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Veröffentlichungsversion / Published Version

Arbeitspapier / working paper

Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Jungblut, J., Pető, A., & Stensaker, B. (2023). *European values and external quality assurance: reflection on the past, pointers towards the future*. Circle U. European University Alliance. <https://nbn-resolving.org/urn:nbn:de:0168-ssoar-89355-0>

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EUROPEAN VALUES AND EXTERNAL QUALITY ASSURANCE

REFLECTION ON THE PAST,
POINTERS TOWARDS THE FUTURE

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13 04 2023

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1 INTRODUCTION

One of the most noticeable developments in the European higher education area together with ERA is the establishment and spread of external quality assurance as a mechanism for enhancing trust, driving student mobility through mutual recognition, and increasing transparency between domestic higher education systems. The assumption that the European education is based on shared values of academic freedom turned to be a false assumption recently.

The key elements in this development have been the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESGs) which have triggered both national systems for quality assurance and Pan-European convergence in this area (Stensaker et al. 2010). While there were initial questions and doubts with respect to whether the ESGs would have much impact on higher education in Europe, observers agree that the ESGs have been one of the most successful elements of the Bologna Process and Europeanisation in higher education when looking at the impact on the ground (Westerheijden et al. 2007; ENQA 2012; Westerheijden et al. 2014).

However, voices have recently been raised about whether quality assurance in general, and the ESGs in particular, should play a greater role in ensuring that more academic and general democratic values are recognized and considered as part of the validation and valorization of higher education institutions in Europe (Pető 2021). This discussion has been partly triggered by several visible cases of infringements on academic freedom and institutional autonomy of universities in some European Union member countries. One prominent example for this was the political process of restricting the institutional autonomy and academic freedom of Central European University (CEU) in Hungary, which eventually led to CEU moving from Budapest to Vienna together with deleting accredited study program in gender studies from the study list as an intervention in academic (Pető 2020). The role the national and the European system for quality assurance played in this process have opened up for a debate on what role quality assurance should play in higher education (Kelo 2023). In addition, several recent studies highlight ongoing debates about and threats to fundamental values in European and global higher education underlining the importance of protecting fundamental values (Kinzelbach et al., 2023; Maassen et al. 2023).

In this discussion paper we reflect upon the ESGs in the wider context of their application, including i) the various dimensions they currently cover; ii) the impact of the ESGs in terms of intended and unintended outcomes and; iii) the relationship between the ESGs and trends in higher education governance. Finally, we iv) offer some reflections about the potential and limitations of the ESGs as an instrument of change and transformation.

The paper is inspired from the presentations and discussions that took place at the Circle U national conference at University of Oslo in December 2022 – where the role of the ESGs was addressed in light of European values that are embedded in the European University Initiative (EUI), and how future European alliances coming out of this initiative can be a driver not only for the transformation of higher education, but also for Europe as a region and the societies in which they are embedded.

2 THE ESGS IN A WIDER PERSPECTIVE

2.1 THE ESGS – THEIR AMBITIONS AND UNDERPINNING VALUES

The process of establishing the ESGs can be said to be characterized by dialogue between key stakeholders in European higher education. The standards and guidelines developed were crafted in close collaboration between the European interest organization for national quality assurance agencies – ENQA – and other Pan-European interest organizations such as EUA, EURASHE and ESU, including also stakeholder organizations such as Education International and Business Europe (Gornitzka & Stensaker 2014). After the

establishment of EQAR – the European register for quality assurance agencies successfully complying to the ESGs, this registry has also been central in the maintenance of the ESGs, not least in the latest adaptation of the updated standards and guidelines in 2015. These have been ratified by the ministers of higher education of the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) at their Ministerial Conference that oversees the development of the EHEA.

Seen in retrospect, the ESGs bear some characteristics that can be said to be fitted to the sector they are serving: First, the process of establishing them has been inclusive allowing various stakeholders a say in the process. Second, the ESGs are also careful in challenging the autonomy and diversity of various higher education systems and higher education institutions, respecting the academic freedom of those working in the sector. While the standards in the ESGs are binding, the guidelines have more of a suggestive character. Third, they are not only focusing on higher education institutions and their responsibilities, but also on those controlling them – external quality assurance agencies – making sure that there are some checks and balances in the relationship between the controller and the controlled.

Hence, the ESGs are quite clear about what the standards and guidelines try to accomplish and what they are not set out to do:

“The ESG are a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in higher education. The ESG are not standards for quality, nor do they prescribe how the quality assurance processes are implemented, but they provide guidance, covering the areas which are vital for successful quality provision and learning environments in higher education” (ESG, 2015: 6).

As underlined above, the ESGs are not specifying what quality is, nor do they aim at evaluating quality per se. Hence, academic autonomy of those working in the respective higher education institution is repeatedly highlighted as something important to protect. However, when looking more closely at how the ESGs are legitimated, there is a clear tendency that they are meant to have an impact at a Pan-European level as the introduction to the current ESGs state quite explicitly:

“Higher education, research and innovation play a crucial role in supporting social cohesion, economic growth and global competitiveness. Given the desire for European societies to become increasingly knowledge-based, higher education is an essential component of socio-economic and cultural development” (ESG, 2015: 6).

Hence, based on the quote above, one could argue that the ESGs are `political` in that they are related to support desired societal developments, especially with respect to a cultural, and not least economic dimension. When specifying what potential cultural development might imply, one learns that preparing students for active citizenship, enhancing their future careers (e.g. contributing to their employability), or supporting students` personal development, are important. In this perspective, one could argue that a key role of the standards and guidelines is to create better foundations for societal economic growth and for individual career gains.

The current version of the ESGs is rather silent on the role higher education may have for the development of democratic and inclusive societies. Such values traditionally have been recognized as important in Europe and have impacted several policy initiatives over time. For example, in the Treaty of Lisbon (2007), article 1A lists a number of values of the European Union, including:

“Respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law and respect for human rights including the rights of persons belonging to minorities... (invoking)...a society in which pluralism, non-discrimination, tolerance, justice, solidarity and equality between women and men prevail”.

In the recent initiative to establish European Universities, these European values are also highlighted as important foundations on which future institutional collaboration across Europe should build upon. While one could argue that there is a significant difference between the EHEA involving almost 50 countries spread

across Europe, and cultural values defined by the EU, one does still find many references to the cultural role of higher education in, for example, the Magna Charta Universitatum – a key document underpinning the value basis of the EHEA where it is stated that the mission of universities are based on three principles:

“The first principle was independence: research and teaching must be intellectually and morally independent of all political influence and economic interests. The second was that teaching and research should be inseparable, with students engaged in the search for knowledge and greater understanding. The third principle identified the university as a site for free enquiry and debate, distinguished by its openness to dialogue and rejection of intolerance” (Magna Charta Universitatum 2020).

Moreover, the latest EU strategy for universities describes them as *lighthouses of the European way of life*, and explicitly highlights their role in addressing societal challenges as well as paving Europe’s post-pandemic recovery, while at the same time promoting European values (European Commission, 2022). The concept of “European way of life” has been under criticism as it is not only vague about the common values but also about common responsibilities including the fight against racism and other forms of exclusion.

While the ESGs do not define quality, or aims to evaluate quality, one could still argue that they are meant as a means to foster some distinct societal `qualities` - especially at a Pan-European level, and perhaps mostly related to the ambition of creating a more vibrant knowledge economy (Olssen & Peters 2005).

2.2 WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF THE ESGS AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CHANGE?

Formal ambitions and explicit or implicit values underpinning a policy initiative do not, however, imply that the outcomes necessarily match the objectives. After almost 20 years of existence, the ESGs have indeed had an impact on European higher education, but perhaps in more complex ways than what was foreseen initially.

Studies focusing on how the ESGs have impacted the European higher education landscape have established strong evidence that convergence among European countries with respect to quality assurance has taken place (Stensaker et al. 2010). While practices related to European higher education quality assurance could be said to be highly diversified before the ESGs, (Rozsnyai 2003; Schwarz & Westerheijden 2004), the ESGs contributed to rather dramatic change in this regard. The concept of quality however is narrowed down to quantifiable variables which are not only not sensitive to social difference but also easy to hijack if states are capturing the quality assurance system like in Hungary.

Hence, EHEA countries have after the development of the ESGs established national systems of quality assurance, have created special and relatively independent agencies conducting evaluations or assessments, and with many similarities in the ways and means quality assurance is conducted, not least when looking at the relatively high number of countries adopting institutional accreditation as the preferred evaluative method (Stensaker 2011; ENQA 2012), despite the methodological discretion offered by the ESGs.

However, the ESGs have also been found to be so generically formulated that the degree of convergence could be argued to be more linguistic rather than related to concrete practices (Stensaker et al. 2010) – questioning the transparency of external quality assurance. Furthermore, the ESGs in general and the requirements related to establishing institutional quality assurance systems that follows from the standards and guidelines have also been found to drive a development towards more formalization, centralization and bureaucratization of higher education institutions (Westerheijden et al. 2007; Dill & Beerkens 2010).

The ESGs have also represented an arena where various tensions between key stakeholders in the sector have been exposed (Gornitzka & Stensaker 2014). For students, the ESGs have been a possibility for increasing their influence in the sector allowing for student participation in the evaluation of teaching and learning. Their influence was not least visible when the concept of student-active teaching became part of the revised ESGs in 2015, arguably representing the first regulation in the ESGs that addresses the way how

teaching is supposed to take place. For the European Commission, the ESGs have opened up new possibilities for impacting a sector where they have formally little jurisdiction. Through the establishment of a new register for quality assurance agencies (EQAR), developed by the E4 group, a “market” for quality assurance is established. For intermediary European organizations such as the European University Association (EUA) and ENQA – the interest organization for national, regional and private quality assurance agencies - the ESGs has meant a possibility to set agendas and increase their own power, exemplified by their strong involvement in the concrete drafting of the ESGs. For national governments, the ESGs have had more diverse impact as some governments have used them as part of domestic reform agendas, while other governments have been more skeptical as they have interpreted them as a form of external interference in domestic responsibilities. Finally, some governments used window-dressing approaches and created formally independent quality assurance agencies, which de facto lack operational independence. Not all stakeholders in higher education have been equally involved though, and one could argue that the academic profession, contrary to students, has been fairly absent as a stakeholder group in the development of the ESGs.

As such, one could argue that the ESGs – even though they have been initially designed to increase trust, mutual recognition, and transparency, also have had effects that go beyond the formal ambitions stated in the standards and guidelines.

2.3 WHAT IS THE GOVERNANCE CONTEXT IN WHICH THE ESGS ARE EMBEDDED?

As illustrated in the short discussion above, the ESGs have been an arena where many different stakeholders have come together, and where key stakeholder organizations such as ESU, ENQA, EUA or EURASHE have had much influence on the formulation and various stages of development of the entire organizational ecology that grew around the ESGs. At the same time, it is also possible to observe tensions between what one might label as `European` policy ideas and domestic reform agendas. While considerable convergence throughout Europe can be observed regarding some of the technical and methodological aspects of the ESGs (Stensaker et al. 2010), one can also observe how national governments tend to use quality assurance as a means to frame domestic reform agendas in an attempt to increase the legitimacy of these reforms. As an illustration, Westerheijden et al. (2014) found that political shifts in national governments tend to result in rather dramatic changes in national quality assurance systems. In other words, the ESGs seems to be very adaptable to various political agendas which opens them up to being used as a framing tool to boost legitimacy of reforms.

This national embeddedness may seem surprising given the fact that the ESGs are meant to be standards and guidelines operating at a European level, where some sort of accountability is needed to facilitate collaboration and trust (Fisher 2004). However, if one relates the ESGs to similar developments in other sectors, the flexibility of the ESGs is not especially unique as `international standards` have become the new normal in an interconnected world with unclear political jurisdictions, mixed interests, that at the same time have common needs for some sort of coordination (Brunsson et al. 2000). One could even argue that this vagueness creates the necessary space for domestic and institutional discretion to adapt the standards and guidelines to specific needs in distinct national or organizational contexts (Power 2007).

Public accountability through instruments such as standards and guidelines can in this way be seen as a framework for dialogue rather than an instrument for top-down steering (Stensaker & Harvey 2011). Hence, while public accountability indeed can be designed in ways underlining a principal – agent relationship, standards and guidelines may offer an arena for conversation between stakeholders involved in a governance relationship. This may be of special importance in areas and regarding issues where the `principal` - the supra-national standard setters - have less formal competence, as is the case regarding higher education.

More recent studies have also suggested that external quality assurance at the national level is still highly dependent on and embedded in domestic policy agendas where the European dimensions are not always the most prioritized (Elken & Stensaker 2022). Hence, empirical observations suggest that national quality

assurance agencies are quite constantly reformed and adapted to shifting national, and sometimes, illiberal reform agendas, questioning the `independence` the ESGs are expecting them to have (Pető 2021).

The picture that emerges then is one where external quality assurance is perhaps less standardized than imagined, where national agencies are under quite strict national influence and control, and where the potential impact of international standards and guidelines should not be overestimated.

3 POSSIBLE POINTERS TO THE FUTURE

Our brief discussion on the roles, impact and context surrounding the ESG suggest that external quality assurance in Europe are in a process of continuous development, closely intertwined with related developments in higher education. Various stakeholders have influenced the development of the ESGs in the past, and will most likely have an interest in impacting them in the future. Our agenda with the current paper has been to discuss whether the scope of the ESG is in need of a change – especially with respect to the underlying values and norms they should reflect.

Our aim in this paper is not to conclude on this matter, but to provide some pointers that should be considered as part of this ongoing debate:

- The ESGs are embedded in wider European policy developments (EHEA, Magna Charta), which are embedded in ideas about academic freedom and institutional autonomy. Academic freedom and integrity are mentioned in the ESG today – but directed only at the higher education institutions – not the national authorities. On this basis, one could argue that the possibility for institutions to fulfil a standard that in many countries is determined by state authorities is rather limited. A possible response could be that the ESGs are expanded with a section that is directed at national authorities underlining European key values. A related issue here is the general problem that national QA agencies have rather limited autonomy – although such autonomy is explicitly mentioned in the current ESGs. In practice though, national quality assurance bodies are often public agencies under direct supervision of a state ministry. A possible response to this situation could be to get more countries to open up their QA system to agencies that are registered at EQAR so that universities do not solely rely on the national agency in the country where they operate.
- However, the ESGs have in the past been successful as an arena for dialogue and collaboration. One could argue that we need to be careful so the current accomplishments of the ESGs are not destroyed (Kelo 2023). An argument against including European values and norms in the ESGs is that it is difficult to imagine that standards and guidelines in the area of QA can be a universal remedy for all things good. Just because we have a functioning assessment structure in QA does not imply that this structure will function as successful in other areas - especially in more contentious areas (e.g. values in higher education). While European values are important as a foundation for higher education, specific questions and disputes on whether values and norms are upheld should perhaps be solved elsewhere. As value conflicts are inherently political, it is difficult to imagine that they can be solved through bureaucratic structures. Political questions need to be solved in political arenas. If this is the case, then we need to make sure that such issues regularly are discussed at a European level. The current interest demonstrated by the European Parliament to put into place monitor mechanisms for fundamental European values are in this respect promising.
- It is also possible to argue for a “wait and see” approach. The ESGs seem to have a `creeping influence` over time as they directly and indirectly affect institutional systems and practices. Such creeping influence may offer an indirect way to promote academic and cultural values throughout Europe. The way students have been included and are increasingly perceived as a valid stakeholder in European QA processes is perhaps the best example of such transformation. Through the networks and arenas for communication the ESGs offers, academic freedom and institutional autonomy might find its way on the agendas. In a sector comprising of old and

established institutions, one should remember that the ESGs are not even 20 years old. It takes time to create institutions.

- A related argument to the “wait and see” approach is that the emerging `market` for higher education quality assurance perhaps might incorporate value dimensions in the future. With the establishment of EQAR, and the possibility for institutions to choose their accreditor, it is also possible to think that not all external accreditations will have the same prestige and status. The ESGs are minimum standards, and it is possible to establish standards that goes beyond what the ESGs cover today. In some disciplinary areas, other global standards exist that emphasize different dimensions than the ESGs (examples are found in both business administration and the engineering, amongst others). If a future prestige hierarchy will emerge in external quality assurance, classic academic and cultural values could be given a more prominent place in some transnational accreditation schemes. The attempt to include an academic freedom index in international university rankings could be a step in this direction. One could even argue that the European University Initiative is an arena where such “special accreditation” is needed, making the EUI a driver for highlighting European values.

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