A Handbook on Internal Quality Assurance System Establishment in Albanian Higher Education Institutions

within the frames of EDUCATION EXCELLENCE AND EQUITY PROJECT
Ministry of Education and Science of Albania

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Foreword

The University system in Albania is state controlled with 52 higher education institutions (HEI), 13 out of which are public and 39 are private HEIs. Driven by problems of access, equity, relevance and quality in higher education Government of Albania is seeking for a reform framework to fulfil the society demand for higher education quality while promoting integration into the European Higher Education Area (EHEA).

In attempting to address this, the Ministry of Education and Science of Albania with the support of the World Bank, EIB and CEDB pools funds for the reform program budget. EEE-P supports the implementation of the NES priorities during 2007-2013 through credits using a sector-wide approach (SWAP).

The EEE-P aims to support the implementation of the first phase of Albania’s National Education Strategy 2007-2013 and is geared towards modernizing the post-secondary education system in the country. The support focuses on improving the quality of learning outcomes in all levels of education, expansion of coverage in secondary education, and the first stage of the reform of tertiary education.

Starting from 2000, the number of HEIs offering academic programmes has increased to include the private sector quality assurance of higher education has thus become one of the crucial aspects to be tackled. An important tool that would contribute to sustenance as well as enhancement of quality, particularly which can help institutions/programmes in self-appraisal for continuous improvement is accreditation, which, in Albanian higher education, takes two forms: institutional and academic programme. Therefore, external quality assurance (EQA) framework, accreditation standards, guidelines and evaluation schemes for assessment and accreditation framework for higher education institutions and academic programmes have been developed by PAAHE.

An important prerequisite for the success of external quality assurance is internal quality assurance of HEIs, the sole responsibility of which lies with HEIs. This handbook is a result of an EEE-P project, Advice to Set-up QA Operations within (Public) HEIs, assigned to an international expert. Its aim is to help the members of the QA Units to develop their procedures of internal quality assurance in line with the European Standards and Guidelines for Higher Education Quality Assurance (ESGs), and thus be able to provide the backbone for the needed improvements in the quality of teaching and learning in their higher education institutions. The handbook includes, but is not limited to the steps for

- development of an internal quality assurance system (IQAS) based primarily on a ‘program’ approach that is rigorous, robust, effective, transparent as well as being timely.
- identification of the key post holders who are likely to be actively involved in the new QA system; along with the members of any new Unit this also targets deans,
heads of department and others with a supervisory responsibility for academic courses and programs.

It also addresses dissemination of *good international practices* of the role of the IQAS and the internal quality assurance units at higher education institutions Europe wide.

For the preparation of the current handbook, meetings with higher education institutions, Public Accreditation Agency for Higher Education (PAAHE), Ministry of Education and Science were held as well as permanent consultation with other international experts supporting development of the Albanian higher education were sought. A survey was carried out in order to assess to what extent there is common understanding on quality, quality assurance, the role and functions of internal and external quality assurance and the aims of the latter.

This handbook builds on the previous reform documents developed by the Albanian Government and takes into consideration international best practices for internal quality assurance of higher education institutions. The purpose of the handbook is to set a stage for internal quality assurance system establishment and describe some of the tools and procedures needed for the implementation of the self-assessment.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to acknowledge the role of the PAAHE, the productive partnership, goodwill and assistance of all PAAHE staff in bringing out this publication and thank all the participants national and international, who actively participated in the survey, interviews, workshops and virtual discussions and contributed immensely to the development of the handbook.

I also thank the PAAHE Director for steering this arduous task and promoting integration of quality into all aspects of higher education and do believe this handbook would contribute to the establishment of a robust, sustainable and transparent internal quality assurance system in Albanian higher education institutions.
**Acronyms**

**ECTS** European Credit Transfer System  
**EEE-P** Education Excellence and Equity Project  
**EFQM** European Foundation for Quality Management  
**EHEA** European Higher Education Area  
**EQA** External quality assurance  
**EQF** European Qualifications Framework  
**ESG** European Standards and Guidelines  
**HEI** Higher Education Institutions  
**IQA** Internal quality assurance  
**IQAS** Internal Quality Assurance System  
**IQAU** Internal quality assurance unit  
**ISO** International Organization for Standardization  
**KPI** Key performance indicators  
**NQF** National Qualifications Framework  
**PDCA** Plan Do Check Act  
**PDSA** Plan Do Study Act  
**QA** Quality Assurance  
**QFEHEA** Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area  
**SWOT** Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats
Section I: Establishment of internal quality assurance system

1. Background

The ‘massification’ of higher education since the latter part of the 20th century has been driven by increased internationalisation following the breakdown of political barriers, the advent of a free market economy, the rapid development of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) and significantly increased demand. This rapid expansion of higher education opportunities together with the exponential growth of demand and supply posed a threat to the quality of higher education in general. This in turn gave momentum to the development of the quality movement in higher education all over the world from the 1980s onwards. Thus, appropriate and reliable accreditation and evaluation processes are needed to assure the public that the courses, programmes and degrees offered by the higher education institutions meet acceptable academic and professional standards.

One of the main issues in education in Albania today is the tight bottleneck in postsecondary education which results in the lack of a robust pool of skilled graduates needed to develop the next generation of globally competitive human potential. As a response to this the Government of Albania initiated the EEE-P, which aims to enhance equity and access, to increase tertiary enrolment and to improve the quality and relevance of learning through robust, reliable, transparent quality assurance system. Within the frames of the EEE-P, provision of advice on establishment and operationalization of internal quality assurance system at HEIs through development of a respective handbook as well as a series of trainings and guidelines (see the Guidelines on Internal Quality Assurance for Albanian Higher Education Institutions) is envisioned.

The main topics of the handbook evolve around the following:

- How to identify the quality of the teaching and learning processes through regular reviews of program and course offerings across the whole university to assess their (continuing) academic quality and their relevance to students and to graduates;
- How to monitor and evaluate the teaching performance of academic staff, paying particular attention to their use of modern teaching methods (e.g. interactive, student-centred learning, the use of a wide range of source materials and a style of examination that requires ‘thinking’ not just factual knowledge);
- How the two processes above should operate, under whose responsibility, with what authority and powers, the coordination and cooperation with other units in the university;
- The key features required in the reporting arrangements and the ways to implement, and monitor the implementation of and the findings resulting from the QA processes.
The key components of up-to-date information about the results of the QA that should be made available to students and the community more generally and the arrangements to do this.

Thus, the topics in this handbook will evolve, among other things, around such major elements in the establishment of an internal quality assurance system as concept and definitions of quality and quality assurance in higher education, approaches to quality assurance, roles and functions of internal quality assurance units, learning outcome approach to quality assurance, self-assessment tools and methodology. It will also provide examples of good practice drawn from international experience.

2. The concept and definitions of quality

The origins of the word quality come from a Latin word qualis meaning “what kind of”. Quality means different things to different people. To illustrate its elusive nature a reference to the highly cited quote of Pirsig (1974) seems to be relevant.

Quality... you know what it is, yet, you don’t know what it is. But that’s self-contradictory. But some things are better that others, that is, they have more quality. But when you try to say what the quality is, apart from the things that have it, it all goes poof! There’s nothing to talk about it. But if you can’t say what Quality is, how do you know what it is, or how do you know that it even exists? If no one knows what it is, then for all practical purposes, it doesn’t exist at all. But for all practical purposes it really does exist... So round and round you go, spinning mental wheels and nowhere finding anyplace to get traction. What the hell is Quality? What is it? (p. 171).

Quality is an elusive concept and also a value-laden term: it is subjectively associated with what is good and worthwhile. That resulted in different concepts of quality in higher education, the following are the definitions of quality in higher education (Harvey and Green, 1993);

- **Quality as excellence**: The traditional concept of quality is associated with the notion of providing a product or service that is distinctive and special, and which confers status on the owner or user. Quality is a form of excellence with references to differentiated and exclusive character.

- **Quality as perfection (zero deficit)**: The notion of quality as conformance to a specification or standard. This approach has its origins in the notions of quality control in the manufacturing industry. It is a basis for measurement, a neutral term to describe a required characteristic of a product or service.

- **Quality as fitness for purpose**: The definition of quality adopted by most analysts and policy makers in higher education is that of fitness for purpose. Exponents of this approach argue that quality has no meaning except in relation to the purpose of the product of service. Quality is judged in terms of the extent to which a product or service meets its stated purpose(s).

- **Quality as value for money**: Quality as effectiveness in achieving institutional goals. This is a variation on the fitness for purpose-model, it has more attention on efficient use of inputs.
- **Quality as transformation:** The transformative view of quality is rooted in the notion of ‘qualitative change’, a fundamental change of form. Transformation is not restricted to apparent or physical transformation but also includes cognitive transcendence. In educational terms, transformation refers to the enhancement and empowerment of students or the development of new knowledge.

In the current debate there is a realisation that the concept of quality is a multi-dimensional and multi-level one, a concept with different characteristics and consequences, but with a certain coherence about the core of the concept. The three core aspects embrace the following: goals, the process deployed for achieving the goals, and to which extent goals are achieved. Quality is hence a relative concept, and different interest groups or stakeholders in higher education may have different priorities, possibly resulting in their focus of attention being different, which results in different definitions and focus points of the concept of quality. The best that can be achieved is to define as clearly as possible the criteria that each stakeholder uses when judging quality, and for these competing views to be taken into account when assessments of quality are undertaken. More tangibly, quality in higher education can be defined through the quality dimensions presented in the table below:

**Table 1:** Quality dimensions in higher education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
</tr>
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</table>
| **Tangibles** | Sufficient equipment/facilities  
Modern equipment/facilities  
Ease of access  
Visually appealing environment  
Support services (accommodation, sports...) |
| **Competence** | Sufficient (academic) staff  
Theoretical knowledge, qualifications  
Practical knowledge  
Up to date  
Teaching experience, communication |
| **Attitude** | Understanding students’ needs  
Willingness to help  
Availability for guidance and advice  
Giving personal attention  
Emotional, courtesy |
| **Content** | Relevance of curriculum to the future jobs of students  
Effectiveness  
Containing primary knowledge/skills  
Completeness/use of computers  
Communication skills and team working  
Flexibility of knowledge, being cross-disciplinary |
3. Quality assurance system

When the term 'quality assurance system' or framework is used, it usually refers to a formal management system that is used to strengthen an organisation. It sets out expectations, is intended to raise standards of work and to make sure everything is done consistently. A quality assurance system usually begins with the setting of expectations (from a variety of stakeholders) against which a comparison of actual performance can be made. This might be self-assessment or external assessment. This assessment is followed by action planning (for improvement), and a review of the difference the actions have made. A system or framework sets out how quality development is managed, explains how evidence is collected, and how the quality of the service is evaluated so that needs are analysed and targets are set for quality development.

Quality assurance systems look at both:

- **internal** processes - having systems in place that deliver performance and answer questions like ‘are we doing it the right way?’
- **and external** areas such as purpose, values and outcomes (results).

### 3.1 Approaches to quality management

Approaches to quality management mainly draw from the definition of the quality and quality assurance adopted by a higher education system. In general, there are three major approaches to quality management:

- **outcome-based** approach to quality management. This approach mainly targets the outcomes of the educational processes rather than process itself;
- **process-based** approach to quality management. This approach mainly targets the processes extant at higher education establishments;
- **outcome- and process-based** approach to quality management. This approach looks at the quality of the processes and the outcomes that result from the approaches to management of educational processes.

*Source: Owlia and Aspinwall (1996)*
Based on the approach to quality management adopted by an institution or a system the following two characteristic features of a given institution/system can be identified:

- **Quality assurance** mainly concerns the **processes** undertaken by an institution. Quality monitoring and its assurance ensure that the processes and systems are developed and adhered in such a way that the deliverables are of good quality.

- **Quality control** mainly deals with **outcomes**. Quality control is product-based approach. It checks whether the deliverables satisfy the quality requirements as well as the specifications of the customers or not. Depending upon the results, suitable corrective action is taken by quality control personnel.

However, heavily drawing on the outcomes may prevent detection of the problems that concern the processes. Further, checking only for input and output is a static process and does not help, therefore, there is a need to look at the process to understand the dynamics and manage development and improvement. Thus, the most suitable approach for assuring quality at higher education level is through looking at both the processes and the outcomes. Further, to ensure the processes are undertaken in due manner of most importance is also the input into the processes. Most systems/institutions nowadays adopt two approaches, **quality assurance** and **quality control**, to ensure both effectiveness and efficiency of the processes and achievement of the qualifications set out by the institutional mission. Thus, the most suitable approach to quality assurance in higher education underpins input-process-output approach.

### 3.2 Quality management model

Continuous improvement is an intervention to stop deterioration of a process with time and increase the quality. To continuously improve quality of a HEI in general and of each process in particular, an approach to incremental improvements of the on-going process is highly recommended. The process of continuous improvement is known as Deming's P-D-C-A cycle. The four original major steps of the cycle are:

- **P** (plan) – gathering of data to identify and define the issues/problems that need improvements and identify ways to achieve them.
- **D** (do) – implementing the plan by using a trial run, a test group, etc.
- **C** (check) – analyzing the results to see if there is good agreement between the original goals and what was actually achieved; make adjustments if necessary.
- **A** (act) – depending on the results from the check step, acting on the plan on a full scale or conducting further work by beginning with the P (plan).

In his later work, Deming replaced ‘check’ with ‘study’ because he wanted to emphasize the process of learning as more important that the limited action of checking. The major underlying principle here is self-assessment, which is a right fit for the academic institution. P-D-S-A cycle can be applied to all academic activities including teaching.
3.3 Process- and outcome-based approach to quality management

To initiate the process and outcome based approach to quality assurance and apply the quality management model to each process it is crucial to differentiate between two major responsibilities, process managers or the process owners and quality managers. Process managers are aware of all the details of the process and are responsible for the success of the process, e.g. student assessment, teaching and learning. The role of the quality managers, the quality assurance officers, is to measure the effectiveness and efficiency of the process. Further the role of the quality manager is to bring in the systemic overview of the system functioning.

Prior to describing the processes, there is a need to identify strategic goals of the university, then move on to the objectives of single units. Thus, the following steps depicted in Figure 1 are to be undertaken:

- Identification of the strategic objectives of the institution/academic programme – for example learning outcome approach
  - Setting objectives for teaching and learning
    - Setting objectives for study programmes, learning outcomes
  - Setting objectives for research
  - Setting objectives for services to society
- Setting objectives of central services
- Setting objectives of administration

![Diagram of Strategic Goals and Objectives](image-url)
Figure 1: Mapping objectives starting from institutional goals and ending with objectives for modules.

The approach described in Figure 1 depicts a top-down approach to setting goals and objectives and a bottom-up approach to quality assurance to ensure achievement of general goals at institutional level and specific outcomes at individual module level. Such an approach also ensures coherency in processes and activities undertaken by an educational establishment.

Next, it is advisable to unfold the developments in the following steps:

- **Step 1**: to start with the PDCA approach first of all it is crucial to describe the processes that are to be quality assured. Thus, a detailed description of the processes run at an educational establishment is necessary. Process is a procedure following the logic of input-activity-output and is handled by process management. All the three dimensions, input-activity-output, are equally important and should be checked to insure quality maintenance and enhancement at higher education level. Each process should be written down, the process of writing down is meant to provide the description of what we have (How is it in fact?) and prescription (How should it be?) (see Figure 2).

- **Step 2**: to start developing activities to achieve the preferable goal (what would you prefer for your approach? And why?).

- **Step 3**: once the answers are ready, the design for quality assurance mechanisms and tools starts. As soon as the process is modelled and the answers to the questions are ready, which is the duty of process management, the quality manager is to step in for the checking against achievement of the aims. The quality manager starts his/her activities with the design of appropriate quality assurance mechanisms and tools to check effectiveness and efficiency of each process. The whole idea is to have quality assurance checks at each point. For the purpose, it is useful to break up a process into segments and set the points that are to be checked. Then define the tools with which the segments are to be checked.

- **Step 4**: last, but not least, the only process to check for the effectiveness is to go back to the strategic goals set forth at the beginning of the exercise. In order to manage and control a process it is crucial to know how it looks like and or how it should look like. Thus, elaboration on sub-processes is also important.

Figure 2: Writing down processes: to start description of a process the modelling in the figure sets a frame, which requires starting from the description of the process landscape and ending with a detailed description of the target process and respective supporting materials.
Table 2: A frame for starting description of the processes and setting check points

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input</th>
<th>Activities</th>
<th>Output</th>
<th>Responsibilities</th>
<th>Documents &amp; Tools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is needed to start this part/step of the process?</td>
<td>What happens in this part/step of the process? Can be designed as flow chart or described by words!</td>
<td>What are the results of this part/step of the process? Are Inputs for next and other process parts/_steps?</td>
<td>Who is responsible for what? Who must take part?</td>
<td>How the activities or results are documented? What tools are at disposal and where to find? templates, forms, databases etc.</td>
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4. Internal quality assurance

4.1 The mission, functions and roles of IQAU

The main mission of the internal quality assurance system is to provide for continuous improvement of a HEI. The continuous improvement process becomes possible due to commitment from all involved parties and also recommends empowerment of the participants, which is possible through regular staff development activities. In Albania PAAHE proposes for each HEI to establish an Internal Quality Assurance Unit (IQAU) to continuously improve the quality of the educational provisions. The role of the IQAU, thus should be seen as two-fold: enhancement of quality and internationalization.

The major functions of the IQAU are that of a quality manager (see Section 3.3 of this guide for more details).

The major roles of IQAU include but are not limited to:

- **Production of an annual self-assessment report.** Internal quality assurance is one of the major elements of the education administration process that faculties and institutions in higher education have to perform systematically and continuously. As a result, higher education institutions are to prepare an annual report that assesses the educational quality internally and make the report public. Thus, the IQAU is to audit and assess the practice of faculties and units of an institution according to the system and mechanism established by the institution by analyzing and comparing the results based on indicators of all quality components according to predetermined criteria and standards.

- **Raising internal awareness on quality issues:** Another major function is to make faculties and educational units or equivalent aware of their status leading to the
determination of methods to develop quality development programs to reach the established targets and goals. In particular, IQAU is supposed to make faculties and educational units or equivalent realize their strengths and weaknesses, together with suggestions received to develop their operations to enhance strengths and develop weak areas continuously.

- **Establishment of credibility for external evaluation** - In higher education institutions the self-evaluation links internal with external quality assurance, especially because the annual report and the report of the self-evaluation lead to a basic document for the site-visit of the external assessment agency.

- **Training and development** on “quality” issues as well as other functional competencies of academic and non-academic staff.

With regards to the organizational set-up of IQAU it takes different forms in different universities. It can thus be expressed in either

- a central QA office with specialized staff,
- a quality manager who sets and manages a quality assurance network in all the units at a university
- or the quality assurance functions could be embedded in the different organizational units of an institution.

In most of the cases, there are QA offices that are located centrally and the QA office usually reports directly or indirectly (through a vice-rector) to the senior management team. A good practice registered at EU universities is independence of the QA office from the faculties, since independence is one of the success factors for a university’s quality assurance initiative and the office reports directly to the rector, thus preventing lobbying from the faculties.

The QA office usually serves several functions. The following sets out the primary functions of the office is to:

- **Support and provide expertise**: the QA officers should visit every faculty and every department regularly and are invited by them to provide expertise in developing their quality assurance processes. In particular, the expertise should evolve around application of quality assurance mechanisms to explicitly assess the use of modern teaching, learning and student assessment methods with the aim to promote a student-centred, interactive and questioning approach to teaching and learning.

- **Coordinate**: since faculties and other departments and units are involved in the quality assurance network and, therefore, processes, the QA officers should coordinate the evaluation processes organized by them, e.g. data collection, analyses.

- **Interpret national and European quality assurance requirements**: one of the tasks of the QA officers should be to interpret the national and European quality assurance requirements so as to adapt them to the institutional context. Thus, the QA officers should ensure that these national and European requirements are embedded in, and owned by, the university.

- **Monitor**: The QA officers should provide instructions, collect information, and flag problems. However, the solution of the problems is done solely by the faculties and units concerned with a given problem.
• **Administer:** the QA officers should organise and prepare external evaluation visits and process institutional questionnaires.
  
  o For these purposes the IQAU should develop a procedures manual describing the institution's structure and processes for quality assurance; specifying criteria for selection and formats for indicators, benchmarks, and objectives; preparing standard forms for matters such as student and graduate surveys; and advising on operational procedures for the planning and implementation of quality processes;
  
  o maintain systematic collections of reports on performance including data on indicators and benchmarks that will be required for analysis and reporting on trends in performance and changes in the environment within which the institution is operating.

• **Facilitator:** the IQAU should facilitate creation of a learner-centric environment conducive to quality education and faculty maturation to adopt the required knowledge and technology for participatory teaching and learning process;

• **Provider of information on quality:** dissemination of information on the various quality parameters of the institution for internal and external stakeholders.

Thus, the effective QA officers are considered to be those who combine successfully all these functions and manage to share the responsibility for quality assurance across the university. It is a multifaceted position that requires a complex set of social skills and personal attributes.

### 4.2 Governance of quality assurance

The governance of quality assurance is usually expressed through setting up committees at some or all levels of a university – central, faculty level, departmental level. To govern quality assurance it is necessary to establish processes for analysing the results, formulating recommendations and discussing them across the various committees (departments, faculties, university, including the governing boards).

It is clear that special importance should be attached to closing the feedback loop, thus feeding the results in annual development and strategic plans. The following three examples illustrate clear sequences in closing these loops.

#### First example

In one university, the dean met with the heads of departments monthly and one meeting a year was devoted to quality issues. It was at this level that the majority of issues arising from the internal evaluations were addressed. The deans’ council, chaired by the rector, discussed quality issues twice a year. In this institution, responsibilities were devolved to the lowest possible level and the reporting lines were very clear.

The decentralised management of quality assurance allowed local adaptations and local responsibilities.
Second example

In the second example, departments gathered and analysed a range of evaluation data and identified areas of concern. This analysis fed into the faculty’s yearly appraisal and went to the faculty QA subcommittee, which included the heads of departments, the persons at faculty level supporting learning innovation, students and the faculty QA officer. A report was then sent to the university QA committee, which included representatives from various levels of the university, from the senior management team to faculties and departments and one student. The university committee had two subcommittees that each included three students. The first looked at teaching/assessment and was chaired by the university QA officer; the second looked at the learning experience and was chaired by the vice rector. The two subcommittees considered a range of data (results of the student questionnaires, course performance data, external examiners, etc.) and developed an annual response that went to the plenary committee. It was then sent to the academic council (the widest body in the university) and to the university board.

Third example

The results of the quality assurance process in the third institution were given to the vice deans, the deans, the rector and the senate. Each faculty produced a development plan with goals and key indicators, measured annually. The senate was informed yearly of the results. The university community was convened every two years to discuss progress. The results of the student questionnaires were sent to the faculty quality committee, which prepared a summary report that was sent to the heads of departments and went to the faculty council. The summary report was anonymous and included general averages and an analysis of trends. The faculty council, which discussed QA as a regular item on its agenda, made recommendations and ensured the follow up. The recommendations were given to the heads of departments who were expected to report back on progress. The summary reports and the recommendations were posted on the faculty web page and were sent to the QA office and the rector’s office.

Student engagement: if the departments and faculties manage to create a home for the students successfully, this increases their engagement. Successful involvement of students is conditional upon there being an effective student union – one that is encouraged and supported by the university to gather and disseminate information to students. It is crucial to note that student involvement brings about positive impact only when students know what it is that is required of them. Therefore, the first step of student involvement in the quality assurance processes should include preparing the latter for a full contribution.

The QA officer as a cultural mediator: the more successful quality officers are those who have ready access to the senior leadership, the social skills to communicate effectively with and to engage and support academics. Playing the cultural mediator between the top and the grassroots seems to be an effective way to grow and, most importantly, to sustain a quality culture, by ensuring that there is shared understanding of its purposes.

Furthermore, when the QA officers have other functions or are involved in a broader set of issues than simply quality assurance processes, their work benefits. It allows them to keep their fingers on the academic pulse and to be perceived as more than the (potentially
controlling) QA officer but as someone who knows the institution well and is an active contributor to its development and that of the staff.

Feedback loops and bureaucracy vs. streamlined structures and clear responsibilities: too much reporting and too many committees may give the impression that the feedback loops have been closed. Although the multiplication of committees serves to distribute responsibility and is, in principle, a good way to ensure that a quality culture develops and is not simply bolted on, these committees are not a “silver bullet” to the extent that they do not necessarily lead to the development of a quality culture. Some caution should be attached to overdoing things and keeping a balance in establishing committees. What really matters is that the results gained from the annual self-assessment do promote quality enhancement of an institution.

4.3 Concept mapping methodology to identify QA mechanisms and tools

Concept mapping is a type of structured conceptualization, which can be used by quality assurance groups to develop a conceptual framework, which can be used for academic program and institutional planning and development, as well as for evaluation purposes.

Mapping is a theory of meaningful learning. Concept mapping is an effective tool in quality assurance since it provides for a method for building capacity amongst key stakeholders as the entire process is premised on group understanding. The final step in the mapping process entails having a group discussion on how the final concept map might be used to enhance either planning or evaluation. In this way, the procedure can work well in assisting stakeholder groups (i.e. QA officers, administrators and teachers) come to a clearer understanding of key concepts and their practical utility of quality assurance practices.

Since the approach underpinned in this guide is a process- and outcome-based one, to start a mapping process, first of all the IQA committee should engage in describing all the processes that are subject to quality assurance. While describing the processes, the mapping exercise can be helpful in revealing the gaps along the following dimensions for each process: policies and procedures, sub-processes, KPIs and feedback mechanisms. The mapping loop is closed with drawing links between the outcomes obtained as a result of self-assessment into the redevelopment of the existing and development of new plans, policies and procedures. The following mapping can be used as a template for detailing the sub-processes, policies and procedures and respective sources of evidence:
If we use the template above to depict one of the processes, for example, teacher assessment, the following results would be obtained.

Thus, the mapping exercise helps to reveal the instruments that are to be developed to ensure quality management in due manner. The same exercise can be applied to each process at an institution to reveal the mechanisms necessary for effective and efficient functioning.

Having identified the tools and mechanisms necessary for assuring quality of a given process it is logical to proceed with identification of indicators for assuring quality. For example the indicators for quality of teaching and learning could take the following form drawing on the input-process-output approach proposed:

**Table 3: Sample indicators for quality assurance of teaching and learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Input indicators</th>
<th>Process indicators</th>
<th>Output indicators</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student satisfaction</td>
<td>Student satisfaction (to be refined)</td>
<td>Student satisfaction (to be refined)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher satisfaction</td>
<td>Teacher satisfaction (to be refined)</td>
<td>Teacher satisfaction (to be refined)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(to be refined)</td>
<td></td>
<td>Employers' satisfaction (to be refined)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Having identified the tools and mechanisms for quality assurance and having obtained the necessary data for self-assessment it is logical to look at the approaches to self-assessment, which actually requires an analytical (as opposed to descriptive) approach.

5. Learning outcome based approach to quality assurance

To make the academic programmes comparable and compatible, to facilitate transparency and academic recognition at European level as well as trust between the higher education systems such tools as qualifications frameworks and European Credit Transfer system (ECTS) have been established. Thus if we look at the frameworks intended to facilitate recognition of qualifications and mobility of students and academic staff several levels of frameworks can be identified:

- **Meta-frameworks** are designed for aligning national qualifications frameworks but are frequently used for aligning specific qualifications. They express statements about generalised knowledge, skill and competence. The EQF and Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QFEHEA) are examples.

- **National qualifications frameworks (NQF)** are designed to set overall standards for qualifications, facilitate recognition of qualifications, and facilitate access to, and transfer and progression between programmes. There may be a single multipurpose national qualifications framework in a country or there may be multiple national qualifications frameworks where each might, for example, be optimised for qualifications in a particular domain (e.g., vocational, higher education, etc.). European policy is that national qualifications frameworks be aligned to a meta-framework and hence to each other. Albania has adopted its National Framework for Qualifications in 2010.

- **Discipline specific qualifications frameworks** may be national or international they are...
optimised for use within a discipline-area. Discipline-specific qualifications (or awards) standards may be established in association with a qualifications framework – these set out common features of specified qualification types in the relevant discipline. One example may be the subject benchmarks set by the UK Quality Assurance Agency.

The higher education qualifications required for certain professions are regulated at either national level (by or through statute) or at international level (European Directives). It should be noted that not all legally binding standards are expressed as intended learning outcomes.

Looking at the quality of teaching and learning processes, it is crucial to start with the intended learning outcomes. To develop and imbed a learning outcome approach to quality assurance, first it is crucial to come to a common understanding of the terms used.

**Learning outcomes** means statements of what a learner knows, understands and is able to do on completion of a learning process.

Learning outcomes consist of:

- **Knowledge** - assimilation of information through learning
- **Skills** - ability to apply knowledge and use it to complete tasks and solve problems
- **Competence** - the ability to use knowledge, skills and personal, social and/or methodological abilities, in work or study situations and in professional and/or personal development.

Learning outcomes, in their turn are further defined into intended learning outcomes (ILO) and achieved learning outcomes (ALO).

- **ILO** - are written statements of what the student is expected to know, understand and be able to do after completion of a learning unit.
- **ALO** - are what individual students have actually achieved in relation to the intended learning outcomes of this learning unit.

Thus, the quality of a higher education institution or programme is defined by subtracting the achieved learning outcomes from intended learning outcomes, which actually reveals the learning gain of students. However, this approach to quality assurance is pretty new at European level and it is still researched at a project level – *Assessment of Higher Education Learning Outcomes* (AHELO). Assessment of learning outcomes and learning gain has a relatively rich history in the USA, through its Educational Testing Services (ETS).

Further, learning outcomes take different levels starting from their broad definitions at international level and national level expressed in the qualifications framework and ending with institutional, programme, course and task level learning outcomes. The hierarchy of qualifications and learning outcomes is depicted in Figure 5, which, through the mapping qualifications and detailing to task level learning outcomes reveals the levels of learning outcomes that are to be defined to ensure learning outcome approach to quality assurance. Mapping of qualifications and detailing them to the level of task level learning outcomes helps to come up with specific teaching, learning and assessment methods linked to each learning outcome (see Tables, 4 and 5). Mapping involves establishing a (level equivalence) link between the intended learning outcomes (ILOs) and the achieved learning outcomes (ALOs) of a standard (whatever the type).
Mapping is typically done in the context of developing, validating, accrediting, reviewing, approving a programme or recognising a qualification. These processes can be found in both internal and external quality assurance procedures. Mapping is also applied in both institutional and system level research.

The learning activity could be, for example, a lecture, a module or an entire programme. For compliance with the Bologna Process, including the alignment of academic programmes with national qualifications frameworks, learning outcomes must be written for each module and for each programme. Learning outcomes must be simply and clearly described and must be capable of being validly assessed. From this definition of learning outcomes, the observer can see an emphasis on the learner and on the learner’s ability to ‘do something’. This is a central shift in focus away from the teacher and his/her objectives and towards the student and his/her achievements and the skills/competences acquired following engagement in a piece of learning. The use of active verbs and terms such as define, list, name, recall, analyse, calculate, design, etc. to describe the learning outcomes, facilitate the explanation of the achievement targets to be met by the student. It is important to note that learning outcomes are not designed to replace the traditional way of describing teaching and learning but to supplement it.

Thus, to make quality assurance more aligned with the Bologna process and promote integration of Albania into the EHEA, it is advisable to move to a learning outcomes approach to quality assurance. This kind of approach is more relevant to assuring quality at academic programme level. This entails understanding quality as achievement of intended learning outcomes. Basically, the underlying question to be answered in this case, whether the programmes ensure that students achieve the intended learning outcomes they have applied for. To answer the questions the criteria for academic programme should be built around achievement of the intended learning outcomes. That is, approaches to teaching
should be measured to the extent they are aligned with and are supporting learning outcome achievement. Thus, each learning outcome should be assigned a teaching approach along with the approaches to learning. Below is an example for some learning outcomes in a Master programme in History and respective links between teaching, learning and student assessment methods and learning outcomes:

**Table 4:** Linking learning outcomes with teaching and learning approaches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcome</th>
<th>Teaching approach</th>
<th>Learning approach</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define the differences in historiographical outlooks in various periods and contexts</td>
<td>Lecture, group work and discussions, presenting examples of historical texts</td>
<td>Attending classes, reading assigned bibliography, participation in discussion groups, using e-learning materials, writing papers and making presentations by comparing and contextualizing historiographical texts relative to different periods and orientations.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write in one's own language using correctly the various types of historiographical writing</td>
<td>Teaching writing techniques, bringing examples of texts, commenting on the performance of students</td>
<td>Writing assignments to practise producing different kinds of texts such as essays, reviews and summaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give narrative form to research results according to the canons of the discipline</td>
<td>Guiding through techniques of narrative writing, workshops, specific activities for guidance in writing and referencing, individual tutoring</td>
<td>Writing assignments to practise producing different kinds of texts such as narrative reports, reflections, reviews and summaries</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate in orally in foreign languages using the terminology and techniques accepted in the historiographical profession</td>
<td>Language courses and laboratories, history courses in foreign languages, discussion of the history literature in foreign languages</td>
<td>Grammatical and lexical study and practice, practice in speaking, oral presentations and discussions in the language, working with native speakers, video conferencing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define research topics suitable to contribute to historiographical knowledge and debate</td>
<td>Research seminars and individual supervision</td>
<td>Participation in seminars and scientific conferences, preparation and choice of topic, designing research project, compilation of a biography, survey of sources.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify and utilize appropriately sources or information for research projects</td>
<td>Research seminars and individual supervision, workgroups, guidance on specific source typologies and methodologies</td>
<td>Critical examination of specific sources by individuals or in small groups, comments and criticism of courses, putting down a literature review</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As explicitly stated above, the innovative teaching and learning methods, required for integration into the EHEA, by no means, allow preservation of the out-dated methods of lecturing and memorization. Rather, they require introduction of elements in teaching and
learning leading to formation of such skills in students as problem-solving, team skills, learning how to learn, continuous improvement, interdisciplinary knowledge, interacting and processing information, technology integral learning. In this process the role of the teacher should be that of a facilitator and/or a guide, rather than instructor or lecturer.

Thus, the new approaches to teaching and learning require the so-called student-centred learning, the essence of which encompasses ways of thinking about learning and teaching that emphasize student responsibility for such activities as planning learning, interacting with teachers and other students, researching, and assessing learning. Student-centred learning implies student responsibility for learning and activities aimed at their becoming independent and active participants of learning in contrast to the stronger emphasis on teacher-control and the coverage of academic content found in much conventional, didactic teaching. Such an approach promotes development of such characteristics of lifelong learners as motivation, self-evaluation, time management and the skills to access information. Student active learning underpins the importance of concentrating on what learners do, and why they think they are doing it, rather than what the teacher does. For example, problem-based learning is an outstanding example of student-centred learning in higher education.

The same learning-outcome approach applies to the student assessment. The following sample template could be used to design and, later on, to measure the effectiveness of approaches to student assessment.

**Table 5: Linking learning outcomes with assessment methods**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning outcomes</th>
<th>Assessment methods</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Define the differences in historiographical outlooks in various periods and contexts</td>
<td>Written and/or oral examinations, assessment of presentation and the extent of participation in discussion groups or exercise groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write in one's own language using correctly the various types of historiographical writing</td>
<td>Correction of text and written and oral feedback, including comparison of their own product with expected learning outcomes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Give narrative form to research results according to the canons of the discipline</td>
<td>Papers prepared for the courses and corrected feedback given, final year dissertation or thesis is discussed and corrected before final presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communicate in orally in foreign languages using the terminology and techniques accepted in the historiographical profession</td>
<td>Oral exams, assessment of presentations and participation in discussions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Define research topics suitable to contribute to historiographical knowledge and debate</td>
<td>Evaluation of the research design and project by tutor/advisor and by fellow students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identify and utilize appropriately sources or information for research projects</td>
<td>Evaluation of performance, written and oral feedback on the papers</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Thus, as Figure 6 shows, the point of departure in designing and evaluating any academic programme and module should be the intended learning outcomes and all the inputs (teaching and learning methods, assessment methods, teaching staff and learning resources) should be linked to the intended learning outcomes and ensure achievement of those learning outcomes. The quality of educational provisions then is measured by looking at the extent to which the intended learning outcomes have been achieved.

Although being the cornerstone in the paradigm shift from teacher-driven to student-centred teaching and learning, the use of ILOs are not enough to ensure that these are turned into ALOs. In the proposed model, a special focus is therefore laid also on what is often labelled *aligned teaching/constructive alignment* (Biggs, 2003) or *the learning chain* (Gehmlich, 2010).

Aligned teaching is a way of tying together the different parts of the teaching and learning situation for the student in a logical and understandable order. The first step is to formulate ILOs and the next to find ways for making these visible, which is the design of relevant, fit-for-purpose assessment tasks. After that, decisions on grading system and assessment criteria need to be taken. Finally, the teaching and learning activities that will enable students to achieve this are designed.

When teaching is planned in this order, focus is shifted from teacher activities to student activities and from the content of the learning unit to the results intended. This is a necessary shift to make teaching and learning more student-centred and outcome-based. In relation to quality assurance, the same type of logic needs to be applied. Thus, the key components for good quality in relation to aligned teaching needs to be identified.

In order for ILOs to be assessed, they must describe “visible use of knowledge”, or competencies, meaning the unique combination of knowledge and skills. The learner “knows and understands” but is also “able to do” something with this knowledge. This constitutes the heart of the learning outcome paradigm, and therefore, *assessability* (i.e., the
use of action verbs) must be seen as the main sign of quality in ILOs. These must also have the right content in relation to course objectives and be on the right academic level for the programme, not too high or low.

6. Design, approval, monitoring and review of academic programmes

While mapping qualifications outlined in the National Framework for Qualifications into learning outcomes at task level within a programme provides for alignment and coherence from top to down and from bottom to up, designing an academic programme provides for another dimension through which to assure quality of educational provisions.

With this regards institutions are to ensure that their responsibilities for academic standards and quality are discharged effectively through their procedures. Thus, each institution should have a clear policy and procedure in place through which to conduct

- the design of programmes
- the approval of programmes
- the monitoring and review of programmes.

Such an approach also has PDCA as an underlying philosophy of academic programme management.

When developing policies and procedures for programme design, approval and review, first, it is important to consider whether due account is taken of:

- external reference points (e.g. NQF), academic standards, national frameworks for higher education qualifications and, where appropriate, the requirements of professional, statutory and regulatory bodies, employers and any relevant national legislation/national commitments to European and international processes;
- labor 'market' factors as the main rationale for proposing a new course/programme;
- the compatibility of programme proposals and developments with institutional goals and mission;
- strategic academic and resource planning;
- existing provision within the institution, including any awards that may be offered jointly with other Albanian or foreign institutions.
- the level of risk involved in each approval/review process and the optimal level of resource necessary to ensure that the required outcomes of the process are achieved.

Second, it is crucial to ensure that the overriding responsibility of the academic authority (e.g. senate or academic board) to set, maintain and assure academic standards is respected and that any delegation of power by the academic authority to approve or review programmes is properly defined and exercised. Thus, it is important that the respective roles, responsibilities and authority of different bodies involved in programme design, approval, monitoring and review are clearly defined in order that staff and students involved in such processes are clear about the hierarchy of procedures and about which body will take final responsibility. The evaluation of any delegated power is important in allowing the institution to ensure that it is continuing to operate its processes in an effective manner.
A third step in designing and approval of academic programme is to make use of participation of external experts in the field at key stages for the approval and review of programmes, as independence and objectivity are essential to provide confidence that the standards and quality of the programmes are appropriate. Participation of external experts is important for ensuring that programmes are designed, developed, approved and reviewed in the light of independent advice and for ensuring both transparency of process and confirmation of standards. Such external participation provides assurance at various levels: to the team delivering the programme and to the institution itself in monitoring the independence and objectivity of decisions taken under its procedures; to its students; and to any reviewers who may carry out reviews/audits that are external to the institution's own processes.

It is important that institutions ensure they make use of external contributions of an appropriate kind when developing, approving and reviewing programmes. External examiners may provide useful contributions at various stages of approval and review processes but, for the purpose of demonstrating impartiality, they are unlikely to be appropriate members of formal approval and review panels. It is also important that this external participation is proportionate to the level, importance and complexity of the process being followed.

Useful contributions could be made in different ways by, for example:

- external advisers who provide relevant information and guidance on current developments in the discipline(s);
- academic peers from other disciplines within the institution;
- any programme partners, for example, institutions with which there are collaborative arrangements;
- students, either studying on the programme or with an appropriate representative role;
- alumni of the programme, their employers, appropriate professional associations and employers' unions to promote relevance of the programme/course to the labor market needs;
- external sources and advisers who provide relevant information and guidance on current developments including, for example, in the workplace.

The use of appropriate externality in processes for programme design, approval and review may also allow an institution to avail itself of opportunities for enhancement, as well as for assurance.

Fourth, it is important that processes for approval and review of programmes are understood by all those who are involved or who have an interest in them. The following may help institutions as they consider the clarity and accessibility of their processes:

- the publication of clear principles and procedures for the approval and review of programmes, that are available to all staff and students in the institution and to external participants in the processes, including the institution's own processes for deciding whether to group programmes together for review purposes or to scrutinise them in a more detailed, individual way
- the clear statement of the different stages of approval and review and the clear definition of the roles and responsibilities of participants
- the clear definition of the responsibility for initiating the process of primary consideration, monitoring and review of programmes
- how staff development strategies and activities may include the dissemination of good practice in relation to programme design, approval, monitoring and review.
Fifth, good programme design creates programmes that facilitate the delivery of the intended learning outcomes and required standards, and is fundamental when institutions approve new programmes or review the effectiveness of existing provision. Where practices for the initial design and approval of programmes are rigorous and effective, subsequent evaluation is likely to be relatively straightforward. Duplication of effort and documentation can be reduced if the requirements of external bodies, such as professional unions and PAAHE, are taken into account when programmes are designed, approved and reviewed.

Next, proper design and development of a programme is crucial for ensuring that it is relevant and sustainable. It is also important for its successful delivery. If the design processes are well thought through and operate effectively, they can assist in the successful operation of later approval, monitoring and review procedures. There are many principles and reference points that may be considered when designing and developing a new programme. These include:

- the institution's goals and mission;
- labour market needs and student needs;
- the intended aims of the programme;
- the level of the programme - its intellectual challenge and value- and its place in a national and/or European qualifications framework;
- external reference points, including any relevant subject benchmark statements, any European reference points, national qualifications frameworks for higher education;
- the role of students in the design and development of programmes;
- the concept of progression, so that the curriculum imposes an increasing level of demand on the learner during the course of the programme;
- opportunities which might be available to students on completion of a programme academic and practical elements, personal development and academic outcomes, breadth and depth in the curriculum;
- the coherence of the programme, to ensure that the overall experience of a student has a logic and an intellectual integrity that are related to clearly defined purposes;
- the award title, to ensure it reflects the intended learning outcomes of the programme;
- how the intended learning outcomes of the programme will be promoted, demonstrated and assessed;
- that the necessary resources are available to support the programme.

Institutions should ensure that programme approval decisions are informed by full consideration of academic standards and of the appropriateness of the learning opportunities, which will be offered to students. The final decision to approve a programme should be taken by the academic authority, or a body acting on its behalf that is independent of the academic department, or other unit that offers the programme, and has access to any necessary specialist advice. Next, there should be a confirmation process, which demonstrates that a programme has fulfilled any conditions set out during the approval process and that due consideration has been given to any recommendations.

With regard to the responsibility of an individual institution for the assurance of the quality and standards of its awards, and in the interests of transparency, it is important that there is a clear designation of the body responsible for approving a programme and for ensuring that all conditions have been met before the programme begins.
It is important for institutions to be clear about the type of process that is appropriate to different kinds of approval; for example, for a new programme, a new module/unit, or a change in the balance of assessment within a module/unit. It may be helpful for this decision to be based on proportionality and risk analysis, with institutions making informed decisions about the kind of process and level of externality that will be appropriate.

During the period of design, approval and commencement of a new programme, the following may be considered (some institutions have a two-stage approval process and will want to consider which of the following are appropriate to which stage):

- the design principles underpinning the programme;
- the definition and appropriateness of standards in accordance with the level and title of the award;
- the necessary resources to support the programme;
- anticipated demand for the programme at labor market level;
- monitoring and review arrangements for the programme;
- the length of time for which approval is granted;
- the contents of the programme specification;
- the nature of the learning opportunities offered by the programme;
- the development of the programme between its approval and start;
- the relationship between the programme's curriculum and current research in the same area.

To ensure there is a continuous development cycle, institutions should consider the appropriate balance between routine monitoring and periodic review of programmes. Routine monitoring is an activity likely to be undertaken within the providing unit. Periodic review is normally an institutional process, involving external participants of high calibre and with academic/professional credibility. In developing and evaluating such processes, institutions will want to be assured that they are monitoring the cumulative impact of small/incremental changes. Further, institutions should routinely monitor (in an agreed cycle) the effectiveness of their programmes:

- to ensure that programmes remain current, valid and relevant to the labor market needs in light of developing knowledge in the discipline, and practice in its application;
- to evaluate the extent to which the intended learning outcomes are being attained by students;
- to evaluate the continuing effectiveness of the curriculum and of assessment in relation to the intended learning outcomes;
- to ensure that recommendations for appropriate actions are followed up to remedy any identified shortcomings.

Routine monitoring of programmes is important; it allows providers to consider the effectiveness of the programme in achieving its stated aims, and the success of students in attaining the intended learning outcomes. It is a process to which an element of proportionality and risk analysis may be applied, with institutions making informed decisions about the kind of process that will be appropriate. Routine monitoring activity,
which will often be the responsibility of people who appraise their own performance at the end of each academic year, may consider, for example:

- external examiners’ reports;
- any reports from accrediting or other external bodies;
- staff and student feedback;
- feedback from former students and their employers on the applicability of the qualifications in the labor market;
- student progress and other relevant data;
- material available to students such as programme specifications, student handbooks and websites.

Effective and prompt follow-up of any recommendations made will protect the interests of current students and should also allow any staff and resource development needs to be addressed.

Reviewing academic programme is another quality assurance mechanism. The timing and nature of reviews will depend on a number of factors, including the rate of development of knowledge and practice in the discipline, the extent to which wider questions of overall aims are dealt with in routine monitoring, and overall institutional policy on such reviews. It is important to remember the concept of continuous evaluation; evaluation processes are not carried out in isolation from one another or from other institutional priorities.

Periodic review assesses the continuing validity and relevance of the programme in the light of, for example, the following:

- the effect of changes, including those which are cumulative and those made over time, to the design and operation of the programme;
- the continuing availability of staff and physical resources;
- current research and practice in the application of knowledge in the relevant discipline(s), technological advances, and developments in teaching and learning;
- changes to external points of reference;
- changes in student demand, employer expectations, employment opportunities and labor market trends;
- data relating to student progression and achievement;
- student feedback.

In the event of a decision to discontinue a programme, institutions are to take measures to notify and protect the interests of students registered for, or accepted for admission to, the programme. Thus, institutions are responsible for managing their portfolio of provision, including any awards that are offered jointly with other institutions, and other collaborative partners. This may involve the withdrawal of existing programmes as well as the design and development of new ones. It is important that the process for the orderly withdrawal of programmes is as well embedded, articulated and understood as those for design, approval and review. In the event of significant changes to the character of the programme, an institution needs to have a process in place to manage this change effectively. It also needs to be clear about what, in its own institutional context, constitutes a significant alteration to the character of the programme, and how any collaborating partners are kept informed.
Last, but not least, institutions should have a means of assessing the effectiveness of their programme design, approval, monitoring and review practices. Evaluation of processes can provide a focus for enhancement and should allow institutions to consider:

- the benefits gained by the institution, staff, students and other stakeholders from the approval, monitoring and review activities undertaken;
- how the outcomes of processes promote enhancement of students’ learning experiences;
- the identification and dissemination of effective practice, both internally and externally;
- opportunities to make approval and review practices more effective and efficient;
- whether the institution, through its processes, is managing risk appropriately and proportionately for its portfolio of programmes.

7. Self-assessment methodology

7.1 Why does a university need to be self-assessed?

Assessment is a systematic process of gathering, reviewing and using important quantitative and qualitative data and information from multiple and diverse sources about educational programs, for the purpose of improving student learning, and evaluating whether academic and learning standards are being met.

Self-assessment is an assessment conducted by the institution or an academic programme to assess whether the educational services provided by the university as well as the academic programmes meet their educational objectives and outcomes with the purpose to improve programme’s quality and relevance and enhancing students’ learning.

With a quality assurance system (and quality models in general) the institutions define their agreements, development direction, goals and improvement zones, and also describe their main processes. This process of the internal quality consists of a procedure where regular monitoring and improvement activities take place. Besides regular (every year or in part even every semester) monitoring and (small-scale) improvement, the major basis of those activities is the (self-) evaluations that may take place every six years. The goals of self-evaluation are as follows:

- To improve the intentions (purposes and goals), content, policies, procedures, services, organisational and intellectual environment and performance of the program or institution under study.
- To foster commitment by enacting the recommended improvements through participation in the study process.
- To enhance the capacity of the program or institution in question for continued self-assessment.
- To yield the basis for informed decision-making (planning) about the future of the unit under study.
- To yield written materials that can be used as the basis of external peer review and review by others within the larger institution or system.

During the process of the self-evaluation the circumstances of the institutions, such as the
previous experience of assessment, the nature and stage of development of the goals, the status of information, any pressing needs, the extent of politisation, the interest of the leader, must be taken into account. The design of the procedure and the framework depends on the circumstances of the organisation. This does not mean that some elements of the self-evaluation framework do not have to be fulfilled. It means that at least those elements must be, to a greater or lesser extent, controlled. In general, at least seven elements are identified that must be studied during the self-evaluation, namely; input (people, resources, and facilities), intentions (goals), external environment, education and research, services, management processes and the results. The outcome of the self-evaluation is a written report. For that reason and in order to judge the different elements on their level of quality the elements are converted into criteria. Through those criteria the professional higher education institutions know which goals must be reached. In terms of criteria for the accreditation, these are not completely the same criteria as the self-evaluation; the external assessment agency has an objective instrument to measure the performance.

Overall, it can be said that self-evaluation is a major part of the continuous improvement of the whole organisation. The self-evaluation (or internal audit) is the basis of the assessment, both internally and externally. To initiate a self-assessment the following major steps are to be envisioned:

- Purpose identification – Why do we need to engage in self-assessment?
- Outcomes identification – What results do we need to achieve with the self-assessment?
- Measurements and evaluation design – What methodology, tools and mechanisms for measurement should we use?
- Data collection – What type of data do we need to obtain?
- Analysis and evaluation - What are the methods we are going to apply to analyse the data?
- Decision-making regarding actions to be taken – How are we going to use the results of the analysis in the decision-making regarding new strategies and developments?

Considering the input-process-outcome approach underpinned above, the following could serve as a model for self-assessment.
Thus, to obtain the necessary data that would serve as a solid evidence basis for the self-assessment, as shown in Figure 7, it is necessary to look at the inputs, the way the processes are delivered given all the inputs, as well as to look at the educational outcomes achieved given the input and process delivery data.

**7.2 How to put together a valid self-assessment**

Prior to embarking on self-assessment of an institution or an academic programme the following questions should be answered to ensure the analysis is productive and the findings are reliable enough to feed into development of new strategies, policies and procedures for an institution or an academic programme.

The questions to be answered are as follows:

1. What indicators do we have already?
2. Which indicators do I need to control my process?
3. Which indicators are out of my influence?
4. Which indicators do I need for doing the work?
5. Which indicators do we need for improvement and enhancement?
6. What is the cost-benefit ratio of collecting indicator data?

Further, to ensure coherency in approaches between internal and external quality assurance it is crucial to look at the standards and criteria for quality assurance promulgated by the external quality assurance agency, create alignment with the internal quality assurance standards and criteria set by the institution/academic programme, which in combination should form quality expectations for both internal and external quality assurance systems. The self-assessment report has to prove that the HEI/academic programme under scrutiny meets the internal and external quality assurance criteria and standards set by the external quality assurance agency.

**7.3 Tools and mechanisms for self-assessment**

The processes and tools related to quality assurance include formal and informal student feedback, alumni consultation, key performance indicators, and internally organised reviews. Thus, institutions should put in place a range of instruments to monitor quality.

To identify the quality assurance mechanisms and tools that best fit the institutional and academic programme needs it is logical, first of all, to identify the sources of data, which would serve as background data for self-assessment. Thus, the major measurement mechanisms based on which a university conducts self-assessment are:

- Data collected from the feedback mechanisms, evaluation groups, which provide for qualitative information;
  - e.g. questionnaires, which are a powerful element if devised the right way;
discussion-oriented team work – “quality circles”, peer-reviewers (external and internal);

- focus groups, individual interviews and the like;

- Statistical data available at the university units and/or statistical office, that is key performance indicators (KPIs) (data like student success rate, drop-out rate, in-coming out-going students, number of teaching staff, budget allocations and the like);

- Performance outcomes (samples) and other evidences (thesis papers, exam questions and respective answers, samples of publications, observations of classes and the like).

However, along with the sources of data, identification of the quality assurance tools and mechanisms that best serves the university/academic programme needs is necessary. This can be done through a mapping exercise in section 3.3.

Before discussing these instruments in detail some general remarks are in order. There seem to be several factors affecting the choice of quality assurance instruments at an institution and system approach. In some cases, there are national requirements that are set by the ministry, the QA agency or professional accreditation bodies. In a minority of cases, universities start with ready-made packages such as ISO or EQFM. These are sometimes then further adapted or have evolved over time while maintaining some elements of the initial approach. In general, to have an in-depth picture of the situation and effectively contribute to the enhancement of an institution/academic programme, it is advisable to apply mixed-methods approach by putting together quantitative and qualitative data. In this case, the two methods would complement each other while minimizing the disadvantages that each of the approaches has.

7.4 Information obtained from the feedback mechanisms

7.4.1 Student questionnaires

Student questionnaires are the most common way for institutions to introduce quality assurance processes. However, caution should be taken not to overemphasize this tool by turning it into the only quality assurance tool for the internal quality assurance system. Further, questionnaires that are not meaningful to the students or are ambiguous or using a single questionnaire across the university, with no possibility of adapting a section locally in order to capture some specific teaching practices or the questionnaires that have not been tested through piloting to reveal their applicability may bring the future of internal quality assurance to a halt. Also, questionnaires that are not revised on a regular basis and/or are too long should be avoided not to distort the value that a well-developed questionnaire might add.

To be effective, the results obtained from the questionnaires should be discussed with the target groups, e. g. students, teachers and should be made publicly available. Thus, survey questionnaires must be thought through carefully, particularly if they are used to make decisions about teachers. To the extent that student questionnaires are used and can affect academic careers, their quality is paramount and much attention needs to be paid to this instrument. To avoid unethical attitude to teachers, the questionnaires that aim to reveal the teacher performance have to mainly address the methods that teachers employ to achieve the learning outcomes set out in a given course rather than the teacher himself/herself.
Further, student questionnaires suffer from a number of failings that require some attention. Four principles seem to be particularly important. The questionnaires must:

- ask questions that are relevant for identifying effective teaching, without pushing particular pedagogical agendas or creating biases. A form that asks whether the instructor used blended learning, for example, implies that all good teachers must do it, but this is not necessarily appropriate for all courses;
- have a limited number of questions and allow some local variations;
- ask questions of students about their engagement in the learning process in order to convey to them that good teaching and learning is the result of an active partnership between the teacher and the learner;
- provide feedback to the students on what has been changed on the basis of the questionnaire results.

**First example**

One institution developed an electronic system that requires teachers to give feedback to the students. The questionnaire has three university-level questions. A faculty or a department may add some questions, which are the same for all feedback collected by that faculty or department. Teachers can then add their own questions. The university has limited the questionnaire to 12 questions. The results are collected and analysed by the teacher who must respond to the students with feedback, and explain what s/he will do to change or why s/he does not think that a student’s recommendation is worth pursuing.

**Second example**

Another institution launched its questionnaire by asking all the faculties to bring the questionnaires that each was using to the table. Each faculty was happy with its questionnaire but felt that the other questionnaires were really poor. The vice rector in charge thought that all the questionnaires were poor; he asked an expert in questionnaires (who was working in the university) to develop a set of questions, which was piloted by volunteer teachers. Students were part of this pilot group and were actually the instigators of this new initiative since they felt that the existing faculty questionnaires did not lead to any results.

Today, the university has two questionnaires: one that is formative and voluntary, that teachers are encouraged to give three weeks into the autumn term; and one that is summative and is required by law at the end of each course. Teachers can choose which questions to ask from a set of 25 questions; they are encouraged not to ask more than five to ten questions and to vary their questions in order to keep students interested. They are also encouraged to use the formative questionnaire and to make immediate changes, if needed, in order to encourage students to respond to the summative questionnaire. The questionnaires, the results and follow-up are posted online. The open comments, which sometimes deal with personal issues regarding a teacher, are not public. The focus of the mandatory questionnaire is on the course, the learning outcomes, the strategy for reaching the learning outcomes, the support the students got from class activities, from readings and other assignments, and from their teachers. Most importantly, the students are asked how much time they have spent on a specific course as opposed to other courses. This allows the administration to judge if the course workload is adequate in relation to the credit units assigned.
7.4.2 Alumni questionnaires and consultation

Alumni surveys and consultations is another powerful tool to obtain a feedback on the university/academic programme performance. Although it is one of the sources that is relatively difficult to keep in touch with, it is one of the few sources to find out about the applicability and practicality of the knowledge, skills and competencies gained as a result of the academic programme coverage. To keep in touch with the alumni annual surveys and interviews or focus groups, it is advisable, at least twice a year, to get a deeper insight on the needs of the market as well as applicability of the learning outcomes.

First example
One faculty dean reported that the alumni were gathered as frequently as needed, about four times a year. A faculty in another institution instituted a very successful annual gathering of alumni. About 1000 alumni come, sometimes with their families. The success of this event prompted other faculties in this institution to follow suit. These gatherings were reported to be a very effective way of getting informal feedback on trends in industry and business and improving the curriculum.

Second example
One institution administered an alumni questionnaire with 20 questions that are set nationally and 30 set by the institution. According to one interviewee, the return rate was poor because it was a new initiative in a country not used to polling its people and where there was a general sense that one's opinion does not count. The high number of questions may also be an issue. Alumni relationship is probably under development in many other institutions; therefore, the link with quality assurance is not always made. It is still early days and it is difficult to draw any conclusions at this point.

7.4.3 Collecting oral and informal feedback

One of the most effective ways of grasping how well students are doing is through collecting oral and informal feedback, e.g. interviews, focus groups, and meetings. Informal and oral feedback seems to be an effective feedback mechanism provided several conditions are met:

- This kind of activity is best left to the departments or faculties in order to ensure that groups are kept relatively small.
- The department or faculty has encouraged trusting, open relationships of staff with students and created a sense of home for the students.
- There is an understanding that different students will feel comfortable giving feedback in different ways. Therefore, best practice seems to be a combination of approaches (written and oral; formal and informal).
- The involvement of student representatives is essential: they can model appropriate behaviour and voice students' concerns in an anonymous way.
First example
For instance, one faculty, which was forced to shut down for a few years, reopened about 20 years ago convinced that it would not survive if its teaching was not constantly improved. As a result, right after every examination period, the students meet with the teachers to discuss the semester. This is done before the teachers mark the exams, which implies a high degree of trust. After the students receive their marks, three or four teachers get together with the students to discuss the examination questions and to explain the marks. One of the students indicated that about 90% of students attend these meetings each teacher gets the relevant results of the student questionnaires and summarises main strengths and the weaknesses that he/she plans to address. This is posted online. Every new semester, the teachers give the results of the questionnaires to the previous cohort and inform the new cohort of the changes they brought to the course in response to the students' evaluations.

Second example
In another example, the dean of a large faculty (6 500 students) explained the following feedback mechanisms. All students give feedback by using an online questionnaire that was developed centrally and focuses on specific study programmes. This feedback is complemented by a number of discussions with students in the faculty. The dean and vice deans collect students' comments throughout the year by meeting quarterly with the head of student representatives to get feedback. In addition students are divided into groups by levels and programmes and they elect heads of groups who meet twice a year with the dean and vice deans. Every two years, students are asked for an overall evaluation of programmes.

Third example
Yet another faculty organises three feedback meetings a year to which all academics and staff are invited. The meetings focus on a specific theme but generally the student union extends the agenda by voicing any student concerns. In addition, teachers have an open door policy and consult students informally, and the students fill in an on-line questionnaire.

Fourth example
One university organises feedback in an unusual way: in addition to the standard questionnaire, an external teacher will meet with a group of students, at the end of a module or the beginning of a semester, to discuss what they liked and did not like and their recommendations. The actual teacher is not present during these conversations but will get a summary of the discussion.

Fifth example
One university collected oral feedback on its evaluation procedures through focus groups. These are an effective instrument for evaluating services or testing new ideas. Focus groups usually gather six to ten people with a similar profile (e.g., students, academic staff, and administrative staff). The facilitator develops five to six questions for sessions that last from 60 to 90 minutes. To the extent that these sessions are essentially group interviews, many of the same guidelines for conducting interviews apply to them.

7.5 Statistical data and key performance indicators (KPI)
7.5.1 Statistical data
Almost all the universities have data information systems, most of which are centralized. Such kind of statistical data include but are not limited to
- student progression and success rates
- employability of graduates
- the profile of the student population
- the teacher/student ratio
- student satisfaction with their programmes
- effectiveness of teachers
- the cost of learning resources and their availability
- tracking graduates' employment
- student drop-out rate
- number of in-coming and out-going staff and students
- institution’s own key performance indicators and the like.

Having such information available, however, does not mean that there should be an institutional research office, which would provide for systemic analysis. This mission is intended for the internal quality assurance system. It is also possible that several different units perform data collection depending upon the sort of information collected, which might include the following while delegating the analysis to the IQAU:

- Tracking graduates of all programmes and levels through annual surveys to analyse how long it took them to find a job and at which level, their salaries, and their satisfaction with their job and education. These data are analysed to produce a list of jobs per subject/level to help current students think about their professional future. Such an approach is also useful for the university since it allows examination of the fitness of its educational offer for graduate employability;
- Annual student evaluations by study programme and level;
- Annual data collection of all study programmes on the basis of a set of indicators;
- Analysis of social and financial data such as student grants and housing;
- A survey of entering students to identify those at risk of failing: family situation, high school record, etc.

### 7.5.2 Key performance indicators

One of the tools to analyse the achievements of institutional mission is through defining a set of key performance indicators (KPIs) to analyse their contribution to the achievement of institutional strategic goals. The data include such items as: retention, pass rates, graduation rates, diversity of student profiles, internationalisation, etc. Typically, such data are assembled at faculty level and sent up to a central committee, which provides a response in the form of corrective actions. These seem, in general, to be actions to be taken across the university. This central steer can sometimes be adapted at faculty level. Thus, faculty deans, in consultation with staff, can define the faculty’s priorities to align them with the university’s priorities.

Another tool that provides important data on a variety of performance indicators is the annual review produced by an institution, which includes but is not limited to the number of students who graduated, number of publications, etc., how the quality assurance system is working, as well as any complaints on the system functioning. It is a useful tool for the
faculty and university executive teams for examining the problem areas and making decisions about resource allocation and future developments.

However, some caution about interpretation of the data is necessary since misinterpretation of the data endangers the system functioning and might bring about erroneous decisions and thus failure. Further, the analysis should, by no means, be overburdened by irrelevant data or redundant data, that is why it is crucial to clearly set the goals of self-assessment at the launch of the process.

7.5.3 Internally organised reviews and articulation with external reviews

To ensure the quality of educational provisions, such techniques as internal and external reviews are employed by universities and academic programmes. With the aim, alongside programme committees that examine academic programmes and the reviews by external agencies (e.g., national or international quality assurance agencies or professional accreditation bodies), some universities use external examiners or conduct unit reviews (UK approach).

First example

In the case of one university, the faculty QA officer coordinates the faculty assessment officers and is responsible for the cross-faculty scrutiny of marking and grades. Faculty assessment officers are members of subject teams who keep track of assessment issues. They ensure that courses and assessments are fit for purpose, collect all marks, check the assessment spread sheets and prepare the documentation for the university examination board. In effect, they are the internal examiners. The external examiners look at a sample of examinations from across the mark range. They look at each module and at the mark profile of the students to identify inconsistencies.

Second example

In one institution, a panel of external and internal members review schools or subjects every four to five years. Their role is advisory and is based on a self-assessment report. The review report goes to the school, the faculty and the university. According to the staff members, colleagues find this process very useful.

The second institution proceeds in much the same way. This university has recently changed the focus of its internal reviews, moving them to the school level. The previous system produced evaluation fatigue because it was focused on smaller units and those academics who were based in several units were constantly being reviewed. The university conducted focus groups to discuss its internal review process. Some of the key concepts that emerged to characterise a good review included: efficient, streamlined, meaningful, sharply focused, fit for purpose, transparent, user-friendly, linked into university strategy. The university hopes that the new process will result in less evaluation fatigue.

This is a very useful approach and the background can be understood during the review meetings. The data are generated by school administrators who are part of the self-evaluation group. It does take time to collect them and the school that was recently reviewed noted that this work plus everything else that is being asked of them (operational and strategic plans, etc) are quite a bit of work. But during the oral report session, the school came around to the process and found it to be very useful because of the panel's constructive comments. In the past, the recommendations were generally confined to asking for more financial and human resources. In addition, the university now asks all schools to produce a plan with targets, to review this plan and present it to the university leadership every six months in order to embed a continuous improvement process.
7.6 Performance outcomes and other evidences

Another source of evidence for checking university/programme performance is through looking at the student performance, e.g. test results, samples of independent work, research papers, and other evidences like thesis papers, exam questions and respective answers, samples of publications, observations of classes and the like. This should be done on a random selection basis and the main measurement criterion would be to what extent the evidences reveal achievement of the learning outcomes.

8. Methods of quality assessment

Quality assurance, to be effective, should refer to everybody in the HEI and be the responsibility of everyone. The commitment of the top-management is a prerequisite for success as well. Thus, the internal quality assurance system should be designed in a top-down and bottom-up approach to ensure it leads to establishment of a “quality culture”. Internal quality assurance should be seen as a continuous and on-going process rather than one-time activity performed for accreditation purposes alone. However, as mentioned above assessment of quality should also be done externally, through accreditation of institutions and programme, for example, as it is the case in Albanian higher education.

Thus, the IQAU within the HEI should be delegated an authority to prepare for the EQA. Across the world quality assurance is done in the following ways:

- Self-evaluation
- Peer-review by a panel of experts, usually including at least some external panel members and one or more site-visits
- Analysis of statistical information and/or use of performance indicators of the best practices benchmarking
- Surveys of students, graduate, employers, professional bodies
- Testing the knowledge, skills and competencies of students.

Quality assurance is a conscious and planned process and it employs qualitative and quantitative tools to assess quality. Some of them are outlined below:

- Process flow-chart
- Graphs
- Pareto analysis
- Fish-bone diagram
- Scatter diagram
- Check sheets
- Control charts
- Brainstorming
- Benchmarking
- SWOT analysis
These tools are supposed to be applied in combination rather than individually to ensure objectivity of assessment as well validity and reliability.

**8.1 Process flow-chart**

A flow-chart is a pictorial representation of the stages in a process. It records the series of activities and events in a process in such a way that communication becomes instant and clear. Flowchart is extremely useful when a problem needs a systematic approach. Flowchart can help to identify critical steps and also ensure that all the steps are carried out without fail making it error free, ensuring quality. Use of a flowchart in a laboratory situation can reduce hazards. By following the flowchart of the admission process, for example, it is less likely that any of the departments will make mistakes that may affect the admission cycle. In fact, the development of a flowchart for any activity should be a participatory process by those involved in the task/problem.

**Figure 8: International student admission flow-chart**

**8.2 Graphs**

Graphs are tools to present information in a concise and graphical manner. There are different types of graphs that can be used to represent data for decision-making. Some of these are histograms, pie charts, line graphs, etc. For example, in order to show the popularity of a programme over the years, to showcase the reputation and quality, the number of applications received over the last 5 years in a line diagram. Or a histogram can be used to show the quality of faculty in terms of their qualifications and number of papers published in the last 5 years.
Figure 9: Sample graph

8.3 Pareto analysis

A Pareto analysis is the method of looking at all the root causes of a problem and trying to determine which ones have the greatest frequency. The idea behind the analysis is that an entire collection of potential causes can be broken down into those that seldom happen and those that happen on a more frequent basis.

Pareto analysis is a tool to prioritize problems for solutions. It says that 80% of problems stem from 20% of the causes. It is also known as 80-20 rule. Thus, by focusing on the 20%, it is possible to improve 80% of results. This is a very important principle in quality assurance, and thus identifying the critical 20% in performance that will result in 80% solution/satisfaction is very important.

Figure 10: Sample Pareto analysis

8.4 Fish-bone diagram

The fish-bone diagram is also used as a cause-and-effect diagram. It is a tool for analysis and open thinking in problem solving. It is also useful in organizing ideas during and after a brainstorming session. In a diagrammatic representation, the effect is placed at the right end of a broad arrow. Major causes are recorded on either side of the effect line. Minor causes are aligned to the respective major causes as clusters.
8.5 Scatter diagram

While the fish-bone diagram provides a simple way to identify causes and effects, the scatter diagram is a method to determine the relationship between the cause and effect in a pictorial manner. Scatter diagrams show pattern of association or otherwise of two variables/parameters. For example, if we see a pattern of poor student attendance in a particular month, using a scatter diagram of attendance record and months, we may decide to cover not so complex topics in that month so that the majority of the students can understand and learn important topics that may have bearing on other components of study.

8.6 Check sheets

These are used as check sheets or tally charts to ensure that some tasks in a process are done and measure how well they have been done. It ensures that everything is in order according to the design. To some this is a quality control device by which one can weed out products that lack some checkpoints. For example, during the development of a training manual, a checklist can ensure both academic as well as production quality by checking the physical design and learning design issues to meet the needs of the target group.

8.7 Control charts

Control charts are primarily used in statistical process control operations in manufacturing and product development to ensure that all the outputs are within an acceptable limit of variations. Thus, control charts show deviations in two possible ways:
The unavoidable or permissible deviations; and
- The unacceptable deviations.

The control charts depict the upper and lower limits of variation to find out whether a particular product is acceptable or not. The control charts serve a priori method and can be used as a tool for measurement of student achievement.

8.8 SWOT analysis

SWOT analysis is the examination of an organization’s internal strengths and weaknesses, and its environments, opportunities, and threats. When correctly applied, it is possible for an educational establishment to get an overall picture of its present situation in relation to its community, other institutions, and the market its students will enter. An understanding of the external factors (comprised of threats and opportunities), coupled with an internal examination of strengths and weaknesses assists in forming a vision of the future. Such foresight would translate to initiating competent programmes or replacing redundant, irrelevant programmes with innovative and relevant ones.

The process of utilizing the SWOT approach in self-assessment requires an internal survey of strengths and weaknesses of an institution and an external survey of threats and opportunities. It is a useful way of examining current environmental conditions around program offerings, inputs, processes, and outputs. The SWOT analysis, provides a framework for administrators in general and quality assurance officers in particular to focus better on the areas in need of improvement, maintenance and those of enhancement.

SWOTs can be performed by an individual administrator or in groups. Group techniques are particularly effective in providing structure, objectivity, clarity and focus to discussions about strategy, which might otherwise tend to wander or else be strongly influenced by politics and personalities.

The SWOT should cover all of the following areas, each of which may be a source of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities or threats:

Internal environment of the institution
- faculty and staff
- classrooms, laboratories and facilities (the learning environment)
- current students
- operating budget
- various committees
- research programmes.

External environment of the institution
- prospective employers of graduates
- parents and families of students
- competing colleges
• preparatory high schools
• population demographics
• funding agencies.

8.8.1 The internal survey of weaknesses and strengths

Making a list of internal weaknesses could reveal areas that can be changed to improve an institution, also some things that are beyond control. Examples of inherent weaknesses are quite numerous. A few are listed as follows: low staff and faculty morale; poor building infrastructure; sub-standard laboratory and workshop facilities; scarce instructional resources; and even the location of the institution within the community.

Seldom do weaknesses occur in isolation; strengths are present and need to be enlisted as well. Examples of potential strengths could be: (a) a reasonable tuition fee charged from students; (b) strong and dedicated faculty with a high morale; (c) articulation with other colleges and universities which would enable students to transfer course credits; (d) a strong reputation for providing the training required to get entry-level employment; and (e) diversity among the student population.

The assessment of strengths and weaknesses are facilitated through surveys, focus groups, interviews with current and past students, and other knowledgeable sources. Once weaknesses and strengths are delineated, it would be appropriate to reconfirm these items. It should be recognized that different perceptions may exist depending on the representative group consulted.

Table 6: Sample SWOT analysis

<p>| <strong>BACKGROUND INFORMATION</strong>: Consider an institution planning to undergo accreditation of a select programme. Assume that, during the self-assessment the group of evaluators is to assess the applicability of the programme learning outcomes. The department or the chair and a select group of faculty could meet and conduct a SWOT analysis to analyze the situation and redevelop the existing learning outcomes. The following points may appear on the worksheet. |
| Potential Internal Strengths | Potential Internal Weaknesses |
| 1) Existing learning outcomes provide some basics required for the qualifications in target. | 1) Current faculty are not well versed in the development of learning outcomes. |
| 2) Faculty who are enthusiastic and willing to go the extra mile to acquire knowledge and training in the target field. | 2) Lack of sufficient resources for initiating new approaches. |
| 3) There are sufficient funds to invest in redevelopment of the learning outcomes for the programme. | 3) Current programme features are not adequate for elaborating on and redeveloping new ones. |
| 4) Successful experiences in the past with new, dynamic programs, thus, expertise in dealing with change. | 4) There are discrepancies between the faculty members about the applicability of the learning outcomes. |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Potential External Opportunities</th>
<th>Potential External Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Market suffers from a critical shortage of the target qualifications.</td>
<td>1) Some other TLI has already taken a lead and possesses the infrastructure to start a similar programme any time soon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) State and nation-wide demand for the target qualifications is projected to increase for the next 10 years.</td>
<td>2) The learning outcomes in target may not get approval from the board because of previous history of non-applicability of such undertakings.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Local high school teachers’ and students’ enthusiasm for the proposed program could result in recruiting the best students.</td>
<td>3) Some efficient alternatives are appearing in recent literature which, if true, will not hold a bright future for prospective qualifications</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4) Expert of the target qualifications in industries have offered to give their expertise on a part-time basis.</td>
<td>4) High school students and market in the area indicate a preference for different qualifications</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 8.8.2 External survey of threats and opportunities

Information about the current business climate, demographic changes, and employment and high school graduation rates should be considered in this phase of the study. A multitude of sources include but are not limited to parents and community leaders, local newspapers, national news magazines, higher education journals, conferences, the local Employer’s union, and local business contacts. Each of these is a potential source of highly valuable information.

Threats need to be ascertained. They come in various forms. Increasingly, restrictive budgets for institutions are a rule rather than an exception. An anticipated cut in funding can have a significant impact on implementing a high-budget program. Nearby universities and other local area institutions may be planning some new changes to attract more students to their programs. In addition, a decreasing number of high school graduates in the region and surrounding areas may pose a considerable threat by way of reduced student demand for some planned programs.

It should be recognized that opportunities and threats are not absolute. What might at first seem to be an opportunity, may not emerge as such when considered against the resources of the organization or the expectations of society. The greatest challenge in the SWOT method could probably be to make a correct judgment that would benefit both the institution and the community.

In order to be most effectively used, a SWOT analysis needs to be flexible. Situations change with the passage of time and an updated analysis should be made frequently. SWOT is neither cumbersome nor time-consuming and is effective because of its simplicity. Used creatively, SWOT can form a foundation upon which to construct numerous strategic plans for the institutions.
**8.9 Benchmarking**

Benchmarking is a process inside an organization with the aim to improve its performance by learning about good practices for primary and/or support processes through looking at those processes in other, better-performing organizations, building on evaluation of relevant performances (if possible through measurement of Key Performance Indicators) in own and others’ organizations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>One-to-one benchmarking</strong></th>
<th>benchmarking with one ‘model’ organization acting as the standard and one organization learning how to emulate the other.</th>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Mutual/collaborative benchmarking</strong></th>
<th>benchmarking among more than two organizations, in which many or ideally all partners act as models for others in some respects and as organizations learning to emulate others in other respects.</th>
</tr>
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Whether carried out as a national exercise for the whole sector, or at the institutional level (within or between several higher education institutions), benchmarking always includes the identification of strengths and weaknesses and a better understanding of one’s institution, with a view to setting targets and benchmarks for improvement. Benchmarking requires a key focus on continuous improvement through a comparative approach and the search for best practices, to be more than a mere comparison of statistical data. Benchmarking is not a quick fix to tackle organizational underperformance. Although it can be used to produce a snap shot (as a tool to obtain one-off information on a specific issue), it is most valuable as a continuous, long-term approach embedded in institutional strategic development.

Every institution has a different starting point: its profile, institutional capacity, organizational climate, focus on quality improvements, willingness to change, available resources and data, and degree of autonomy all impact on the nature and size of the benchmarking exercise. The choice of processes should be in line with the institution’s profile, mission and organizational developments. In all cases, it is crucial to have a clear understanding of problems and, based on needs, to prioritize them, so that a realistic benchmarking exercise with adequate resources can be launched. Self-assured and high-aiming institutions usually seek to benchmark against higher achieving institutions; others might seek to benchmark first internally, then with peer institutions focusing more on functional than strategic areas.

The purpose of a benchmarking exercise must be clearly defined from the outset: what do you want to find out, why, and what do you want to do with the results? Going a step further:

- How well are you performing in relation to other institutions?
- Which institution is doing better and how does it do so?
- What can you adapt from other institutions and how can you improve?

Both one-to-one and collaborative approaches have their value in carrying out systematic and comparative data gathering and the further steps in benchmarking. In both cases...
issues of trust, confidentiality and information sharing must be dealt with in a careful manner.

At its simplest, one-to-one benchmarking can be initiated through active institutional and desk research within the institution looking at public data available on one or several other institutions as a comparative exercise to produce reports for improvement. On the other hand, collaborative benchmarking can be carried out in various ways. The advantage of collaborative benchmarking approaches is that they offer possibilities for further networking and professional development between peers from different institutions, thus reinforcing the learning dimension of the benchmarking exercise towards improvement and higher performance.

In all cases senior level commitment is vital to ensure sustainability of the benchmarking exercise over time and to give strategic directions and support to the implementation of change. A benchmarking exercise needs both top-down and bottom-up interactions between decision-makers and staff at various levels. This will ensure both ownership of the process and consensus in terms of implementation.

To conduct benchmarking institutions should go through the following steps:

- Decide whether to use existing pre-standards/benchmarks as starting point
  - Develop an action plan for the data gathering, review it with higher education institutions in the partnership
  - Appoint the benchmarking team, staff and the moderating institution
  - Carry out the data collection (internally and externally) – questionnaires, site visits, peer reviews
  - Develop an action plan with targets for improvement
  - Implement the action plan and set new areas for benchmarking

- Decide on a clear action plan and task allocation (who processes the data, who prepares the reports, etc.), a timetable with milestones, numbers of meetings (internally and with partners). All these will determine the volume of staff time needed and the budget.

- For a collaborative benchmarking exercise involving several partners, it will be necessary either to appoint one university to act as coordinator for the whole exercise or to hire a consultant (or another type of organisation) to act as external moderator for the partners.

- **Inside each partner higher education institution**, we recommend appointing one person to act as project manager to coordinate the inputs from various people, lead the team involved in the benchmarking exercise and liaise with senior management.

- Benchmarking exercises take time. The timeframe depends on the nature and scale of the benchmarking exercise. Some benchmarking exercises are established as a one-off activity to look at one specific issue for a very limited period of time. In some cases these are then extended to look at other issues. But overall, benchmarking is most effective as a management tool when it is carried out on an ongoing basis.

- A clear mode of operations to which partners abide must be agreed. This should include how to assure confidentiality and trust.
The **type and volume of data to be collected** will very much depend on the focus of the benchmarking exercise. In any case, the amount of data collection should be realistic for best results. Below is some practical advice:

- **Measure only what needs to be measured** (rather than measure what is measurable) and select or develop the best possible indicators which will make it possible to define short and long term targets and benchmarks.

- Once the focus of the benchmarking exercise is clear it is worth carrying out some desk research into **existing performance-based indicators, pre-standards and benchmarks** for the area you wish to benchmark.

- For the data gathering, the **methodology** will very much depend on the focus and expected outputs of the benchmarking exercise. Quantitative data, qualitative information, focusing on management processes or a mix of these, all are viable options.

### Example

**Benchmarking the human resource management**

If the focus is on benchmarking the human resource management, background material will be needed such as the institution’s mission statement, a strategy document, and an organizational chart to understand clearly how the HRM strategy is related to the overall strategy. Benchmarking HRM will for example look at what mechanisms are used to measure the HR strategy’s implementation and effectiveness (e.g. in terms of attracting top scholars, or improving the gender balance), who has responsibility for ensuring that the HR policy complies with legislative requirements, and the level of staff and trade unions’ involvement in determining policies and procedures. Central to benchmarking HRM will also be issues such as the balance between central and devolved HR activity and how to ensure implementation of HR policies (nature of control or support mechanisms to deal with variations in local management performance and capability).

Next, how the university identifies its overall requirements for staff development and matches this with the needs of individuals, how training and development (induction programmes, coaching, individual study, personal counseling, on the job learning) are provided and how their effectiveness is reviewed should also be addressed.

Self-assessment is the first step for effective benchmarking in which higher education institutions will gain a more accurate understanding of their own policies and processes. However, a common approach identified is as follows:

- First, design a template for a questionnaire or survey, either in the form of open or closed questions to collect information. A preliminary meeting with all partners will bring added value in terms of commitment and understanding.

- One option for the next step is that the templates/questionnaires are sent to all partners with a return date for completion. The coordinating institution should have staff available to clarify matters. You may wish to add telephone interviews or site visits in the process for qualitative aspects of the data gathering exercise.

- Alternatively you may wish to collect qualitative data purely through site visits by two/three experts/peers who will use a questionnaire and checklists. Validation of information with partners for accuracy is vital. Gathering all data in a standardized format/database is of paramount importance for further use in benchmarking and other exercises.
The next stage will be to process data and produce comparative, structured and transparent reports on the results, which are clearly understandable to all those involved.

Reporting results should:

- Be carried out in an effective way (Internal/external)
- Produce well-structured, transparent and comparable information (qualitative/quantitative) with a view to identifying good practices and gaps in performance which can lead to future target-setting
- Apply measures to enhance the credibility and the visibility of the benchmarking exercise

Public dissemination of results will enhance the reputation both of the higher education institutions and of the benchmarking exercise itself among stakeholders. The issue of communicating results to the outside audience must be addressed carefully. Results of the benchmarking exercise will produce new benchmarks for the sector, so public reporting will be valuable, but obviously paying close attention to the confidentiality issue. Some benchmarking exercises have compiled results in an anonymous way for some aspects of the exercise where sensitive data were at stake.

Once the results of the benchmarking exercises have been produced and analyzed, the final step concerns the design of a clear framework, a precise action plan and to convert the results and benchmarking efforts into improved processes and organizational change.

The leader(s) of the benchmarking exercise (i.e. either a group or one person inside an institution) will have the responsibility to oversee the effectiveness of the implementation with goals, targets, milestones and deadlines and appropriate resources for the change process to take place effectively. Prioritizing projects for implementation and allocating appropriate resources for their effective implementation is essential.

Plans for changes should be realistic and include clear steps over time. Obviously while the focus of the benchmarking exercise will determine the immediate and long term action plan, short and long term goals to improve performance should be identified, and detailed action plans agreed upon to adopt good practices found in other higher education institutions.

Integrating benchmarking into strategic planning, conducting benchmarking exercises as a regular practice, and introducing new topics for benchmarking will support on-going organizational evaluation and retaining a competitive edge. Such a change agenda depends crucially on strong leadership to set clear directions and ensure their implementation. With the implementation of new approaches and new modes of operation, a new cycle begins: the new ways of working will need to be evaluated, once they have had time to have an impact, and be compared with the impacts achieved by the other partners’ new approaches. In other words, a new round of benchmarking will naturally evolve.

### 8.10 Brainstorming

It is one of the most fundamental processes of generating ideas and solutions for problems identified during the self-assessment phase. It involves participation of the stakeholders and thus teamwork. Brainstorming is a key activity in quality assurance. Brainstorming can be used for all the tools discussed above to generate ideas for assuring quality. The process
involves knowledgeable and experienced participants who share their ideas on a problem in a free flowing manner without restrictions. One of the major criticism of brainstorming is that it does not provide objective assessment. But, at the time of brainstorming, a large pool of possible alternatives can be generated, which can be later subjected to objective assessment. During the brainstorming session, the following rules may be followed:

- Be clear about the topic of brainstorming
- List all ideas as they are expressed
- Wild ideas are welcome
- Do not criticize others’ ideas
- Build on ideas
- Allow everyone to express their ideas
- Record all ideas in a visible manner.

In whatever position may be, these tools are helpful to assure quality of actions. They can be used both for self-assessment as well as for external quality assurance. They provide symptomatic clues to assure quality and also provide opportunity to think about quality in a quantitative perspective.

**Section 2: International practices**

In this section we will look at the practice of internal quality assurance at European level. It will reveal the diversity of cases extant with their specific philosophy and practice, though we can distil some of the commonalities of self-assessment and internal quality management.

1. **The Netherlands**

Many professional higher education institutions in the Netherlands use the INK-model and the self-evaluation model in addition to the accreditation framework. Indeed, some aspects of the INK-model Internal quality assurance in professional higher education are used in the accreditation framework.

**Sexion Hogeschoelen**

The distribution of tasks and existing power relations at Saxion Hogeschoelen is as follows: at the top of the organisation stands the Supervisory Board. This Board controls the Board of Directors and controls if the organisation reaches its goals. The Board of Directors is the daily management of the organisation; they have contact with the lower levels to be informed on the details of the processes.

The study programmes of Saxion are subdivided in thirteen academies in Enschede, Deventer and Apeldoorn. The director of every academy is responsible for a high level of quality of the study programmes and a continuous quality assurance system.
The eight support services of Saxion have a line relationship with the Board of Directors. Quality assurance is a part of the service ‘Onderwijs en Student’ (Education and Student). The department is called ‘Onderwijsontwikkeling en Kwaliteitszorg’ (DOK), translated in English it is the department for educational development and quality assurance. DOK advises and supports Saxion as an institute and separately the domains on the field of educational innovation, development of new study programmes, request of the accreditation and the accreditation process itself. They handle everything in the field of quality assurance (advising, set up, and the functioning of the system). The director of DOK is responsible that the department can fulfil the following tasks; that quality assurance is set up, appointments are subsequent and initiatives about new innovations and developments are taken. Their task also includes the development of the criteria for the internal quality assurance framework for the academies.

The academies are responsible for their own quality assurance (system). It does not matter how they organise it, as long as they do it and if they use the criteria from the ‘Saxion-wide’ framework. The function of the quality staff is filled in differently by the academies; the quality staff member can be a teacher who receives some extra hours to fulfil that task, or may be a staff member of the management level. Internal

Machinery of internal consultation

In the organisational structure of the quality assurance of Saxion there are three formal meetings, namely;

- Meeting between the support services and the Board of Supervisors; management consulting
- Meeting between academies and the Board of Supervisors; management consulting
- Meeting between DOK and quality staff members of the academies and other support services; Saxion Meeting Quality Assurance (SOK, In Dutch; Saxion Overleg Kwaliteitszorg)

The quality assurance policy, their problems, advice about solutions, new developments and ideas are the main subjects during the management consulting. For the academies and support services there is enough space to bring in new ideas during the meeting. Academies have also the opportunity to give their opinion about the (new) policy. When academies are really negative about a new policy, the policy will not be implemented. The outcome of the meetings between the academies and the Board of Supervisors are presented in the meetings between the support services and the Board of Supervisors and vice versa.

The SOK is an regular organised (operational) work meeting between DOK, de quality assurance staff members of the academies and the quality assurance staff members of the other support services. During those meeting problems of the system are discussed and exchange of information and experiences is taking place, for example; how departments organise their internal quality assurance, which procedure they use during educational innovation, which procedure they use by processing data and what happens with the return data. Finally, the outcome of the reports made for the P&C cycle (discussed on farther afield) are discussed. The outcomes of those meetings are presented during the meetings between DOK and the Board of Supervisors.
Simultaneously, DOK has direct and informal contact with the director and quality staff members in the academies. Those contacts are used to support the academy by creating and organising their internal quality assurance system, but also support them during the accreditation procedure.

**Internal quality assurance processes**

In 2000 the professional higher education institution IJsselland and the professional higher education Enschede became Saxion Hogeschool. Both professional higher education institutions had their quality assurance partly shaped, but both institutions did not have a complete structured quality assurance system. In other words, some quality processes where visible, but it was not a smoothly running system. After the merger and the expected implementation of an accreditation system a more concrete quality assurance system was implemented during 2000-2002.

The quality assurance system of Saxion exists of two cycles, which are running at the same time. The first one is the regular planning and control cycle (P&C cycle). Here the reporting of and responsibility for the processes in the organisation are located. The P&C cycle is a PDCA-cycle and takes place at different levels, namely; level of the institution, academic level and level of the study programmes. Each level has installed the P&C cycle on its own way. The P&C cycle exist of three elements;

- Four-year cycle; strategic plan at institution and academic level.
- Annual cycle at institutional level; spring memorandum, multi-annual budget, management reports, annual report, annual account.
- In correlation with the annual cycle at institutional level, an annual cycle at the academic support services level.

The second cycle is the internal quality assurance cycle. This is the six yearly cycle for the accreditation of the study programmes. The cycle consists of; a provisional evaluation and an internal audit done by staff members of the academies and support services, the preparation for the external audit and the application for accreditation by the NVAO. As a model for the internal quality assurance framework the INK-model is used. Saxion does not follow the exact process including the manuals and score boards of the INK-model, it rather adopts the steps and the procedures. Subsequently, that framework is being integrated with the aspects of the NVAO. In as well theory as practise it means that Saxion does not have to fulfil extra tasks in order to fulfil all the accreditation criteria. The outcomes on both quality assurance cycles are made into a digital document system (DKS) and a Compliance Management System, which can be seen as an actual back-office system.

The academies may decide how they want to implement the P&C cycle and quality assurance cycle, as long as they fulfil the centrally decided requirements. The requirements includes agreements on what the academies must deliver (annual report, audit report) and that it is organised in a systematic way. The justification of those activities are taking place by the means of reports and during the management consulting. This can be seen as line responsibility. In terms of the development of policy there is an indirect line between the Board of Supervisors and the academies.

The quality assurance policy, as described before, is realised with the support of the so-called quality management system (KMS) in which processes, instruments, tasks and the
responsibilities are set. The implementation in the sub-levels (level of institution, level of academy/support services, level of study programme, and level of employees) differs, but the goals to reach are the same for all levels, namely; the implementation of quality assurance policy, achievement of the quality framework and the advancement of the continuous improvement of the quality at all organisational levels.

2. The University of Barcelona Internal Quality Assurance System for Doctoral Studies

In each University of Barcelona faculty or school, the Internal Quality Assurance System is modelled on the standards, procedures and guidelines set out in the European Association for Quality Assurance in Higher Education document Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG) produced by the European Network for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ENQUA) and adopted by the European Ministers of Education at the Bergen Ministerial Conference in May 2005. In Catalonia and in Spain, the ESG are implemented through external review in the form of the AUDIT program, a joint initiative of the three ENQUA member agencies the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency (AQU Catalunya), the National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation (ANECA) and the Galician Agency for Quality Assurance in University Studies (ACSUG). Finally, each faculty or school’s system also complies with the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science’s regulations on official university study programs.

The Faculty Internal Quality Assurance System (hereafter, IQAS) is the instrument that brings together all those activities related to the quality assurance of EHEA bachelor’s degree and university master’s degree courses and it is used both at the design phase of a faculty’s course offerings and then also during the teaching of courses, to ensure that education outcomes are being achieved. Furthermore, the IQAS is also used to ensure the quality of the faculty’s doctoral programs. Certified by AQU Catalunya in the framework of the AUDIT program, the IQAS model is based on three lines of action: planning and documentation of the system; a process-mapping model of management organization; and the rendering of accounts on the faculty’s education programs through an annual quality review. These lines of action reflect the result of systematic analysis used to improve the quality of the faculty’s study programs.

The scope of IQAS for doctoral studies

In each faculty or school, the development of IQAS for UB doctoral studies considers the following guidelines:

- Education quality policy and goals - the establishment of a quality culture must be based on an education quality policy and goals that, through the appointment of IQAS managers, are publicly accessible and known.
- Quality assurance in the design of education programs - the maintenance and renewal of the range of educational courses and programs on offer must be founded on the development of methodologies for the design, approval, implementation, review and improvement of education programs and, if applicable, for their elimination and for attending to suggestions and complaints regarding programs.
- Development of education programs to encourage student learning and other student-oriented actions - the actions undertaken, including the design, development and continual improvement of external training placements and student mobility, must serve to encourage student learning.
Quality assurance of teaching and research staff (TRS) and administrative and service staff (AdSS) - the actions undertaken must ensure that the admission, management and training of TRS and AdSS members is conducted in such a way that these staff members may work satisfactorily and complete the duties that are theirs.

Quality assurance of material resources and services - it will be necessary to ensure that material resources and services are suitably designed, approved, managed, reviewed and improved in order to develop student learning in an appropriate manner.

Compiling and analysing results for the improvement of education programs - the results of the education program must be compiled and analysed in order to review and improve the program. The results of the education program refer in part to the outcomes of learning, access to the labour market and the satisfaction of stakeholders (how far needs and expectations are met).

Publication of information and rendering of accounts on education programs - it will be necessary to ensure that up-to-date information is published regularly and that accounts are rendered on the education programs provided and related aspects.

The governing body, unit or officer responsible for IQAS management

Pursuant to Article 46 of the University of Barcelona Statute and approved by the University’s General Council, October 2009, the Agency for Policy and Quality is the official instrument by which the UB oversees quality assurance.

As a consultative and supervisory body, the Agency is charged with the quality management of all the UB’s academic offering (EHEA bachelor’s and master’s degree courses, doctoral degrees and lifelong learning courses), and with the entirety of its doctoral studies and the evaluation of these.

Until doctoral studies are adapted to Royal Decree 99/2011 on Doctoral Studies, a committee officially called the Doctoral Program Committee will be established for each doctoral program in each UB faculty or school. A minimum of three members shall sit on these committees and one of these members will be the doctoral program coordinator, who will act as committee president. The committee will supervise and ensure the quality of the program, in accordance with the guidelines set out by the Agency for Policy and Quality, and will analyse the results of its study, draft proposals for improving the program and deliver an annual report on that program to the Faculty’s main committee for all its doctoral programs, the Faculty Doctoral Studies Committee.

The Faculty Doctoral Studies Committee, delegated by the University’s Governing Council, ensures that there is a satisfactory system of coordination between the different doctoral program committees and the decision making bodies which have been delegated responsibilities of different kinds, both within and across the faculties and schools and the departments; the Committee analyses the report submitted by the Agency for Policy and Quality and supervises the progress of doctoral studies across the University to make those improvement it deems necessary.

The Faculty’s Quality Assurance Committee ensures the implementation and effectiveness of the Faculty’s IQAS. Together with the organs described above, this Committee helps to design and implement the IQAS with the drafting of an annual review, and overviews strategic planning actions to achieve the following:

- measure, analyse and use the results of education programs, which refer in part to
the outcomes of learning, access to the labour market and the satisfaction of stakeholders, in order to review and improve learning quality;

- supervise the execution of education programs and provide public accounts on aspects of their quality;
- guarantee, at all moments, that the courses being offered can be satisfactorily accredited by external agencies in accordance with Spanish legislation on higher educational course offerings.

IQAS mechanisms facilitating the compilation of information on the progress and results of doctoral and mobility programs

The UB Agency for Policy and Quality (see 3 above) provides opinion surveys for students at three different moments of the doctoral program:

- students in the process of completing the Diploma for Advanced Studies (DEA);
- students who have successfully completed a university master’s degree (the training period of the doctoral program);
- Students who are in the process of writing their doctoral thesis (the research period of the doctoral program).

In each UB faculty or school, the procedure for making complaints and suggestions is guaranteed by the Administration of the Centre (note that the term ‘centre’ refers to any single UB faculty or school, and the ‘Administration of the Centre’ is the basic management body comprising the different offices and units that deal with matters relating to students and teachers.). This procedure is also approved by the Faculty Board. Basic features of the complaints and suggestions procedure:

- All complaints and suggestions are lodged at the Secretary’s Office for Students and Teaching Staff, and this office sends each complaint or suggestion to the UB governing body or officer responsible for the area in which the complaint or suggestion has been made.

- Once the UB governing body or officer responsible has prepared an answer, this is sent to the Secretary’s Office for Students and Teaching Staff, and this office delivers the answer to the complainant, and a copy of the answer to the manager or person in charge of the governing body that is affected by the complaint.

If the faculty or school does not have the authority to process complaints and suggestions, then the Secretary’s Office must send the complaint or suggestion to the official UB body that does have authority and inform the complainant of this.

Each academic year and in each faculty, the Dean’s Office and the Administration of the Centre receive a list of all the complaints and suggestions that have been made and the answers that have been given to these, and a report on the steps that have been taken by the official UB body or officer involved to remedy the problem. Furthermore, and in line with an agreement between the Catalan University Quality Assurance Agency and trustees at the seven Catalan public universities, a report is made on the access to the labour market of doctors graduating from the Catalan university system. The results of the surveys are used for the institutional evaluation of doctoral programs and are sent to the doctoral program committees within each faculty.
A series of mechanisms are also established to evaluate the scientific production of doctoral students. These include access to an institutional database at the moment in which the student’s doctoral thesis is registered, so as to update student curriculums, and the creation of the University of Barcelona Board of Trustees prizes for the best scientific projects deriving from doctoral theses defended at the UB, to provide a record of the quality of UB alumni’s study achievements and research and to foster scientific production and knowledge transfer to the community at large.

IQAS mechanisms facilitating the implementation of actions and improvements resulting from decision making processes. The IQAS mechanisms guarantee that the results of surveys and different procedures are analysed by a faculty’s governing bodies, with the objective of improving the quality of education programs, when and where applicable. The Faculty Doctoral Studies Committee and the Faculty Quality Assurance Committee are responsible for programming the different measures to be taken to improve these programs.