



International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ISG)

INQAAHE

October 2025

Contents

I.	About INQAAHE	4
II.	Introduction.....	5
III.	International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ISG).....	7
	Legitimacy, Mission, and Governance.....	7
	1. Legal basis and recognition	7
	2. Mission.....	8
	3. Governance.....	9
	Organizational Capacity and Strategic Planning.....	10
	4. Organizational structure	10
	5. Resources and capacity	11
	6. Strategic planning	12
	Quality Assurance Framework.....	13
	7. Quality assurance procedures	13
	8. Quality assurance standards	14
	9. Fitness for purpose and institutional autonomy	15
	Evaluation and Outcomes.....	17
	10. Evaluation and decision making	17
	11. Peer-reviewers	18
	12. Transparency of outcomes.....	20
	Quality Culture	21
	13. Internal quality assurance	21
	14. External review of agencies	23
	15. Integrity and transparency.....	24
	Sector Engagement and Enhancement	25
	16. Stakeholder engagement	25
	17. International engagement.....	26
	18. Thematic analysis and guidance.....	27
IV.	Glossary	29

I. About INQAAHE

INQAAHE, founded in 1991, was the first global network to unite quality assurance agencies with the goal of enhancing quality assurance practices in higher education worldwide. Since its inception, it has established itself as a trusted platform for enhancing the practice of quality assurance and a global umbrella network for quality assurance agencies.

INQAAHE was originally established under the auspices of the Hong Kong Council for Academic Accreditation, which served as its first Secretariat and hosted the network's inaugural conference. Although legally incorporated in New Zealand, INQAAHE's Secretariat has relocated over time in line with its international mission, with host agencies based in the Netherlands and later in Spain. Today, the Secretariat is legally incorporated in Spain, operating as an independent international organization.

The central mission of INQAAHE is to promote and advance excellence in higher education by fostering an active international community of quality assurance agencies. Its core activities include research and innovation in quality assurance, capacity building, setting quality benchmarks for higher education, conducting external evaluations of quality assurance agencies, and supporting the development of regional or specialized quality assurance networks, among others.

With a membership of approximately 350 organizations - including quality assurance agencies and higher education providers - INQAAHE brings extensive expertise in aligning and advancing both external and internal quality assurance systems. Beyond this core function, it provides valuable insights into international best practices and actively engages with a broad spectrum of regional and subject-specific networks. Through strategic collaborations with global partners such as UNESCO, regional quality assurance networks, and university associations, INQAAHE contributes to a wide range of initiatives aimed at strengthening quality assurance worldwide. These efforts support continuous improvement across the higher education sector and promote a shared commitment to excellence in higher education.

II. Introduction

The INQAAHE *International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education* (ISG) are the product of an inclusive, participatory process that draws on the collective expertise of external quality assurance agencies and professionals worldwide.

The ISG are grounded in the extensive application and lessons learned from INQAAHE's external review procedures based on the Guidelines of Good Practices (GGPs), as well as similar international and regional procedures, standards, guidelines, and principles that have been in operation for over twenty years.

In response to the growing diversification of higher education and its quality assurance, in 2022 INQAAHE reviewed its GGPs (originally established in 2003, and revised in 2006 and 2016). This review led to the ISG, with the primary purpose of recognizing and embracing the diversity of higher education offerings and providers, while ensuring that quality assurance measures remain relevant and adaptable.

Following two years of pilot implementation of the ISG, feedback from both quality assurance agencies that participated in the pilot reviews and the reviewers who conducted them has offered rich insights to support the refinement of the standards.

The updated ISG 2025 are designed to streamline, simplify, and clarify the standards framework by removing duplications and ambiguities, while providing clearer guidance on interpretation and implementation, and explicitly outlining minimum expectations. These revisions will support quality assurance agencies in using the ISG as a tool for continuous improvement, as well as reducing the burden on those undergoing ISG review.

The revised framework consists of 18 overarching standards, each accompanied by a concise commentary that explains its rationale, offers guidance on policies and practices agencies may adopt, and sets out the minimum requirements for compliance.

The modules that in the 2022 version addressed different modes of delivery have been integrated into the baseline standards, underscoring the expectation that quality assurance agencies meet the ISG baseline standards across all types of quality assurance activities. To further support the quality assurance community, INQAAHE will consider developing dedicated guidance documents to strengthen practices related to diverse and emerging modes of delivery, as well as innovations in teaching, learning, and research, such as those associated with the use of AI.

The ISG underpin INQAAHE **ISG Review**, whose central purpose is to support the improvement of external quality assurance internationally and provide an independent

and reliable foundation that, in alignment with UNESCO's [Global Recognition Convention](#), fosters international trust in external quality assurance across regions, and ultimately supports the global recognition of quality-assured higher education provision and the global portability of qualifications.

A successful ISG Review entitles reviewed quality assurance agencies to use the **ISG Quality Mark**, and to be included in the **ISG Review Register (ISGRR)** of successfully reviewed quality assurance agencies.

Value of ISG Review for key stakeholders	
Governments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing trust in the operations and credibility of quality assurance agencies at both national and international levels.
Quality Assurance Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Promoting continuous improvement in quality assurance practices. Enhancing global credibility and recognition of quality assurance outcomes. Facilitating cooperation and mutual learning among quality assurance agencies.
Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building trust in higher education providers that have undergone quality assurance.
Higher Education Providers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Strengthening confidence in the quality assurance agencies with whom they engage. Enhancing trust in international higher education providers.
Qualification Recognition Bodies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitating the global recognition of international qualifications.
Employers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Enhancing trust in international qualifications and graduate competencies.

III. International Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education (ISG)

Legitimacy, Mission, and Governance

1. Legal basis and recognition

The quality assurance agency is legally established and is recognized by relevant stakeholders.

A quality assurance agency's authority and legitimacy in carrying out its activities hinge critically on its legal standing and recognition by key stakeholders, such as government, sector bodies, and higher education providers.

Its purpose, authority, and functions may be established through a legal or regulatory framework, such as a law, a decree, or government regulation, or be recognised by the government or the higher education community it aims to serve. The higher education community it serves is represented by nationally recognized higher education providers.

The quality assurance agency operates as a legal entity within the regulatory framework of the country in which it is registered, ensuring compliance with national laws.

To reinforce its legitimacy and cultivate trust among external stakeholders, the quality assurance agency publicly shares its legal foundation and recognition through official channels, such as its website, reports, and stakeholder communications.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have its purpose, authority, and functions established through a legal or regulatory framework or recognised by government or the higher education community it serves.
- operate as a legal entity within the country's regulatory framework.
- publicly share its legal foundation and recognition.

2. Mission

The quality assurance agency has a defined and publicized mission that explicitly states its role in external quality assurance of higher education, outlining the purpose and scope of its activities.

A well-defined and public mission statement clearly expresses the purpose, scope, and role of the quality assurance agency in the quality assurance of higher education.

This might include clarifying whether the agency's quality assurance activities are statutory or voluntary, whether they apply to whole institutions, programs, or both, whether they cover public, private, national, or international higher education providers, or whether they extend to different modes of delivery, such as transnational education and online learning.

The mission statement is easily accessible and is included in key documents such as the agency's website and annual reports.

This clarity and transparency help stakeholders, such as education providers, policymakers, students, and employers, understand the agency's role in maintaining educational quality and ultimately support a more robust higher education system.

In developing its public mission, the agency involves, as much as it is possible, and with due consideration of its regulatory and cultural environment, relevant stakeholders.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have a published mission statement that states the agency's role in external quality assurance of higher education and outlines the purpose and scope of its quality assurance activities.
- involve relevant stakeholders in developing the agency's public mission.

3. Governance

The quality assurance agency has a clear governance model, ensuring its independence and accountability to key stakeholders.

The quality assurance agency has a clearly defined governance structure and documents publicly how it is governed. It clearly outlines the roles, responsibilities, and composition of the governing body (such as the Board of Directors or equivalent), and its relationship with the executive leadership (e.g. CEO and Directors), who manage the day-to-day operations, and the processes for appointing and removing board members and executive leaders, implementing policies to avoid conflicts of interest within governance bodies.

The quality assurance agency engages a diverse range of stakeholders in its governance, such as education providers, students, sector bodies, and industry representatives, as well as international representatives. Their inclusion in key bodies, such as the governing body and advisory committees, ensures that decisions are well-informed, balanced, and reflective of the broader higher education ecosystem it serves.

The agency's governance structure safeguards its independence and autonomy from external interference, including government. This is critical to ensure impartiality in decision-making, allowing the agency to uphold standards and evaluate institutions

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have a clearly defined and publicly documented governance structure, setting out the roles, responsibilities and composition of the governing body and its relationship with executive leadership.
- outline processes for appointing and removing governing body members.
- have conflict of interest policies for its governing body.
- engage diverse stakeholders in its governance structure.
- ensure independence of its governing body from external interference, including from government.

fairly and objectively, thus underpinning its credibility and building trust among key stakeholders.

Organizational Capacity and Strategic Planning

4. Organizational structure

The quality assurance agency's organizational structure supports the effective, efficient, and transparent execution of its mission and objectives.

A well-structured organization delineates roles and responsibilities and specifies decision-making authority for all activities. This enables the quality assurance agency to allocate resources, pursue its mission and objectives, and respond to challenges and changing circumstances effectively, efficiently, and transparently.

The agency maintains clearly defined divisions or functions responsible for key areas of its operations, such as the implementation of quality assurance procedures, the development of policy and standards, research and analysis, international engagement, communication, and administrative support. While the organization of these activities may vary according to the quality assurance agency's organizational culture, the scope of its activities, and the broader context in which it operates, the overall structure is designed to ensure coordinated efforts, accountability, and alignment with the agency's mission, goals, and processes.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- ensure its organizational structure has defined divisions or functions, roles, and responsibilities, aligned with the provider's mission, goals, and processes.
- set out where decisional authority rests within the agency for different activities.

5. Resources and capacity

The quality assurance agency has adequate physical, financial, technological, and human resources to fulfil its mission and objectives.

A quality assurance agency requires adequate physical, financial technological, and human resources to effectively carry out its core functions, such as evaluation of higher education providers and quality improvement initiatives.

The quality assurance agency ensures that it has adequate office space, equipment, and technological infrastructure to support its operational needs effectively and efficiently. These include information management systems to support its quality assurance activities. The agency recruits staff with the necessary experience and competencies and maintains sufficient personnel to carry out its functions effectively.

These resources are regularly reviewed to ensure they continue to remain fit-for-purpose to support the changing circumstances that might affect the operations of the agency, and to continue to meet the diverse and evolving needs of the higher education sector it serves.

The agency offers a comprehensive induction program for new staff, allowing them to understand its mission and organizational structure, its range of quality assurance activities, and the key stakeholders it engages with. It also offers regular professional development opportunities for staff to ensure they remain up to date with emerging priorities, new technologies, and evolving educational practices, providing structured opportunities for staff to identify and communicate their professional development needs.

The quality assurance agency has a sustainable business model that ensures its long-term financial viability. This might include core funding from the government, fees for quality assurance services, and other third-party funding, such as revenues from projects or consultancy services.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have adequate physical, financial, technological, and human resources, which are regularly reviewed to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose.
- offer a comprehensive induction programme to new staff.
- provide regular opportunities for professional development, offering opportunities for staff to identify and communicate their professional development needs.
- have a sustainable funding model for long-term viability.

6. Strategic planning

The quality assurance agency is guided by robust strategic planning, ensuring that its quality assurance activities align with its mission and support tracking progress and impact towards goals.

Strategic planning enables the quality assurance agency to prioritise, allocate resources efficiently and effectively, and respond flexibly to the evolving needs of the higher education sector, in alignment with its mission.

The quality assurance agency develops a strategic plan that aligns with its mission, vision, and long-term objectives. The plan articulates key objectives and strategic priorities that will guide the agency over the defined planning period.

The strategic plan is associated with detailed operational plans that help to integrate strategic objectives into the day-to-day operations of the agency, setting out tasks, timelines, resources, and responsibilities. This includes a detailed and adequate budget that covers all aspects of its operations, including staffing plans to meet operational needs, and identification of technology and infrastructure requirements.

Through measurable goals and performance indicators, the quality assurance agency evaluates the effectiveness of its quality assurance activities, identifies areas for improvement, and ensures its activities remain aligned with sector needs.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- develop a strategic plan that aligns with its mission, vision, and long-term objectives, articulating key objectives and priorities for the planning period.
- create detailed operational plans that break down strategic objectives into tasks, specify timelines, resources, and responsibilities, and establish measurable goals and performance indicators.
- have a detailed and adequate budget that covers all aspects of its operations.

Quality Assurance Framework

7. Quality assurance procedures

The quality assurance agency conducts its external quality assurance activities based on transparent, clear, and comprehensive procedures.

The quality assurance agency develops detailed procedural guidelines and manuals that describe its external quality assurance processes in a structured and accessible format. These documents are published on the agency's website and updated regularly. This helps to foster trust in the quality assurance processes and supports higher education providers' effective engagement with external quality assurance.

Procedural guidelines and manuals help providers understand what is required of them, how findings are reached, the consequences of the evaluation exercise, and how to plan accordingly to engage effectively with each stage of the process. They describe each phase of the quality assurance process, providing clear and realistic timelines. These would normally include, as applicable:

- **Preliminary engagement:** formal commencement of the review, orientation sessions, and preparatory communication.

- **Self-evaluation and evidence submission:** the development and submission of the self-assessment document and required supporting evidence.
- **Evaluation method:** how the evaluation will be carried out, who is involved, and how potential conflicts of interest are managed
- **Review visits:** the conduct of interviews and site visits, and associated protocols and logistics.
- **Evaluation findings:** how judgments are reached, how impartiality and objectivity are guaranteed, and the consequences of possible outcomes.
- **Reporting:** the format of the report, opportunities for factual accuracy checks, and modality of their dissemination.
- **Follow-up activity:** monitoring of actions taken, submission of progress reports, and potential consequences for non-compliance.
- **Appeal procedures:** mechanisms to submit appeals, and to guarantee their independence.
- **Timelines:** describing realistic timelines for each phase to support effective planning.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have comprehensive, transparent, and publicly accessible procedures, outlining all the phases of its external quality assurance processes.
- ensure providers understand what is required of them, how findings are reached, the consequences of the evaluation exercise, and how to engage effectively with each phase of the external quality assurance process.

8. Quality assurance standards

The quality assurance agency conducts its external quality assurance activities based on publicly available, clear, and actionable standards.

The quality assurance agency publishes the standards, criteria, and related minimum requirements underpinning its external quality assurance activity in accessible and user-friendly documents, made publicly available on its website. The documentation provides not only the standards themselves but also supporting commentary to explain their rationale, scope, and interpretation.

Standards are written in precise, unambiguous, and actionable terms that enable higher education providers to understand what is required for compliance. The standards include explicit references to the types of evidence expected, providing institutions with practical guidance on how compliance can be demonstrated.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- set out in public documents specific and actionable standards that higher education providers are expected to meet.
- make clear to providers what is required of them to demonstrate compliance, setting out minimum requirements.

9. Fitness for purpose and institutional autonomy

The quality assurance agency ensures that its quality assurance procedures and standards are and remain fit-for-purpose for the different and evolving types of higher education providers and provision within its remit, acknowledging institutional autonomy and diversity.

The quality assurance agency ensures that its procedures and standards cover different types of higher education providers and provision falling within its scope, with required variances to ensure they are fit for purpose.

Different procedures and standards might, for example, acknowledge differences in areas such as institutional mission and goals (e.g., teaching-focused and research-intensive providers), program offerings (e.g., vocational training and academic programs), institutional size and structure (e.g., small colleges vs. large universities), geographical and cultural contexts (e.g., national vs. international institutions), modes of

delivery (e.g. transnational or online education), and ownership (public vs. private institutions).

The quality assurance procedures and standards are developed through consultation with key stakeholders, and in particular, higher education providers that fall within the agency's remit. Stakeholder consultation ensures that procedures and standards are fit-for-purpose and do not place any unnecessary burden on higher education providers, acknowledging that providers bear the primary responsibility for ensuring the quality and standards of their educational offerings through their internal quality assurance mechanisms.

Quality assurance procedures and standards are cyclically reviewed to ensure that they remain relevant to the evolving missions, needs, and activities of different higher education providers. Review and consultation processes are publicly accessible and transparent, explaining how stakeholders' feedback has been used to shape the evolution of quality assurance procedures and standards.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- ensure its quality assurance procedures and standards cover all types of education provision and providers within its remit, with required variations, as applicable, to ensure they are fit-for-purpose.
- review its quality assurance procedures and standards on a cyclical basis to ensure they remain fit-for-purpose in response to the sector's dynamic landscape.
- develop and review its quality assurance procedures and standards, consulting externally and in a transparent way with key stakeholders, in particular higher education providers that fall within the agency's remit.
- give due consideration to minimising unnecessary administrative burden for higher education providers when engaging with its external quality assurance processes.

Evaluation and Outcomes

10. Evaluation and decision making

The quality assurance agency's evaluation procedures ensure its quality assurance findings are evidence-based, consistent, fair, and impartial.

The evaluation procedures used by the quality assurance agency are clearly explained, including whether they are based on peer review or agency officers, whether they involve review visits or rely only on desk-based analysis, and whether eventual review visits are in person or online. The criteria and evidence used to inform decision-making are also clearly explained.

Regardless of the evaluation approach adopted, policies and procedures ensure that evaluations are objective and evidence-based. This is critical to enhance the impartiality, fairness, and consistency of quality assurance findings, and to foster trust among providers, stakeholders, and the public, ensuring they understand the basis for decisions made by the quality assurance agency.

Implementing standardized evaluation procedures ensures fairness and consistency. These include guidelines for information and evidence submission, clear rubrics and evaluation criteria that are consistently applied across all education providers, and transparent procedures for decision-making bodies, such as peer-review teams, accreditation committees, and governing bodies.

The quality assurance agency has mechanisms for addressing inconsistencies or biases in evaluation practice. This includes internal moderation processes to ensure that decisions are consistent across different review teams; training for peer reviewers and agency officers involved in evaluations and decision-making; a conflict of interest policy that applies to all external reviewers, agency officers, and decision-making bodies; and appeals policies and procedures that allow education providers to ask for an independent review of findings or decisions.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- explain the evaluation procedures it uses, ensuring all key stakeholders understand the basis and the modality for its quality assurance decisions.
- establish how it ensures consistency, fairness, and impartiality in its findings, including through:
 - standardized assessment procedures
 - clear assessment criteria
 - transparent decision-making procedures
 - internal moderation processes
 - training programmes for reviewers and agency officers
 - conflict of interest policies
 - appeals procedures

11. Peer-reviewers

The quality assurance agency has policies for the recruitment, training, and appointment of a suitable pool of peer-reviewers, ensuring that they have the necessary expertise and preparation to conduct its different external quality assurance activities effectively, impartially, consistently, and professionally.

The quality assurance agency, when using peer reviewers to inform its external quality assurance processes, sets well-defined criteria for their recruitment, ensuring they have the appropriate academic background, professional experience, and familiarity with quality assurance practices. The reviewer pool reflects diversity across academic disciplines, teaching and learning modalities, gender, and ethnicity, reinforcing the objectivity and fairness of the evaluation process. Where possible, agencies consider the inclusion of a broader range of stakeholders, such as students, employers, and international experts, in their pool of reviewers.

Diversity in the pool of reviewers enhances the breadth of perspectives, helping to ensure that evaluations reflect a range of experiences and are free from biases. This is

particularly important when quality assurance agencies operate different quality assurance activities and oversee a variety of higher education providers with different characteristics.

Similarly, the quality assurance agency applies specific selection criteria when appointing peer reviewers for specific quality assurance exercises. These criteria include relevant expertise in the scope of activities under review, absence of conflicts of interest, and a diversity of perspectives and experiences, ensuring that review teams are balanced and consider all aspects of an institution's or program's performance (e.g. expertise in different modes of delivery, financial governance, research, industry engagement, and the student experience).

The reviewer selection process for each review exercise is designed to be transparent and trustworthy, giving education providers and stakeholders confidence in its impartiality.

The quality assurance agency provides regular training sessions or orientations for peer reviewers, in addition to review handbooks and guidelines, to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills required to perform their duties effectively. In particular, the quality assurance agency ensures that peer reviewers understand the procedures they are requested to implement, including the assessment criteria, the decision-making process, reporting requirements, and the timelines for every phase of the process, as well as the agency's ways of working, including conflict of interest policies, and confidentiality and integrity requirements.

The quality assurance agency implements a system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of reviewers after each quality assurance process, which might include gathering feedback from education providers that have undergone review, other reviewers, or the agency's staff managing the quality assurance exercise.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have documented policies for recruitment, training, and appointment of peer-reviewers.
- ensure that appointed peer-reviewers have an appropriate academic background and professional experience.
- have a conflict of interest policy for the appointment of reviewers to specific quality assurance exercises.
- comprehensive reviewers' training covering its quality assurance procedures and standards.
- have a system for monitoring and evaluating the performance of reviewers.

12. Transparency of outcomes

The quality assurance agency publicly shares the findings of its quality assurance activity, in line with cultural, legal, and regulatory requirements, and publishes the list of those providers that have successfully met quality assurance standards.

Publicly sharing the findings of quality assurance activities ensures that the agency is transparent about its evaluations, helping to build trust in its findings among stakeholders, such as students, higher education providers, and the public. It also helps to share good practice across the education system it serves, and beyond.

The format in which quality assurance findings are shared publicly, including the language used, the amount of detail, and the medium of communication, might depend on the local cultural context.

At a minimum, it includes a list of successfully quality-assured providers, which serves as a public record of providers meeting the agency's minimum expectations. The list contains information about the date of the last review, the status of the reviewed

institutions or programs, and the validity period of this status. It also contains a summary of the key findings, which helps to underpin public trust in the quality assurance process and its outcomes.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- publicly share quality assurance findings, with consideration for cultural, legal, or regulatory requirements.
- publish a list of providers that successfully met the agency's quality assurance expectations, including information on the date of last review for each provider, and the validity period of the evaluation findings.

Quality Culture

13. Internal quality assurance

The quality assurance agency has transparent internal quality assurance mechanisms, that ensure its organizational structure, objectives, and activities remain fit-for-purpose and respond to the evolving nature of higher education and the changing policy environment.

The quality assurance agency develops internal policies and processes to regularly evaluate and improve its own operations, governance, and service delivery. The quality assurance agency's internal quality assurance activity is linked to the strategic and operational planning cycle to ensure alignment with its mission, objectives, financial soundness, and the effectiveness and efficiency of its operations and activities.

As higher education evolves and the policy environment shifts, it is crucial that the quality assurance provider is agile and responsive, maintaining an ability to meet new challenges and demands. By implementing internal processes for regular evaluation and

adjustment, the agency can ensure that it remains effective in its role in a dynamic higher education landscape.

The internal quality assurance mechanisms consider changes in external factors, such as national education policies, global education and quality assurance trends, and technological innovations that impact the quality assurance agencies' operations. These inform regular risk assessments to identify and manage potential risks associated with changes in the external policy or operating environment or organizational capacity.

To this aim, quality assurance agencies engage with stakeholders, such as government bodies, education providers, sector bodies, students, and employers, nationally or internationally, to ensure that they are aware of shifting priorities and expectations in the higher education sector, and that its strategic direction, policies, and quality assurance activities align with stakeholder needs.

Continuous improvement also requires establishing mechanisms that allow staff, including external members of its governing bodies, and, where applicable, review panel experts, to share feedback and engage in regular self-reflection, helping to establish a quality culture across the quality assurance agency.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have internal quality assurance mechanisms.
- link its internal quality assurance processes to strategic and operational planning cycles.
- engage stakeholders in its internal quality assurance processes to align with sector priorities.
- establish feedback mechanisms for all staff, including external members of its governing bodies, and, where applicable, review panel experts.

14. External review of agencies

The quality assurance agency undergoes regular external reviews of its operations and engages proactively and constructively with the resulting recommendations and required actions.

Regular external reviews maintain a high level of accountability and transparency and demonstrate the quality assurance agency's commitment to continuous improvement. External reviews serve as an important mechanism for assessing the agency's effectiveness, identifying areas for enhancement, and ensuring it meets its mission and objectives, and remains aligned with best practices in the field, such as the ISG.

External reviews also offer a valuable mechanism through which the quality assurance agency can ensure that its practices and standards remain dynamic, relevant, and effective in maintaining high-quality education across higher education providers, responding to emerging trends, educational reforms, and shifting priorities. Engaging with external reviews and responding constructively to their recommendations not only strengthens the agency's own operations but also builds trust among education providers and stakeholders, reinforcing the overall quality assurance framework.

External reviews might be carried out by independent experts or organizations capable of providing an external independent perspective on the operations of a quality assurance agency, or by regional or international networks, such as ENQA, RIACES, APQN, and INQAAHE, which regularly undertake external reviews of quality assurance agencies against regional or international best practices.

External reviews are viewed as valuable learning opportunities, with feedback being used constructively to enhance the quality assurance agency's processes and operations. They are approached as a collegial endeavour involving collaboration across the quality assurance agency and, where appropriate, with external stakeholders.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- undergo regular external reviews of its systems, practices, and operations by independent and credible experts or organizations.
- engage proactively and constructively with the external review process and its outcomes.

15. Integrity and transparency

The quality assurance agency adheres to defined ethical and professional principles, supported by formal policies and procedures that ensure integrity is embedded in all aspects of its work.

Upholding the highest standards of integrity is essential to the credibility of a quality assurance agency and its overall contribution to improving the quality of higher education. Stakeholders, including education providers, students, governments, and the broader public, must have full confidence that the quality assurance agency's evaluations and decisions are fair, impartial, and free from undue influence.

To support this, the quality assurance agency establishes and publicly shares formal policies and procedures that clearly articulate expectations for all staff, including external members of its governing bodies, and, where applicable, review panel experts, to ensure the integrity of its operations and quality assurance activities. These cover critical areas such as conflict of interest, anti-bribery, confidentiality, objective and fair decision-making, and adherence to due process.

Transparency is also critical to underpin integrity and trust in the quality assurance agency's activity. The agency therefore publishes and makes easily accessible the key policies and procedures underpinning its operations, including its legal standing, mission, and governance structure, as well as its quality assurance framework and the findings and implications of its quality assurance activities.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- have defined ethical and professional principles, supported by formal policies and procedures, applying to all staff, including external members of its governing bodies, and, where applicable, review panel experts, to ensure the integrity of its operations and quality assurance activities.
- publish and make easily accessible the key policies and procedures underpinning its operations.

Sector Engagement and Enhancement

16. Stakeholder engagement

The quality assurance agency is aware of its stakeholder environment and proactively and strategically engages with a diverse range of stakeholders to support the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of its quality assurance activities, while advancing its mission.

The quality assurance agency is aware of its stakeholder environment and proactively seeks input from relevant parties, such as government bodies, education providers, students, academic communities, industry representatives, and international experts, to ensure its quality assurance activities are informed by diverse perspectives and stay attuned to the needs and expectations of the higher education sector it serves.

By constructively engaging with students and student bodies, the quality assurance agency ensures that its processes align with students' evolving needs. Collaboration with education providers and their representative bodies helps ensure that standards and procedures are co-owned and not overly burdensome. Engagement with industry and professional organizations ensures that external quality assurance supports higher education providers in developing skills aligned with labour market needs, especially for program accreditation. Relationships with government vary, but constructive engagement helps build public trust, align quality assurance activities with national priorities, and inform regulatory changes needed to respond to evolving educational demands. Engagement with international experts allows the agency to benchmark itself against international practice and draw from international experience.

Stakeholders may be engaged through various means, including participation in the quality assurance agency's governance structures, consultation activities that inform the development and review of quality assurance standards, procedures, and guidelines, and, where appropriate to the cultural and regulatory context, as peer reviewers.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- engage with a diverse range of stakeholders to support the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of its quality assurance activities.
- involve relevant stakeholders in the agency's governance structures and consultation activities that inform the development of its quality assurance framework.

17. International engagement

The quality assurance agency engages internationally to support the development, implementation, and continuous improvement of its quality assurance activities.

The quality assurance agency remains attentive to international and regional developments in quality assurance and higher education, ensuring its processes and standards stay relevant and aligned with global best practices.

It actively engages with other quality assurance agencies – bilaterally and through regional or international networks – to share insights, exchange best practices, and participate in collaborative projects, including, where possible, joint quality assurance activities. These efforts support continuous improvement, enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of quality assurance activity, in particular of cross-border education when applicable, and help higher education providers meet international expectations.

To strengthen global alignment, the agency benchmarks its practices against internationally recognised standards, which may include external reviews by regional networks or INQAAHE, and the involvement of international experts in its quality assurance activities, governance, and advisory structures. This benchmarking promotes mutual understanding, recognition, and cooperation across diverse education systems.

To secure alignment with UNESCO's normative instruments and contribute to mobility and international cooperation, the quality assurance agency should demonstrate, through its quality assurance activities, how it supports the international recognition and portability of qualifications. In doing so, the UNESCO Global Recognition Convention and relevant regional recognition conventions should serve as key reference points.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance agency **must**

- remain attentive to international and regional quality assurance developments.
- participate in knowledge-sharing and, where possible, joint quality assurance activity.
- benchmark practices against internationally recognized standards.

18. Thematic analysis and guidance

The quality assurance agency prepares and disseminates thematic analyses and guidance documents to contribute to the enhancement of higher education and quality assurance.

The quality assurance agency conducts thematic analyses of the findings of its quality assurance activities to identify emerging trends, examples of good practice, and areas of improvement across the higher education providers it oversees. These analyses inform the agency's priorities and guide the development of resources and guidance to support the continuous enhancement of the higher education sector it serves.

To assist higher education providers in adapting to change, the agency develops practical guidance and tools that address innovation in teaching, learning, and academic practice, including, for example, developments in artificial intelligence, online and hybrid delivery, micro-credentials, and transnational education. In selecting themes and developing these resources, the agency engages with sector experts and stakeholders to

ensure relevant expertise is incorporated and that the outputs respond effectively to the sector's evolving needs.

This proactive approach keeps the quality assurance system dynamic, responsive, and aligned with evolving educational needs, while fostering collaboration and knowledge-sharing across institutions and contexts.

Minimum requirements

The quality assurance provider **must**

- develop thematic analyses of the findings of its quality assurance activities to identify emerging trends, areas of improvement, and good practice to inform the continuous improvement of the higher education sector it oversees.
- develop guidance documents to support higher education providers in responding to innovation in teaching and learning and academic practice.
- engage with sector experts and stakeholders in selecting themes and developing content for guidance documents.

IV. Glossary

External quality assurance: Quality assurance activities conducted by a body external to the higher education provider, typically a quality assurance agency.

External review of agencies: Third-party assessments of quality assurance agencies, conducted by bodies such as regional quality assurance networks or INQAAHE through ISG Review, for example.

Higher education: All types of courses of study at the post-secondary level aligned with UNESCO ISCED levels 4-8. These can often be referred to also as tertiary or post-secondary education.

Higher Education Provider: An organization, public or private, that provides higher education courses.

Internal quality assurance: Mechanisms and processes developed by a higher education provider or a quality assurance agency to regularly evaluate and improve its own operations, governance, and service delivery.

International Standards and Guidelines Review (ISG Review): The external review process conducted by INQAAHE for quality assurance agencies to benchmark their practices against the ISG, supporting continuous improvement and enhancing credibility.

ISG Quality Mark: A mark granted to successfully reviewed quality assurance agencies, entitling them to use it as an indication of meeting the ISG.

ISG Review Register (ISGRR): A register where successfully reviewed quality assurance agencies are included, alongside their right to use the ISG Quality Mark.

Quality Assurance Agency: Agencies, public or private, that offer services aimed at enhancing and evaluating the quality of higher education providers and higher education courses, including through accreditation.

Quality assurance: the process by which the quality of a higher education provider or course of study is assessed to ensure that set educational standards are being maintained and enhanced.

Quality Assurance Framework: the set of standards and procedures that a quality assurance agency uses to quality assure higher education providers.

International Network
for Quality Assurance Agencies in Higher Education
(INQAAHE)

Enric Granados 33
08007 Barcelona SPAIN

secretariat@inqaahe.org
+34 93 268 89 50