

Position paper

The role of education trade unions and social dialogue in quality assurance in education sectors

Adopted by ETUCE Committee on 28-29 April 2026

Background

1. ETUCE plays a key role in shaping EU and European policies on quality assurance (QA) in education, and in particular in different education sectors. There is an ongoing revision of the Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area. ETUCE is represented in the advisory group of the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQA) shaping the revision. It is a member of the General Assembly of the European Quality Assurance Register for Higher Education (EQAR) and nominates an independent expert to its Register Committee. ETUCE is also contributing to ETUC's work on the European Quality Assurance Reference Framework for Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET).
2. The following position is based on ETUCE's earlier QA policy defined by [ETUCE Policy Paper on Quality Assurance in Higher Education \(2014\)](#), [ETUCE Position on Council Conclusions on "Quality assurance supporting education and training" \(2014\)](#), [ETUCE Resolution on Enhancing the Status and Recognition of Teaching in Higher Education \(2016\)](#), [EFEE-ETUCE Joint Policy Recommendations on Promoting Quality of Academic Teaching & Management \(2022\)](#), and [ETUCE Position on a European Degree & Academic Career Framework \(2024\)](#). The attached *background document* summarises these position papers.
3. Quality assurance (QA) has become a central instrument in European education policy. From among many policy documents and policy groups focused on QA, some documents are particularly noteworthy:
 - [Council conclusions on quality assurance supporting education and training \(2014\)](#) underlines that "*quality assurance - within a framework of continuous quality*

enhancement - should support reforms of education and training systems in line with EU and national reform agendas.” It recommends the EU Member States to involve “staff, learners and employers – through quality assurance – in strategic decision-making, in qualification design, and in programme development, delivery and monitoring, with a view to ensuring continuous quality enhancement within education and training institutions.”

- [Council conclusions on European teachers and trainers for the future](#) (2020) links teacher well-being and manageable workload, and their co-ownership of policy decisions as preconditions for high-quality education (paragraphs 23 - 24).
- European Commission’s non-legislative document, the [Guiding principles on Quality assurance for school development \(2020\)](#) stresses that effective quality assurance should be “based on trust, collaboration and dialogue between all stakeholders” and highlights the role of teachers, school leaders, students and parents in self-evaluation and external evaluation processes.
- Council Recommendation on European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) (2009, updated 2020 via [Council Recommendations on VET](#) (2020) framework is built on the principle that QA must be participatory. The Recommendation explicitly states that VET systems should be developed in cooperation with social partners and all other relevant stakeholders. According to EQAVET, QA should involve teachers, trainers, learners, employers, and other actors in planning, implementation, evaluation, and review and Member States should promote active participation of all relevant stakeholders in quality assurance processes.
- [Council Recommendation on a European quality assurance and recognition system in higher education](#) (2025) underlines that QA systems should be developed “in cooperation with relevant stakeholders”, including higher education institutions, staff, students and employers to build trust and transparency.
- [European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (2015) (ESG), developed to support the Bologna Process, stands as a backbone of QA in European higher education and it explicitly requires stakeholder participation, including teachers/academic staff, students, and external partners, in both internal and external QA processes.
- Tirana Communiqué (2024) acknowledges “the crucial role of teaching staff in supporting high-quality, learner-centred and innovative learning and teaching”. To ensure this, the ministers responsible for higher education in the EHEA agreed that “institutions need to offer adequate and attractive working conditions, staff development opportunities, and assessment and career progression based on appropriate criteria and metrics”. Moreover, the ministers stated that “higher education can only fully develop its missions when its fundamental values are respected”. To keep the ESG “in line with ongoing developments, challenges and expectations” such as expectations relating to the fundamental values set

out in the Communiqué, the ministers invited the authors of the ESG to propose a revised version by 2026 to the BFUG.

Introduction

4. Over the last two decades, EU policy on QA has shifted from periodic “assessment” to creating a culture of continuous improvement within educational institutions. When QA is conceived and implemented well, it can facilitate trust in qualifications and institutions, strengthen pedagogy, and serve the public mission of education. When it is misapplied, it can reduce both professional autonomy and academic freedom and create structures that hamper the quality of education by creating administrative burden and shifting education to a market-style competition.
5. Education trade unions are not only partners on industry relations, but they have a key role in policy making. Education trade unions, representing the professionals who teach, research, and support learning, are indispensable actors in ensuring that QA systems fulfil their promise. ETUCE’s long-standing position is that QA must be independent, participatory, and focused on enhancing teaching and learning, and that social dialogue with education trade unions must be embedded at all stages: from design and implementation to evaluation and follow-up. This approach is set out in [ETUCE’s Policy Paper on Quality Assurance in Higher Education](#) (2014) and reiterated across our policy issue work on QA at European and national levels.
6. In recent years, the European QA landscape has continued to evolve, not least through proposals relating to a European Degree and a European Quality Assurance and Recognition System in Higher Education. EQAR’s vision is a coherent QA framework for the EHEA in which higher education institutions have the freedom to turn to any EQAR-registered agency for their external quality assurance reviews. ESG (2015) are defined as a set of standards and guidelines for internal and external quality assurance rather than standards for quality. ETUCE has assessed these developments carefully, welcoming the opportunity to improve coherence while warning of risks that could move QA into a competitive market for services and thereby undermine public responsibility and academic values. Our [position](#) stresses democratic governance and meaningful involvement of trade unions when QA standards are designed and adopted as well as in financial decisions and management linked to QA, precisely because quality assurance is inseparable from the provision of quality education, staff resources, employment security, and the working conditions under which teaching and research are undertaken.
7. Alongside these system-level debates, ETUCE has contributed to the current revision of the [Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area](#) (ESG). Our comments call for explicit recognition of trade unions of academics as social partners in designing and managing quality assurance systems, for stronger support and monitoring of the level of academic freedom as an integral part of QA under the ESG, collegial governance and social dialogue within QA policies, and for the protection of personal integrity and data in complaints

and appeals procedures. We have proposed concrete amendments to the ESG to strengthen the role of teachers in programme design and evaluation, to ensure supportive work environments, and to link QA more clearly with fundamental values and labour protections.

Social dialogue is key for trustworthy QA

8. Trustworthy QA must be built through social dialogue. Education trade unions, as recognised social partners, must be systematically involved in QA at institutional, national and European levels. ETUCE's work within the European Sectoral Social Dialogue in Education, including joint projects with the European Federation of Education Employers (EFEE), demonstrates the value of structured engagement in shaping QA schemes and accreditation systems. In [our joint recommendations](#) on promoting the quality of academic teaching and management, the social partners of education sector affirm that QA should be codesigned, proportionate, and oriented to sustainable workloads, with decision-making reflecting collegial governance and the fundamental values of higher education.
9. Similarly, [ETUCE Position on a European Degree and Academic Career Framework](#) which criticises EU policy intentions on developing a European QA framework to support joint programmes developed by European University Alliances, emphasises that QA must remain a public responsibility. Shifting QA to a market for services would commodify an integral part of higher education, dilute Member States' competence under Article 165(1) of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and ultimately weaken the protection of academic freedom and institutional autonomy under Article 13 of the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union. Safeguards must include democratic governance in design and implementation of QA procedures for joint programmes, and trade union participation in decisions relating to QA, because quality education is produced by teachers and quality assurance is intimately connected to teacher resources, staff workload, working conditions and academic freedom.

Staff well-being, working conditions, and collective agreements as quality criteria

10. Education trade unions believe, based on evidence and experience, that quality assurance of education institutions must include an evaluation of the wellbeing of staff. This evaluation should consider working conditions, salary structures and pay progression for teachers and academics, as well as the availability of secure employment and manageable workloads. It should assess the existence and respect of collective agreements, the effectiveness of collegial governance, and the quality of social dialogue with trade unions. In higher education, this means examining whether institutions provide supportive work environments with fair recruitment, transparent career development pathways, academic freedom in teaching and research, and opportunities for professional development within working hours and financed by the employer. This must explicitly include continuous, employer-funded training in digital tools, emerging technologies and

pedagogical innovation, enabling teachers and academics to adapt their teaching and research practices to evolving educational and scientific contexts. ETUCE's contributions to the ESG revision explicitly propose the reinsertion and strengthening of guidance on supportive work environments, secure contracts (tenure or functional equivalents), and high-quality professional development as necessary preconditions for quality teaching.

11. These elements are strengthening quality since quality teaching and students' learning outcomes decline where staff are overburdened, precariously employed, or excluded from governance. However, where staff enjoy decent pay, decent working conditions, and genuine participation in decision-making, institutions are more likely to develop robust quality cultures that are evident in pedagogy, curriculum, and student support. This understanding is embedded in ETUCE policy and in social partner engagements, including the EFEE–ETUCE joint recommendations which link quality teaching and learning to decent working conditions, stable employment, and effective collegial governance.
12. QA in general education should combine internal self-evaluation with dialogue among school actors. It should recognise teacher autonomy and avoid being a top-down reform instrument. QA must remain an independent instrument for internal and external evaluation of processes and procedures, not a vehicle for policy reforms detached from professional practice.
13. In schools, QA frameworks should examine whether institutions provide adequate time for lesson preparation, collaboration, and self-assessment, and whether staffing levels and resources enable teachers to exercise professional agency. These are the practical conditions that allow QA to enhance, rather than constrain, the quality of teaching and learning.

QA supporting professional integrity

14. Education trade unions understand QA as a means to support internal and external evaluation for improvement rather than a control or ranking tool. ETUCE has consistently cautioned against the reliance on student satisfaction surveys or [graduate tracking](#) as the only measurement for teaching quality, and the accumulation of time-consuming documentation related to quality assurance that diverts effort from pedagogy. We argue for peer review and professional judgement to be central in evaluating the quality of teaching and learning in higher education.
15. In this perspective, QA is inseparable from professional agency: teachers and researchers must have the time to prepare, to reflect, and to engage in self-assessment and teamwork. They must be able to exercise academic freedom in curriculum design and choice of pedagogical methods. QA must support teaching conditions that improve learning instead of undermining student-teacher and teachers-manager trust.

QA in higher education must embed fundamental values

16. Quality assurance in higher education must explicitly safeguard academic freedom, institutional autonomy, collegial governance and public responsibility for higher education as these are preconditions of high quality teaching and research.
17. External QA has a legitimate role in assuring the public that internal quality procedures exist and guarantee that higher education meet its goals in supporting freedom of knowledge and quality education and research. QA should avoid overreliance on narrow quantitative indicators as proxies of quality. It should instead emphasise a holistic perspective, peer enhancement, curriculum integrity, and evidence of pedagogical quality developed and owned by staff and students. QA must focus on supporting and improving the educational process rather than imposing unjustified administrative burdens on staff and aiming at supporting university rankings.
18. Teachers must play a significant role in the development, approval, delivery, monitoring, and review of study programmes, while students and external stakeholders should be involved systematically and meaningfully. ETUCE's proposals to the ESG revision underline that programme design relates to academic freedom and collegial decision-making, and that teaching personnel must be supported to access high quality professional development, with clear references to EU labour standards on transparent and predictable working conditions.
19. Institutional QA must also protect personal integrity and data. Complaints and appeals procedures should respect privacy and align with the General Data Protection Regulation, avoiding mandatory publication of identifiable outcomes while ensuring that processes are visible and accessible. These safeguards contribute to a culture of trust and fairness within QA.
20. Finally, QA in higher education should be vigilant against marketisation. Proposals that allow university alliances to choose any EQA Registered QA agency, may inadvertently create a market for QA services, consolidate provision among the largest agencies, and commodify higher education. Such a shift risks diluting Member States' competence and driving policy through internal market provisions rather than through educational values. Quality assurance must remain part of the public architecture of higher education, supported by sustainable investment and effective social dialogue, as meaningful improvements in pedagogy, research and institutional quality require long-term strategies and cannot be achieved through short-term or project-based funding.

Conclusion

21. Quality assurance can only be trusted when it is shaped through social dialogue and anchored in the professional values of education. Education trade unions bring essential expertise to QA: they safeguard professional autonomy, academic freedom, social dialogue and collegial governance; they defend quality work and access to quality professional development; and they insist that quality be understood as improvement in teaching and learning rather than as a contest of metrics or documentation.

22. ETUCE's policy work sets out a coherent framework: QA must be independent, participatory, and aligned with fundamental values; it must include a thorough evaluation of staff well-being, working conditions, salaries, and the existence and respect of collective agreements; and it must remain a public responsibility, supported by sustainable investment and democratic governance. In this way, QA strengthens the public mission of education, the integrity of institutions, and strengthen quality of teaching and learning.