



# Comparison of the quality assurance reference frameworks of the European Higher Education Area and the Iberoamerican Knowledge Area



**SIACES**

Sistema Iberoamericano de Aseguramiento  
de la Calidad de la Educación Superior

# COMPARISON OF THE QUALITY ASSURANCE REFERENCE FRAMEWORKS OF THE EUROPEAN HIGHER EDUCATION AREA AND THE IBERO-AMERICAN KNOWLEDGE AREA

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Alignment of SIACES-ENQA quality guidelines in higher education for bi-regional trust building (ESG-PBP Alignment)

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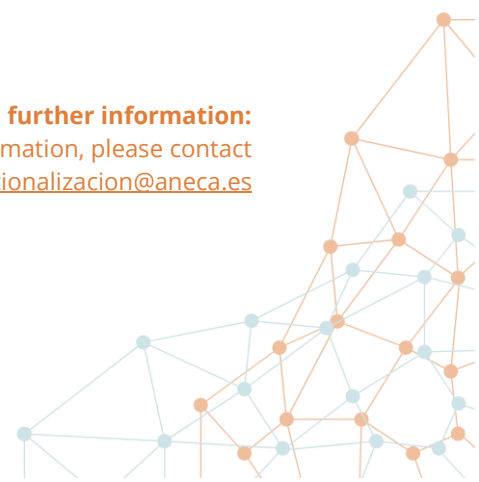
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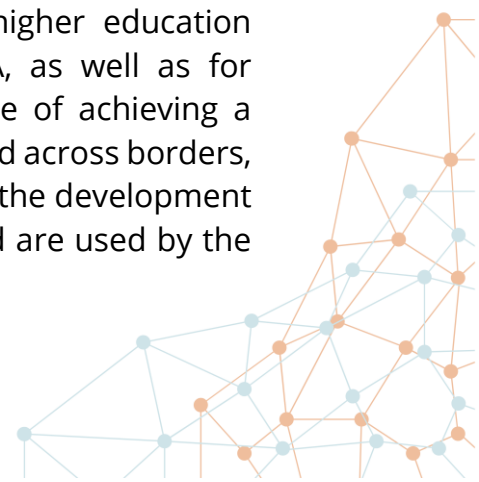
## FOREWORD

Higher education faces global challenges that require a coordinated and collaborative response across regions. In this context, the ESG-PBP Alignment project is a milestone in the cooperation relations that traditionally exist between Europe and Ibero-America and strengthens the ties between the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the Ibero-American Quality Assurance System of Higher Education (SIACES).

This project, which involves ten quality assurance bodies and agencies from ten different countries and the Secretariats of ENQA and SIACES, is based on the Memorandum of Understanding signed by SIACES and ENQA in April 2022. Additionally, as political background, it is worth mentioning the EU-CELAC Declarations endorsed by the Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) that reaffirm the commitment to create a bi-regional higher education area, materialised in an action plan aimed at establishing a Common Higher Education Area between the two regions.

The work of the ESG-PBP Alignment initiative is presented as an opportunity to bring into dialogue the regional frameworks through which quality in higher education is promoted and assured. In line with the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals, both SIACES and ENQA adhere to the premise that higher education is a key tool to promote economic, social and cultural development, as well as a means to democratise societies and reduce the inequality gap. Considering that internationalisation is an intrinsic dimension of higher education institutions and the systems they shape, it is vital to promote the development of quality assurance systems at national and regional level and establishing inter-regional dialogues that allow these systems to communicate.

At European level, the *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area* (ESG), the current version of which was approved by the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) Ministerial Conference held in Yerevan in 2015, are a key tool of the Bologna Process and the shaping of the EHEA to promote transparency and mutual trust as a basis for mobility and recognition between higher education systems. In this sense, the ESG are the main reference document for higher education institutions and quality assurance agencies in the EHEA, as well as for stakeholders. Beyond contributing to the overall objective of achieving a common understanding of quality assurance both within and across borders, the ESG have also played and continue to play a key role in the development of institutional and national quality assurance systems and are used by the



European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) as a criterion for inclusion, as well as by ENQA as a criterion for an agency to become a member of the association.

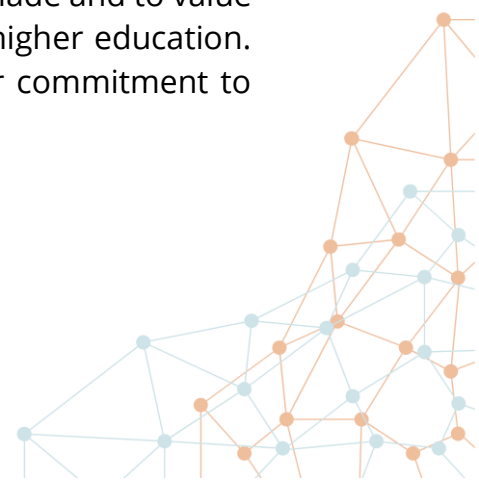
For its part, at the Ibero-American level, and within the framework of the summits of heads of state and government of the countries of the region, the Declaration of the Principles of Good Practice in Quality Assurance Systems was issued in Salamanca in 2019. These are fundamental principles that ensure the proper functioning of bodies and agencies in charge of quality assessment. These principles not only reinforce and support quality policies within national systems but also foster trust between and within higher education institutions. External reviews carried out by these agencies are a strategic tool for States, acting as instruments of quality assurance and quality control, and as a crucial source of information for decision-making and future policy planning. In this way, internationalisation is promoted on the basis of shared principles and procedures, with comparable and harmonised quality measurement standards. The validation of quality assurance agencies under these principles provides confidence and transparency to university systems.

The comparison of these two regional frameworks and the conclusions included in this paper offer a clear statement of the areas of convergence and divergence between the two systems, which can point to the issues in which it is necessary to foster a greater dialogue that leads to common understanding. In this sense, this comparative approach between both regions and the aim of mutual understanding in evaluation and accreditation processes, considering the diversity not only between both documents but also between each national quality assurance system, will also feed into the second phase of this project, aimed at identifying more concrete ways of bringing both regional systems closer.

This first year of joint work represents tangible progress in the cooperation between SIACES and ENQA, always bearing in mind the overall objectives of an internationalisation of higher education aimed at facilitating the mobility of students, teachers and researchers, as well as the recognition of degrees and competences, key elements for fostering a truly global academic community.

With this foreword we invite you to consider the progress made and to value the transformative power of international cooperation in higher education. We thank all the people and institutions involved for their commitment to this shared goal.

ENQA Secretariat and SIACES Secretariat



## INTRODUCTION

This document presents the results of the first phase of the ESG-PBP Alignment project<sup>1</sup>. This is a joint ENQA-SIACES initiative involving a working group composed of the secretariats of both networks and ten quality assurance agencies from the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) and the Ibero-American Knowledge Area (EIC).

The current global landscape highlights the need for increased dialogue and international collaboration to jointly address important shared challenges such as those identified in the *2023 EU-CELAC Summit Declaration*, which was endorsed by the Heads of State and Government of the European Union (EU) and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC), the President of the European Council and the President of the European Commission.

As a prelude to this summit, the declaration resulting from the informal meeting of Ministers of Higher Education of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States in May 2023 recaptures the intention expressed more than two decades earlier to create a bi-regional higher education area through an action plan to build a Common Higher Education Area between the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean.

To this end, five crucial areas of work are identified. Specifically, the second of these *"is the definition of a working plan to promote cooperation between the quality assurance and recognition agencies in the countries of both regions. This will contribute simultaneously to the building of trust between the higher education systems and institutions and continuous improvement in the quality of higher education in our countries. In this regard, it would be necessary to promote a regional cooperation platform between the agencies of both regions, based on the collaboration initiative already established between the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) and the Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES)"*.

In close harmony with the above, the university and scientific community, rectors, academic authorities, professors, researchers, students and technical and management staff of universities and other higher education and research institutions, as well as the councils, conferences, associations and networks that comprise them, gathered on the occasion of the 2nd EU-CELAC Academic and Knowledge Summit, adopted, among other agreements, the goal of *"encouraging and accompanying the creation of a*

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<sup>1</sup> Project *Alignment of SIACES-ENQA quality guidelines in higher education for bi-regional trust building*.



*collaboration framework between the national and regional systems of evaluation, quality assurance and accreditation of higher education of CELAC and the EU", and welcome the "Memorandum of Understanding signed between the Ibero-American System for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (SIACES) and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), encouraging its development".*

As a result of the shared will of the European and Ibero-American quality assurance communities to establish ties of friendship and cooperation, to build a common understanding that contributes to mutual trust and to strengthen their good practices in quality in higher education, and to reinforce and broaden the collaboration and exchange of experiences in this field in their respective regions, the aforementioned **Memorandum of Understanding between the Ibero-American Quality Assurance System of Higher Education (SIACES) and the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA)** was signed in April 2022.

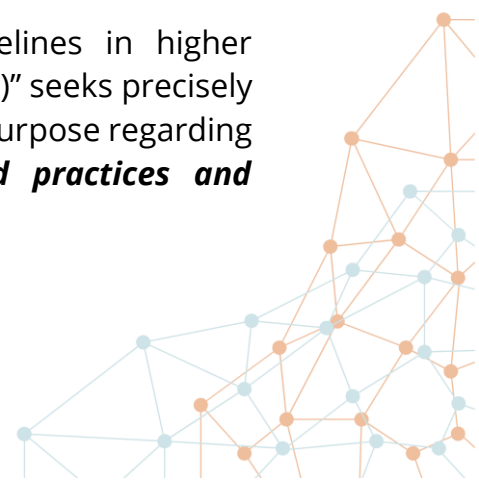
Through this memorandum, ENQA and SIACES agree, on the one hand, to actively seek opportunities for cooperation with the aim of strengthening trans-regional skills to ensure the quality and improvement of higher education. And, on the other hand, to cooperate for the development and implementation of joint projects, activities, events and other forms of collaboration in the areas of information, training and mutual understanding exchange.

It is in the latter area where it is determined to *work to enhance the Parties' understanding of each other's approach to assuring quality in higher education, the respective systems in place for quality assurance and enhancement in higher education, and the critical matters related to quality and harmonisation of standards and guidelines, good practices and procedures adopted in both regions.*

Subsequently, on the occasion of the *VII ordinary SIACES Plenary* in May 2023 in the city of Santiago de Compostela, ENQA and SIACES expressed their willingness to take steps towards a bi-regional framework for collaboration in the field of quality assurance.

### **Objectives of the initiative**

The initiative "Alignment of SIACES-ENQA quality guidelines in higher education for bi-regional trust building (ESG-PBP Alignment)" seeks precisely to take steps in the development of the above-mentioned purpose regarding the ***harmonisation of standards and guidelines, good practices and procedures adopted in both regions.***



Thus, the **overall objective** of this project is to **strengthen mutual trust** in quality assurance and quality enhancement of higher education **between the EHEA and the EIC**. This will be done through the establishment of a dialogue on their main reference points in this field with a view to their potential future alignment.

These fundamental reference guidelines are, in the case of the EHEA, the **Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area -ESG-**, in their 2015 version<sup>2</sup>, which have the following purposes:

- *They set a common framework for quality assurance systems for learning and teaching at European, national and institutional level;*
- *They enable the assurance and improvement of quality of higher education in the European higher education area;*
- *They support mutual trust, thus facilitating recognition and mobility within and across national borders;*
- *They provide information on quality assurance in the EHEA.*

The ESG were endorsed by EHEA ministers responsible for higher education in May 2015. The document was drafted by a group of authors including the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA), the European Students' Union (ESU), the European University Association (EUA), the European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), Education International (EI), BUSINESSEUROPE and the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).

In the case of the EIC, the fundamental reference guidelines are the **Principles of Good Practice -PBP-** (SIACES, 2019a) in quality assurance systems.

The objectives of the validation of the PBP are:

- *Recognise Agencies that comply with the SIACES Declaration of Principles of Good Practice;*
- *Simplify processes for recognition of qualifications and student mobility;*
- *Aim at the adoption of common guidelines for assessment and accreditation tools in the region, respecting the particularities of each context;*
- *Ensure and guarantee sufficient quality in the actions of the agencies in the region;*

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<sup>2</sup> N.B. The EHEA Ministerial Conference in Tirana in May 2024 asked the authors of the ESG for a revised version of the document to be adopted at the 2027 Ministerial Conference (to be co-hosted by Romania and the Republic of Moldova).





- *Build a system of mutual trust between agencies based on public accountability processes;*
- *Encourage inter-agency cooperation and the implementation of joint inter-agency evaluation and accreditation initiatives.*

Although both reference documents, ESG and PBP, are clearly in line with similar purposes and ways of understanding quality assurance, there has not been a systematic comparative exercise to date endorsed by SIACES and ENQA.

On the other hand, the fact that both quality assurance and quality enhancement frameworks are currently under review is an exceptional window of opportunity for this joint ENQA-SIACES initiative.

Taking all of the above into account, the aim is to achieve the general objective of this project by working on two **specific objectives**:

1. To understand the level of concordance-discordance between the ESG and the PBP in order to lay a solid foundation from which to take steps towards a mutual understanding of such quality assurance.
2. Establish a joint proposal for the alignment of the ESG and the PBP in order to facilitate potential mutual recognition.

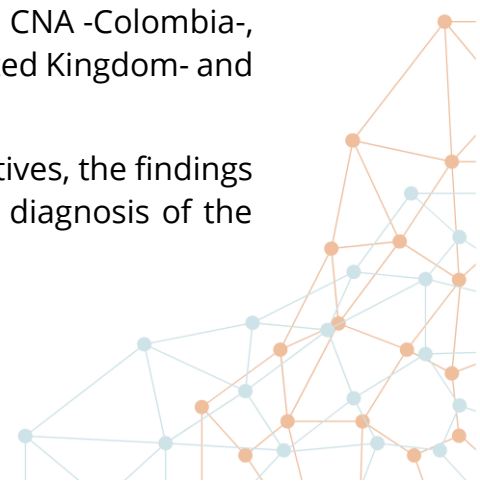
The elaboration of a proposal for the harmonisation of the main reference frameworks for quality assurance seeks to advance the common purpose of bringing together perspectives, in this case in concrete and instrumental terms.

Thus, if considered by ENQA and SIACES, it is foreseen that the results of this project will be made available to all the entities in charge of the official work of reviewing and updating the ESG and the PBP, respectively. If these results are of interest to these entities, they can be taken into account in the review and update process.

## **Development of the initiative**

The ESG-PBP Alignment project, coordinated by ANECA, has been developed by a working group with the participation of the ENQA Secretariat, the SIACES Secretariat and ten quality agencies from both regions such as A3ES - Portugal-, ANVUR -Italy-, AQUA -Andorra-, CNA Chile -Chile-, CNA -Colombia-, CONEAU -Argentina-, Hcéres -France-, JAN -Cuba-, QAA -United Kingdom- and the coordinating agency -Spain-.

In close alignment with the above-mentioned specific objectives, the findings of the first phase of the project presented here provide a diagnosis of the



current situation as a result of a systematic comparative analysis of the ESG and the PBP.

To reach this point, two main steps have been followed. First, under the overall coordination of the project, three working subgroups were established with the participating agencies, led by ANVUR, CONEAU and CNA Chile, to address, respectively, the preliminary comparison of three blocks of content: the introductory section of the PBP with the section 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles' of the ESG; the section 'The agency' of the PBP with 'Part 3: European standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies' of the ESG; and the section 'The actions of the agency' with 'Part 2: Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance' (and, where possible, with 'Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance') of the ESG.

Secondly, on the basis of this preliminary block-by-block progress and after taking into account the assessments made by the Secretariats of ENQA and SIACES, a complete consensual version of the comparison of the central elements of both documents has been consolidated.

Hereinafter, as mentioned above, the second phase of the project foresees the elaboration of a proposal for the development of the ESG and PBP documents that feeds into a potential future alignment of these documents regarding the main aspects previously identified.

### **Key considerations for the interpretation of results**

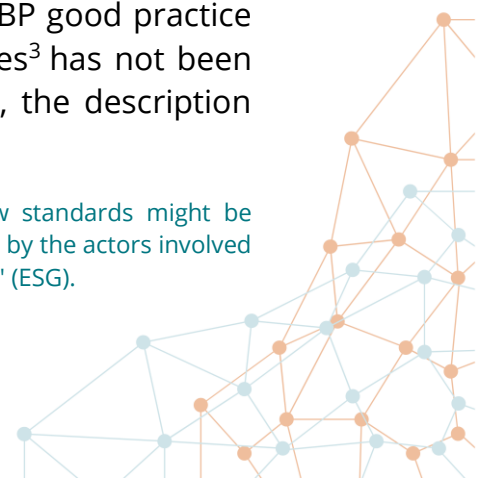
In this first phase of the project, a comparative analysis of the literal content of the two reference documents, ESG and PBP, has been carried out in order to determine the similarities and fundamental differences and, where appropriate, an appraisal of potential equivalences.

However, when interpreting the results presented here, the following should be borne in mind. Both documents have a markedly different structure and scope. For this reason, in this paper we have prioritised a thematic comparison of substantive elements that are at a similar level in both documents and/or, in any case, are contained in them.

Thus, for instance, priority was given to comparing the elements present at the ESG standard level with the elements present at the PBP good practice principle level. In general terms, the level of ESG guidelines<sup>3</sup> has not been included in the comparison, given that, on the one hand, the description

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<sup>3</sup> "The guidelines explain why the standard is important and describe how standards might be implemented. They set out good practice in the relevant area for consideration by the actors involved in quality assurance. Implementation will vary depending on different contexts" (ESG).



contained in the guidelines of how the standard could be implemented does not specify which elements are explanations - at the same level as the standards- and which are examples of how the standard could be implemented; and, on the other hand, the PBP document does not have an equivalent level of guidance (and such development could only be considered on the basis of complementary documents published by SIACES where some details are mentioned regarding some aspects present in the ESG<sup>4</sup>).

Only exceptionally, when some of the important elements identified in the PBP did not appear in the text of the ESG standards, the information has been retrieved, if available, from the guidelines for those specific standards.

In addition, it should also be noted that, while the PBP do not have a section equivalent to 'Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance' of the ESG, there is content related to this part in two SIACES documents on the general criteria for programme accreditation (SIACES, 2019b) and on the evaluation of e-learning (SIACES, 2019c). These two documents have not been included in the comparison.

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<sup>4</sup> For example, even though the PBP do not refer to any period for the external review of the agencies, this type of information can be found in the document on the procedure for the *Validation of Good Practices in Quality Assurance Agencies in Ibero-America*, which specifies that "The Certificate of Validation of Good Practices» will be valid for 6 years from the approval of the final report. Once this period has expired, the agency should apply for a new Validation process". In a similar way, the ESG state that "agencies should undergo an external review at least once every five years in order to demonstrate their compliance with the ESG" (ESG 3.7.).



# RESULT OF THE COMPARISON BETWEEN THE REFERENCE FRAMEWORKS

As a result of the comparison between the ESG and the PBP, a whole range of common and divergent elements can be highlighted, which will be presented here in four thematic blocks.

Based on the contents of the reference documents themselves, the first of these blocks deals with the comparison of the constituent elements of both regional quality frameworks. The second block focuses on the comparison of elements relating to the role of quality assurance in each region as expressed in both documents. The third and fourth blocks focus on the comparison of approaches to quality assurance based on the profile and actions of higher education institutions (HEIs) and quality agencies, respectively.

## 1. CONSTITUENT ELEMENTS OF QUALITY ASSURANCE FRAMEWORKS IN EACH REGION

This first section traces the main common and divergent elements of the two regional quality frameworks under comparison, focusing on the following issues: the overall objective of each framework; its intended scope; the strategic elements to be put in place for the achievement of QA objectives at regional level; the authorship, endorsement and prescriptive character of each framework; and, finally, its structure.

### 1.1. General objective of the reference documents

The ESG and the PBP aim to provide a **shared regional framework for quality assurance in higher education** for actors with responsibility for carrying out such tasks<sup>5</sup>.

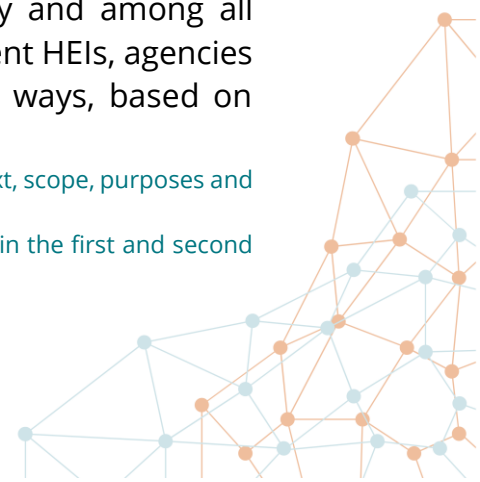
However, the mission given to each of these frameworks has its own distinguishing features.

The ESG are explicitly given the **mandate to define a common quality assurance framework for quality assurance systems** for learning and teaching **at European, national and institutional levels**; and to contribute to a common understanding of quality assurance in learning and teaching in any country and among all stakeholders. It is a generic framework which different HEIs, agencies and countries can use and implement in different ways, based on

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<sup>5</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Scope and concepts' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble (here "Preamble" is understood as the content included in the first and second pages of the Spanish version of the reference document).



specific principles, mechanisms and processes to which institutions are expected to adhere, and with an important role in the development of **national and institutional quality assurance systems** in the EHEA and in cross-border cooperation<sup>6</sup>.

In the case of the PBP, it is agreed to **promote compliance with** a set of **good practice principles for quality assurance agencies** as a prelude to the creation of **a regional quality assurance system**<sup>7</sup>.

## 1.2. Scope of the reference documents

The main focus of both frameworks **is on quality assurance in higher education**, comprising higher education institutions and the programmes they deliver<sup>8</sup>.

The ESG, on the one hand, encompass **all forms of higher education provision** within their definition of "programme", including the education offer that is not part of a programme or leads to a formal degree<sup>9</sup>; and, on the other hand, focus on quality assurance related to learning and teaching, including the learning environment, as well as relevant connections related to research and innovation<sup>10</sup>.

In the case of the PBP, the focus is on quality assurance mechanisms in higher education so that their implementation by the bodies that certify the quality of institutions and programmes would make it possible to develop a regional system for the recognition of **periods of study and degrees**<sup>11</sup>.

Both the PBP and the ESG recognise the **diversity** of higher education systems<sup>12</sup> and both frameworks allow for the diversity of agencies<sup>13</sup>. However, the ESG state more explicitly that they are designed to be flexible and adaptable to various higher education systems based on standards that are intended to be general<sup>14</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>7</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>8</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context', 'Scope and concepts' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble; PBP 2.1. and PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>9</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Scope and concepts' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>10</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Scope and concepts' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>11</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble.

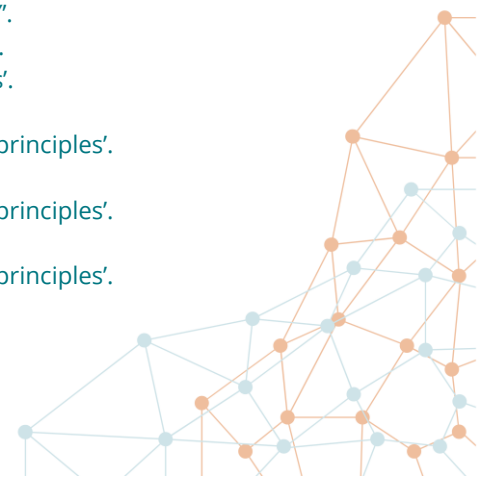
<sup>12</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>13</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>14</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.



### 1.3. Strategies to be implemented to achieve the objectives of quality assurance at regional level

Regarding the strategies to be implemented to achieve quality assurance objectives, **consensus** and **collaboration** between agencies are key elements present both in the PBP and the ESG<sup>15</sup>.

In the case of the ESG, this consensus extends to all organisations and stakeholders that have been involved in enhancing quality assurance in the EHEA<sup>16</sup>.

As for the PBP, beyond cooperation in the joint elaboration of the framework, there is explicit reference both to an agreement on promoting compliance with it<sup>17</sup> and to the need for the agencies in the region to collaborate with each other<sup>18</sup>.

In both cases, accepting a **shared** set of **principles** is a condition **for creating a common understanding** of quality assurance<sup>19</sup>.

However, the emphasis on quality assurance agencies adhering to established principles is greater in the case of the ESG<sup>20</sup>. On the other hand, in the case of the PBP, while the opportunity for agencies to consolidate their reliability at international level is mentioned, a more decentralised approach is favoured<sup>21</sup>.

### 1.4. Authorship, endorsement and prescriptiveness of the reference frameworks

With regard to authorship and endorsement, the ESG document was drawn up by a range of **diverse actors**<sup>22</sup> representing the main

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<sup>15</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Foreword'.

In the *PBP*: Introduction (here "Introduction" is understood as the content included in the first two paragraphs of the third page of the Spanish version of the reference document, which precede the section "1. THE AGENCY").

<sup>16</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Foreword'.

<sup>17</sup> In the *PBP*: Introduction.

<sup>18</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.6. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

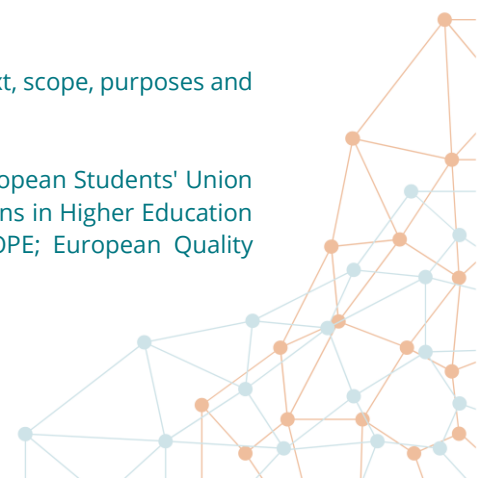
<sup>19</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>20</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>21</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>22</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) European Students' Union (ESU) European University Association (EUA) European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE) In cooperation with: Education International (EI); BUSINESSEUROPE; European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR).





stakeholders within the EHEA<sup>23 24</sup>; and was approved as a reference framework by the Conference of EHEA Ministers responsible for higher education held in Yerevan on 14-15 May 2015<sup>25</sup>. The development of quality assurance systems in line with the ESG is one of the three key commitments of the Bologna Process<sup>26</sup>.

In this case, it should be noted that "the standards set out agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA and **should, therefore, be taken account of and adhered to** by those concerned, in all types of higher education provision". Therefore, standards are meant to be complied with<sup>27</sup>.

As for the authorship of the PBP, the document was produced by the **agencies and bodies that are members of SIACES**<sup>28</sup>. Although this document **was adopted by ministers and government authorities for higher education** at the February 2020 meeting in Havana, the document itself does not specify an external endorsement by a higher government body.

An agreement is established among SIACES members to **promote compliance** with a set of principles, and it is anticipated that, the fulfilment of these principles by the entities that certify the quality of institutions and programs "would allow the development of a regional system for the recognition of short study periods and diplomas". A less prescriptive level is therefore established<sup>29</sup>.

## 1.5. Structure of the reference documents

The structuring of the two reference documents **differs substantially**, which means that the emphasis on certain aspects and

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<sup>23</sup> European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education; European Students' Union; European University Association; European Association of Institutions in Higher Education; Education International; BUSINESSEUROPE; European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education.

<sup>24</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Foreword'.

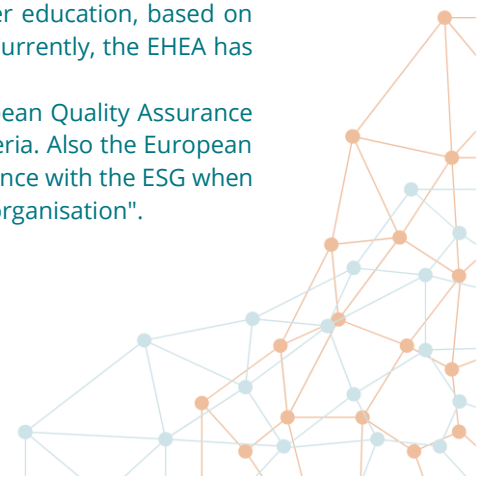
<sup>25</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Foreword'.

<sup>26</sup> Launched through the Bologna Declaration in 1999, the Bologna Process is one of the main consensus-based intergovernmental processes at European level. The Bologna Process supported the creation of a European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in which higher education systems are more comparable, compatible and coherent. This EHEA was formally established in 2010 as a mechanism for cooperation between public authorities and stakeholders in the field of higher education, based on mutual trust and with the aim of defining and achieving common objectives. Currently, the EHEA has 49 countries plus the European Commission as members.

<sup>27</sup> It is indicated in the footnote "Agencies that apply for inclusion in the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR) undergo an external review for which the ESG provide the criteria. Also the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) relies on compliance with the ESG when it comes to granting quality assurance agencies full membership status in the organisation".

<sup>28</sup> In the *PBP*: Introduction.

<sup>29</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble and Introduction.



the level of detail in their approach that can be seen in each of the standards also differ.

In the case of the ESG, it is structured in four blocks, consisting of an introduction followed by three parts. The introduction provides a presentation of the context, the scope of the framework and the most relevant concepts, and the aims and principles underpinning the standards and guidelines of this framework of reference. The other three blocks of the document provide a series of standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance (Part 1), external quality assurance (Part 2) and quality assurance agencies (Part 3). The document also has a final annex in which the standards of the three parts are repeated as a synthesis.

In the case of the PBP, the document begins with an introductory preamble in which aspects of context, justification and purpose of this framework of reference are addressed. This purpose is subordinated to the compliance of these central principles of good practice in higher education quality assurance mechanisms. The document then outlines, in the form of a declaration by the SIACES entities, the core contents of the framework, firstly through the expression of commitment and secondly according to a set of principles grouped into two sections: the agency; and the actions of the agency (its relationship with HEIs and the evaluation processes).

The section related to 'the agency' has an important parallel in the subject matter addressed in ESG Part 3 ('quality assurance agencies'); and the section related to the 'the actions of the agency' does so with regard to the subject matter addressed in ESG Part 2 ('external quality assurance')<sup>30</sup>.

## 2. ROLE OF QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE REGION

The second section of this comparative study presents the main common and divergent elements regarding the role of quality assurance in each region from the perspective of the two frameworks, focusing on the following issues: the objectives of quality assurance; the main factors guiding quality assurance; intra-regional collaboration; and the responsibility of the actors involved in quality assurance.

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<sup>30</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Part 2: Standards and guidelines for external quality assurance' and 'Part 3: Standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies' of 'II. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education'.  
In the *PBP*: '1. THE AGENCY' and '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.



## 2.1. Objectives of quality assurance

In terms of their general approach, both the PBP and the ESG substantially align on the **objectives of quality assurance**, which translate into both **accountability** and **continuous enhancement** of higher education institutions (HEIs) and their study programmes<sup>31</sup>.

Moreover, the PBP highlight the role of quality assurance as a **strategic planning tool for states**; in other words, the actions of the agencies are considered a tool for the **definition of public policies**<sup>32</sup>.

On their side, the ESG underline **the contribution of quality assurance to society**.

In relation to this, the ESG differentially stipulate in their standards that agencies should regularly publish, in the form of thematic analyses, **reports describing and analysing the general findings** of their external quality assurance activities. And, in their guidelines, they appreciate that the agencies provide here structured analyses across the higher education system and that the findings of such thematic analyses can help to **reflect on and improve quality assurance policies and processes** in institutional, national and international contexts<sup>33</sup>.

Furthermore, the ESG emphasise that quality assurance contributes to a **culture of quality**, as well as the role of quality assurance in supporting higher education institutions to respond to changes while maintaining high standards<sup>34</sup>.

On the other hand, both the PBP and the ESG seek to contribute to building **mutual trust**<sup>35</sup>.

The ESG state that such trust will be generated by the **adoption of common standards**<sup>36</sup>, while the PBP state that it is based on the **recognition of good practice** in assessment and accreditation processes, and the **harmonisation** of higher education systems<sup>37</sup>.

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<sup>31</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Scope and concepts' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>32</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble; PBP 1.1. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>33</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'; ESG 3.4.

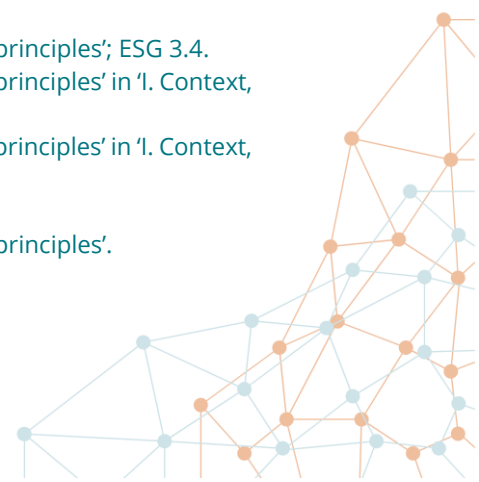
<sup>34</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context', 'Scope and concepts' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>35</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context', 'Scope and concepts' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>36</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>37</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble.



This trust, backed up by a quality assurance framework, is highlighted in both reference documents as central to the objectives of **promoting mobility** (national and international) and **mutual recognition of qualifications**<sup>38</sup>.

In this regard, the PBP place specific emphasis on the development of a **regional system** for the recognition of qualifications<sup>39</sup>.

## 2.2. Quality assurance orientation

Both the ESG and the PBP point to several elements that contribute to **substantively guiding quality assurance**<sup>40</sup>.

In the case of the ESG, the **needs and expectations of stakeholders**, which may sometimes differ, are mentioned. Additionally, external quality assurance processes are expected to be not only reliable, pre-defined, implemented consistently and published, but also **useful**<sup>41</sup>.

In the PBP, SIACES' commitment to the **Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations 2030 Agenda** is highlighted, through an explicit agreement of its members to contribute from their scope of action to the fulfilment of these goals, promoting constant innovation of processes, methodologies and tools involved in the framework of quality assurance in higher education<sup>42</sup>.

## 2.3. Intra-regional collaboration

**Cooperation within the region** is at the heart of the initiative of each of these frameworks<sup>43</sup>. However, it is the ESG that most explicitly aim to facilitate the **exchange of information** on quality assurance between the countries and systems involved<sup>44</sup>. Moreover, their objectives and principles are specifically oriented towards goals that are particularly relevant for inter-regional collaboration.

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<sup>38</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>39</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>40</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Foreword'; 'Setting the context' and 'Scope and concepts' and 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble; Introduction.

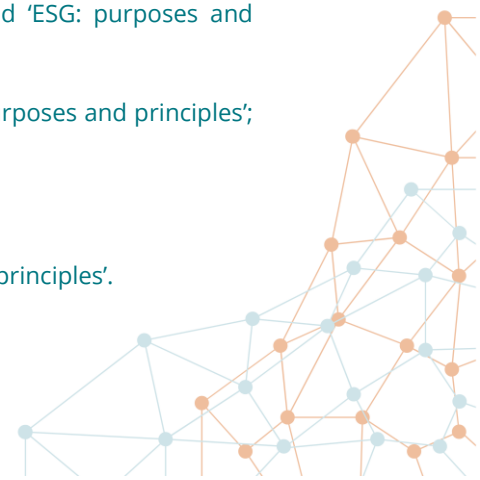
<sup>41</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Foreword'; 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'; ESG 2.3.

<sup>42</sup> In the *PBP*: Introduction.

<sup>43</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Introduction.

<sup>44</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.



## 2.4. Responsibility in assuring quality

From the point of view of the ESG and the PBP, there is a common understanding that **higher education institutions have the primary responsibility** for quality assurance<sup>45</sup>.

Notwithstanding the above, the actions of **quality assurance agencies** are also an element **to be taken into consideration** in (external) quality assurance<sup>46</sup>.

In addition, it should be noted that the PBP state that the agency (and the actions it carries out) is considered a strategic tool in the definition of **public policies**<sup>47</sup>.

## 3. CONTRIBUTION TO REGIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE BASED ON THE PROFILE AND ACTIONS OF HEIS

Building on the elements highlighted above with regard to responsibility for quality assurance, this third section focuses on the main common and divergent elements of quality assurance based on the profile and actions of HEIs, with a particular focus on internal quality assurance in HEIs.

### 3.1. Internal quality assurance in HEIs

Both frameworks attach **importance** to the **internal quality assurance** of HEIs, which is **complementary** to their **external quality assurance**<sup>48</sup>.

In this case, the ESG place greater importance to internal quality assurance, through the **development** of an entire **specific** section of standards and guidelines **at the beginning of the overall quality assurance process**, with an explicit link to the external quality assurance elements of the same framework.

In this respect, the ten specific standards that the ESG deploy for internal quality assurance of HEIs develops aspects of their actions in relation to: quality assurance policy; programme design and approval; student-centred learning, teaching and assessment; student

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<sup>45</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'; ESG Guidelines 2.1.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.1. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

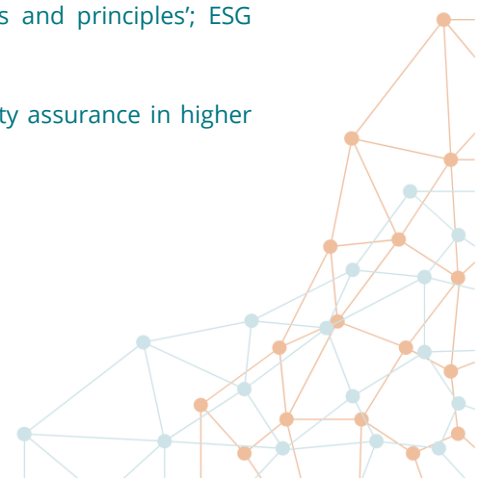
<sup>46</sup> In the *ESG*: Introduction to 'II. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education'; ESG 3.1.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.1. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>47</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.1. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>48</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.1.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.2. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.



admission, progression, recognition and certification; teaching staff; learning resources and student support; information management; public information; on-going programme monitoring and periodic review; and cyclical external quality assurance<sup>49</sup>.

#### 4. CONTRIBUTION TO REGIONAL QUALITY ASSURANCE BASED ON THE PROFILE AND ACTIONS OF AGENCIES

Like the previous block, this fourth section of the comparison also starts from the elements highlighted in relation to responsibility in quality assurance. In this case, the focus is on the responsibility of agencies and similar bodies with regard to their role in quality assurance in higher education.

Thus, this section focuses on the main common and divergent elements with respect to quality assurance considering the profile and actions of quality assurance agencies, paying particular attention to the following issues: the definition of the agencies' goals and objectives; the main guidelines for their actions; their profile; how agencies develop processes for the external quality assurance of HEIs and programmes; and the quality assurance processes followed by these agencies.

##### 4.1. Definition of agencies' goals and objectives

The PBP and the ESG coincide on the need for agencies to have **clear goals and objectives**<sup>50</sup>.

In the case of the ESG, it is also pointed out that these goals and objectives should be explicit, should be translated into the daily work of the agency and should be part of the agency's mission statement<sup>51</sup>.

##### 4.2. Guidelines on how agencies should proceed

The agencies' actions are notably delineated by a number of specifications, among which it is worth making a comparative examination of: independence; autonomy; ethics and integrity; professionalism; and transparency.

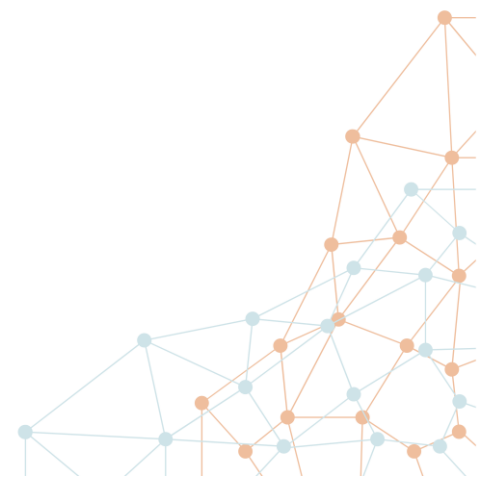
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<sup>49</sup> In the ESG: 'Part 1: Standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance'.

<sup>50</sup> In the ESG: ESG 3.1.

In the PBP: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>51</sup> In the ESG: ESG 3.1.





### 4.2.1. Independence

Both documents of reference stipulate that agencies should act **independently and impartially**, without the influence of third parties<sup>52 53</sup>.

### 4.2.2. Autonomy

In addition, both the PBP and the ESG emphasise that agencies should have **autonomy**<sup>54</sup>.

The ESG also stress that agencies should be fully responsible for their operations<sup>55</sup>.

### 4.2.3. Ethics and integrity

Both reference frameworks establish the need for agencies to be guided by **integrity** in their actions and activities<sup>56</sup>.

This aspect is particularly emphasised in the PBP, which indicate that agencies should have ethics and integrity policies in place<sup>57</sup>.

Albeit at guideline level, the ESG also refer, to the need to ensure that all persons involved in the activities of an agency act ethically and professionally<sup>58</sup>.

Also in this regard, the two reference documents state that agencies should have adequate mechanisms in place to **prevent conflicts of interest**<sup>59</sup>.

The PBP note that these agencies need to have clear and specific mechanisms in place for this purpose<sup>60</sup>, both at the peer-reviewer level and at their own organisational level.

In the case of the ESG, again through their guidelines, they also highlight the independence of experts through the

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<sup>52</sup> On this particular point, although there is agreement, the ESG deal with this issue in a more structured way in their guidelines so that it is addressed from the organisational, operational and results points of view..

<sup>53</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.3.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. and PBP 1.3. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>54</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.3.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2 in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>55</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.3.

<sup>56</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.6.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

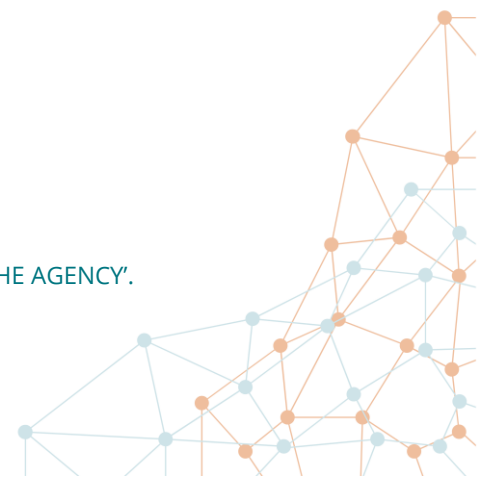
<sup>57</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>58</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 3.6.

<sup>59</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>60</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'. and PBP 2.4. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.



implementation of a mechanism to ensure that there is no conflict of interest<sup>61</sup>.

#### 4.2.4. Professional conduct

Both the ESG and the PBP agree that agencies should conduct their activities in a **professional manner**<sup>62</sup>.

#### 4.2.5. Transparency

Both documents stipulate that agencies should act with **transparency**<sup>63</sup>.

Furthermore, in the case of the PBP, the need for **policy** on this particular issue is underlined<sup>64</sup>.

Thus, the ESG and the PBP agree on three main elements in this regard that should be **publicly available**.

Firstly, the orientation of the agency<sup>65</sup>.

Here, in the case of the ESG, the explicit reference is to goals and objectives<sup>66</sup>, while in the case of PBP the reference is to the agency's policies<sup>67</sup>.

Secondly, its **criteria and processes**<sup>68</sup>.

Thirdly, the **reports on the results** of the quality assurance processes and, where appropriate, the **decisions** taken in relation to them<sup>69</sup>.

On this point, the PBP even mention the effort to disseminate such reports<sup>70</sup>.

From their side, the ESG, refer specifically to detailed reports produced by experts, which should be published, clear and

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<sup>61</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

<sup>62</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.3; ESG Guidelines 2.7; ESG 3.6.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>63</sup> In the *ESG*: 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'; ESG 2.3; ESG 2.5; ESG 2.6; ESG 2.7; ESG 3.1; ESG 3.4; ESG 3.6 Guidelines.

In the *PBP*: Preamble; PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'; PBP 2.3. and PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>64</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>65</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.1.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>66</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.1.

<sup>67</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

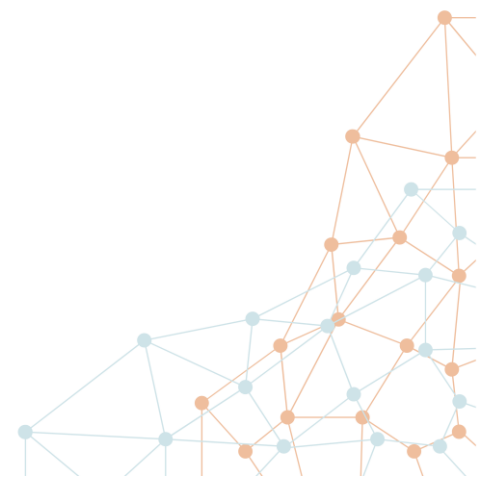
<sup>68</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.3.; ESG 2.5.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.3. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>69</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.6.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>70</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.



accessible to the academic community, external partners or any other interested person<sup>71</sup>.

The ESG also specify that **complaints and appeals** processes should be communicated to HEIs<sup>72</sup>.

### 4.3. Profile of agencies

With regard to elements that organically characterise the agencies, it is worth examining comparatively: their status; their structure; the involvement of stakeholders in their work; the internationalisation perspective of their work; and their resources.

#### 4.3.1. Official status of agencies

Both quality assurance frameworks stress the need for **legal recognition** of quality assurance agencies<sup>73</sup>.

#### 4.3.2. Agency structure

This is a point on which the PBP particularly insist, noting that agencies must have a **governance structure consistent with their mission and objectives**<sup>74</sup>.

#### 4.3.3. Stakeholder involvement in the work of the agency

The ESG and the PBP state the need to **involve different stakeholders**<sup>75</sup>.

However, it is in the ESG where a **special emphasis** is explicitly placed on this aspect. They state that agencies should ensure that stakeholders are involved in their governance and work, and that stakeholders should be involved in the design of external quality assurance methodologies and their continuous improvement<sup>76</sup>.

Nevertheless, this aspect in the PBP is only referred to in a general way in the introductory part<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.6.

<sup>72</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.7.

<sup>73</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.2.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.2. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>74</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.3. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>75</sup> In the *ESG*: Introduction to 'II. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education'; ESG 2.2.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.

<sup>76</sup> In the *ESG*: Introduction to 'II. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education'; ESG 2.2.

<sup>77</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble.



#### 4.3.4. *Internationalisation in the work of agencies*

With regard to internationalisation of the work of agencies, both documents agree on the importance of having a **perspective that supports it**<sup>78</sup>.

In the case of the PBP, this aspect is raised at the first level through a **specific principle** indicating the need for the agency to collaborate with other agencies, to participate in international networks and to be open to international developments in quality assurance<sup>79</sup>.

As for the ESG, they allude to elements of internationalisation at the level of their guidelines, referring, on the one hand, to the desirability of having international peer-review experts as well as international members on their committees; and, on the other hand, to the fact that the thematic analyses' findings can help to think about quality assurance policies and processes and their enhancement also in international contexts<sup>80</sup>.

#### 4.3.5. *Agencies' resources*

The two documents of reference indicate that the agencies should have different types of **resources** in order **to function properly**. They both underline, among others, human resources<sup>81</sup>.

However, while the ESG, along with the above, highlight financial resources<sup>82</sup>, the PBP do the same with physical resources<sup>83</sup>.

With regard to the **human resources** employed by the agency, both frameworks share the idea that they should be skilled and have access to timely training<sup>84</sup>.

This idea is raised at the level of principles in the case of the PBP and refers to the agency's staff<sup>85</sup>. In the ESG, although it is indicated for all the people who participate in the agencies' activities, it is placed at the level of guidelines<sup>86</sup>.

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<sup>78</sup> In the *ESG*: 'Setting the context' in '1. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

In the *PBP*: Preamble; Introduction; PBP 1.6. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>79</sup> In the *PBP*: Preamble; PBP 1.6. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>80</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4; ESG Guidelines 3.1; ESG Guidelines 3.4.

<sup>81</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.5.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.4. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>82</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 3.5.

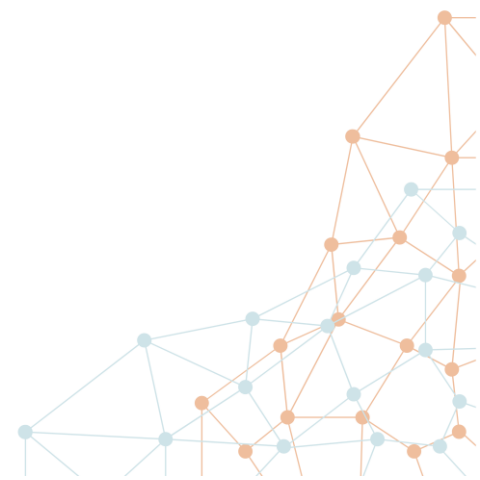
<sup>83</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1.4. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>84</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.; ESG Guidelines 3.6.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.4. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>85</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1. 4. in '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>86</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.; ESG Guidelines 3. 6.



#### 4.4. Development of external quality assurance processes for HEIs and programmes

As for the development of processes for the external quality assurance of HEIs and programmes, it is worth comparing aspects such as: the adaptability of external quality assurance processes to the reality of HEIs; the complementarity of such external quality assurance processes with respect to internal quality assurance processes; the adequacy of their review methodologies; the reliability and consistency of external review procedures; the stages in the above-mentioned external review processes; the involvement of peer reviewers; and the results or judgements derived from external quality assurance.

##### 4.4.1. Adaptability of external quality assurance processes to the reality of HEIs

The two frameworks align in promoting an **approach** to external quality assurance **capable of adapting to the diversity** of HEIs and their educational provision in its different modalities<sup>87</sup>.

The PBP emphasise that the agency, on the one hand, should respect this diversity and translate it into criteria that take into account the identity and goals of HEIs. On the other hand, it should respect the autonomy, identity and integrity of institutions and the programmes<sup>88</sup>.

For their part, the ESG set out as one of their guiding principles the need for quality assurance to respond to the diversity of higher education systems, institutions, programmes and students<sup>89</sup>.

##### 4.4.2. Complementarity of external quality assurance processes with internal quality assurance processes

It is important to mention that both the ESG and the PBP assume the inclusion of complementary contributions from the internal quality assurance processes of HEIs in the configuration of external quality assurance processes<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.  
In the *PBP*: PBP 2.2. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>88</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.1. and PBP 2.2. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>89</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'.

<sup>90</sup> In the *ESG*: Introduction in 'II. European standards and guidelines for quality assurance in higher education'; ESG 2.1.

In the *PBP*: Preamble.



In the case of the ESG, beyond affirming that external quality assurance should address the effectiveness of internal quality assurance processes<sup>91</sup>, it is assumed that these processes will be specifically those mentioned in their own standards for internal quality assurance<sup>92</sup> (ESG Part 1).

The PBP, in a more general way, point to the role of agencies in considering the internal quality assurance carried out by HEIs in their review criteria, as well as the aspects of HEI activity that are within the scope of the agency and the availability of resources required for such activity. However, the PBP do not offer a broad and explicit development equivalent to that of the ESG with regard to principles clearly oriented towards such internal quality assurance, but rather assume greater **flexibility** in this respect<sup>93</sup>.

#### **4.4.3. Review methodologies fit for purpose**

In both documents of reference, the design of criteria and methodologies includes central elements in **line with the purpose** of ensuring the quality of education<sup>94</sup>.

In addition, the ESG agree to take into account the **regulations** in force<sup>95</sup>.

#### **4.4.4. Reliability and consistency in the procedures for the external review of HEIs/programmes**

Both the ESG and the PBP stress the need for assessment processes to be **reliable** and **consistently** applied as intended, which shall be reflected in the results obtained<sup>96</sup>.

In this sense, the ESG state that the outcomes or judgements derived from the above should be based on explicit and published criteria that are applied **consistently**<sup>97</sup>.

On the side of the PBP, they state that the agency should have **policies and procedures** in place to ensure a fair decision-making process<sup>98</sup> at the end of the external review of the institution or programme.

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<sup>91</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.1.

<sup>92</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.1.; ESG 2.5

<sup>93</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.2. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>94</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.2.

In the *PBP*: PBP 1.5. in '1. THE AGENCY'; PBP 2.2. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

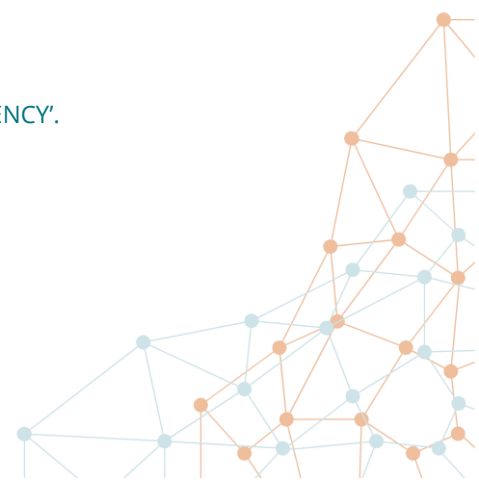
<sup>95</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.2.

<sup>96</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.3.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.3. and PBP 2.7. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>97</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.5

<sup>98</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.7. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.





#### **4.4.5. Stages in the processes of external review of HEIs and programmes**

With regard to the **stages established** to carry out the external quality assurance processes of HEIs and educational programmes, both documents of reference agree in pointing out:

- A self-assessment phase<sup>99</sup>.
- An external assessment phase<sup>100</sup>.
- A phase in which potential errors can be corrected<sup>101</sup>. Although this issue is shared in both documents, in the ESG it is only mentioned at the guidelines level<sup>102</sup>.
- Finally, once the review process has been completed, a phase in which, if necessary, the opportunity to check the evaluation process or its results due to discrepancies with the evaluated institution<sup>103</sup>.

However, at this point it is also worth highlighting some differences between the two frameworks.

In the self-assessment phase, the PBP emphasise the design by the agency of different **assistance and support mechanisms** for HEIs that are undergoing the process<sup>104</sup>.

As for the external assessment phase, the ESG consider a **site visit** as one of the main elements of the review process, as well as **consistent follow-up**<sup>105</sup> after receiving the final report.

Finally, within the last checks in case of potential discrepancies, the ESG also differentiate between appeals and complaints<sup>106 107</sup>.

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<sup>99</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.3.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.3. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>100</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2. 3.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.3. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>101</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.6.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2. 3. at '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>102</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2. 6.

<sup>103</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2. 7.

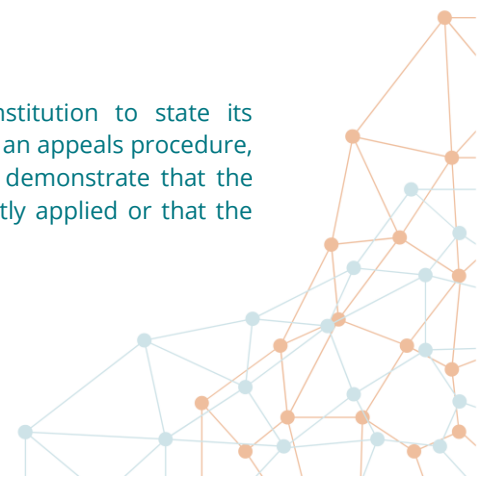
In the *PBP*: PBP 2.3. and PBP 2.7. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>104</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.5. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>105</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2. 3.

<sup>106</sup> According to the guidelines, the complaints procedure allows the institution to state its dissatisfaction about the conduct of the process or those carrying it out; and in an appeals procedure, the institution questions the formal outcomes of the process, where it can demonstrate that the outcome is not based on sound evidence, that criteria have not been correctly applied or that the processes have not been consistently implemented.

<sup>107</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.7.



#### 4.4.6. Peer reviewers

The involvement of **peer reviewers** in quality assurance processes is considered necessary in both reference documents<sup>108</sup>.

It should be noted that, in the case of the ESG, they refer to "groups" of peer-review experts<sup>109</sup> and that these should include one or more students<sup>110</sup>.

The PBP and the ESG coincide in the following aspects:

- An **appropriate selection process** for such profiles must be conducted<sup>111</sup>;
- these persons should have an aptitude profile in line with the assignment and be **skilled**<sup>112</sup>;
- and they should be provided with appropriate **training**<sup>113</sup>.

It is only in the PBP that the latter aspects are referred to in their principles at a primary level of importance, while in the ESG they are found in the guidelines<sup>114 115 116</sup>.

Finally, the PBP also stress the need to provide such peer reviewers with **technical assistance** for the development of their activity, through instruments specially designed for this purpose<sup>117</sup>.

#### 4.4.7. Results or judgements obtained from external quality assurance: review reports

Both the ESG and the PBP draw a line between the **review reports based on the outcomes and the decisions** (e.g. in terms of accreditation) that may, where appropriate, be derived from them<sup>118</sup>.

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<sup>108</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.4.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.4. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>109</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2.4.

<sup>110</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2. 4.

<sup>111</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.4. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>112</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.4. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>113</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

In the *PBP*: PBP 2.4 in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

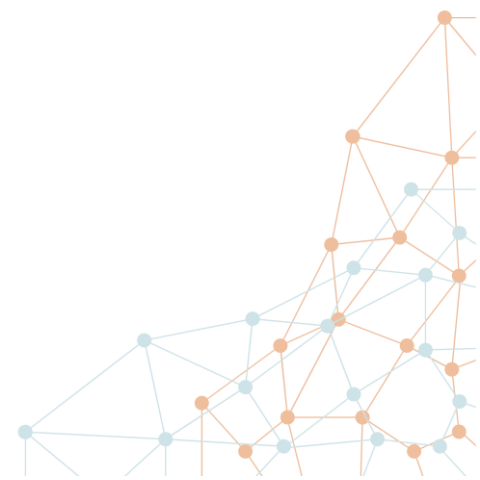
<sup>114</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

<sup>115</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

<sup>116</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG Guidelines 2.4.

<sup>117</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 2.4. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>118</sup> In the *ESG*: ESG 2. 5.



With respect to such results, in the PBP they are provided in the form of feedback including the observations and recommendations resulting from the external assessment<sup>119</sup>. In the ESG, these outcomes can take different forms, such as recommendations, judgements or formal decisions<sup>120</sup>.

#### 4.5. Development of quality assurance processes for agencies

Finally, with regard to the processes that the agencies undergo to ensure their own quality, it is worth differentiating between internal and external ones.

##### 4.5.1. Internal quality assurance

Both documents underline the need to pay attention to the **internal quality assurance** of the **agencies** themselves<sup>121</sup>.

In the ESG, this aspect is specified when they stress that agencies should have in place internal quality assurance processes related to the definition, integrity and quality assurance and enhancement of their activities<sup>122</sup>.

The PBP point to the need to adopt mechanisms for reviewing their own activities and to the duty to periodically conduct self-assessment processes for continuous enhancement, in order to respond to changes in higher education, improve the effectiveness of their actions and contribute to the achievement of their objectives<sup>123</sup>.

##### 4.5.2. External quality assurance

Agencies should undergo regular external reviews aimed at their continuous enhancement in line with their internal quality assurance work<sup>124</sup>.

However, it is only the ESG that specify, on the one hand, that this framework itself provides European-wide standards against which quality assurance agencies and their activities are reviewed; and, on the other hand, a specific period, in this case five years<sup>125</sup>, for verifying their continued compliance with the standards. This

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In the PBP: PBP 2.6. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>119</sup> In the PBP: PBP 2.3. in '2. THE ACTIONS OF THE AGENCY'.

<sup>120</sup> In the ESG: ESG Guidelines 2.5.; ESG Guidelines 2.6.

<sup>121</sup> In the ESG: ESG 3.6.

In the PBP: PBP 1. 5. In '1. THE AGENCY'.

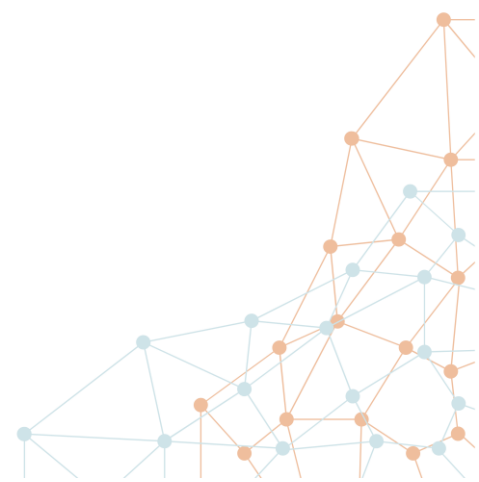
<sup>122</sup> In the ESG: ESG 3. 6.

<sup>123</sup> In the PBP: PBP 1. 5. In '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>124</sup> In the ESG: ESG 3. 7.

In the PBP: PBP 1. 5. In '1. THE AGENCY'.

<sup>125</sup> In the ESG: ESG 3.7.



guarantees that quality assurance agencies in the EHEA comply with the same set of principles while their processes and procedures are modelled to suit their purposes and the demands of their contexts<sup>126</sup>.

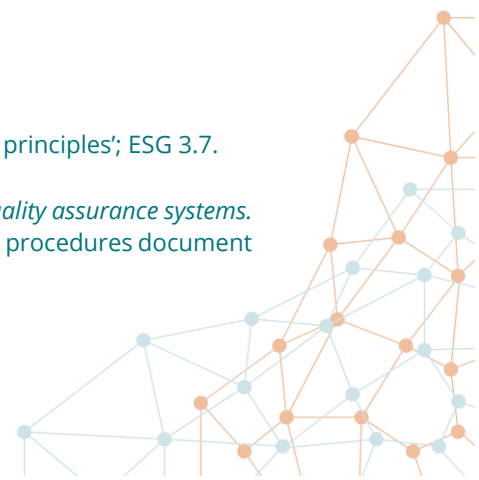
In the case of the PBP, external reviews, just like internal ones, focus on the continuous enhancement of the agency in order to respond to changes in higher education, to improve the effectiveness of its actions and to contribute to the achievement of its objectives<sup>127 128</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> In the *ESG*: 'ESG: purposes and principles' in 'I. Context, scope, purposes and principles'; ESG 3.7.

<sup>127</sup> In the *PBP*: PBP 1. 5. in '1. THE AGENCY'. [\(Spanish version only\)](#).

<sup>128</sup> NOTE: although this is not in the reference document *The good practices in quality assurance systems. Declaration of Principles of Good Practice*, a period of six years is established in the procedures document *Validation of good practices in quality assurance systems in Ibero-America..*



## CONCLUSIONS

The first phase of the ESG-PBP Alignment project has completed a systematic comparison of the ESG and the PBP. Although their unequal structure and, in certain cases, their different levels of development do not facilitate a direct comparison between the two documents, this exercise, by means of a thematic analysis, has permitted a series of relevant conclusions.

Firstly, the **similarities** that already exist between the two frames in their fundamental elements are significant. Therefore, the following could be highlighted.

The ESG and the PBP, in their respective regions, provide a guide of reference with regard to quality assurance in higher education to a diverse range of higher education systems and agencies, including HEIs and their study programmes.

The acceptance of these shared frameworks by quality assurance agencies, among other actors, is a condition for creating a common understanding of quality assurance in each of the regions.

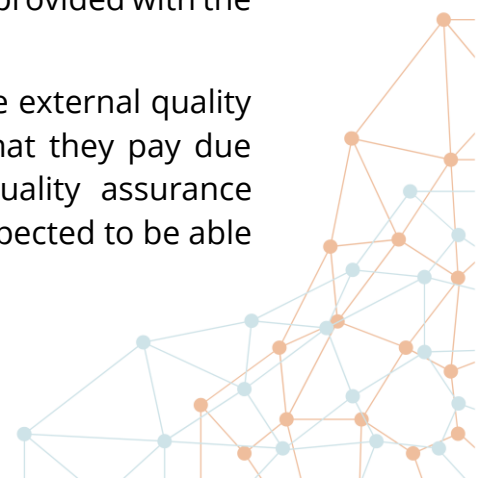
A central underlying objective of quality assurance is the building of mutual trust through cooperation, as well as through mechanisms for accountability and continuous enhancement of HEIs and their study programmes. Such trust is the basis on which two key aims are supported in these regional contexts, namely mobility and mutual recognition of qualifications.

In this scenario, although quality assurance agencies have an obvious role to play, both frameworks place the main responsibility for quality assurance with HEIs.

On the other hand, agencies are expected to act in accordance with the basic principles applying to this type of organisation, such as independence, autonomy, ethics and integrity, professional conduct and transparency in their actions.

Furthermore, for their proper functioning, it is expected that these organisations are legally recognised within the boundaries of their role and are adequately supported with various types of resources, including suitably skilled human resources which, where appropriate, may be provided with the necessary training.

With regard to the work of these agencies in relation to the external quality assurance processes that they carry out, it is assumed that they pay due attention to the complementarity with HEIs' internal quality assurance processes. The external quality assurance perspective is expected to be able



adapt to the diversity of HEIs and their education offer in its different modalities.

This work of the agencies is characterised by a number of common elements in both frameworks. Thus, agencies seek to ensure that the design of criteria and methodologies includes key elements in line with the purpose of quality assurance of education; and that review processes are reliable and consistently applied as intended, so that they are reflected in the outcomes, whether or not they linked to subsequent decisions.

To achieve the above, the involvement of peer reviewers in quality assurance processes is considered necessary. An appropriate selection of persons from outside the agency needs to be made. These persons, who should be suitably skilled and have aptitudes consistent with their assignment, should be provided with appropriate training.

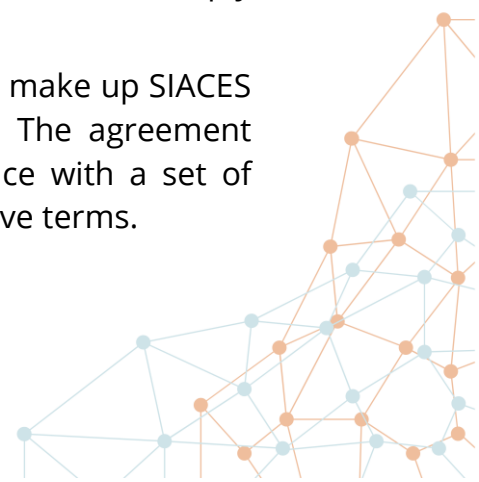
It is also expected that the external review processes of HEIs and educational programmes carried out by agencies are divided in a number of main stages, among which the two documents agree on mentioning: self-assessment; external assessment; correction of possible errors during the review process; and, after the review process, the opportunity to check the process or its outcomes following dissatisfaction expressed, for example, by the HEI under review.

Finally, both the ESG and the PBP focus on the importance of agencies' own quality assurance, both through interrelated internal and external quality assurance mechanisms, the latter consisting of periodic external review processes that also have an impact on the agencies' continuous enhancement.

Secondly, there are also significant elements that show **differences** between the ESG and the PBP, which have been discussed in greater detail in previous pages. In this respect, among others, the following could be highlighted.

The ESG were drawn up by a wide and diverse range of higher education stakeholders at European level and have been formally endorsed by all the ministers responsible for higher education in the EHEA. These standards set out the agreed and accepted practice for quality assurance in higher education in the EHEA and, therefore, stakeholders should take them into account. Thus, HEIs and quality assurance agencies are expected to comply with them.

Regarding the PBP, they are drawn up by the agencies that make up SIACES within the EIC, without the intervention of other actors. The agreement reached by the agencies consists of promoting compliance with a set of principles. Thus, compliance is established in less prescriptive terms.





With regard to the elements that contribute to substantively guiding quality assurance, the PBP explicitly highlight SIACES' commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals of the 2030 Agenda. In contrast, the ESG point out the needs and expectations of stakeholders in a generic way, without further specification.

However, although both frameworks note the need for participation of different stakeholders, the ESG stand out for being more specific and effectively establishing the different points where which this participation should take place in internal and external quality assurance processes. In this sense, a specific role is recognised for students as one of the co-authors of the ESG, as well as through their necessary involvement by the agencies within groups of peer-review experts.

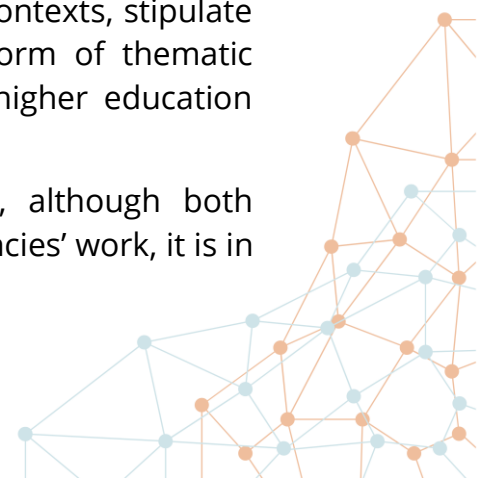
On their side, the PBP point out that agencies should have a governance structure consistent with their mission and objectives.

As far as the internal quality assurance in HEIs is concerned, it is mentioned in both frameworks. However, only the ESG provide a specific and comprehensive development through ten standards that HEIs should comply with, while the PBP do not specify any guidelines in this respect and allow HEIs a clear degree of flexibility.

In the case of the external quality assurance processes carried out by the agencies, differential nuances can be identified, even if both documents include largely similar main phases for such processes. On the one hand, the ESG usually include a site visit as one of the parts that make up the assessment process, which should necessarily include consistent follow-up. On the other hand, the PBP allow for agencies to design different assistance and support mechanisms for HEIs undergoing a self-assessment process. Likewise, during external assessment processes, the PBP note the need to provide peer reviewers with technical assistance for the development of their activity through instruments specially designed for this purpose.

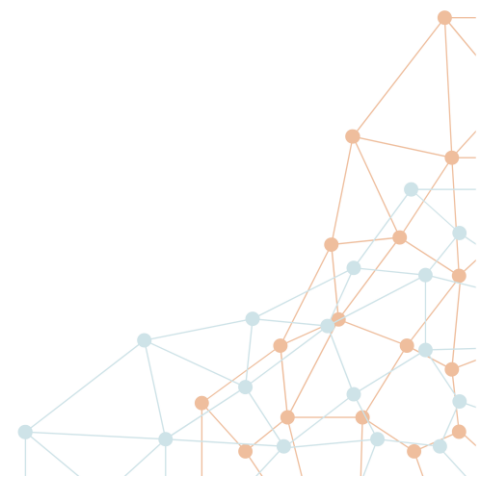
In addition to the above, although both documents have the aspiration to contribute to society and its environment, the PBP encourage this aspiration to materialise in quality assurance being understood as a strategic planning tool for states to define public policies. In contrast, the ESG, as a more specific mechanism that can help to reflect on and improve quality assurance policies and processes in institutional, national and international contexts, stipulate that agencies should regularly publish reports, in the form of thematic analyses, which provide structured analyses across the higher education system.

The last difference to be highlighted is the fact that, although both frameworks include internationalisation as part of the agencies' work, it is in



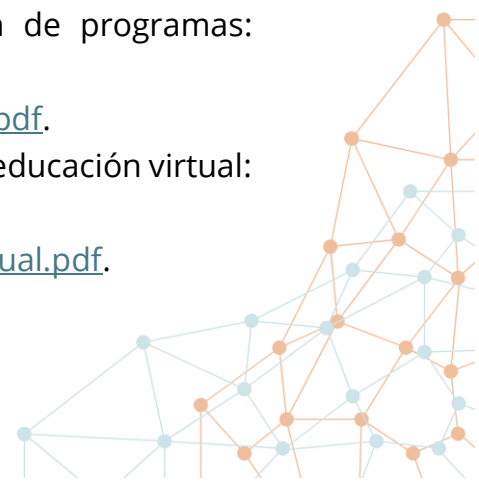
the PBP that this aspect is explicitly addressed through a specific principle whereby agencies are expected to collaborate with peers, participate in international networks and be open to international developments in quality assurance.

Finally, in the context of the bi-regional dialogue within which this initiative was born, it is important to underline as a **final conclusion** that these and other converging and differentiating elements become here an opportunity for the exchange of perspectives between these two reference frameworks for quality assurance and for their mutual enrichment. Precisely, the second phase of the ongoing ESG-PBP Alignment project will build on both the findings herein and this idea in order to move forward with a proposal of key elements that will facilitate a potential future alignment between both regional frameworks and, from there, an increase in mutual trust and the strengthening of bi-regional relations and cooperation to face common challenges.



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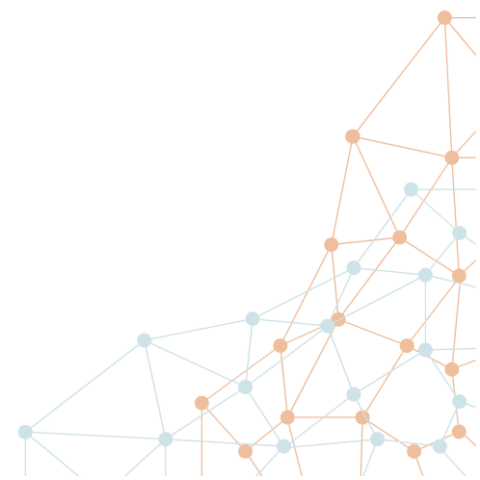
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- Validación de buenas prácticas en los sistemas de aseguramiento de la calidad en Iberoamérica: <http://www.siaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/DocumentoValidacionBuenasPracticas.pdf>.

### **Versions of the reference documents being compared:**

- *Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area -ESG-*:
  - English: [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG\\_2015.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/ESG_2015.pdf).
  - Spanish: [https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/filebase/esg/ESG in Spanish\\_by ANECA.pdf](https://www.enqa.eu/wp-content/uploads/filebase/esg/ESG%20in%20Spanish_by%20ANECA.pdf).
- *Declaración de Principios de Buenas Prácticas -PBP-*:
  - English: [https://www.siaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Principles-of-Good-Practice\\_SIACES\\_EN.pdf](https://www.siaces.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Principles-of-Good-Practice_SIACES_EN.pdf).
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