



**QUALITY ASSURANCE AGENCY FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

**National action plan  
for quality assurance development in Albania**



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## **1. Introduction**

This national action plan is implemented within the project “Supporting Countries and their Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Meeting the ESG 2015”, organized by ENQA. This project aims to support quality assurance agencies and relevant bodies responsible for quality assurance, in creating a quality assurance system for higher education institutions, in accordance with ESG 2015.

For the drafting of this national action plan, Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education (QAAHE) and the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MESY) are engaged in a close cooperation. This national action plan has as a priority 4 main points, which are: The review of the Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) No. 109, dated 15 February 2017, amended with DCM No. 562, dated 31.07.2019; Review of Decision of Council of Ministers No. 531 “The Quality Code of Higher Education”; QAAHE Registration in EQAR and QAAHE Membership in ENQA.

The fulfilment of these 4 points is foreseen to be realized in the time frame July 2019-December 2023. With the realization of this action plan and the legal changes foreseen in it, QAAHE will have the opportunity: to include in the external evaluation and decision-making processes, the stakeholders; to establish a proper body of appeal for the decisions of the accreditation board; to review the current standards of the Quality Code and to include in it the standards for the evaluation of the study degree programs leading to Executive Master, Doctorate, Long-term specialization and institutional accreditation. Fulfilling the above-mentioned points will enable the alignment of QAAHE evaluation standards / criteria with ESGs and as a result, will create more favourable conditions for the agency to register in EQAR and then in ENQA.

The implementation of this action national plan has already started, with the establishment of working groups for each of the points mentioned above. The working groups consist of field specialists from MESY and ASCAL. Also, QAAHE, in fulfilling its mission and legal obligations, continues the work towards achieving its goal of full membership in ENQA. In that regard, on 22 and 23 October 2020, with the support of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), QAAHE underwent a mock external review process.

## 2. Albanian's higher education system

Albania is a parliamentary democracy with 2.8 million inhabitants bordered by Montenegro, Kosovo, North Macedonia, and Greece. Albania's capital, Tirana, is located in the centre of the country and is Albania's social, cultural and economic engine.

Structured higher education institutions (HEI) in Albania are relatively young as the first higher education institution, the Higher Pedagogical Institute of Tirana, was officially opened in 1946. However, since the humble post-WWII beginning, Albanian higher education has achieved significant milestones. Such achievements notwithstanding, there are still important limitations to overcome in order to widen and deepen Albanian participation in the European higher education area and achieve European standards of education.

Actually, Higher Education in Albania is regulated by law No. 80/2015 "On Higher Education Institutions and Research in the Republic of Albania". The law defines the mission of higher education, the different types of HEIs, their mode of governance, and principles of academic autonomy. According to law No. 80/2015 there are four types of higher education institutions that can operate in Albania: **University, University College, Academy** and **Higher Professional College**. In Albania, there are three types of HEIs, public, non-public (private) and independent public ones. Currently are 41 institutions of higher education operating in Albania; 15 of them are public and 26 are non-public. Public HEIs offer approximately 917 study programmes and Non-public HEIs offer approximately 450 programmes.

As it regards their governance, based on article 3 of law No 80/2015, higher education institutions operating in Albania enjoy academic autonomy. This autonomy includes the ability to self-governance and organisation of internal structures, the right to implement and offer study programmes and research projects and the right to set criteria for the admission of students. Higher education institutions may also sign agreements and collect funds from other legal sources. Importantly, the law on higher education in the Republic of Albania explicitly sanctions academic freedom in teaching and research.

The structure of higher education in Albania follows the three-cycle system according to the Bologna structure (Level 6 to 8 in NQF). They also offer short cycle study programs (called study programs with professional character) which belong to the 5<sup>th</sup> level of NQF). Law no. 80/2015 establishes the general rules for each cycle, including general academic requirements, the length of studies, ECTS-load, and type of degrees. Currently, there are approximately 131.000 students enrolled in HEIs, with around 82 % (107.000) in Public HEIs and 18 % (24.000) in non-public HEIs. Admission to higher education is based on the applicant's results on the State Matura exam. The selection process is based on the merit-preference principles.

By law, short cycle study programs include 60 – 120 ECTS, BA programmes include 180 - 240 ECTS, MA/MSc programmes include 120 ECTS, PM include 60 or 120 ECTS; Integrated MSc programmes include 300 /or 360 ECTS, Executive Master study programs offer a high level of scientific and professional education. They are offered with 60 or 120 ECTS credits and normal duration, respectively, of 1 or 2 academic years, and long-term

specializations programmes The long-term specialization study programs are programs of professional training that offer special professional knowledge. They have a duration of not less than 2 academic years and are offered with not less than 120 ECTS credits. Furthermore, the law explicates the elements, which need to be followed/ fulfilled for each programme such as classification in NQF, credit transfer, admission requirements, quality assurance, professional titles, etc. In addition to programmes, according to the Bologna structure, HEIs may also offer courses in continuing education. Related to this, HEIs may also offer professional diplomas, which include 120 ECTS (level 5 in NQF).

A university offers study programs of 5th – 8th AQF level.

A University College offers study programs of 5th – 7th AQF level.

An Academy offers study programs of 5th – 8th AQF level.

A Higher Professional College offers study programs of 5th AQF level only.

Joint study programs may be offered. They are realized by a higher education institution or its main unit, in cooperation with one or several foreign institutions of higher education, public or non-public ones. The process of implementation of joint programs may be carried out in one or in the participating institutions, in accordance with the cooperation agreement. At the end of the studies, a joint diploma or a double or multiple diplomas is issued by the participating institutions. In the conditions of realization of joint study programs with foreign institutions of higher education, different standards from the state ones can be applied.

HEIs from European Union, United States of America, Canada and Australia may offer study programs or higher professional trainings. These study programs should be accredited in the country of origin and be offered by accredited Albanian HEIs, after the approval by the minister responsible for education. The program is offered with the same standards, modalities and academic staff, as it is offered in the country of origin of the foreign institution. The Albanian HEI is responsible for the fulfilment of the standards and accomplishment of the academic process.

The HEIs are licensed, closed and separated/merged based on a Decree of the Council of Ministers (DCM), upon a proposal of the minister responsible for the education, according to respective standards approved by a DCM. The new HEI begins its activity only after the order of the minister responsible for the education is issued.

Foreign HEIs may open branches in Albania. Criteria and procedures for opening branches of foreign higher education institutions, accredited in the country of origin, are determined by a decision of the Council of Ministers. The foreign institution of higher education, accredited in another state, in the application for the opening permit is obliged to submit to the ministry responsible for education the official document certifying the accreditation.

A HEI terminates its academic activities, defined in its mission, only at the end of an academic year.

### **3. Quality assurance of higher education in Albania**

### 3.1 Legal framework

Law no. 80/2015 (Art 103-106) sets the legal framework for quality assurance and accreditation in higher education institutions. Overall, the law establishes instruments for internal quality assurance and external quality assurance. The two competent bodies for external quality assurance in Albania are the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAAHE) and the Accreditation Board (AB), which operates within QAAHE.

External quality evaluation is performed in accordance with the Quality Code in Higher Education in Albania approved by a Council of Ministers' Decision. The ministry responsible for education and QAAHE can cooperate with foreign quality assurance agencies, which are members of ENQA, in order to evaluate quality assurance in Albanian HEIs. The Decision of the Council of Ministers No. 109, dated 15 February 2017, amended with DCM No. 562, dated 31.07.2019, clarifies and enumerates the roles and competencies of QAAHE. Based on DCM 109/2017, point 4: The Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education has independence in: drafting and approval of its procedures, criteria and evaluation formats; the selection of experts and special committees of evaluation; compilation of the content and results of academic evaluations; the academic quality evaluation reports. In addition, QAAHE has financial independence as it can use 90% of the funds it generates itself, has been granted official administrative responsibility of the building where it carries out its activities, and its employees are hired following the Labour Code specifications independently of any other bodies. *Although, the revision of DCM No. 109 is part of the national action plan, in order to strengthen furthermore the independence of the QAAHE from the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth and to fully aligned with ESG 3.3.*

### 3.2 QA activities and their methodologies

The activities and methodologies of QAAHE are based and described in the Handbook 2017 “*Procedures and Deadlines for Quality Assessments within the accreditation process of Higher Education Institutions and Study Programs*”. The accreditation process of institutions and study programs normally follows 4 main stages.

First stage is the **internal evaluation preparation process**, where three days after payment submission for the accreditation process and submission of the confirmation letter from QAAHE, the HEI coordinator is officially notified regarding the start of the accreditation process and set the meeting date with him, to further discuss the steps of the process. One week after the meeting is held with the coordinator of the HEI, the institution determines and approves the composition of the Internal Evaluation Group (IEG), who will be tasked with the implementation of the self-assessment report. The IEG must have at least one member of the student council. The name list together with the contacts of the members, is officially sent to QAAHE. If the institution requires a training session for its internal group, the QAAHE notifies the institutional coordinator about the training date and time. This training session can both be conducted in the QAAHE or the institution's premises depending from their request. The QAAHE training consists in helping the internal evaluation group with the necessary knowledge on the institutional accreditation process (the available list of documents the HEI has and what should be drafted) as well as on drafting the IER. The QAAHE also makes available all the necessary documentation to the IEG, gives access to

their electronic management system etc. The whole assistance procedure and training last no longer than 15 days from the submission of the IEG list from the HEI.

The second stage is the **internal evaluation process**, within 30-40 days, the HEI and its IEG should prepare the accreditation file with all the documents required by the QAAHE. Some of the IEG's tasks are:

- Document or data compilation, extraction and processing during the internal evaluation period.
- Updating the institution and its constituent unit's information.
- Information preparation in the electronic version (CD) and managing the accreditation procedure through the QAAHE electronic management system.
- Drafting the Internal Evaluation Report (IER) according to the approved format by QAAHE/ AB,
- Drafting a summary of the IER in both the Albanian and English languages, according to the approved format.
- Final report and summary version approval and preparing the accreditation file.
- Formal submission to the QAAHE of the Accreditation FILE (AF) within the set deadline (printed and electronic version). Materials are also to be uploaded to the QAAHE Electronic Management System.

In case the HEI does not submit the accreditation file within the set deadline, the QAAHE formally notifies the institution within 3 days about the delay and of the consequences that derive from it. If the HEI does not forward to the QAAHE all the complete documentation, 3 days after the official notification by the agency or does not present arguments for the delay, the QAAHE immediately terminates the accreditation process. Upon expiration of this deadline, the accreditation process is considered unilaterally ended by the institution. The QAAHE considers this process terminated, therefore the HEI should apply from the beginning for the accreditation process according to the requirements of phase 1. The payment made by HEIs on behalf of the accreditation process is non-refundable.

Third stage is the **external evaluation process**, the External evaluation stage is the main phase of the accreditation process, which is carried out by QAAHE, EEG and HEI. At this stage of the accreditation process, the main activities performed are:

#### ***1. The External Evaluation Team establishment (EEG)***

While the HEI is drafting its IER, the QAAHE sets up the External Evaluation Group. EEG members are selected from a list of approved experts for the institutional accreditation process. These members are being selected for the evaluation process based on the institution, its profile and size. The number of experts varies according to the type of institution where the lowest number of experts is 2 (for Vocational College) and the highest number is 3 (for the University). In the institutional accreditation process at least one of the members must be a foreign expert. Foreign experts are selected based on a public announcement made by the QAAHE or by its international partners proposals, part of the ENQA network. Each EEG has in its composition a representative of the QAAHE, who plays the role of technical coordinator for the process (TC). The QAAHE is tasked with the selection of well-known experts, with high academic profile from approved list of experts. The assessment experts are constantly trained by the QAAHE and informed for updates and new changes in the



accreditation procedure. These experts have access to the agency's electronic system and to all the necessary documents and materials.

The head of QAAHE approves the EEG composition and officially informs the institution, 3 days after the accreditation file and IER are submitted. The HEIs within 3 days of notification must formally express if they approve or not of the EEG composition. The objection of one or all the EEG members must be based on facts and arguments, and it is sent to the QAAHE by the HEI. The agency after reviewing the submitted information, considers or not the arguments of the HEI and may or may not change the composition of the EEG. In any case and for any change, the HEI is informed. In no case may the approval of the EEG take more than 6 days from the date of notification of the HEIs for its composition.

## ***2. The Accreditation File verification process (AF)***

The HEI submits the complete accreditation file no later than the deadline set in the detailed agenda. The QAAHE within 5 days from the submission of materials, has the task to fully control the file if all the submitted documentation and IER is in accordance with the standards and accreditation procedures. In cases where the standards are not met in the accreditation file or in drafting process of the IER, the QAAHE immediately notifies the HEI. The institution within 5 days from the date it was notified, may or may not correct AF and IER, and send additional materials or change the final version of the IER. After this date the HEI cannot add any additional material or information to the AF.

## ***3. The EEG briefing and AF's evaluation process***

The QAAHE after receiving the final approval from the HEI regarding the final version of the AF and IER, notifies the EEG members about their first meeting. The Technical Coordinator, within 5 days from the submission date of the AF, informs the EEG about the accreditation process of the respective HEI, its progress up to this phase, make available all the information and materials submitted by the HEI (AF and IER), the questionnaires results, additional information and individual access to all this documentation through the QAAHE electronic system. The EEG is obliged to carry out the preliminary assessment based only in the documentation made available. However, the group might conduct one or more meetings with the HEI representatives during this period, to discuss on its findings and the AF. Also, the EEG based on the findings and uncertainties arising from the assessment prepares a working plan and a list of additional information needed and to be verified during the visit to the HEI. This working plan is proposed to the head of the QAAHE in order to later draft the visit agenda planned to the HEI.

## ***4. The HEI's visit day(s)***

Based on the EEG proposal, the TC drafts the visiting day(s) to the HEI agenda and sends it for approval to the head of the QAAHE. The agenda contains a complete information for each visit day, with a predetermined schedule and topics.

For the institutional accreditation process the visiting days cannot last more than 6 days. The small HEI with limited structure and a small staff and students' number, the visiting days vary from 1-3 days. While in other large HEIs with over 10000 students, the visiting days may vary from 4-6. The preliminary agenda is officially sent to the HEI. The institution, within 3 days must express itself formally regarding the visiting agenda, proposes eventual

changes (changes of schedules or meetings) but without changing its content and topics. Also, the HEI has the duty to offer all the necessary infrastructure in function of EEG such as: the work environment, additional materials, the responsible personnel during the visit as well as the people who will conduct the meeting with the EEG members according to agenda. In cases when the EEG member(s) do not know the English language well, the HEI makes available to the group an interpreter throughout the visit to the institution.

The visiting days in the HEI must be carried out on the dates set out before in the agenda. The EEG is obliged to respect and conduct all the predetermined visits of the agenda. The main task of the QAAHE representative is to monitor every step of the process and guarantee its normal development in compliance with accreditation procedures and standards. In cases where there are observed violation of the accreditation procedure either by the HEI or EEG, the TC immediately terminates the accreditation process, records the relevant meeting minutes and informs the head of the agency about his findings. The QAAHE and AB decide on the further progress of the accreditation process. Also, the EEG must comply with the QAAHE Regulation and the accreditation procedure, and in no case may exceed the competencies arising from these acts (e.g. the expression of their opinions for HEIs, comparison with other HEIs, arguments unfounded legally or in bylaws, etc.). In these cases, the TC has a key role in smoothing the running process and avoiding any further violations. After each visit day, the EEG compiles a daily report with a summary of its findings. Depending on these findings, issues and progress, the EEG may change the agenda for the next meeting day, but it should inform the TC and the HEI coordinator in advance. During their visit, the EEG can request additional information or documents from the HEI. For this reason, the EEG compiles a list with all the necessary documents and submits it to the HEI coordinator. The HEI makes available the required documents no longer than 3 days from the submission of the request, officially and through the QAAHE electronic management system.

##### ***5. The External evaluation report (EER)***

The EEG is responsible for drafting the Draft External Evaluation Report (DEER) and the External Evaluation Report (EER) and must submit it to the QAAHE within the predetermined deadline. The EER is drafted in the English language according to an approved format by the QAAHE. Experts should write and use a clear and understandable level of English, and the report must be based only in facts and findings. The report should present the actual and real situation of the HEI, providing detailed information for each aspect and indicator defined in the state and European accreditation standards. The EEG should carry out an assessment for each indicator or quality indicator, defined in each of the institutional evaluation area. Each EER should contain the final analysis regarding the institution indicating its strength and weaknesses point(s). Based on this analysis, the EEG should determine a final assessment or if the HEI meets the evaluation standards (the EEG can give 4 judgements, the standards are fully, substantially, partly and not met). In any EER, the experts must clearly express their final assessment on the evaluation areas of the HEI.

The EEG submits its first EER version, the draft EER, in the electronic form no later than the specified date. The TC is responsible for the review of this report and, stating if the DEER follows the standards and the accreditation procedures, and if all aspects/quality indicators are included in the experts' analysis. If there a lack of information or the report does not meet the standards, it is sent back to the EEG for further review and compliance with the necessary

data. The EEG may or may not update its report based on the finding of the QAAHE and submits it electronically. This procedure must be conducted within the deadline set out in the detailed agenda. After finalizing the DEER, the QAAHE officially sends it to the institution. This procedure must be carried out within the set deadline. The institution technically evaluates the EER in terms of content, within the timeframe set out in the detailed agenda. The HEI prepares a material with comments, remarks, and eventual suggestions regarding the EER and sends them to the QAAHE. The QAAHE and the EEG may reflect or not on the HEI suggestions and proposals within the specified deadline. In any case, any change in the EER is a competence only to the EEG. In this case the QAAHE only acts as an intermediary between the HEI and the EEG. After any eventual changes (if it has), the EEG completes and sends a final EER to the TC. The QAAHE and the TC, edit the final version (linguistic and aesthetic corrections) and send it again to the EEG for approval. After confirmation, the EER is printed in 2 copies, signed by the EEG members where one copy is archived in the QAAHE and the second copy is officially sent to institution. The electronic version of the EER is also uploaded into the QAAHE system. The EER together with other additional documents (comments or notes of the EEG) are attached to the AF. The TC and the QAAHE prepare the Complete Accreditation File with all the documentation used during the accreditation process. The complete AF must contain: written communication, the AF, the IER, additional documents, the EER, and other additional documents. The TC submits the organized AF along with an accompanying list of documentation it contains in the Accreditation Board secretariat. All this procedure should be ended no later than set deadline.

The fourth stage is the **decision makings by the Accreditation Board**. The evaluation file of any HEI is reviewed by the AB in their next meeting. Since the AB's meeting agenda is finalized 15 days before its development date, the AF is taken in consideration by the AB at the next meeting only if it is submitted at least 15 days before the meeting date. In other cases, the AF is reviewed in the further next meeting.

The AB is obliged to review all completed AFs within the above deadline. In any case, if the AB delays or postpones the review of one AF, it must provide relevant arguments for this postponement. The Board, after prior review of the AF, may postpone its decision due to time impossibility in the decision-making process. The AB, can call the TC, EEG members and HEI's representatives in cases where their presence and any detailed information is needed regarding the review and the procedure followed for the AF. In specific cases, the AB may set up verification groups consisting of AB members and various experts who assist in decision making.

However, the AF review and decision-making cannot be postponed by more than two successive meetings. The final decision is printed and signed by the AB members present at the review meeting. The AB and QAAHE within two weeks after the review and decision making, archive the AF and the AB's Decision and formally send the latter to the Ministry Responsible for Higher Education (MRHE). At the same time, this decision is officially sent to the institution, accompanied by the accreditation certificate. The AB decision and summary report of the EEG are made public on the QAAHE official website. In accordance with the AB decision the HEI's are obligated to present to the QAAHE, 6 months after the decision is issued, an action plan addressing the recommendations left by the AB in the decision.

The date the AB reaches its decision, is the date that the institutional accreditation process for an HEI ends.

For all above, the methodology and process carried out by QAAHE in this section is fully aligned with ESG 2.3.

*The remaining challenge in this point is the complaint and appeal procedure, in its decision making, the Accreditation Board follows the Code of Administrative Procedures. The decision of the Board is final and mandatory. Appeals against the decisions of the Board may be filed in court by the party having a legitimate interest, according to the deadlines provided in the legislation in force for the judicial objection of administrative acts. The changes foreseen in the legislation (DCM no.109/2017), will make possible also the creation of an appeal body as the first step of appeal before going to the Administrative Court.*

### **3.3 National criteria in external quality assurance**

The evaluation of study programs and institutional evaluation of HEIs is based on the Quality Code of Higher Education, which is the main document for quality assurance processes and procedures in higher education in Albania. The Code sets state quality standards mandatory for implementation by higher education institutions.

The Quality Code of Higher Education was approved by DCM no. 531, dated 11.09.2018. The Code establishes state standards for quality assurance, for study programs of professional character, study programs of the first cycle "Bachelor", study programs of the second cycle "Professional Master", "Master of Science" and "Master of Arts", and "Integrated Master of Science".

The standards for all types of programmes follow the same structure. The six chapters address the following issues:

- 1. THE PROVISION OF STUDY PROGRAMMES;**
- 2. ORGANIZATION, MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION OF STUDY PROGRAMS**
- 3. TEACHING, LEARNING, EVALUATION AND COMPETENCES;**
- 4. HUMAN, FINANCIAL, INFRASTRUCTURE, AND LOGISTICS RESOURCES FOR STUDY PROGRAM DELIVERY;**
- 5. STUDENTS AND THEIR SUPPORT;**
- 6. STUDY PROGRAM QUALITY ASSURANCE;**

*Table of compliance of QAAHE standards with ESG*

ESG STANDARD	QAAHE STANDARD
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<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Policy for Quality Assurance</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.1:</b> Institutions should have a policy for quality assurance that is made public and forms part of their strategic management. Internal stakeholders should develop and implement this policy through appropriate structures and processes, while involving external stakeholders.</p>	<p><b>Standard VI.1</b> The Higher Education Institution drafts and implements transparent policies and procedures on the study program quality assurance within the framework of internal quality assurance system.</p> <p><b>Standard VI.4</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution includes academic units, staff and students in the study program IQA process and informs interested parties on the results and the subsequent action plan.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Design And Approval Of Programs</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.2:</b> Institutions should have processes for the design and approval of their programs. The programs should be designed so that they meet the objectives set for them, including the intended learning outcomes. The qualification resulting from a programs should be clearly specified and communicated, and refer to the correct level of the national qualifications framework for higher education and, consequently, to the Framework for Qualifications of the European Higher Education Area.</p>	<p><b>Standard I.1</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution provides study programs in accordance with its mission and objectives, aiming at maintaining national interests and values.</p> <p><b>Standard II.4</b></p> <p>The structure and organization of the study program is in accordance with the training objectives, the qualification level based on the National and European Qualifications Framework, learning outcomes and competencies, and labor market requirements..</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Student-Centred Learning, Teaching And Assessment</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.3:</b> Institutions should ensure that the programmes are delivered in a way that encourages students to take an active role in creating the learning process, and that the assessment of students reflects this approach.</p>	<p><b>Standard II.6</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution encourages students and partners to participate in the study program continuous improvement and successful delivery in accordance with their objectives.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Student Admission, Progression, Recognition And Certification</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.4:</b> Institutions should consistently apply pre-defined and published regulations covering all phases of the student “life cycle”, e.g. student admission, progression, recognition and certification.</p>	<p><b>Standard V.1</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution drafts, follows and implements policies and procedures on students’ admission, selection, progress, transfer, knowledge assessment and graduation in the study program.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Teaching Staff</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.5:</b> Institutions should assure themselves of the competence of their teachers. They should apply fair and transparent processes for the recruitment and development of the staff.</p>	<p><b>Standard II.5</b></p> <p>The academic staff covering the study program meet the quantitative standards and have the appropriate and special academic qualification in accordance with the program area in order to guarantee the teaching standards of the study program.</p> <p><b>Standard IV.2</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution is mainly</p>

	<p>responsible for the quality of staff who cover the study program and support for performing tasks efficiently and effectively.</p> <p><b>Standard IV.1</b> The Higher Education Institution follows transparent legal procedures on recruiting, evaluating and selecting staff for the study program.</p>
<p><b>Learning Resources and Student Support</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.6:</b> Institutions should have appropriate funding for learning and teaching activities and ensure that adequate and readily accessible learning resources and student support are provided.</p>	<p><b>Standard IV.6</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution guarantees the necessary financial support for the implementation of the teaching / research process, study program progress and students' support.</p>
<p><b>Information Management</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.7:</b> Institutions should ensure that they collect, analyse and use relevant information for the effective management of their programmes and other activities.</p>	<p><b>Standard IV.5</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution has an internal institutional management system, which is made available to the management, information and monitoring of academic, financial and administrative activity for the study program.</p> <p><b>Standard V.4</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution collects, manages, updates and maintains detailed information about the number of students attending the second cycle study program from their admission to university, as well as employment/career data through an internal IT management system.</p>
<p><b>Public Information</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.8:</b> Institutions should publish information about their activities, including programmes, which is clear, accurate, objective, up-to date and readily accessible.</p>	<p><b>Standard VI.5, Criterion 1:</b></p> <p>The policy, strategy, organization and activities within the framework of study program Internal Quality Assurance system are transparent and are made public to all students and parties concerned.</p>
<p><b>On-Going Monitoring and Periodic Review of Programmes</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.9:</b> Institutions should monitor and periodically review their programmes to ensure that they achieve the objectives set for them and respond to the needs of students and society. These reviews should lead to continuous improvement of the programme. Any action planned or taken as a result should be communicated to all those concerned.</p>	<p><b>Standard VI.2</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution monitors and evaluates periodically through the special units the study program to ensure training objectives achievement and the intended learning outcomes.</p> <p><b>Standard VI.3</b></p> <p>The Higher Education Institution makes use of assessment procedures, methodologies, and</p>

	instruments for the study program opening, development, and progress; graduation, entering the labour market as well as students' further studies.
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Cyclical External Quality Assurance</b></p> <p><b>ESG 1.10:</b> Institutions should undergo external quality assurance in line with the ESG on a cyclical basis.</p>	<p><i>The accreditation of HEIs and study programs in Albania, by law are done in a cyclical basis. The decision of the Accreditation Board varies from 0-6 Years. The HEIs are obligated by law to apply for accreditation at least one year before the end of their accreditation period.</i></p>

As it regards the study degree programs leading to Executive Master, Doctorate, Long-term specialization and institutional accreditation, QAAHE implements the state quality standards approved in 2011 and 2013. *One important point of the national action plan is also the review of the DCM no. 531/2018 of the "Quality Code of Higher Education", aiming to review the existing quality criteria for professional programs, first and second cycle programs, and to include also new criteria for the study degree programs leading to Executive Master, Doctorate, Long-term specialization and institutional accreditation.*

### 3.4 Peer review experts

QAAHE is tasked with the selection of well-known and respected experts with high academic profile from the approved list of experts. Based on the law on higher education no. 80/2015 and DCM no. 109/2017, QAAHE enjoys independence in the selection of experts and special evaluation commissions. The Accreditation Board approves the list of eligible domestic and foreign experts at its first meeting at the beginning of each calendar year. The list of experts is updated throughout the year, depending on the requirements/needs that QAAHE has for the accreditation of programs in specific areas. Based on Art. 12/a, b of DCM no. 109/2017, for the evaluation procedure, the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education acts as follows:

- a. Establishes special evaluation commissions, composed of national and/or foreign experts, who must have:
  - scientific degree or academic title;
  - documented previous experience of work at institutional evaluation and/or in the field of study programs, in the framework of external quality assurance in Albania and/or abroad.

Additional criteria for selection of these experts in specific and certified cases, depending on the type of external evaluation, program and the study cycles, are determined in the internal Regulation of the Accreditation Board.

- b. The experts in the composition of these committees are selected according to the internal regulation of QAAHE from the annual lists approved by the Accreditation Board. The composition of the special commissions for evaluation, number of experts for each kind of evaluation and their remuneration are determined according to the provisions of the DCM No. 109/2017.

Each EET has in its composition a representative of QAAHE who plays the role of technical coordinator for the process and ensures that the process follow the legal requirements, apply the Quality Code, is conducted in a transparent manner, and involve the HEI and other interested parties.

The selected foreign experts are well-known personalities from the institutions from which they come. QAAHE has in its list experts coming from European countries, such as: Netherlands, Spain, France, Italy, Czech Republic, Poland, Germany, Great Britain, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, etc. Currently, the approved list of external review experts consists of about 800 local and foreign experts grouped in 9 academic fields. Once the experts are selected based on the defined criteria, QAAHE registers the experts according to general and specific fields in the AMS system. The external evaluation experts fill a form with their data.

At the time of the engagement for the external evaluation of a HEI or study program, the experts sign the Declaration of Conflict of Interest and the engagement contract. The experts have an obligation to inform QAAHE of any potential conflict of interest.

In addition, QAAHE informs the interested HEIs of the experts who will conduct the evaluation and they have an opportunity to raise any issue especially as it regards potential conflict of interest.

The external experts are continuously trained by QAAHE and informed for any updates and changes in the accreditation procedure. The experts have access to the agency's electronic system and to all the necessary documents and materials required for conducting the external evaluation. The experts are trained and/or retrained by QAAHE specialists when there has been a long period of non-engagement or when they are engaged for the first time. The training can be done face-to-face or online (for international experts).

Experts are trained on the main working principles, drafting of the SER, based on templates, legal acts / bylaws, supporting the accreditation process, access to the QAAHE AMS platform etc. In addition, each time QAAHE engages an expert for the first time it ensures that he/she is coupled with an experienced expert so that they can rely on their experience.

### **3.5 Stakeholder engagement**

QAAHE is currently operating with the 2010 organizational chart, the new organizational chart is already approved by the government and is ready for implementation. Nevertheless, the involvement of stakeholders is crucial and QAAHE strives to achieve it through:

- Relying on the institutional coordinators of each HEI as a bridge of communication and transparency with the HEI in order to ensure that HEIs are involved in the process and trust in its independence and objectivity;
- Involving students in the internal quality assurance process of each HEI and study program;
- Involving, and seeking documentation, from academic and non-academic stakeholders in the design, opening and operation of study programs under review;
- Including students in the different working groups it establishes especially as it regards the National Student Survey;



*The legal change of the DCM no. 109/2017, which, will facilitate the agency in a better engagement of stakeholders in the external evaluation procedures and decision-making, thus aligning it with ESG 3.1.*

#### **4. Priority actions**

This action plan which is being implemented in cooperation with the Ministry of Education, Sports and Youth (MESY) and with the help of the project "Supporting Countries and their Agencies for Quality Assurance in Higher Education in Meeting the ESG 2015", organised by ENQA, has in focus 4 priorities that will enable the improvement of quality assurance processes and standards in higher education institutions and the study programs they offer.

##### ***1. The review of the Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) No. 109, dated 15 February 2017, amended with DCM No. 562, dated 31.07.2019.***

DCM No. 109/2017 is the legal act on which QAAHE operates, as such its review requires compromise and close cooperation of MESY, which has already been reached. Through the revision of this act it is expected to create the opportunity and to detail the procedures for the inclusion of students in the Accreditation Board, and the involvement of stakeholders in the external evaluation processes. Also, the revision of this DCM would pave the way for the establishment of an appeal body and concrete complaint procedures on which it will for the appeals against the decisions of the Accreditation Board. This body will serve as the first level of appeal, preceding the other level, which so far is the Administrative Court. All these processes in themselves will lead to further strengthening of the independence of QAAHE and the alignment of its standards with ESG 2015. For the realization of all the above, QAAHE in cooperation with MESY have establishment the working group consisting of 8 experts in the respective fields. The deadline for the implementation of these changes is January - December 2021.

##### ***2. The review of the Decision of the Council of Ministers (DCM) No. 531, dated 11.9.2018. "The Quality Code of Higher Education".***

The Quality Code of Higher Education is the legal document in which are defined the quality assurance standards for professional programs, first cycle bachelor programs, second cycle Professional Masters, Master of Science and Integrated Master of Science programs. The standards set out in this Code are to a satisfactory extent similar to ESG 2015, however in order to achieve a better alignment with ESG 2015, it has been deemed reasonable to review these existing standards and also to include in it the standards for the accreditation of Executive Master study programs, Doctorate study programs, Long-Term Specialization Studies and institutional accreditation. The evaluation and accreditation of the above mentioned programs (except the Executive Master study programs) so far has been done based on the State Quality Assurance Standards approved by Order of the Minister of Education and Science No. 126 dated 17.03.2011, and Order of the Minister of Education and Science No. 136 dated 21.03.2013.

To achieve this objective QAAHE in cooperation with MESY, the Accreditation Board and higher education institution in Albania, have formed a working group of 10 members, who are well-known figures and experts in higher education in Albania. The deadline for the review of this document is foreseen to be July 2019- December 2021.

**3. EQAR Registration and 4. ENQA Membership.**

QAAHE, in fulfilling its mission and legal obligations, continues the work towards achieving its goal of EQAR registration and full membership in ENQA. In that regard, QAAHE prepared an Internal Evaluation Report and after that on 22 and 23 October 2020, with the support of the Regional Cooperation Council (RCC), QAAHE underwent a mock external review process. During the two-day-long online visit, the international external quality assurance experts met the director and staff of QAAHE, the deputy minister for education, sport and youth, the chairman and members of the Board of Accreditation, rectors and vice-rectors of public and non-public higher education institutions, QAAHE's external quality assurance experts, representatives of student councils, and representatives of internal quality assurance units in universities. The aim of this 'exercise' was to gain experience for the staff of QAAHE and identify potential intervention points. Based on the forthcoming report of the international external quality assurance experts which is yet not sent to QAAHE, the agency will devise a work plan for 2021 with the goal of fulfilling the criteria to become a full ENQA member. The total period of time foreseen for the realization of those objectives is October 2020 - December 2023.

## 5. Summary table

No.	Priority action	Was the priority action already identified in BFUG TPG C-QA? (YES/NO)	Activity steps	Actors	Timeline	Desired outcome
1	Review of Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM) no. 109, dated 15.02.2017 "On the organization and functioning of the Quality Assurance Agency in Higher Education and the Accreditation Board and on setting tariffs for Quality Assurance processes in Higher Education" for the full implementation of the ESG in accordance with European standards.	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Establishment of the DCM review group</li> <li>•Drafting the revised version of DCM</li> <li>•Discussion of the revised DCM version with the Accreditation Board</li> <li>•Discussion of the revised DCM version with stakeholders</li> <li>•The final DCM version is sent to MESY / MEF for review. Their approval / correction is there are comments.</li> <li>•MESY sends the final DCM to PM for approval.</li> </ul>	QAAHE; MESY; Working Group composed of experts of the field.	January – December 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inclusion of students and stakeholders in the external evaluation processes and decision making.</li> <li>• Strengthening of the QAAHE Independence.</li> <li>• Creation of an appeal structure.</li> </ul>
2	Review of Decision of Council of Ministers (DCM) no. 531, dated 11.09.2018 "On the approval of the Quality Code in Higher Education" in order to reflect the ESG standards and allow the full implementation of the ESG.	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Establishment of the mixed working group (MESY/ QAAHE / etc.) for drafting the new Quality Code</li> <li>•Drafting of the standards that are missing in the Quality Code and revising the existing ones</li> <li>•Discussion of the revised version with the Accreditation Board</li> <li>•Discussion of the revised version with stakeholders</li> <li>•The final version is sent to MESY for review and approval.</li> <li>•MESY sends the final version to PM for approval.</li> </ul>	QAAHE; MESY; Working Group composed of experts of the field.	July 2019- December 2021	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Revision of the existing quality standards (Quality Code)</li> <li>• Inclusion in the Quality Code of the standards for evaluation of study degree programs leading to Executive Master, Doctorate, Long-term specialization and institutional accreditation.</li> </ul>
3	QAAHE registration in EQAR.	YES	•Completion of Mock review project, in which	QAAHE	October	• EQAR registration

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			<p>recommendations will be taken to improve the activity of QAAHE;</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up improvement process, which includes the review of legal acts, change of structure (organization chart, inclusion of students in EET, etc.);</li> <li>• Official application for membership in EQAR.</li> <li>• Conduction of the QAAHE self-assessment process;</li> <li>• The realization of external evaluation process by EQAR;</li> <li>• Decision making by EQAR structures for membership in this organization;</li> </ul>		2020-December 2022	
4	Full membership of QAAHE in ENQA.	YES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Official application for membership in ENQA;</li> <li>• Conduction of the QAAHE self-assessment process;</li> <li>• The realization of external evaluation process by ENQA;</li> <li>• Decision making by ENQA structures for membership in this organization;</li> </ul>	QAAHE	April - December 2023	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Full ENQA membership</li> </ul>

## **6. Conclusions**

In conclusion, as mentioned above the action plan has 4 priorities which are foreseen to be realized in the time frame July 2019- December 2023. With the realization of this action plan and the legal changes foreseen in it, QAAHE will have the opportunity: to strengthen furthermore its independence to include in the external evaluation and decision-making processes, the students and stakeholders; to establish a proper body of appeal for the decisions of the accreditation board; to review the current standards of the Quality Code and to include in it the standards for the evaluation of the study degree programs leading to Executive Master, Doctorate, Long-term specialization and institutional accreditation. Fulfilling the above mentioned points will enable the alignment of QAAHE evaluation standards / criteria with ESGs and as a result, will create more favourable conditions for the agency to register in EQAR and then in ENQA.