European Quality Assurance System

Current developments, key dilemmas and role of the „mature" framework for ensuring trust and stability

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Today's plan and aims:

1. Shortly about the European Higher Education Area

2. Current state of play and timeline

3. ESG and its future – Next steps, key questions and dilemmas

EURASHE
European Association for the Applied Sciences in Higher Education

- Formed in 1990

- Secretariat office in Brussels

- **87 members**:
  - 63 Full Members
    - 11 national associations
    - 52 individual HEIs
  - 12 Affiliate Members outside the EHEA
  - 12 Associate Members

- +500 HEIs represented in 34 countries
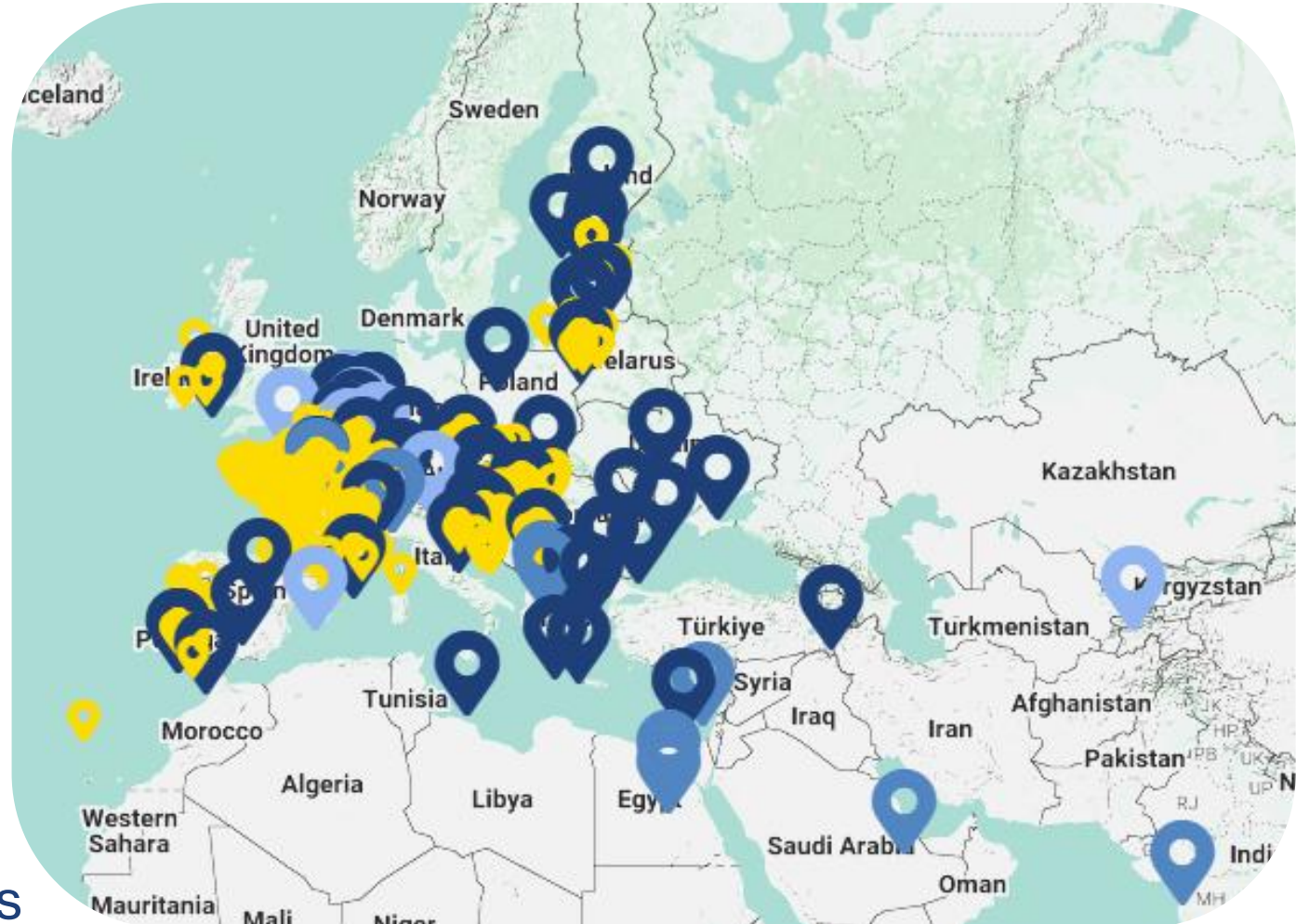
Before we go any further with QA lets bring back a story of how it started and why?

Bologna Process

Bologna process members as a concept serving academic mobility

Origin: Sorbonne Declaration (1998) – FR, UK, IT, DE

Follow up:

- Bologna Declaration (1999) -29 countries

- Prague Communiqué (2001)

- Berlin Communiqué (2003)

- Bergen Communiqué (2005)

- London Communiqué (2007)

- Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué (2009)

- Bucharest Communiqué (2012)

- Yerevan Communiqué (2015)

- Paris Communiqué (2018)

- Rome Communiqué (2020) - 49 countries (-2 RU, BE)

Bologna Process and the EHEA

- Process steered by the BFUG, which prepares the ministerial conferences and implements the work plans

- Ministerial communiques set priorities and objectives for each working period

- And an intergovernmental reform process to support interoperability, mobility, recognition, competitiveness

- The role of stakeholders is crucial

The E4 group

- The **EHEA** was set up through the **Bologna Process** and is steering by the **BFUG**.

- **IQA** and **EQA** in line with the **ESG** is a key commitment of the Bologna Process.

- Primary authors of the ESG are the **E4 Group (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU).** The same organisations are the founding members of **EQAR**.
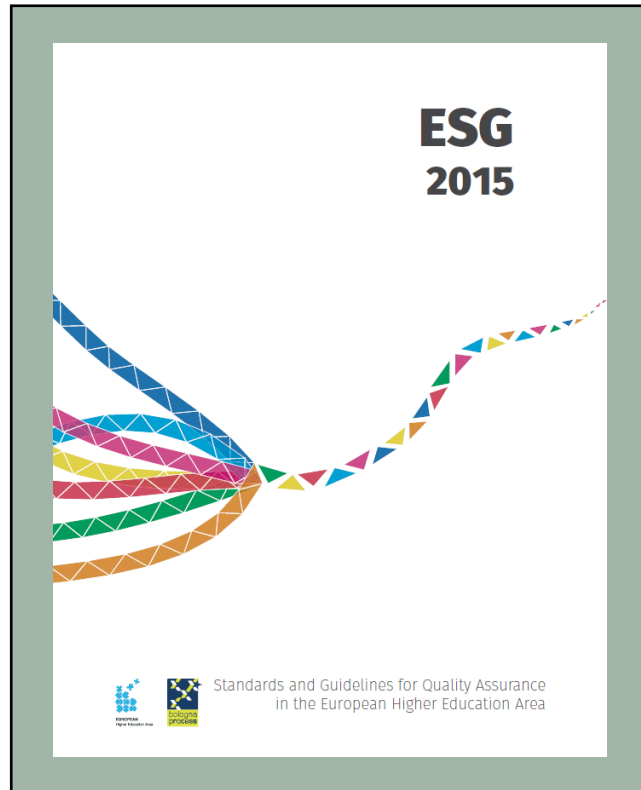
European Standards and Guidelines (ESG) – one of the EHEA „success stories"



ESG 2015

Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area

- The Standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) provide the framework for internal and external quality assurance. As well as the Internal QA within QAAs

- Proposed by the E4 Group (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE and ESU) and other stakeholder organisations (Education International, Business Europe), and with EQAR

- Implementing quality assurance in line with the ESG is one of the key commitments of the Bologna Process. As such, the ESG provide the basis for enhancing trust, mobility and recognition between higher education systems.

Principles for QA in the EHEA as defined in the ESG

- HEIs have primary responsibility for the quality of their provision and its assurance

- QA responds to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students

- QA supports the development of a quality culture

- QA takes into account the needs and expectations of students, all other stakeholders and society
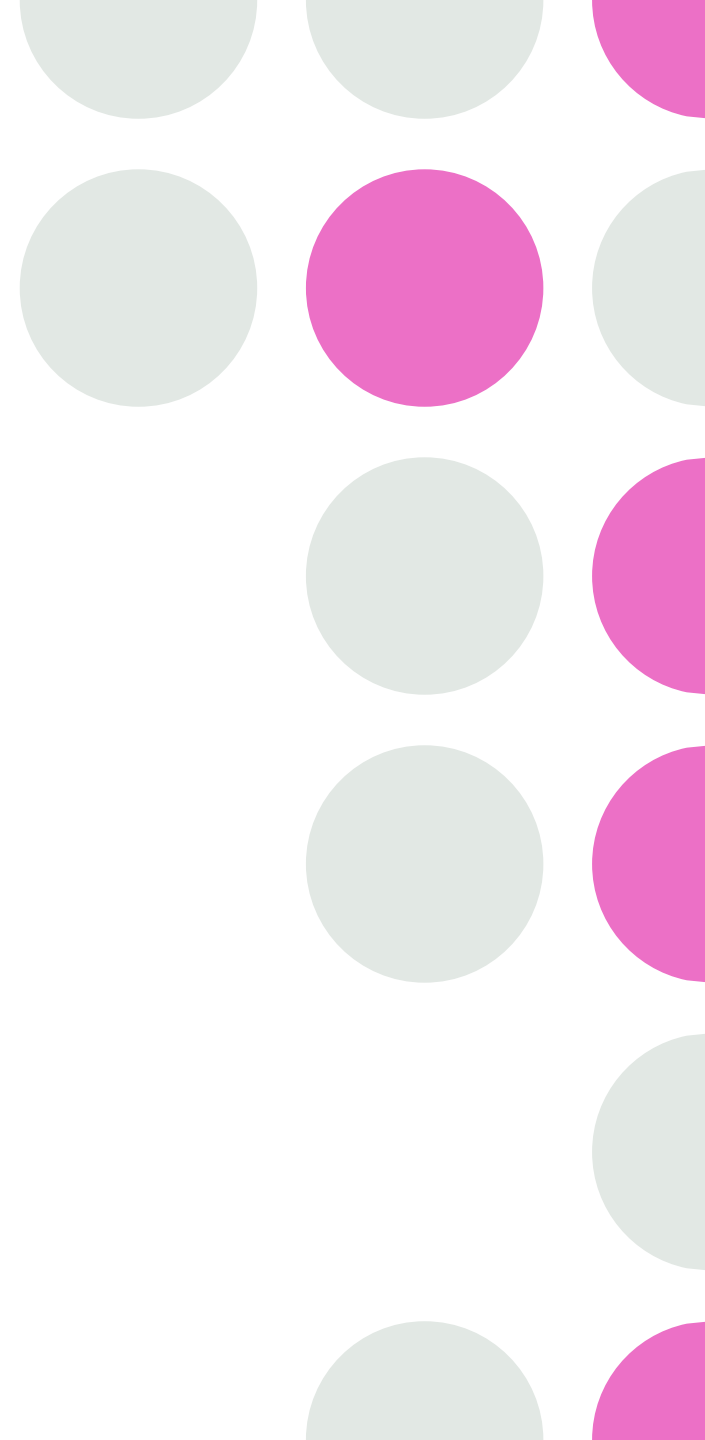
Underlining statements to remember while working on implemeting QA systems

- You cannot achieve „quality assurance", its a process and ultimately the culture of QA

- The QA needs to work for the need of a place where its developed, there is no one size fits all solution

- Standards are there to ensure that minimum requirements are set in place and mechanisms for QA exist. Everything beyond that is a room for ambition and innovation

- Stakeholder involvement and co-ownership of Education system by all actors is a basis

Stakeholders' involvement in QA and in EHEA

*It is important to notice that the degree of stakeholders' involvement in QA also varies and often is not linear.

| absence of any structural involvement of stakeholders | ad-hoc and individual stakeholder approach because of external obligation and only formal consultations | strategy of structural stakeholder involvement and commitment based on trust | co-creative involvement of stakeholders who feel co-owners and feel co-responsible, based on shared values and beliefs |

https://esqa.ro/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GESIQA.pdf

ESG Revision Process
why, how and when

TIRANA COMMUNIQUÉ

- Reaffirmed the role of the three key commitments for the successful development of the EHEA.

- Gave the mandate for the revision of the ESG

  - *"The application of the ESG promotes trust and transparency within and between higher education systems and facilitates accountability and enhancement. To keep them in line with ongoing developments, challenges and expectations, we invite the authors of the ESG to propose a revised version by 2026 to the BFUG, to be adopted by us at our 2027 Ministerial conference, as well as an adjustment, where required, of the European Approach for Quality Assurance of Joint Programmes."*

Preparatory work before the mandate was given – QA FIT project

- conduct a comprehensive mapping exercise of the state of play of internal and external quality assurance in the EHEA;

- take a critical look at the ESG and see how they have been adapted to different contexts;

- explore how quality assurance activities are addressing recent and emerging developments in higher education including activities that go beyond the focus of the ESG and that use innovative approaches, and

- gather perspectives on the future of quality assurance in the EHEA.

**QA-FIT**
Quality Assurance Fit for the Future

Outcomes

- Paper on HEIs' perspective
- Paper on Students' Perspective
- Paper on Ministries' Perspective
- Paper on QA agencies' perspective
- Webinar: Needs and expectations of higher education institutions
- Webinar: EHEA Ministry Survey ResultsQA-FIT_Agencies' Perspective
- Webinar: The future of external QA: Perspectives from agencies
- Paper on the future of the ESG
- Paper on quality assurance and internationalisation
- Policy brief: Quality assurance fit for the future
- Final webinar
- Final paper: Key considerations for the revision of the ESG

QA-FIT project – example of findings

Figure 7: External QA procedures
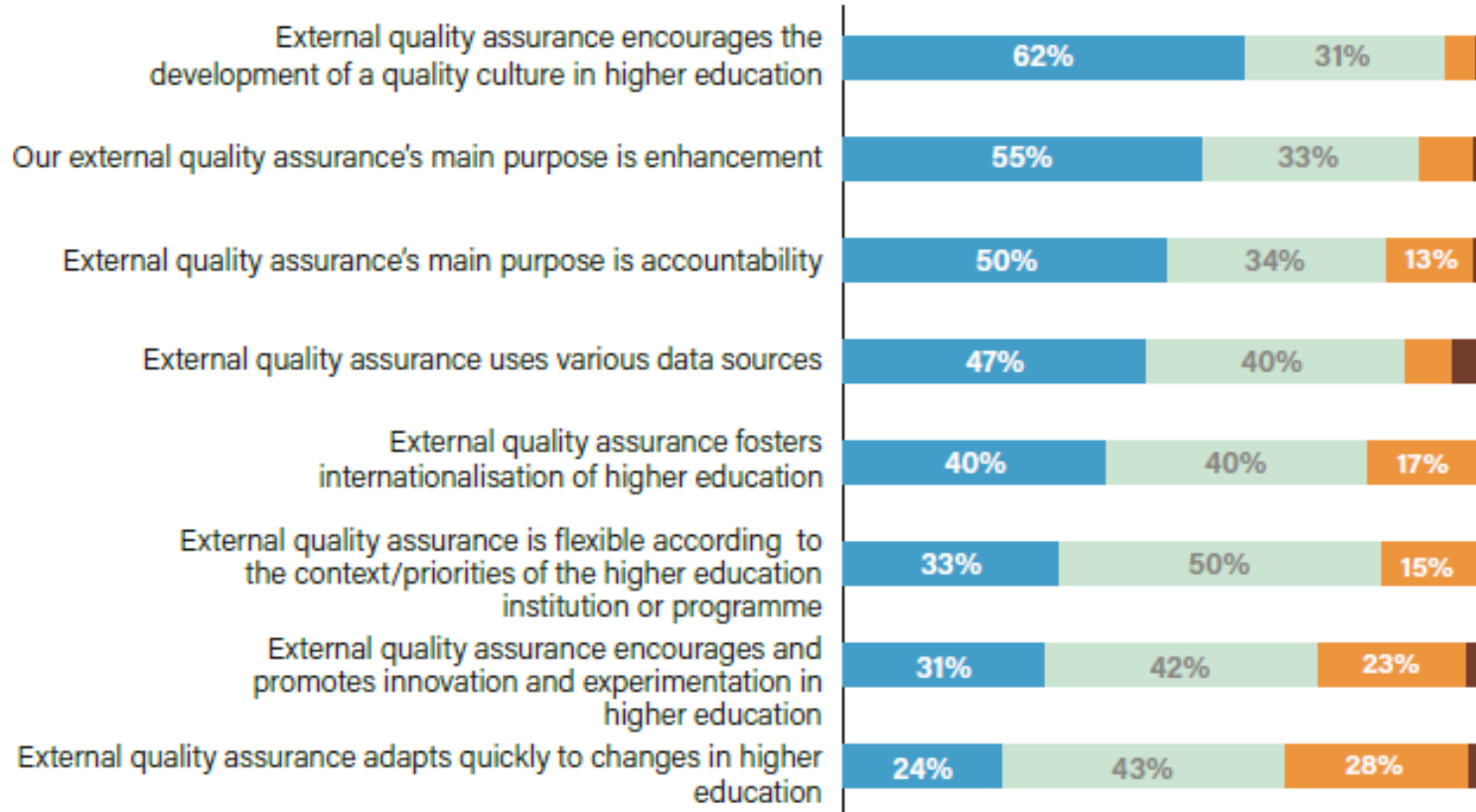
How the revision process is organised

- **ESG Steering Committee**
  - Representatives of all ESG authors (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, ESU, EQAR, Education International & Business Europe)
  - Coordinate the overall process, including main directions and consultations
- **ESG Drafting Group**
  - Representatives of primary ESG authors (ENQA, EUA, EURASHE & ESU)
  - Prepare drafts and identify issues for further discussion
- **Consultation rounds with all key stakeholders, internal stakeholder members, including BFUG**
- **Parallel revision of the European Approach for QA of Joint Programmes**
- **Final versions in autumn/winter 2026 for the BFUG in Copenhagen, ministerial approval in mid 2027**

Future steps
QA-FIT findings

Key questions and dilemmas

What works from the perspective of all users

- Universal acknowledgement of the Importance of a European QA framework
- Strong agreement that the ESG are still needed
- The ESG support development of L&T, trust in and recognition of qualifications, student mobility, quality culture
- The basic principles remain relevant

Those points remain relevant for all the stakeholder groups

CONSULTATION OUTCOMES: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ESG REVISION

- Introduction: Update and make the main concepts and messages clearer

- Internal QA: digitalisation, diversity of learners and academic staff, flexible learning pathways, links with other institutional missions, transversal topics (…)

- External QA: flexibility in QA methodologies while maintaining sufficient accountability (…)

- Complementarity with other frameworks/tools – EAJP, CBQA, EEA framework

- Internationalisation both within and outside of Europe

Source: https://www.enqa.eu/publications/the-future-of-the-esg-reflections-based-on-findings-from-the-qa-fit-project/

CONSULTATION OUTCOMES: KEY CONSIDERATIONS FOR THE ESG REVISION

- Recognise the existing purposes of the ESG as relevant and valid
- Maximise the added value of EHEA standards
- Celebrate the diverse contexts and cultures in higher education
- Situate the quality assurance of learning and teaching in its broader context
- Balance current issues with long term relevance

- Source: https://ehea.info/Download/BFUG_PL_AL_95_7_2_ESG_presentation_19.02.2025.pdf
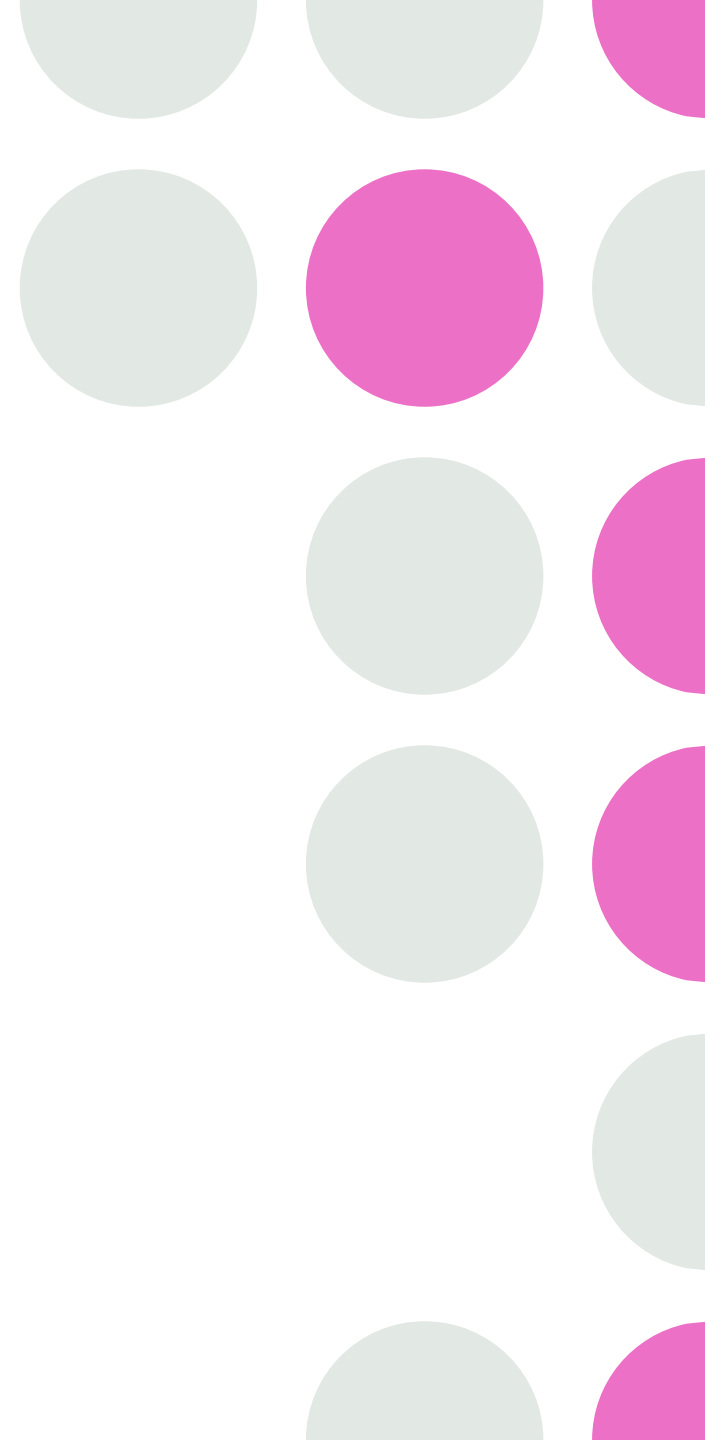
Meta questions and dillemas

Clarifying the Purpose of the ESG

Main challenge: Balancing the roles of ESG as both an enhancement tool and a compliance instrument.

- Should ESG primarily support **international cooperation** or **national system development**?

- Can ESG successfully serve **both innovation and minimum quality assurance**?

- There is still an unresolved tension between using ESG for **enhancement and experimentation** vs. enforcing **accountability and uniform standards**.

Meta questions and dillemas

Revisiting the Scope of the ESG

Main challenge: Deciding whether and how to widen the scope without diluting the ESG's clarity or usability.

- Strong calls to include new areas (e.g., **social dimension**, **fundamental values**, **digitalisation**, **lifelong learning**, **AI/data protection**, and **employability**), but also visible resistance across stakeholder groups

- Risk of ESG shifting from being **standards for QA** to being **standards for quality** itself, which may create **unintended rigidity** or hinder innovation.

- Students and QA agencies are more in favor of expansion than ministries and HEIs

In paralell – just recently adopted Council recommendations (May)

- **Council Recommendation (May 2025): A Policy Push**
- Calls for **full implementation of Bologna tools**, including ESG, as a basis for:
  - Automatic recognition
  - Cross-border QA
  - Agile and institutional-level approaches
- Proposes a **dedicated QA framework for European University Alliances**.
- Introduces the **Joint European Degree Label**:
  - Based on ESG & European Approach
  - Calls for EQAR-registered agencies to implement evaluations
- Emphasizes **enhancement-led QA** and **removal of national legal obstacles**.

- Source: https://www.enqa.eu/publications/enqa-briefing-note-on-the-council-recommendation-on-a-european-quality-assurance-and-recognition-system-in-higher-education/
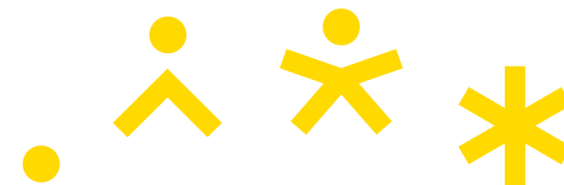
Take-away message

Co-ownership and trust
Enhancement
Long-term investment
Student-centred approach