



European
Commission

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

Executive summary



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: 10.2766/268811.

ABOUT NESET

NESET is an advisory network of experts working on the social dimension of education and training. The European Commission's Directorate-General for Education and Culture initiated the establishment of the network as the successor to NESET II (2015-2018), NESSE (2007-2010) and NESET (2011-2014). The Public Policy and Management Institute (PPMI) is responsible for the administration of the NESET network. For any inquiries please contact us at: info-neset@ppmi.lt.

Contractor:

PPMi

PPMI Group
Gedimino ave. 50, LT - 01110 Vilnius,
Lithuania
Phone: +370 5 2620338 Fax: +370 5
2625410
www.ppmi.lt
Director: Rimantas Dumčius

AUTHORS:

Ninoslav ŠĆUKANEC SCHMIDT, Executive Director
Ana SKLEDAR MATIJEVIĆ, Higher Education
Project Manager
Zvonimir ANIĆ, Project Coordinator
(Institute for the Development of Education –
Croatia)

PEER REVIEWERS:

Mark FREDERICKS, Coordinator of the
international policy department of NVAO
Dragana AVRAMOV, NESET Scientific coordinator

DELIVERABLE COORDINATOR:

Cosmin NADA, NESET Expert Committee Member

LANGUAGE EDITOR:

James NIXON, freelance editor

EUROPEAN COMMISSION

Directorate-General for Education, Youth, Sport and Culture
Directorate A — Policy Strategy and Evaluation
Unit A.4 — Evidence-Based Policy and Evaluation

E-mail: eac-unite-a4@ec.europa.eu

*European Commission
B-1049 Brussels*

LEGAL NOTICE

This document has been prepared for the European Commission however it reflects the views only of the authors, and the European Commission is not liable for any consequence stemming from the reuse of this publication. More information on the European Union is available on the Internet (<http://www.europa.eu>).

PDF

ISBN 978-92-76-55846-0

doi: 10.2766/268811

NC-07-22-854-EN-N

Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union, 2023

© European Union, 2023



The reuse policy of European Commission documents is implemented by the Commission Decision 2011/833/EU of 12 December 2011 on the reuse of Commission documents (OJ L 330, 14.12.2011, p. 39). Except otherwise noted, the reuse of this document is authorised under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY 4.0) licence (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). This means that reuse is allowed provided appropriate credit is given and any changes are indicated.

For any use or reproduction of elements that are not owned by the European Union, permission may need to be sought directly from the respective rightholders. The European Union does not own the copyright in relation to the following elements:
[cover Image(s) © [carloscastilla + 11900361], 2012. Source: [depositphotos.com]

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 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.

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

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
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

LINKING QUALITY ASSURANCE AND THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF HIGHER EDUCATION:
LITERATURE REVIEW AND MAPPING NATIONAL PRACTICES

	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

GETTING IN TOUCH WITH THE EU

In person

All over the European Union there are hundreds of Europe Direct information centres. You can find the address of the centre nearest you at: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

On the phone or by email

Europe Direct is a service that answers your questions about the European Union. You can contact this service:

- by freephone: 00 800 6 7 8 9 10 11 (certain operators may charge for these calls),
- at the following standard number: +32 22999696, or
- by email via: https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en

FINDING INFORMATION ABOUT THE EU

Online

Information about the European Union in all the official languages of the EU is available on the Europa website at: https://europa.eu/european-union/index_en

EU publications

You can download or order free and priced EU publications from: <https://op.europa.eu/en/publications>. Multiple copies of free publications may be obtained by contacting Europe Direct or your local information centre (see https://europa.eu/european-union/contact_en).

EU law and related documents

For access to legal information from the EU, including all EU law since 1952 in all the official language versions, go to EUR-Lex at: <http://eur-lex.europa.eu>

Open data from the EU

The EU Open Data Portal (<http://data.europa.eu/euodp/en>) provides access to datasets from the EU. Data can be downloaded and reused for free, for both commercial and non-commercial purposes.



Publications Office
of the European Union