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

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Abstract. With the role of higher education in economic development, international competitiveness, and social cohesion becoming more important, quality assurance in higher education has become a focus for all countries. Hassan (2013) pointed out that accountability, quality, and productivity are key concepts for higher education reforms in the 21st century. As a lifeline of higher education, quality is both a requirement of accountability and the key to improving productivity. As early as the 1980s, Europe had begun to pay increasing attention to quality assurance in higher education. With political and economic integration of European states and the promotion of the Bologna Process, quality assurance in higher education had been defined as one of its main goals. In order to ensure a unified framework and standard for the quality assurance activities in the European Higher Education Area (EHEA), enhance the transparency of systems, and promote the mobility of staff and students in the area, the E4-Group members (European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education [ENQA], European Students’ Union [ESU], European University Association [EUA], and European Association of Institutions in Higher Education [EURASHE]) jointly drafted and published the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area in 2005 (ESG 2005). The introduction of the ESG 2005 greatly promoted the development of higher education quality activities in Europe and has become the cornerstone of quality assurance in the EHEA. Following implementation of the ESG 2005, corresponding experience was accumulated, and new developments emerged in higher education; the ENQA thus revised ESG 2005 in 2015 (ESG 2015) to enhance its applicability.

Given that China has since launched its Double First-Class Initiative (develop world-class universities and disciplines), reviewing the development history, contents, and concepts of the ESG can help shed light on the quality assurance processes in higher education and assist in the construction of world-class universities.

1. Development Path

On May 25, 1998, the Ministers of Education of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom issued a joint declaration of harmonization of architecture for the European higher education system at the Sorbonne University (Sorbonne Declaration). The declaration stated that an open EHEA should be constructed to promote both cooperation among higher education institutions in Europe and the mobility of students and teaching staff. In June 1999, the Ministers of Education of 29 European countries held a meeting in Bologna and signed the Bologna Declaration, reaching a consensus to jointly build the EHEA. Promoting cooperation in quality assurance in Europe and developing comparable standards and methods are one of the six objectives [1]. The ENQA was established in 2000 and was influenced by the Sorbonne Declaration and Bologna Declaration, based on the Council Recommendation of 24 September 1998 on European cooperation in quality assurance in higher education issued by the Council of the European Union (EU). The mission of the ENQA was to build a quality assurance system for the EHEA [2]. To advance the Bologna Process, achieve its quality objectives, and fulfill its mission, the ENQA promotion team invested efforts to strengthen its links with higher education institutions and university students [3]. Together with the ESU (formerly known as the National Unions of Students in Europe, ESIB), European Association of Institutions in Higher Education (EURASHE), and European University Association (EUA), the
E4-Group was established [4]. In addition, it also strove to improve its own capabilities and organizational strengths. Since September 2003, the promotion team of the ENQA was reformed and renamed as the ENQA Board. The ENQA, an independent organization, formulated strict membership standards, officially becoming an independent association in 2004, and appearing on the political stage as a formal quality assurance organization [5].

As follow-up actions to the Bologna Declaration, the EHEA discusses the development and actions of European higher education through the Conference of Ministers of Education. Eight Conferences of Ministers of Education have been held by the EHEA member states since the Bologna Declaration. As part of the quality assurance system in higher education, the ESG was gradually formed through successive ministerial meetings [6].

In 2001, the first Conference of Ministers of Education was held in Prague (Ministerial Conference Prague 2001), emphasizing the importance of the quality assurance system and calling for higher education institutions to work with the ENQA and other members of the E4-Group to establish a universal quality reference framework [7]. With the development of the ENQA and the integration of higher education in Europe, the Ministerial Conference Berlin 2003 defined the improvement of the quality in higher education as the core motivation behind the construction of the EHEA. The Ministers of each country agreed that, to achieve the internationalization of higher education and the Lisbon Strategy (an action and development plan that aims to make the EU the most competitive knowledge-based economy in the world), the quality of EHEA must be guaranteed and enhanced. As a result, the Ministers formally requested the ENQA to work with the EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB to develop quality assurance standards, procedures, and guidelines and a peer review system for quality assurance; to create accreditation agencies/bodies for the EHEA; and to report progress in the following conference (Ministerial Conference Bergen 2005) [8].

In accordance with the principle that universities and colleges should be responsible for the quality of their education, the ENQA began to preside over the drafting of the ESG following the Ministerial Conference Berlin 2003 [15]. The drafting of the ESG is inspired by the principles of the Graz Declaration – “a European dimension to quality assurance is to promote mutual trust and improve transparency while respecting the diversity of national contexts and subject areas.” The ENQA also referred to the experience in the pilot project “Transnational European Evaluation Project (TEEP)” and important documents such as “The Code of Good Practice” proposed by the European Consortium for Accreditation (ECA) in December 2004, “Statement on Agreed Set of Standards, Procedures, and Guidelines at a European Level” and “Statement on Peer Review of Quality Assurance and Accreditation Agencies” issued by the ESIB in April 2004 [9]. Moreover, the ENQA invited quality assurance organizations, such as other members of the E4-Group, to provide constructive suggestions and insights. Relevant experience in countries outside of Europe was also consulted so as to bring an international perspective into the standard drafting process.

The Ministerial Conference Bergen 2005 formally approved and adopted the ESG 2005. This ESG 2005 provided a set of general guidelines for the quality assurance of higher education in Europe and has become the entry criteria for the ENQA. The ESG 2005 consists of four parts: basic introduction (context, aims, and principles), European standards and guidelines, peer review system for quality assurance agencies, and future perspectives and challenges. In addition to the standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance in the EHEA, the ESG 2005 also proposed the establishment of a European Register to assess the quality assurance agencies and decide their inclusion according to nationally-based reviews. Based on the ESG 2005, the Communiqué of the Ministerial Conference Bergen 2005 stated, “We commit ourselves to introducing the proposed model for peer review of quality assurance agencies on a national basis, while respecting the commonly accepted guidelines and criteria. We welcome the principle of a European register of quality assurance agencies based on national review. We ask that the practicalities of implementation be further developed by ENQA in cooperation with EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB with a report back to us through the Follow-up Group [10].”

Following the Ministerial Conference Bergen 2005, the ESG 2005 was implemented at the EHEA. In order to promote the sustainable development of quality assurance in higher education and
successful application of the ESG 2005, ENQA, EUA, EURASHE, and ESIB jointly organized the first European Quality Assurance Forum (EQAF) in 2006. The EQAF has been held regularly thereafter. By the time the Ministerial Conference London 2007 began, all the EHEA countries had adopted the ESG 2005 as a standard for quality assurance activities. Some substantial progress was made [11]. Specifically, the standards of external quality assurance activities were greatly developed and participation from students in internal quality assurance processes was significantly increased. In accordance with the requirements of the Ministerial Conference Bergen 2005, the E4-Group presented the “Report of the E4 Group on Quality Assurance” at the Ministerial Conference London 2007, which explained the operational model and framework for the Register of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Agencies. Their proposal was approved and recognized by the conference. On March 4, 2008, as the first legal entity of the Bologna Process, the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) was formally established in Brussels. The role of the EQAR is to ensure the quality of quality assurance agencies, improve the reliability and effectiveness of external assessment activities, and promote the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education. The establishment of EQAR was based on the recommendations of the ESG 2005 and the corresponding member selection criteria, which further promoted the significance and authority of the ESG 2005 in quality assurance processes in Europe. As stated in the “ENQA Position Paper on Quality Assurance in the EHEA” released at the Ministerial Conference Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve 2009 [12], the four years of implementation of the ESG 2005 has clearly demonstrated its applicability in different countries and organizations.

However, the achievements of the ESG 2005 signified the beginning, rather than the completion and end of the establishment of quality assurance standards. The nature of higher education has since shifted towards the rise of lifelong learning and e-learning, alongside shifts in the type of students, and the methods of learning, teaching, and evaluation are constantly being updated. For that reason, questions such as how to truly comply with the ESG standards in practice, how to interpret the standards in different national contexts, and what the true meaning of independence is have triggered many discussions. In response to the new development of higher education and the new problems in the implementation of the ESG 2005, the European Commission proposed in the “EU Report on Progress in Quality Assurance in Higher Education” (2011) that a re-assessment of the ESG 2005 should be conducted [13]. In order to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the implementation and revision of the ESG 2005, the E4-Group launched the project “Mapping the implementation and application of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (MAP-ESG)” between October 2010 and April 2012 to review the implementation and application of the ESG 2005 in the 47 Bologna signatory countries. The results showed that, although the ESG 2005 greatly promoted quality assurance processes in the EHEA, further improvement was needed. Nevertheless, the improvement was not a comprehensive revision of the principles and content, but rather a re-alignment of vision of the ESG with the Bologna Process, elimination of ambiguity of language and standards, and further improvement of the understanding of the application of the standards among teaching staff. Based on the research results of the project, the Ministerial Conference Bucharest 2012 requested that the E4-Group cooperate with all stakeholders (particularly the Confederation of European Business [Business Europe] and EQAR) to revise the ESG, improve its clarity and enhance its applicability and practicality [14].

Following the Ministerial Conference Bucharest 2012, the E4-Group collaborated with corresponding stakeholders and revised the ESG 2005. In 2015, the revised ESG was submitted to the Ministerial Conference Yerevan 2015 and became the new quality assurance standard— the ESG 2015. To enhance applicability, the ESG 2015 took into account new developments in higher education and gave more attention to a culture of diversity and quality. To improve clarity, the ESG 2015 introduced several new concepts, such as student-centered learning and the student “life cycle.” To expand practicality, the ESG 2015 referred to other tools used in Europe that helped to increase transparency and trust in higher education, such as qualification frameworks, European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System (ECTS), and diploma supplements. While the ESG 2015 is more responsive to the changing background of higher education, the revision of standards tended to
present a series of challenges for users. Therefore, a two-stage “Enhancing Quality through Innovative Policy & Practice (EQUIP)” project was launched between November 1, 2015 and January 31, 2018. The project aimed to support and facilitate the efficient integration of the ESE 2015 into the EHEA so as to ensure its applicability in local regions. In addition, the project also “put forward European-level policy recommendations to stakeholder groups to feed into the discussions leading up to the 2018 EHEA Ministerial Conference [15].”

As the standards and guidelines for quality assurance in the EHEA, the ESG serves as a general guideline to be respected by quality assurance agencies and when conducting internal and external quality assurance activities in higher education, as well as an admission standard for ENQA and EQAR membership. The ESG has enhanced the effectiveness and reliability of quality assurance in European higher education, promoted the mutual recognition of education systems and mobility of students and teaching staff, and facilitated the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education in Europe.

2. Philosophy and Content

The purpose of the ESG is to establish a common standard for quality assurance in the EHEA to promote the mutual recognition of the higher education system at home and abroad and the mobility of students and teaching staff. Given that the political economy, social culture, educational traditions, and development of higher education are multi-faceted and diverse among member countries, and in order to guarantee the universality of the ESG, universal guidelines for quality assurance are speculated rather than defined as specific quality objectives and implementation processes. The main body of the ESG is divided into three parts: standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, standards and guidelines for external quality assurance, and standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies (Table 1) [15]. Each part contains a guide that explains the meaning of the standards and describes how they should be implemented. Specifically, the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance is the foundation of the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance; the standards and guidelines for external quality assurance serves as a review of the standards and guidelines for internal quality assurance, and the standards and guidelines for quality assurance agencies acts as the prerequisite for the effective implementation of the external quality assurance activities. The parts are a unified whole as they complement and supplement one another. The ESG has thus become the cornerstone of quality assurance in European higher education.

2.1 Student-Centered Internal Quality Assurance

The fundamental function of higher education is the cultivation of talent. The fundamental purpose of quality assurance in higher education is to guarantee the quality of talent training. Based on this, the standards and guidelines for ESG internal quality assurance focus on student learning, student development, and learning outcomes. The standards, defined from five aspects (including policy planning, student management and support, teacher development, information management, and cyclical review), are created to ensure a student-centered internal quality assurance system.

In terms of policy planning, the ESG requires higher education institutions to have a public policy of internal quality assurance that is designed by students and other stakeholders. Although each institution is permitted to determine their processes of development, implementation, and revision of the policy for internal quality assurance, the ESG explicitly requires the involvement of students in the design of the policy. In addition, the ESG specifically points out that institutions should guard against any kind of discrimination against the students. This emphasis of the responsibility of the involvement of students affirms the importance and role of students in internal quality assurance from a top-level design perspective.

In terms of student management and support, the ESG focuses on meeting the development needs of students. Firstly, the regulations related to the development of students should cover all phases of a student’s “life cycle.” The admission, assessment, and graduation evaluation are a series of continuous processes. Regulations of student development should include each stage and be announced prior to student admission. Specifically, the admission policies, processes, and criteria
should be consistent and transparent; the collection processes, analysis tools, and monitoring methods should be applied in accordance with clear regulations; and the certification processes should be consistent with the Lisbon Recognition Convention. Moreover, institutions are asked to cooperate with other universities, quality assurance agencies, and the European Network of Information Centers (ENIC) to ensure consistency of academic certification in the EHEA [16]. Secondly, institutions should implement a student-centered learning, teaching, and assessment system. Student-centered teaching and learning means stimulating students’ motivation, paying attention to students’ learning processes, and promoting students’ self-reflection. Therefore, institutions should respect the students, attend to their diversified needs, and adopt flexible pedagogical methods to encourage students to develop self-learning while ensuring adequate guidance and support from the teacher; and establish appropriate methods to handle students’ complaints. Furthermore, the criteria and methods that are used to assess learning outcomes should be student-centered and made known in advance; the assessment should allow students to evaluate their achievements based on the expected learning outcomes; and the results and feedback should be provided to the students in a timely manner. Finally, institutions are expected to provide adequate service and support to facilitate student learning. Providing support services is of great significance to the promotion of student-centered learning and student mobility. In order to provide students with a good experience in higher education, the ESG believes that institutions should provide physical resources (such as libraries and information technology facilities) and human support (such as counselors and study consultants) for the students. While providing learning service support, the diversity of student groups and the needs of a student-centered teaching model should also be fully considered.

**Table 1. Contents of European Higher Education Quality Assurance Standards (Esg 2015) [15].**

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<th>External Quality Assurance</th>
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<td>1.9 On-going monitoring and periodic review of programs</td>
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<td>1.10 Cyclical external quality assurance</td>
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In terms of the construction of the teaching team, the ESG pays attention to the effective implementation of teaching. Due to the diversity of students and the shift of focus towards learning outcomes, student-centered teaching and learning has led to changes in the role of teachers. Instead of passing on the knowledge, teachers are expected to guide the learning process of students. Hence, the ESG believes that institutions should provide a favorable environment, encourage innovation in
teaching methods, and strengthen the connection between teaching and research through academic activities, to promote the development of various capabilities of the teaching staff and the effective implementation of teaching activities.

In terms of information management, the ESG requires effective collection, analysis, application, and disclosure of information related to the quality assurance of the study programs and activities. The collection and analysis of relevant information is essential to understand and continuously improve the quality of study programs. The ESG believes that institutions need to attend to and collect the following information related to student learning: key performance indicators; profile of the student population; student progression, success, and drop-out rates; students’ satisfaction with their programs; learning resources and student support available; and career paths of graduates.

When collecting and analyzing information, students, as one of the main stakeholders should be involved. Institutions are expected to announce the results of information analysis to the public in a timely manner. The contents should at least include the programs that are offered; the intended learning outcomes; the qualifications that are awarded; the teaching, learning, and evaluation procedures; the qualification rate; learning opportunities; and graduate employment information.

In terms of quality monitoring, the ESG emphasizes learning-outcomes based on professional monitoring, review, and external quality evaluation. Academic programs are the basic unit for students to learn knowledge and skills; they are also one of the most essential, core paths to completing the missions of the institutions. In order to ensure the achievement of the goals, respond to the needs of students and society, and promote the continuous improvement of the programs, it is essential for institutions to implement real-time monitoring and regular review of the programs. Based on the concept of student-centered teaching and learning, the ESG claims that the monitoring and review of study programs should fully consider students’ progression and completion of the program, their expectations and satisfaction in relation to the program, and the support services and their applicability in relation to the program goals. Moreover, in order to determine the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance system, institutions should actively invite external quality reviews on a cyclical basis. The external review may take different forms and focus on different organizational levels (such as program, faculty, and institutional levels), depending on the legislative framework of the corresponding region. Regardless of the form or level, external quality reviews should focus on student learning outcomes and provide reliable information to relevant stakeholders.

2.2 Enhancement-Based External Quality Assurance

External quality assurance reviews the effectiveness of internal quality assurance based on recognition of internal quality assurance activities. In order to coordinate the relationship between internal and external quality assurance activities and effectively promote the continuous improvement of the quality of higher education, the ESG believes that the fundamental goal of external quality assurance is to promote the continuous improvement of the quality of institutions by fully considering the results of internal quality assurance. Based on the fundamental purpose of improvement, the ESG regulates the procedures for external quality assurance as follows:

1) The fundamental purpose of external quality assurance is to promote continuous improvement of the quality of higher education. The goal of external quality assurance is to define specific quality assurance practices as well as the criteria for determining the effectiveness of the activities and the achievements of the objectives. Although different external quality assurance activities have different points of focus, the ESG believes that each form of external quality assurance should consider the following three aspects when determining objectives: the provision of detailed results and clear suggestions for improvement, the workload and cost that may place upon the institutions, and the effectiveness of implementing the suggestions in terms of quality improvement. Specifically, workload and cost determine the feasibility of the improvement measures; detailed results and clear suggestions serve as the guidelines for quality improvement, and effectiveness is considered the result of implementing the improvement measures. All three aspects are directly associated to the improvement of the institutions themselves.
2) The implementation of external quality assurance activities should be transparent and sustainable. External quality assurance usually involves the provision of an assessment report compiled by external experts based on the review of relevant materials (generally including self-assessment reports and other supporting materials) and field visits. The report assesses the current quality of the institution and provides suggestions for future improvement. Furthermore, the ESG requires the entire process to be transparent to guarantee the impact and acceptability of external assessment results. Quality assurance is a continuously progressing process. External quality assurance does not terminate following provisions of the evaluation and suggestions or the implementation of improvement measures. Therefore, the ESG requires that each external quality review should fully consider the results of the previous review and the improvement observed thereafter, so as ensure the continuous improvement in quality.

3) The peer-review experts should be independent and professional personnel that cover a wide range of expertise. At the core of external quality assurance is the assessment panel and the expertise it provides. To ensure the professionalism of the external assessment and the effectiveness of the results, the ESG believes that the members of the assessment panel should include at least managers, scholars, students, employers, and other professional personnel. In addition, appropriate mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the independence of the experts. The experts should receive corresponding training and have appropriate skills and competence to perform the assessment. Thus, the assessment panel can truly investigate the advantages and disadvantages of the institutions with their knowledge from different perspectives and ensure the reliability of the results and the rationality of the improvement suggestions.

4) The assessment report shall provide clear guidance of improvement measures for the evaluated institution. The results of external assessment are generally presented in the form of assessment reports. Although the results may be presented in different forms (recommendations, judgments, and decisions), the assessment reports are evidence to respond to inquiry of society as well as guidelines for follow-up action. Hence, the ESG believes that the report must be clear and concise in its structure and language. In view of this, the report should include at least the following information: context description (specific information regarding the evaluated institution); description of the assessment procedure (including experts involved); evidence, analysis, and findings; and conclusions, good practices, and recommendations for follow-up actions. Such an approach can enhance self-reflection of the assessed institutions, as well as the impact of the results and improvement recommendations, and thereby clarify the direction of follow-up actions.

5) A comprehensive complaints and appeals procedure should be established. The appeals process is a channel that allows the assessed institutions to express their dissatisfaction with the processes of the external quality assurance. The ESG believes that the appeals process should be part of the design of the external quality assurance program and clearly communicated to the institutions. The appeals process allows the corresponding institutions to challenge whether the results are obtained based on reasonable evidence, standards, and procedures; while the agencies can handle the misunderstandings and dissatisfaction of the institutions in a professional way. The purpose is to facilitate communication and dialogue between institutions and agencies and ensure the reliability of external quality assurance results as well as a smooth implementation of improvement measures.

2.3 Independence-Based Quality Assurance Agencies

A major function of the Bologna Process is to promote the effective operation of quality assurance agencies and mutual recognition of quality assurance agencies in different countries. In order to achieve this goal, the ESG has developed independence admission standards and industrial specifications. The ESG believes that the professionalism, reliability, and mutual recognition of European quality assurance agencies can only be achieved on the basis of ensuring their independence. The independence standards of quality assurance agencies consist of three main aspects:
1) **Organizational independence:** The ESG requires quality assurance agencies to have official documentations (such as government documents, legislation, and organizational charters) officially approved by a competent authority to certify that they are engaged in independent, third-party tasks [17]. Specifically, the quality assurance agencies should be an independent legal person whose behavior is not interfered and influenced by any institution, government, or other stakeholder. The requirement of official certification is to ensure that the results of the assessment are accepted by the state, the public, and other stakeholders (particularly for regulatory purposes).

2) **Operational independence:** Since quality assurance agencies are required to conduct external quality assurance activities speculated in the second part of the ESG, which may include assessment, review, audit, and certification, they should remain independent throughout the entire operation. Therefore, quality assurance agencies should set clear and specific objectives and establish internal quality assurance procedures independently. The objectives and procedures should become part of their daily work to improve the reliability and integrity of quality assurance activities and the quality of services. To ensure operational independence, the ESG requires quality assurance agencies to provide policies related to their internal operations and quality assurance processes on their official website. The policies should at least include the following aspects: ensure that all personnel involved in the activities are competent and act professionally and ethically; guard against intolerance of any kind or discrimination; ensuring that any activities conducted and material produced by their subcontractors are in line with the ESG; outline the appropriate communication with the relevant authorities in corresponding jurisdictions; and establish internal and external feedback mechanisms that lead to a continuous improvement within the agency. In addition, quality assurance agencies should ensure that they have sufficient human and financial resources to support efficient organization and conduct of relevant activities to ensure their independence.

3) **Independence of outcomes:** The results of the external quality assurance activities are the responsibility of the agency. Although the assessment panel of external quality assurance include various stakeholders (including students), the results are reviewed and accounted for by the quality assurance agency. Quality assurance agencies are expected to publish thematic reports that describe and analyze the general findings of their external quality assurance activities. Since these findings play an important role in the structured analyses across the higher education system and reflection on quality assurance activities, the ESG also requires that a thorough and careful analysis of the corresponding information be conducted and that quality assurance agencies be responsible for the analysis results.

Since the independence of external quality assurance agencies is determined based on certain conditions, it is necessary to conduct an external review of the agencies on a regular basis to ensure their professionalism and reliability. The ESG stipulates that quality assurance agencies should conduct an external review at least every five years to demonstrate compliance with ESG requirements.

3. Conclusions and Implications

3.1 Respecting Diversity in Higher Education

As higher education shifts from the edge to the center of society, its function of social service has become increasingly strengthened and it also has increased openness. The differentiation and reorganization of formal higher education institutions and the emergence of informal higher education courses have made higher education more diversified and the demands for higher education more complex. In addition, the varied students’ needs, constant renewal of teaching models, and increasing differentiation of funding sources have further exacerbated its diversity. The political and economic systems, cultures and traditions, and the development of higher education system among the 48-member states of the EHEA are different [18]. Faced with such a complex and diversified context, it is difficult to stipulate uniform standards for quality assurance in higher education. However, in order to satisfy the needs of internationalization of higher education and
allow stakeholders to have a general understanding of quality assurance, and to increase mobility of students and teachers, integration of European higher education, and international mutual recognition, an effective framework for quality assurance in higher education is required. Therefore, the ESG is designed to serve as a general guideline rather than a narrow, standardized, and highly unified standard and detailed process for the implementation of quality assurance activities. The ESG clearly states that the application of processes should not inhibit diversity and innovation. With the new development of the diversification of European higher education, the standards are revised in a timely and appropriate manner to enhance their practicability and applicability and promote the development of a diverse quality culture [19].

Since the expansion of enrollment in 1999, higher education in China has experienced blossoming development and various studies on university classification have emerged. Although classification assessment has been implemented thereafter, with the differentiation and integration of higher education institutions, simple classification and assessment method are unable to fully adapt to further continuous development. However, respecting the diversity of higher education during the assessment processes does not mean that a set of quality assurance standards should be introduced for each type and form of higher education, but rather enhance the compatibility and comparability of quality assurance on the basis of respecting the special requirements of each institution. For that reason, questions based on balancing the relationship between diversity and consistency, conducting quality assurance activities without compromising diversity, enhancing the universality and compatibility of quality assurance standards, and promoting the comparability and mutual recognition of the quality of higher education require further consideration and reflection.

3.2 Coordinating the Internal and External Quality Assurance Activities

Although both internal and external quality assurance activities aim to ensure the quality of education programs, they are implemented from a different perspective. Hence, the contradiction between internal and external quality assurance has existed since the beginning of the assessment activities. Institutions emphasize the right to self-governance and regard external quality assurance activities as a violation of their autonomy and academic freedom; therefore, they request less external interference. External quality assurance agencies emphasize accountability and response to the demands of stakeholders; therefore, they require constant monitoring and regular inspections of the quality of education programs. In order to reduce conflicts between institutions and external agencies, the ESG states that external quality assurance standards are based on internal quality assurance standards and institutions are responsible for their quality. This statement clarifies the relationship between internal and external quality assurance. Specifically, internal quality assurance is the foundation of external quality assurance; external quality assurance agencies should fully respect the autonomy and subjective status of institutions; and internal quality assurance activities actively respond to external quality reviews. In addition, the ESG further stipulates that institutions should “undergo external quality assurance...on a cyclical basis” (ESG 2015, Part 1), while external quality assurance activities should “address the effectiveness of the internal quality assurance processes described in Part 1 of the ESG” (ESG 2015, Part 2) [20]. Thus, internal and external quality assurance activities are linked, so that they complement and supplement one another, and can develop coordinately.

In order to achieve the goal of the Double First-Class Initiative, China has actively implemented various quality assurance activities, emphasizing the importance of self-assessment and casting attention to the role of institutions in quality assurance processes. However, the majority of assessment activities in China are initiated by education authorities. In addition, the attention is mostly focused on the results of external evaluation rather than the progress of internal quality assurance. For that reason, the internal quality assurance activities are mostly conducted by institutions to cope with external assessment and internal quality assurance tends to become an attachment of external quality assurance. At the same time, there are many problems in the internal quality assurance of higher education in China, such as a lack of comprehensive internal quality assurance systems, internal quality assurance institutions, and quality improvement mechanisms. As
a result, there is a severe lack of standardization and self-discipline in internal quality assurance. External quality assurance activities tend to focus on more explicit and observable indicators; however, the less visible observation points still rely on the examination of institutions. Therefore, it is essential in quality assurance in Chinese higher education to define and clarify the relationship between internal and external quality assurance activities, place internal and external quality assurance under the same framework, enhance the connection between internal and external quality assurance, and promote the effectiveness and standardization of internal quality assurance activities.

3.3 Maintaining a Balance Between Accountability and Enhancement

There is a fundamental disagreement in terms of the relationship between accountability and enhancement. Some assessment agencies believe that external quality assurance is essentially a “consumer protection” issue that aims for accountability from institutions, while other assessment agencies believe that external quality assurance is the provision of advice and guidance that target enhancement. Accountability emphasizes “evidence” while enhancement emphasizes “development.” As Burton pointed out, enhancement and accountability are two sides of the same coin; although they are totally opposite, they are a unified whole. Hence, the ESG believes that “a successfully implemented quality assurance system will provide information to assure the higher education institution and the public of the quality of the higher education institution’s activities (accountability) as well as provide advice and recommendations on how it might improve what it is doing (enhancement).” Accountability and promotion can be said to be the twin roles of quality assurance. Institutions should aim to improve quality and develop a quality-based culture while responding to accountability. In order to balance the relationship between accountability and enhancement, one of the most effective methods that the ESG adopts is to focus on student learning outcomes. By constructing quality assurance standards that focus on student learning outcomes and collecting and analyzing data related to learning processes and results, institutions can improve their programs in terms of the teaching model and teacher training and improve education quality. In addition, by presenting relevant evidence of student learning outcomes, institutions are able to respond to inquiries from the government, market, students, and other stakeholders. Thus, the predicament of having to choose between enhancement and accountability is no longer an issue. Moreover, the ESG emphasizes that the fundamental goal of external quality assurance activities is the improvement of quality, so that the concept of improvement can be further penetrated into the activities of quality assurance, avoiding the hindrance of assessment due to the fear of being punished or held accountable.

With the advancement of the Double First-Class Initiative, the development of Chinese higher education is faced with a dilemma. Continuous improvement and development are needed; at the same time, constant response to the inquiries from society is required. As a result, the contradiction between accountability and enhancement becomes increasingly prominent. At present, the assessment activities are inclined to focus on “input” rather than “output.” The majority of the “Undergraduate Program Quality Reports” are mainly drafted to cope with government policies. Administrative and social requirement is conducive to pushing higher education to meet the needs of talent cultivation in the country and the market. However, students have their own mentality, characteristics, and development path. Accountability may ensure the basic quality of institutions; however, it cannot facilitate the construction of specialized, first-class universities. Therefore, it is suggested that institutions aiming for higher quality place more emphasis on enhancement, and institutions with a lower quality focus on accountability. Nevertheless, all institutions should tie enhancement and accountability to student-centered teaching and learning outcomes. In response to accountability, institutions should take quality enhancement as its fundamental purpose, so as to stimulate the internal drive and initiative of higher education development, and thereby enhance the vitality of higher education.

3.4 Enhancing the Independence of Quality Assurance Agencies

As a basic principle, the independence of quality assurance agencies can ensure the autonomy of institutions as well as the effective operation of quality assurance institutions. As independent
organizations with individual development plans, institutions need to determine their development goals and paths independently. Ensuring the independence of quality assurance agencies can prevent the self-governance of institutions from being negatively interfered with, while the professionalism and independence of the quality assurance agencies is the basis for maintaining reliable and effective evaluation results. The 49-member states of the EHEA have dissimilar types of quality assurance agencies, including autonomous, independent organizations and public institutions, independent government organizations, and independent organizations affiliated with the Ministry of Education. However, all types of agencies follow the principle of independence and respect the requirements of the ESG in terms of organizational independence, operational independence, and independence of formal outcomes.

Since the 1990s, reforms in higher education assessment among European countries and around the world are characterized by the enhanced independence of quality assurance institutions. In addition, the role of the government has shifted towards indirect management [21]. China also emphasizes the separation of management and assessment, requiring a gradual shift from government-led assessment to assessment done by independent and professional third-party agencies. Construction of professional evaluation agencies in provinces, autonomous regions, and municipalities is strengthened. However, at present, the majority of evaluation agencies are government and semi-government organizations; very few agencies are truly independent of universities and governments. Moreover, there is currently no unified certification standards or industrial norms for evaluating quality assurance agencies in China. As a result, the quality of existing independent agencies is varied; the authority and professionalism of third-party evaluation results are therefore questionable. For that reason, the external quality assurance activities in China are still dominated by the government, and the participation of other stakeholders remains insufficient. As an activity that has a high requirement on professionalism, quality assurance in higher education must be conducted by professional, independent, and standardized evaluation agencies. Therefore, China urgently requires the establishment of an admission system and industry norms of third-party quality assurance agencies so that they may develop and operate independently.

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