inclusive higher education. This goal also recognises 'the need to continuously improve funding for student support to incentivise greater participation for

underrepresented groups and to protect against the increased costs of college for students from priority groups.' (HEA, 2022)

Although no reference is made to quality assurance, there is a reporting procedure dedicated solely to the social dimension in terms of the National Plan. HEIs report annually to Higher Education Authority on the implementation of the National Access Plan as part of Strategic Dialogue Process, and data are reported annually through Student Records System (SRS) and Equal Access Survey.

4.2.2. National quality assurance standards

Irish universities undergo internal and external quality assurance procedures, meeting both national and European standards. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) is the national agency that oversees quality assurance procedures in higher education, which are based on QQI's Core Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines and Sector-Specific Statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines. These guidelines are in line with the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG 2015) and the National Access Plan. However, although some criteria refer to the social dimension, the criteria do not directly reflect the National Plan.

Guideline 5, *Teaching and Learning*, suggests that 'the needs of a diverse learner population (mature, part-time, employed, international, as well as learners with disabilities) are taken into account when planning and providing learning resources and supports' (QQI, 2017a). Guideline 5.2, *A provider ethos that promotes learning*, mentions that the 'The learning environment respects and attends to the diversity of learners and their needs, enabling flexible learning pathways'. This guideline states that it is expected that the learning environment:

- *Considers the use of different modes of delivery, where appropriate*
- *Flexibly uses a variety of pedagogical methods that are evaluated and monitored and adjusted accordingly*
- *Encourages a sense of autonomy in the learner, while encouraging adequate guidance and support for the learner* (QQI, 2017a)

Guideline 7, *Supports for Learners*, under point 7.1, mentions that learners should be provided with access to services related to programmes.

QQI is conducting a review cycle for HEIs, named the CINNTE review cycle. This began in 2017 and will finish in 2023, and is in line with the ESG 2015, especially parts 2 and 3 and Core Quality Assurance Guidelines. Among the objectives of the review, the one that may in practice relate to aspects of the social dimension is *Objective 4. To review the effectiveness and implementation of procedures for access, transfer and progression.*

Another procedure that higher education programmes need to undergo is the validation process. This is a regulatory process that determines whether a particular QQI award can be given to a programme of education and training. The [Policies and criteria for the validation of programmes of education and training](#) also reflect the social dimension of higher education in some of their criteria. For example, *17.8 The learning environment is consistent with the needs of the programme's learners* includes the following criteria:

- *The programme's physical, social, cultural and intellectual environment (recognising that the environment may, for example, be partly virtual or involve the workplace) including resources and support systems are consistent with the intended programme learning outcomes.* (QQI, 2017b).

- *Learners can interact with, and are supported by, others in the programme's learning environments including peer learners, teachers, and where applicable supervisors, practitioners and mentors. (QQI, 2017b).*

Then, 17.9 *There are sound teaching and learning strategies* includes the following:

- Individualised guidance, support and timely formative feedback is regularly provided to enrolled learners as they progress within the programme.

Finally, 17.11 *Learners enrolled on the programme are well informed, guided and cared for* includes the following criteria:

- There are arrangements to ensure that learners enrolled on the programme are supervised and individualised support and due care is targeted at those who need it.
- The programme provides supports for enrolled learners who have special education and training needs.
- The programme makes reasonable accommodations for learners with disabilities.

4.2.3. HEI-level examples

At institution level, HEIs report on the implementation of the Public Sector Equality and Human Rights Duty, which is a statutory obligation for public bodies. Equality, Diversity, Inclusion and Inter-Culturalism (EDI) is often included in university strategies, and according to Irish Universities Association (IUA), EDI refers to gender equality, race equality, consent, sanctuary seekers, age-friendly universities, and LGBT inclusion. This is separate from Access and from Quality Assurance. Universities prepare annual EDI reports. An example is provided below:

Maynooth University Equality, Diversity, Inclusion, and Inter-culturalism EDI Annual Report 2019/20

- *The university undergoes an annual equality audit and produces a report which describes the achievements related to gender equality, Family Friendly University, LGBTQIA+, cultural diversity, disability, staff diversity, consent framework and Covid-19 measures.*

Meanwhile, under the terms of the CINNTE²⁰ review procedure, HEIs prepare an institutional self-evaluation report, which reflects the EDI principles, particularly in the section *Procedures for Access, Transfer and Progression*.

Institutional Review Report 2022 Trinity College Dublin, The University of Dublin

- *It is clear to the review team that Trinity is working hard to increase the diversity of its student body, and this is strongly endorsed. Students highly praised the support they had received directly from the specific support services and particular individuals within those services, and this is noteworthy. The review team notes that overall efforts at Trinity to create links and synergies between support services are discussed in the ISER. These include the launch of a student supports and services handbook in 2018 and the creation of the 'Big Wheel' graphic in 2018/19.*
- *Recommendations:*

²⁰ CINNTE refers to the Cyclical Review of Higher Education Institutions, a periodic external quality assurance review.

The review team recommends that Trinity provide all cohorts and subgroups of students with timely, clear and consistent information about key policies, including (but not limited to) those that relate to access, transfer and progression, learner supports, assessment and feedback. Within this, Trinity should pay particular attention to the needs of international students and students entering the college via access routes.

Institutional Review Report 2021, University of Limerick

- *In the ISER, the university highlights its commitment to responding to the needs of vulnerable students through its designation as a University of Sanctuary and plans to review how to support the recognition of entry qualifications and appropriate RPL arrangements for refugees who wish to access or return to higher education. There is much to commend in the approach taken by the university in relation to the development and communication of clear RPL policies and its recognition of the need to review the policy and ensure it remains fit for purpose for an ever more diverse demographic. To work towards widening access, UL plans to appoint a new primary access coordinator.*
- *Recommendations*
The review team recommends that the university clarify its objectives in relation to access and diversity and, as part of this planned review of RPL, it should consider what monitoring data would enable it to determine the effectiveness of its access policies in meeting the objectives identified with particular emphasis on social disadvantage and diversity.

4.2.4. Quality labels

In addition to the EDI, which covers some aspects of the social dimension, there are other tools in Ireland which support social mobility and access to higher education by unrepresented groups. These include the 1916 Bursary financial award for underrepresented groups (e.g. students from socio-economically disadvantaged communities, students with a disability, students who are carers, lone and/or teen parents, members of the Irish Traveller community, members of the Roma community, mature students, ethnic minorities etc.); and the Higher Education Access Route (HEAR) and Disability Access Route to Education (DARE). In addition, there are awards that can be interpreted as quality labels which refer to various types of diversity, such as gender equality.

- Athena Swan Ireland is a nationally funded cross-sector initiative launched in 2015. All universities and institutes of technology and several colleges participate in Athena Swan Ireland, since this is a key element of the national strategy for gender equality. Its aim is to support HEIs in implementing gender equality and building capacity.

4.3. Catalonia, Spain

4.3.1. National strategic document for the social dimension of higher education

Although there is no strategic document regarding the social dimension of higher education in Spain, the [Spanish Law on Universities](#) modifies previous laws in accordance with the underlying principle of 'Leave no one behind'. Article 42 of this law states that universities should 'establish procedures for the admission of students who request to enter their

centres with respect to the principles of equality, merit and ability' (BOE, 2021). Article 45 regulates scholarships and financial aid, and states that 'in order to ensure that no one is excluded from studying at the University for economic reasons, the State and the Autonomous Communities, as well as the Universities themselves, will implement a policy of scholarships, grants and credits for students and, in the case of public Universities, they will also establish modalities of partial or total exemption from the payment for the provision of academic services.' Article 64, which deals with students' rights, stipulates that students have a right to 'equal opportunities and non-discrimination for reasons of sex, race, religion or disability or any other personal or social condition or circumstance in access to the university, admission to the centres, permanence in the university and exercise of their academic rights] (BOE, 2021).

Other laws and decrees secure admission for students with permanent special educational needs due to disability, for students over the age of 25, and for students over the age of 45, and there is a separate law on gender equality.

The social dimension of higher education is not explicitly mentioned in the context of quality assurance in these laws.

4.3.2. Regional quality assurance standards

Although Spain has a National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA), which is responsible for the assessment, certification and accreditation of the Spanish university system, evaluation the quality of universities in Spain is the responsibility of the Autonomous Communities. The Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency, AQU Catalunya, oversees quality assurance in Catalan higher education, and it conducts assessment, accreditation and certification of quality in HEIs in Catalonia. The following documents establish a connection between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education.

[The Guide to the institutional accreditation of university centres](#), a document which sets out the standards and criteria for institutional accreditation, includes some references to the social dimension in its dimension 6.1, 'Facilities and infrastructures'. Here, it is stated that '...the technological infrastructure, especially for degrees offered in blended and distance learning modes, will be assessed to ensure it is dimensioned to support the entire student body and is permanently accessible. [...] The educational facilities and infrastructure should allow for smooth interaction between students and teachers and should be fully accessible to students with disabilities. The facilities and rest of the educational infrastructure should be designed to avoid bias based on gender, race, origin or any other personal or social condition or circumstance.' (AQU, 2021a). Furthermore, in dimension 6.2, 'Learning support services and resources', it is stated that 'the assessment of learning resources and support services will take into account three main aspects: quality, adequacy and access. [...] The adequacy and consistency of learning support services and resources in relation to the discipline of the degree programmes and subjects and the teaching methodology will be assessed. Learning resources should be consistent with students' learning needs, regardless of their mode of participation. [...] The centre will operate responsibly and proactively to create an environment of well-being and safety for all students.' (AQU, 2021a).

The [Standards and criteria for the institutional accreditation of university centres](#) includes further references to the social dimension of higher education. Thus, Dimension 5, Part 1, 'Teaching method and training activities' states that they should consider and 'respect student diversity (origin, race, sex, sexual identity, religion, opinion or any other personal, social or cultural considerations)' (AQU, 2021b), while Part 2, 'Assessment' states that assessment should be 'adapted to the type of student, especially those with disabilities or

other special educational needs'. (AQU, 2021b). Dimension 6, 'Learning resources and student support' indicates that the resources which contribute to students learning should include guidance for students with disabilities and advice on financial aid, and that the resources should be accessible. Part 1, 'Facilities and infrastructure' includes the following criterion: 'technological facilities and infrastructure are adapted to the characteristics and needs of students, especially those with disabilities' (AQU, 2021b), while Part 2, 'Learning support services and resources', includes the following criterion: 'The centre ensures equal access to services and learning resources and they are designed to respect student diversity' (AQU, 2021b).

4.3.3. HEI-level examples

HEIs undergo initial institutional accreditation, which needs to be renewed through internal and external assessment. This is carried out in accordance with international practices for the accreditation of programmes and institutions. The *Accreditation of teaching assessment* handbook, which was launched in 2007, is aimed at encouraging HEIs to develop their own mechanisms to manage the quality of teaching. This is voluntary, and includes the usual accreditation steps: self-assessment, followed by an external review committee visit, which results in a report and the final accreditation or renewal. This procedure also reflects some aspects of the social dimension. For example:

Renewal report of the accreditation of the process teaching evaluation content in the teacher evaluation handbook from the University of Girona, 2021

- *It is recommended to include in the teaching evaluation process elements that allow assessment the actions carried out to incorporate the gender perspective in teaching and attention to special educational needs.*

4.4. Austria

4.4.1. National strategic document for the social dimension of higher education

Austria has a [National strategy on the social dimension of higher education](#), which connects categories of the social dimension with quality assurance. Namely, 'Target dimension I: More inclusive access' contains a measure under 'Action line 8: Integrate the social dimension into strategic planning for higher education and create appropriate governance structures', which implies such a connection: 'Consider social dimension categories in diversity management, quality assurance, evaluations and reviews of effectiveness' (BMFMW, 2017)

4.4.2. National quality assurance standards

Although the National Plan implies a connection with quality assurance, Austria's national quality assurance standards do not explicitly state any criteria that refer to the social dimension, but do indicate that they comply with the principles of the ESG, and that all standards should be viewed through this lens. The social dimension is therefore implicitly reflected through several standards.

The procedural rules are almost identical for institutional and for programme accreditation, and comply with the principles of the ESG.

The Decree of the Board of AQ Austria on the Accreditation of Universities of Applied Sciences 2021 includes the following criteria:

§16. Criteria for the extension of the institutional accreditation

- (3) Organisation of the university of applied sciences
The following issues [...] are specified in a comprehensible and adequate manner:
 - 2.e. an equal opportunities plan with measures to promote gender equality;
- (5) Counselling and support for students
 1. The university of applied sciences provides adequate support offerings on the subjects and relating to the study formats as well as psychosocial counselling and support for their students. (AQ Austria, 2021)

The document Guidelines for International Accreditation of Higher Education Institutions and Degree Programmes (Bachelor, Master, PhD) includes the following reference to the social dimension of higher education, under 'Degree programme and programme management':

- *The following criteria are to be applied with consideration of a diverse student population. (AQ Austria, 2019)*

Aside from these, there are no further reflections of the social dimension.

4.4.3. HEI-level examples

Institutional-level reports refer to institutional accreditation, which include areas of assessment such as development planning, degree programmes and teaching, and the organisation of the higher education institution and its activities; or programme accreditation, which includes areas of assessment such as the degree programme and its management, staff and quality assurance. Some elements relating to the social dimension can be found in such reports, as shown in the examples below:

Review Report of the Expert Panel on the Joint Programme Copernicus Master's in Digital Earth

- Under Standard 5 Learning, Teaching and Assessment (ESG 1.3), there is a reference to diversity:
5.1 Learning and teaching: The programme should be designed to correspond with the intended learning outcomes, and the learning and teaching approaches applied should be adequate to achieve those. The diversity of students and their needs should be respected and attended to, especially in view of potential different cultural backgrounds of the students.

Foundation for International Business Administration Accreditation (FIBAA) Institutional audit report for Campus O2, 2017

III. 4 Equal Opportunities / Diversity

The code of conduct of the CAMPUS O2 postulates equal treatment and contains a ban on discrimination. Implementation measures to achieve and support equal opportunities and diversity primarily include:

- *the establishment of a Gender Mainstreaming & Diversity Management Officer, who has been anchored in the organization since mid-2011 and reports directly to the management;*
- *a legally binding language guide on the use of gender-fair language;*
- *an internal FH paper on the subject of 'Gender Mainstreaming & Diversity Management at the FH CAMPUS O2', which, on the one hand, summarizes the most relevant researched core dimensions of GM&DM for a (technical)*

university institution and, based on this, lists the current status of activities and also measures that are still planned in the medium term;

- *The diversity of the students must be taken into account in the admissions process. [...] The provision of the Law on the right to different examination methods was incorporated into the General examination regulations of the FH CAMPUS 02.*
- *Disabled and chronically ill applicants are also informed as part of the application and admissions process and, if necessary, looked after (also anonymously). [...] are invited to get in touch with the representative for diversity management and to find out about the general conditions or to clarify concrete measures for a different implementation of the admission procedure. In the case of a disability or chronic illness, there is the possibility of an extension.*
- *The existing technical equipment (e.g. larger monitors, reader for Braille) as well as a corresponding preparation of the teaching and examination documents.*
- *Accessibility measures in the building infrastructure and website are in place and are constantly being expanded.*

Report on the audit the system of internal quality assurance at the Ferdinand Porsche FernFH

- *The university representatives for gender and diversity compile an annual equality report based on different data sources. [...] In addition to the data (e.g. on gender distribution among students and employees), the reports also contain recommendations for further measures.*
- *Gender and diversity aspects are also included in the degree program and course reports as well as in the evaluation of the courses.*
- *New employees of the university are also required to participate in an online workshop on gender and diversity. This is also open to external lecturers, students and alumni.*
- *3.2 Social objectives and cross-cutting issues*
- *The community role and function of the FernFH is clearly anchored in the current university development plan, especially in the main goal of "open-mindedness". [...] In addition, the FernFH's community task is, through their special range of courses, to contribute to reducing educational barriers. This also includes efforts to promote diversity among students.*
- *In general, the cross-sectional area of gender and diversity management is firmly anchored in the university's control and quality management system. Apart from the university development plan, this can be seen, for example, in the existence of a separate part of the statute Equality, gender and diversity management and the existence of a permanent working committee on this topic.*

4.5. Final remarks

The examples from four countries given above demonstrate that at HEI level, numerous practices are in places in various countries to implement social dimension policy, since this is most probably a response to actual needs of the HEI and of its student body.

External quality reports demonstrate that there are procedures at national level for evaluating such practices and to encourage HEIs to improve them. In three out of the four cases presented, national quality assurance standards and criteria include references to the social dimension – but even in Austria, which has no such formal standards and criteria, national guidelines indicate that all of the criteria listed should be applied in the light of the

social dimension. This is exactly what happens in the field, as can be seen from the examples provided.

In terms of a national strategic document that covers the social dimension, different countries apply different approaches: a national plan or strategy that complements a law, or a law without a pertaining strategic document.

Table 4 below provides an overview of the four preceding cases.

Table 4. An overview of national case studies

Country / Region	National strategic document for SD	National / Regional QA standards and criteria include references to SD	HEI-level examples of connecting SD and QA	Additional information
Croatia	National Plan	Yes	Yes	
Ireland	National Access Plan	Yes, some	Yes	There is a reporting procedure with regard to the implementation of the National Plan, separate from QA
Catalonia, Spain	Regulated by national law, no separate strategic document	Yes	Yes	QA is the responsibility of Autonomous Communities (regional level).
Austria	National Strategy	No	Yes	

5. Conclusions and policy recommendations

5.1. Conclusions

Points of contact between quality assurance and the social dimension

Quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the European Education Area (EEA)²¹ have reached a point in their development at which links can be created between the two policies. The two strategic documents that outline these two policies at EHEA level, and which are relevant to both the EHEA and the EEA are 'Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the EHEA' (ESG 2015) and 'Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education in the EHEA' (PAGs). Both of these contain lists of points of contact that enable the formation of links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education.

Quality assurance is a policy at a higher level of maturity than the social dimension. It has an established policy landscape, which consists of a stable EHEA-level framework for the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of quality assurance, national quality assurance systems, quality assurance agencies and institutional quality assurance processes at HEIs. The social dimension, on the other hand, has yet to develop its policy landscape through the implementation of the EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education, and the development of pertaining indicators and descriptors which will steer and facilitate the implementation of social dimension policy at national and institutional level.

Mapping areas in which links are established between quality assurance and the social dimension at EHEA and EEA level

Even though the references to the social dimension in the ESG 2015 are not direct, the concept of diversity, the need for support, and the necessity to respond to the needs of students and of society are clearly visible. The mapping of ESG 2015 onto the Principles and Guidelines reveals that five standards from Part I of the ESG 2015 and its pertaining guidelines (1.1, Policy for quality assurance; 1.3, Student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; 1.4, Student admission, progression, recognition and certification; 1.6, Learning resources and student support; and 1.9, Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes) can be connected with seven principles and pertaining guidelines from the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension (Principle 1 on the strategic approach to social dimension; Principle 2 on a supportive legal framework; Principle 5 on effective counselling and guidance; Principle 6 on sufficient and stable funding; Principle 7 on strengthening higher education institutions' capacity for diversity; and Principle 9 on community engagement).

In the reverse process of mapping the Principles and Guidelines onto the ESG 2015, new links were discovered. Aside from the direct reference to quality assurance in Principle 7 of the social dimension, on strengthening higher education institutions' capacity for diversity, the mapping analysis showed that five principles of the social dimension and their corresponding indicators can be connected to four standards for quality assurance from Part I of ESG 2015 (Standard 1.1 on Policy for quality assurance; Standard 1.4 on

²¹ The European Higher Education Area (EHEA) includes the 47 countries participating in the Bologna process. Therefore, the EHEA covers much larger geographical area than the EU and its European Education Area (EEA) with its 27 Member States. More information on the EHEA is available at <http://www.ehea.info/> and on the EEA at <https://education.ec.europa.eu/>.

Student admission, progression, recognition and certification; Standard 1.6 on Learning resources and student support; and Standard 1.9 on Ongoing monitoring and periodic review of programmes). This shows that the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension – and especially the indicators relating to the social dimension – perceive quality assurance mechanisms as tools that can help to reinforce the implementation of social dimension policies.

Established links at national level

The findings of the EC-Eurydice report (2022) presented in Chapter 3 demonstrate that the links between quality assurance and the social dimension of higher education have already been put to practice at national level through external evaluation processes. The findings of the survey conducted by ENQA within the Quality Assurance Fit for the Future (QA-FIT) project confirm that the majority of quality assurance agencies in the EHEA (85% of the quality agencies surveyed) are already addressing the social dimension to a certain extent in their external evaluation.

Examples from the four case studies presented in Chapter 4 on Austria, Catalonia in Spain, Croatia and Ireland, indicate that some higher education systems have already incorporated the social dimension into their national standards and criteria for quality assurance in higher education, or have found other ways of linking the two policies, depending on their specific contexts. Also, a number of national strategies or action plans for strengthening the social dimension of higher education contain objectives relating to national quality assurance systems. It can be concluded that the link between quality assurance and the social dimension already exists at national level in higher education in a number of EHEA countries.

Established links at higher education institution level

Due to institutional autonomy, links between the social dimension and quality assurance at HEI level are more difficult to discern. However, as described in Chapters 3 and 4, it is likely that there are plenty of initiatives that represent direct responses by HEIs to the diverse needs of their student bodies, which encompass underrepresented, disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, with the aim of addressing them through internal quality assurance procedures and institutional strategies for strengthening the social dimension. In addition, there is an evident need to provide training for academic and non-academic staff in HEIs in matters of both quality assurance and the social dimension. The EC-Eurydice report (2022) indicates that as yet, few higher education systems provide such training.

Concerns to be considered

Some concerns need to be taken into account in the process of establishing links between quality assurance and the social dimension, however. First, the ESG were adopted by the EHEA ministers as a framework for quality assurance in higher education that provides requirements for external and internal quality assurance procedures. The latest, currently valid version of the ESG 2015 applies specifically to quality assurance of learning and teaching, and not to the quality assurance of all activities undertaken by HEIs. It is therefore important to bear in mind that certain quality assurance agencies do not have a remit to look beyond learning and teaching (ENQA, 2023).

Second, the creation of EHEA principles, guidelines and indicators for the social dimension should not infringe the autonomy of national public authorities, quality assurance agencies and HEIs. They should be able to implement the EHEA agreed policies in the way that is best suited to their context. With regard to quality assurance agencies, the EHEA's expectations in relation to the fostering of the social dimension need to be compatible with their remit (if any) within a specific national system, their operational independence, and their ability to maintain a non-conflict of interest towards the HEIs they evaluate (ENQA, 2023).

Third, the development of EHEA indicators relating to the principles of the social dimension, as well as the creation of indicators that establish an explicit link between the social dimension and quality assurance, needs to take into account the diversity of external quality assurance systems and agencies within the EHEA. Some quality assurance agencies only cover learning and teaching in their external evaluations, while other agencies are more comprehensive and cover all activities of HEIs. Some national frameworks combine evaluations of both programmes and institutions, while others employ either one or the other.

Fourth, special care should be taken not to create an additional administrative burden for agencies and/or HEIs, in order to avoid reducing quality assurance procedures (which would include references to social dimension) to box-ticking exercises, thus stripping them of their meaningful purpose.

Lastly, any potential EHEA requirement relating to monitoring the implementation of the principles of the social dimension at national level needs to take into consideration that some quality assurance agencies operate across borders. EHEA ministers committed to allowing HEIs in the EHEA to choose any EQAR-registered agency for their external evaluations (though the implementation of this commitment is uneven in practice), and some agencies are not rooted in any national system at all. National legislation and national quality assurance frameworks should support international cooperation in quality assurance. In seeking to strengthen social dimension policies by requiring the detailed evaluation of national policies through external quality assurance, care should be taken not to create barriers to cross-border quality assurance (ENQA, 2023).

A step forward in establishing links between quality assurance and social dimension of higher education

The evidence of existing links between quality assurance and the social dimension at both national and institutional levels leads to the conclusion that such links are both possible and welcome. The authors of this report believe that it would also be beneficial to create links also at EHEA/EEA level. Evidence suggests that current European-level quality assurance policies need to catch up with developments at grassroots levels (national and institutional contexts) by creating explicit references to the social dimension. Meanwhile, the Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension should adopt indicators that enable the implementation of these principles to be monitored. Some of the pertaining indicators should indicate that in certain national contexts, quality assurance framework could be used to monitor the implementation of the principles.

Based on these conclusions, which arise from a comprehensive overview of the development of the two policies and the analysis of the relevant documents and examples provided in the previous chapters, recommendations for further actions to link quality assurance with the social dimension of higher education have been made on three levels: 1) EHEA/EEA level; 2) the national level; and 3) the higher education institution level.

5.2. Policy recommendations

5.2.1. EHEA/EEA level

At EHEA and EEA level, the following policy recommendations can be made:

Table 5. Policy recommendations at EHEA and EEA level

EHEA and EEA LEVEL	
Policy recommendation 1.1	Strengthen the policy framework at EHEA level for the social dimension of higher education
Description	The Bologna Follow-up Group (BFUG) should adopt a new policy framework for the social dimension at the EHEA ministerial conference in 2024. This should consist of principles and guidelines, together with indicators and explanatory descriptors that contain references to quality assurance in higher education. The creation of a new policy framework at EHEA level for the social dimension should not infringe the autonomy of national public authorities, quality assurance agencies and higher education institutions, which should all be able to implement the EHEA-agreed policies in the way most suited to their context.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG, in consultation with the ENQA, EQAR, EUA, EURASHE, ESU and other relevant stakeholders.
Policy recommendation 1.2	Create synergies between the ESGs and the EHEA frameworks for the social dimension of higher education
Description	Consider implementing changes to the ESG so that they contain more explicit links to strengthening the social dimension of higher education.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG; ENQA, EQAR, EUA, EURASHE, ESU and other relevant stakeholders.
Policy recommendation 1.3	Include the social dimension into any future policy development referring to quality assurance in higher education at EU level
Description	Consider including the perspective of the social dimension, based on the Principles and Guidelines, into new EU policy documents for quality assurance in higher education.
Responsibility for implementation	EU – European Commission
Policy recommendation 1.4	Maintain the continuity of BFUG/EHEA and EEA working groups focusing on the social dimension and quality enhancement
Description	The BFUG/EHEA (Working Group on Social Dimension) and the EEA working groups (Working Group on Equality and Values in Education and Training; Working Group on Higher Education) should continue to be active until at least 2030, in order to continuously work on strengthening links between the social dimension and other policy areas in higher education, including quality assurance.
Responsibility for implementation	BFUG and the European Commission

5.2.2. National level

At national level, the following policy recommendations can be made:

Table 6. Policy recommendations at national level

NATIONAL LEVEL	
Policy recommendation 2.1	Consider creating synergies between national external quality assurance frameworks and national frameworks for the social dimension of higher education

Description	Consider incorporating references to fostering the social dimension into national external quality assurance standards and criteria, in line with national regulatory contexts, the ESG and BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education.
Responsibility for implementation	National quality assurance agencies
Policy recommendation 2.2	Facilitate policy dialogues on implementing the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education
Description	Engage in a policy dialogue with higher education institutions, quality assurance agencies and other relevant stakeholders on how to implement the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines in order to strengthen the social dimension of national higher education systems and higher education institutions.
Responsibility for implementation	Ministries and agencies responsible for higher education, with relevant stakeholders

5.2.3. Higher education institution level

At the level of HEIs, the following policy recommendations can be made:

Table 7. Policy recommendations at higher education institution level

HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION LEVEL	
Policy recommendation 3.1	Consider including the social dimension of higher education among internal quality assurance standards
Description	Higher education institutions should consider including standards and criteria that refer to the social dimension into their existing internal quality assurance procedures, if this is in line with the national regulatory framework for quality assurance in higher education. Consider using the BFUG/EHEA Principles and Guidelines to Strengthen the Social Dimension of Higher Education and the ESG as guidelines on how to implement this recommendation.
Responsibility for implementation	Higher education institutions
Policy recommendation 3.2	Support higher education institution staff in addressing the social dimension and quality assurance issues
Description	Higher education institutions should aim to raise awareness about the social dimension and quality assurance among their academic and non-academic staff, and to provide training, guidance and support.
Responsibility for implementation	Higher education institutions, in cooperation with ministries and agencies responsible for higher education

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